

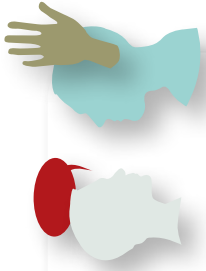


Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Notes for facilitators



Language Policy Division



The **Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters** is a concrete response to the recommendations of the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living together as equals in dignity" (<http://www.coe.int/dialogue>), Section 5.3 "Learning and teaching intercultural competences", paragraph 152:

"Complementary tools should be developed to encourage students to exercise independent critical faculties including to reflect critically on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures."

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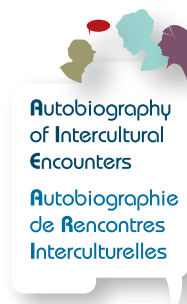
For further acknowledgements, please see the *Introduction*.

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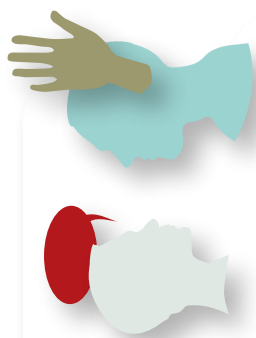
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Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Notes for facilitators

What is the **Autobiography**?

The Autobiography is a document for learners and normally should be their property to use as they wish. It guides learners to think critically about an intercultural experience, i.e. an encounter with people from another social group. The group can be of any kind: people from another country, from another ethnic group, from another religion, from another region of the same country, from another level or class or stratum of the same society. The Autobiography is to be completed in connection with one specific encounter (each encounter needs a new copy of the Autobiography).

The Autobiography consists of a series of questions which learners answer about the specific encounter, but they only answer the questions they choose to answer. *There is no obligation to answer them all.*

There are two related purposes for the Autobiography:

- Self evaluation: it guides learners to evaluate their own responses to a specific encounter; over time they can look back at different encounters and how they evaluated them and thus learn about themselves;

- Teaching and learning: teachers can use the Autobiography as a means of stimulating reflection and analysis, and can thus facilitate learning in deliberate ways.

The two purposes are related and differ in the emphasis but also in the ways the Autobiography is used.

- The intercultural experience which some learners choose to talk about might be a relatively profound one which led to an awakening of their awareness of cultural difference. Some of the more complex questions in the Autobiography have been designed with this possibility in mind.
- Other learners may choose a much more mundane experience (such as buying a loaf of bread in a shop in a foreign country, or an occasion on which a foreigner asked them for directions in the street). With the latter type of experience, some questions in the Autobiography may be redundant and should simply be omitted if they are not relevant.



How to **use** the Autobiography

The Autobiography can be used formally in the classroom and also informally at a time and place of learners' own choice.

It can be used as a teaching instrument working with groups or individuals, led by a teacher - the teaching and learning option. It can be used privately by individuals – the self-evaluation option – as a kind of diary, which may remain confidential.

The use will depend on one or more factors:

- The intention of the teacher to introduce the Autobiography into a course of study;
- The wishes of the learner about confidentiality;
- The age of the learners and whether they need help with the Autobiography.

Here are some possible scenarios where the Autobiography might be used:

After a school holiday

After a school holiday, when students may have been on away from home – perhaps to another country or to another region of their own country or at a school camp – the Autobiography can be used with primary/elementary school students to encourage them to reflect upon a specific experience which they have had while on holiday. In the case of such students, they may be interviewed individually either by their teacher or by a classroom assistant.

In vocational training placements in other countries

Younger and older people in vocational training may be offered the opportunity to take up a work experience placement in another country. This involves then not only in learning about and experiencing other ways of living on a daily basis but also other work practices and traditions. They might be encouraged by their managers to complete the Autobiography as a means of analysing their experience of the workplace and/or living in another country and not just being a visitor there.

After a school trip

Schools often organise visits to other regions of the same country or to other countries. Often they prepare the students/pupils for this very carefully but it is just as important to facilitate their reflections after the event. Each student/pupil in a group will have had some particular experience or encounter even though they

have all been on the same trip, and the Autobiography can help to individualise the follow-up and reflection. After each individual has completed the Autobiography, they may be willing to share their Encounter with others in the group and, with the help of a teacher, think about the variety of experience rather than over-generalise their individual experience.

In preparation for and during study abroad at university

In preparation for study abroad, through the scheme for School Exchanges promoted by the Council of Europe or through an ERASMUS exchange for example, students are introduced to the Autobiography and complete it for a specific encounter they have already had (perhaps with another student acting as mentor). They then complete the Autobiography for specific experiences they have during their period of study and residence abroad and afterwards when they reflect with hindsight.

After a major event

After a major event such as learners witnessing an exchange of racial abuse, the Autobiography is used as a tool for analysis of learners' reactions. This may be in a classroom and led by a teacher. It may be a private use encouraged by a teacher – with the option of keeping it confidential or showing it to others.

Or in any other scenarios of intercultural encounters...

Above all the Autobiography can be used and adapted flexibly to the circumstances. Users do not need to answer all the questions; **it is not a questionnaire.**

Teachers may wish to change the formulation of the questions under a heading, to make them more appropriate to an age group or to the previous experience of learners.

The only things which should not be changed are the headings and introductions for each section and the order in which the sections are presented.

(Users may however respond to the sections in any order they wish, and often decide to do some later sections first; facilitators should not prevent them from doing this.)



What is the rationale behind the Autobiography?

There are three ideas behind the Autobiography:

- That a special or 'rare' event in someone's life, can have a lasting effect on them;
- That a tool for helping people to think about their experiences, especially 'rare events', can make them more meaningful;
- That changes are not always 'incremental' and people sometimes become more intercultural and sometimes less as a result of their experiences.

The make-up of the Autobiography, the particular questions and the order in which they are put, is derived from a definition or model of intercultural competence, with a number of identifiable elements. Users of the Autobiography are encouraged to think about their intercultural competence in relation to these elements, but without any reference to the technical terms.

Teachers however will be able to help learners if they know what lies behind the questions and what the elements are. They are summarised here, and in the Theoretical Indicators that follow these Notes (page 9), the Autobiography is presented with the links from each question to the elements made clear.

A model of intercultural competence

Attitudes and feelings

- Acknowledging the identities of others: noticing how others have different identities and accepting their values and insights.
- Respecting otherness: showing curiosity about others and being willing to question what is usually taken for granted and viewed as 'normal'.
- Having empathy: being able to take someone else's perspective, to imagine their thoughts and feelings.
- Identifying positive and negative emotions and relating them to attitudes and knowledge.
- Tolerance for ambiguity: accepting that, because people who belong to different cultures have different beliefs and different values, there can be multiple perspectives on and interpretations of any given situation.

Behaviour

- Being flexible: adapting one's behaviour to new situations and to what other people expect.
- Being sensitive to ways of communicating: recognising different ways of speaking and other forms of communication that exist in other languages or other ways of using the same language.

Knowledge and skills

- Having knowledge about other people: knowing facts about people whom one meets, and knowing how and why they are what they are.
- Discovering knowledge: using certain skills to find out about people one meets, by asking questions, seeking out information, and using these skills in real-time encounters.
- Interpreting and relating: understanding people or places or things by comparing them to familiar people, places, things in one's own environment, seeing similarities and differences.
- Being critical: noticing how other people think and act and distancing oneself from one's own ways of thinking and acting, and being able to explain one's judgements about both.
- Becoming aware of one's own assumptions, preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices.

Action

- Taking action: as a consequence of all the rest, being willing and able to become involved with other people in making things different and better.



What are the ethical issues?

The Autobiography follows the ideas in this model by encouraging learners to think about their attitudes, behaviour, knowledge/skills and the action they could take. In some circumstances (see possible scenarios in 'How to use the Autobiography') teachers may wish to use the questions to stimulate learners to think more deeply and critically about their experiences. They may, in particular, wish to stimulate learners to become involved with others in making changes in themselves and their environment.

Ethical issues may arise when the Autobiography is used, especially if the student expresses negativity or hostility towards the 'other' in the encounter. Extreme negativity will need to be followed up at a later time. However, milder negative reactions may eventually assist the student to learn through the use of the Autobiography to welcome intercultural differences (or at least to accept them).

A detailed treatment of the ethical issues which could arise is beyond the scope of these Notes. However, it may be useful for facilitators to be aware of the following resources for dealing with racism and intolerance towards others which are available from the Council of Europe:

Young People Facing Difference. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1995.

All Different, All Equal: Education Pack - Ideas, Resources, Methods and Activities for Informal Intercultural Education with Young People and Adults. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2005.

Domino: A Manual to Use Peer Group Education as a Means to Fight Racism, Xenophobia, Anti-semitism and Intolerance (2nd edition). Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2005.

Compass: A Manual on Human Rights Education with Young People (3rd edition). Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2007.

Companion: A Campaign Guide about Education and Learning for Change in Diversity, Human Rights and Participation. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2007.

COMPASITO: Manual on Human Rights Education for Children. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2008.

Living in Democracy, EDC/HRE Volume III, Council of Europe Publishing, 2008.



Who can use the Autobiography?

The Autobiography is the property of the learner and can be used in a number of ways with or without the help of a teacher. Here are some possibilities:

- A school as a whole decides to offer the Autobiography to learners and all teachers may help and encourage learners to use it; for example after a class excursion with a geography or history teacher or during/ after a trip with a languages teacher;
- One particular teacher – the learners' 'class teacher' or 'tutor' – helps and encourages a class to use the Autobiography;
- A university language centre decides to introduce the Autobiography as part of a dossier students keep of their language learning, perhaps linked to the European Language Portfolio;
- In a Youth Centre, Youth Workers suggest that the Autobiography should be used by young people if there is a clash of ideas and experiences among them;
- Learners are left to use the Autobiography whenever they wish, perhaps with help and encouragement from parents (who will need some explanation such as these Notes for Facilitators);

- A group of teachers (for example teachers of the language of schooling taught as a subject, foreign languages, citizenship education, history or geography) co-ordinate to use the Autobiography for the exploitation of cross-curricular themes.

There are two versions of the Autobiography:

- **Version for Younger Learners** - approximately up to age 10-12 where the language has been simplified and some complex issues have been omitted;
- **Standard Version** - for all others, but here too learners are encouraged to make their own choice of which questions they should answer.

The decision about which one to offer to learners in the age range 10-12 is a matter of teachers' judgement of their learners.



What are the responsibilities of teachers and other facilitators?

The Autobiography is the property of the learner and can be a very private document. This creates some special conditions for teachers who might wish to consider the following options:

- Teachers only encourage learners to use the Autobiography as a private diary; they do not see the Autobiography, unless invited by learners, and they do not oblige learners to use it;
- Teachers act as 'mentors', reading and discussing the Autobiography with individuals (and the record in this case need not be written; it could be an audio-recording which the learner keeps);
- Teachers encourage pairs of learners to act as 'mentors' for each other; one may be older than the other;

- The Autobiography is completed by a whole class of learners in connection with a specific event (such as a class excursion) OR it is completed only when the learner wishes.

In all of these, and many other, circumstances, it is important to assure confidentiality if learners wish.

If teachers intend that learners should share their experiences and what they write in their Autobiography, then learners need to be told this in advance.



Action

The questions which ask learners about actions they have taken or might take as a consequence of the intercultural experience are particularly important. Teachers and other facilitators need to consider if and how they actively encourage learners to engage in some activity. There are ethical issues here, about whether teachers should take this responsibility or not.

The decision will be for each teacher/facilitator, or group of these, or may be an institutional policy as a whole. The decision will vary from teacher to teacher, from institution to institution and from one education system to another, depending on the traditions and responsibilities which teachers and others usually take.

Practical matters

How to interpret the Autobiography

If facilitators are acting as mentors helping learners to complete the Autobiography, they should *not* treat it as a questionnaire:

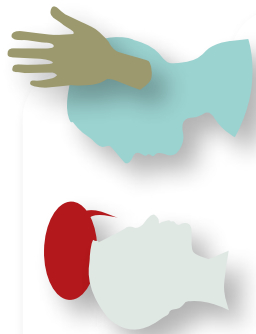
- The questions need not all be used – only those which are useful;
- Facilitators can interpret/explain/paraphrase the questions, using them as a framework for discussion of an intercultural experience.

How to record the experience

There are two main approaches (but others can be used):

- Learners write – by hand or computer – in their own words what they want to say (either completely privately or during/after discussion with a teacher or other mentor);
- Learners and mentors (a facilitator/teacher or another learner – who may be of the same age or older) discuss their experience and make an audio-recording of the conversation, or make an audio-recording at home (perhaps with the help of parents).

It is recommended that teachers complete the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters themselves before using it with their class.



Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Theoretical indicators

1. The encounter

Title

Give the encounter a name which says something about it...

Description

What happened when you met this person / these people?

Time

When did it happen?

Location

Where did it happen? What were you doing there?

Was it... (please tick one or more)

- ☐ study –
- ☐ leisure –
- ☐ on holiday –
- ☐ at work –
- ☐ at school –
- ☐ other –



Importance

Why have you chosen this experience?

Was it because... (please tick one or more)

- ☐ It made me think about something I had not thought about before
- ☐ It was the first time I had had this kind of experience...
- ☐ It was the most recent experience of that kind

- ☐ It surprised me
- ☐ It disappointed me
- ☐ It pleased me
- ☐ It angered me
- ☐ It changed me

Add any other reactions in your own words and say what you think caused your reaction...

2. The other person or people

Who else was involved?

THEORY – acknowledgment of identities

Give the name of the person or people if you know...

Write something about them...

**What was the first thing you noticed about them? What did they look like?
What clothes were they wearing?**

Were they male / female, or older / younger than you, or did they belong to a different nationality or religion or region, or any other thing you think is important about them

3. Your feelings

Describe how you felt at the time by completing these sentences?

My feelings or emotions at the time were...

My thoughts at the time were...

What I did at the time was...

(for example did you pretend you had not noticed something that was strange?
Did you change the subject of the conversation which had become embarrassing?
Did you ask questions about what you found strange?)...



4. The other person's feelings

Imagine yourself in their position...

How do you think the other people felt in the situation at the time?

This can be difficult but try and imagine what they felt at the time.

Happy or upset / stressed, or what? How did you know?

What do you think they were thinking when all this happened?

Do you think they found it strange, or interesting, or what?

Choose one or more of these or add your own and say why you have chosen it.

THEORY – Tolerance for ambiguity

For them it was an everyday experience/an unusual experience/a surprising experience/a shocking experience/because...

Choose one or more of the options below and complete the sentence or add your own ideas.

The other people involved in the experience appeared to have the following feelings
- surprise/shock/delight/no special feelings/...

THEORY – Respect for otherness

I noticed this because of what they did/said and/or how they looked,
for example they... (say what you noticed)

I am not sure because they seemed to hide their feelings...

5. Same and different

Thinking about the similarities and differences between the ways in which you thought and felt about the situation and the ways in which they thought and felt about it...

were you aware at the time of any similarities and, if so, what were they?

THEORY - Empathy

were you aware at the time of any differences and, if so, what were they?

Looking back at the situation...

are you aware now of any other similarities, and if so what are they?

are you aware now of any other differences, and if so what are they?

How do you see your own thoughts, feelings and actions now?



First thoughts

Choose one or more of the following and complete the sentence
OR invent your own.

The way I acted in the experience was appropriate because what I did was...
I think I could have acted differently by doing the following...
I think the best reaction from me would have been...
My reaction was good because...
I hid my emotions by...

6. Talking to each other

When you think about how you spoke to or communicated with the other people, do you remember that you made adjustments in how you talked or wrote to them?

First thoughts

THEORY - Communicative awareness

Further ideas – for example:

I was talking to them in my own language and I noticed I needed to make adjustments to help them understand me, for example...

I was not speaking in my own language and I had to make adjustments to make myself understood - to simplify/to explain using gestures, by explaining a word, by...

I noticed things about how they spoke – that they simplified, that they used gestures, that they spoke more slowly...

Did you already have any knowledge or previous experience which helped you to communicate better?

First thoughts

THEORY - Knowledge

Further ideas – for example:

I already knew things about how people communicate and behave in other groups which helped me to understand the experience and communicate better – I knew for example that...

I knew that other people involved in the experience thought and acted differently because of what they had learnt as children, for example...



7. Finding out more

There may have been things in the experience which puzzled you and you tried to find out more at the time.

If you did so, how did you do it?

If you have found out an answer since, how did you do it?

For example:

There were things I did not understand, so I tried to find out by asking questions at the time/reading about it/looking on the internet/asking questions...

I used the following sources for information...

When finding new information I noticed the following similarities and differences with things I know from my own society...

The following things still puzzle me...

THEORY - Knowledge discovery

8. Using comparisons to understand

People often compare things in other groups or cultures with similar things in their own.

Did you do this? Did it help you to understand what was happening?

THEORY - Interpreting and relating

For example:

The experience involved some things which were similar to what I know in my own group and these are the things I noticed...

There were some things which were different from my own group...



9. Thinking back and looking forward

THEORY - Critical cultural awareness

If, when you look back, you draw conclusions about the experience, what are they?

Complete as many of these as you can...

I liked the experience for the following reasons...

I disliked the experience for the following reasons...

There were some things which **I approve** of and these are my reasons...

There were some things which **I disapprove** of and these are my reasons...

Try to imagine that you are telling someone you know well about all this. It could be your brother or sister for example.

Do you think they would have the same opinions as you? Would they approve and disapprove of the same things for the same reasons?

Try to think about why people you know well and who belong to the same group(s) as you (same family, same religion, same country, same region etc) might have the same reactions and write your explanation here:

Did the experience change you? How?

THEORY - Action orientation

Did you decide to do something as a result of this experience? What did you do?

Will you decide to do something as a result of doing this Autobiography? If so, what?

Feedback form for facilitators

The team that developed the AIE would be very interested to receive feedback from facilitators. If you have any information or comments to offer about your experience of using the AIE, please use the form available on the website to send these to the team.

When you have completed this form electronically, it should be sent as an email attachment to the following address:

AIEfeedback@coe.int