



Project INTEGRA: using drama to support integration for migrants

A Dublin-based theatre company has been using its innovative drama techniques to support migrants in Ireland to train themselves in how to develop basic language skills for managing financial matters.

What most Irish citizens regard as routine financial transactions can be a nightmare for new arrivals to our shores, even those who have some competence in spoken or written English. Over the last two years Mary Moynihan and Freda Manweiler of Smashing Times Theatre Company have developed a series of new drama workshops that have been used as tools by migrant community members in Ireland to train their peers in how to have basic dealings with financial institutions and government agencies.

The initiative is part of a European wide partnership involving 11 countries. Smashing Times Theatre Company is the key partner from Ireland, working in collaboration with organisations from Lithuania (the coordinating group) and from Britain, Germany, Spain, Romania, Poland, Greece, the Netherlands, Turkey and Belarus.

Now in its second year 'Project INTEGRA – Migrants Integrating Kit: Basic Language for Dealing with Financial Matters' is a Grundtvig multilateral project funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme. Grundtvig supports both formal adult education and more informal types of adult education such as autonomous learning, community learning or experiential learning.

As part of the project Smashing Times Theatre Company developed two sets of workshops available to communities free of charge; firstly, workshops aimed at training members of migrant communities to conduct the 'Language Skills Training Workshops' and secondly, the actual 'Language Skills Workshops' conducted with new members of migrant communities and using drama and theatre to develop basic language skills for dealing with financial matters.

According to Freda Manweiler, project manager with Smashing Times Theatre Company, the drama techniques and exercises used in the project have been successful in building confidence, imparting language skills and practicing techniques in dealing with banks, credit unions, government departments and

other financial companies and individuals, such as landlords. "It is supporting the participants to become integrated into Irish society, to become the Irish citizens of the future", she said.

Topics covered include: opening a bank account; the exchange and transfer of money; negotiating payments for accommodation; claiming social benefit; borrowing money and getting credit; and reporting a stolen bank card by telephone.

At the beginning of the process, Smashing Times Theatre Company made contact with a number of social partners in Ireland, including the Migrant Rights Centre, Spirasi, the Vincentian Refugee Centre and the Dublin School of English. These organisations made valuable contributions to the research on the project, which later developed into the training workshops in the Carmichael Centre in Dublin's north inner city and other venues.

A crucial aspect to the work has been 'training the trainers' – the identification of potential trainers in the migrant and immigrant communities and teaching them to conduct the workshops themselves. Six training workshops were conducted with six trainers representing the migrant community, domestic workers and refugee and asylum seekers from Ukraine, Eritrea, South Africa and the Central Asian country of Uzbekistan.

On completion of their training they passed on what they learned through the workshop model to more than 40 other participants by conducting language

skills workshops through drama in their local communities. Participants from Pakistan, Somalia, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Ukraine, India, Nigeria and Eritrea, and ranging in age from 18 to 60, have now all benefited from these trainers.

A further key aspect to the project is the website, www.integra-project.eu, developed with input from all 11 participating groups across Europe. As part of the training everyone uses the website to access resources, ask questions of trainers in Ireland and other countries, and provide feedback.

Remarkably, perhaps, the degree of competence in English didn't necessarily correlate to a swifter grasp of the financial skills and interactions being learned. Freda Manweiler reported that some trainees with basic English quickly absorbed the financial terminology and were able to 'act it out'. With others, although they were more fluent in English, they found it harder to understand the concepts involved. "As with so much else in life and learning, a person's own interests and abilities were what counted, and these factors drove them on to overcome the language difficulties", she said.

What also helped was the active learning model being used in the drama workshops. A workshop on 'Opening a Bank Account', for instance, would begin by using a drama game, the 'Energy Circle', to introduce key words relating to the topic. This would be followed by two physical games, 'Walk in Pairs' and 'Bomb and Shield' to develop concentration and group and spatial skills. Finally, the workshop participants would prepare a short improvisation using words and phrases from a prepared handout on the particular topic. They would divide into

pairs or groups of four to perform the improvisations and then discuss the issues raised. Alternatively, having read the handout, the group would perform or read a short play script prepared by the theatre company on the theme of 'Opening a Bank Account', followed by a discussion.

Feedback from the trainers and their fellow migrant workers in the workshops has been very enthusiastic, all of them enjoying how they have learned financial language skills without having to sit down with pen and paper. For some of the women involved it has been a particularly empowering experience, learning how to apply for and obtain their own credit card, as one example. It is hoped that, having 'trained the trainers', the project will continue into the future with more and more immigrants learning these important life skills in a stimulating and fun environment.

According to feedback from the participants the training and workshops were "fun" and "enjoyable" and "helped with learning new words and gaining an understanding of financial terms". The trainers developed "an understanding of how the games and exercises work and how they can be used to help people learn". There was positive feedback also on "learning by doing" and "learning while having fun and how the energy in the room (generated by drama) helped people learn".

Three other participants recorded their views on the project as follows:

"I have learnt skills on how to deal with financial issues in an interesting way and to be able to teach other people in an easy and understandable way".

“When I went on a different course we usually only write and listen to the teacher. In this course I play in different games, I have action and when my body has action I speak English with other people...it is a very interesting system for education.”

“To have the opportunity to be able to do this course, it’s going to change the lives of other people and we had fun doing it and we made friends. ”

For Smashing Times Theatre Company, Freda Manweiler has no doubts about the value of the drama exercises and how they can be applied to many other areas of life and education: “Smashing Times Theatre Company has successfully adapted the methodologies of drama and theatre to explore issues related to positive mental health and suicide prevention, through its long-running programme, Acting for the Future.

“The company has also successfully adapted the methodologies of drama and theatre to promote anti-racism and anti-sectarianism in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties. As part of our commitment to promoting social justice, we are delighted to be involved in this project and to continue our commitment to using innovative and creative approaches to engaging communities in active learning.”

For information on the project please view a short video on

<http://vimeo.com/43393014>.

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Contact:

Freda Manweiler,
Smashing Times Theatre Company Limited,

Coleraine House,
Coleraine Street,
Dublin 7,
Ireland.
T: 01 865 6613
Email: freda@smashingtimes.ie
Web: www.smashingtimes.ie