

Interview Irena Žemaitaitytė (Soros International House, LT)

1. Name and profession / position

Irena Žemaitaitytė, professor and deputy director of Mykolas Romeris University's Institute of Educational Sciences and Social Work.

2. In your opinion, why is multiculturalism and development of adult educators' intercultural communication skills important in Lithuanian society?

These things are important because Lithuania is an open country and there are many foreigners coming, also a lot of Lithuanians leaving and coming back with a changed mindset. For society, to accept other cultures and to be open to others is particularly important. Intercultural communication is a difficult challenge, which does not only depend on knowing the English language – there are a lot of nuances in vocabulary and intonation.

3. Briefly describe your work with adult learners. How many of them have been multicultural? How are they different from Lithuanian learners?

For a long time, we have had full-time foreign students, and of course we have Erasmus exchange students, so I interact with multicultural students every day as a deputy director and a professor. I have had some students from Africa, and they seemed to be a little less motivated than Lithuanian students, who, usually keep separate from any foreign students. However, the students from Africa got a lot more motivated when they were in the same classroom with foreign Erasmus students. All foreign students usually form a separate expat community and interact with Lithuanian students only if they happen to live together in the same dorm room.

4. What is your personal experience with developing your intercultural communication skills?

It has mostly been learning from my own experience. Although, I remember in the year 2000 or 2001, I went to an ICC workshop in Finland, which was remarkably interesting. The trainers showed us a picture with signs for male and female toilets, which were triangles – with the triangle pointing up meaning the female toilet, because the triangle was supposed to look like a dress. However, in Arab cultures, men also wear clothes similar to dresses. Even my European colleague had trouble understanding which toilet to use when she came to Lithuania in 2001. So, there is a lot to learn in ICC. I have also learned a lot by working with European projects.

5. How is teaching multicultural learners different from teaching Lithuanian adult learners? What kind of multicultural activities do you use in your training?



Teaching multicultural learners is different, first of all, because it is a challenge to lecturers. When every student brings their own culture – Korean, Italian, Belgian, Spanish, or Portuguese, they bring their own attitudes and expectations. When conducting activities in those kinds of multicultural groups, tasks are usually very general. But it is good when students present those tasks from their cultural perspective – it enriches everyone’s experience. Students learn from one another.

6. How well has the educational system and society prepared you for teaching multicultural learners?

I do not know how well society is able to prepare anyone for teaching multicultural learners. The educational system – has somewhat prepared me. However, in the very beginning, lecturers were basically “thrown into” teaching foreign students, no one was preparing them in any way. So, it was through each of our experiences that we learned about teaching multicultural learners, no one told

us about what foreign students were like. So we had to learn on our own that, let’s say, African students from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon are completely different, and we cannot just call them African – just like it would not be fair for them to treat all Europeans like we are all the same.

7. What is the impact of multicultural educational activities on the learners? Do the relationships between local people and foreigners change? What about the relationship between adult educators and adult learners? Does it really change attitudes and behavior?

The relationship between local people and foreigners is changing little by little, our society is becoming more open and tolerant, especially this is true when talking about the younger generation.

8. Have you had any challenges, and do you have any success stories?

I had some challenges when I was a lecturer. In Lithuania, our learning culture is heavily based on writing, and for some foreign students that I was teaching at the time, in their culture, learning was mostly based on speaking. When those students got written assignments, they did not like it and tried to challenge us by confronting us and even calling us racist, this way testing our limits to see if we would let them out of the assignment. This situation turned into a success story because after we explained to these foreign students that they were equal full-time students in our 4-year university program and got identical assignments as other Lithuanian students, they seemed to be very happy and they left the office smiling and thanking us.

9. Do you have any advice for other adult educators?

Always respect the learner, do not try to show that you know better because the learner may actually know better than you. They may express their knowledge differently, but they have a lot of their own experience. Also, the more we know about the specific country that the learner comes from, and the more



we know about their culture, the easier it is to interact with them. We cannot learn all of the languages, but we can learn about the cultures.

