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The MELLIE Project: Intercultural Collaborative Storytelling

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Abstract

This paper accounts for the MELLIE Project (Migrant English Language, Literacy and Intercultural Education), a collaborative storytelling project involving asylum seekers and refugees living in Direct Provision (DP) and volunteer students and staff from Dublin City University. The project was designed to enhance the DP residents' English language as well as to overcome their social isolation and lack of contact with the local community, and to also develop greater intercultural awareness and understanding on both sides. The first paper, written by Julie Daniel (PhD candidate) explores the rationale and objectives of the project.

Keywords: Narratives, Storytelling, Language learning, Intercultural communication, Mellie Project, Asylum seekers, Political refugees, Direct Provision

Introduction

Acknowledging the challenges that the integration into European societies of a substantial number of asylum seekers and refugees represents, particularly in a context of a perceived identity crisis throughout the European Union, this article outlines the rationale and objectives behind MELLIE (Migrant English Language and , a collaborative storytelling project, first piloted in the spring 2017 in Dublin City University (DCU), the first Irish university to be designated 'University of Sanctuary'. This paper explores how the project was designed in response to the lack of contact of asylum seekers and refugees with the local population, in all its diversity, and with Irish culture. It discusses how the question of literacy and language acquisition is addressed, as it represents a key to freedom and integration and yet is still a major obstacle for many.

Context

Ireland, like many other European countries, is experiencing a wave of migration, and for a country with a strong emigration tradition, its scope is unprecedented. In a context of economic austerity, social division and political crisis, the welcoming of newcomers is complex. Asylum seekers arriving in Ireland, while waiting for their case to be examined in order to be granted (or not) the formal status of refugee, are placed under a reception system known as Direct Provision (DP). There are currently 35 centers around the country which provide them with shelter, food and other various basic requirements, as well as a weekly allowance of €21.60 per adult. Initially set up in late 1999 as a provisional measure in response to the large number of

arrivals, it has changed very little over the past 18 years and forces asylum seekers to “live in a state of enforced idleness” as the Irish Immigrant Support centre, Nasq,¹ reports. Indeed, while safety and a relative material comfort are assumed, the right to work is extremely limited and education for those above the age of 18 is inaccessible, mainly due to lack of financial resources. In 2014, after years of campaigning of various NGOs, the Irish government established a ‘Working Group on the Protection Process and Direct Provision’ aiming to make recommendations on both the protection process and the reception system which resulted in the publication of a rapport known as the McMahon Report.² However, a satisfying and sustainable integration into Irish society remains a challenge for many as the DP centres, often situated in remote locations around the country, make contacts with local communities difficult and represent a barrier to intercultural exchange and language learning.

Awareness of these particular asylum issues has been raised, with particular attention drawn to language acquisition³ and access to education.⁴ On the 17th of May 2017, asylum seekers met with the Irish Minister for Justice and Equality and presented a manifesto which identified issues that needed to be addressed urgently and talked of the English language in the following terms:

Learning English is the key to integration. The current provision of English classes by the State is inadequate. [...] The ghettoised nature of many centres means there is not the contact with local communities which would facilitate English language learning and interaction. Zuhur Quasim (Somalia)⁵

In the domain of education some courses are starting to emerge due to initiatives such as the Dublin City University (DCU) *University of Sanctuary*. Inspired by the City of Sanctuary movement, first established in Sheffield, U.K., in 2005 and which promotes the culture of welcoming asylum seekers and refugees, DCU was designated University of Sanctuary in December 2016, becoming the first higher education institution in Ireland to be awarded this label. The designation was in recognition of a range of projects demonstrating commitment to welcoming asylum seekers and refugees into the university community and to fostering a culture of inclusion for all. One sanctuary initiative, a collaborative storytelling project, called MELLIE,⁶ was first set up in March 2017. The MELLIE project’s main objective is to improve asylum seekers’ English language skills and understanding of Irish culture through establishing and developing meaningful contacts with DCU volunteers, who, in turn, get insights into the migrants’ life journeys and cultures on a reciprocal basis. Participants meet on campus once a week in order to co-write their life stories with a focus on people’s hopes and aspirations.

Migrant English Language and Intercultural Education: The MELLIE Project

Why storytelling?

Through storytelling, the MELLE project aims to develop sustainable language learning which will allow its asylum seekers and refugees participants to interact in a meaningful way with Irish society. Indeed, through shared contact, asylum seekers and refugee participants will improve their English, gain a better understanding of Irish culture in all its diversity, and potentially make new friends. Narrative approaches are considered appropriate and ethical

¹ The Irish Immigrant Support Center (Nasc), Finn, 2017

² McMahon Report 2015

³ Egan and Dundar, 2017

⁴ McMahon Report, 2015

⁵ City of Sanctuary, Dublin website

⁶ MELLIE: Migrant English Language Literacy and Intercultural Education

tools for research engaging with vulnerable populations,⁷ including refugees and those seeking asylum as participants can author their life stories, thus gaining a unique voice. This section will first analyse the rationale behind the method chosen to support the project and then evaluate two pilots, which were carried out respectively in the Spring of 2017 and the Spring of 2018.

In the field of migration studies, the interest in narrative approaches, such as storytelling, has been growing among practitioners in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of storied lives, with a stronger focus on the human aspect of migration.⁸ These approaches also offer a good insight into the lives of those seeking asylum when analysing integration in the host society. Daiute⁹ who has worked extensively on the notion of 'Refuge', notes the holistic benefit of storytelling and writes that narration can symbolically enact refuge. According to Lenette,¹⁰ it "provides an opportunity for storytellers to meaningfully deconstruct and connect aspects of their internalized evolving life stories". Socially situated praxis, such as storytelling, is also gaining exposure in education. Bell remarks that, within minorities, this type of narrative approach directly affects the ways in which learners experience "immigration, settlement and language as the learning is wrapped in the story they hold"¹¹ with an intrinsically human and universal dimension.

The medium of storytelling in the context of the MELLIE project, with a group of individuals who come from various backgrounds and cultures and who may have suffered various traumatic experiences, is particularly relevant. Its didactic possibilities are powerful as the very nature of the narrative discourse makes it ideal to develop literacies and languages skills. Reissman says that "stories don't fall from the sky...they are compared and received in contexts - interactional, historical, institutional and discursive".¹² Indeed, knowing a language is not limited to the sole understanding of words but it implies a capacity to use this knowledge in various contexts.¹³ With the interview approach, on which most narrative inquiries are based, the participants go beyond the words, as they often use body language such as gestures and hands,¹⁴ reinforcing the paralinguistics.¹⁵ Storytelling and narratives put language in motion, thus embodying the concept of "languaging"¹⁶ in which language acquisition is no longer seen as yet another school subject but "a process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language"¹⁷. Storytelling in the MELLIE project allows one-to-one exchanges with a proficient speaker, facilitates direct feedback and develops a set of competences in the target language in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Gass explains that intercommunication in language learning is primordial:

Through input and interactions with interlocutors, language learners have the opportunities to notice differences between their own formulations of the target language and the language of their conversational partners.¹⁸

⁷ Clandinin, 2000, Gimignani 2011, Caine et al, 2013

⁸ Abkhezr, 2108, Lennette, 2018

⁹ Daiute, 2017

¹⁰ Lenette, 2018 p.3

¹¹ Bell, 2002 p.211

¹² Reissman, 2008, p.105

¹³ Gee 2008

¹⁴ Reissman, 2008

¹⁵ Sheekey, 2015

¹⁶ Swain 2006

¹⁷ Swain, 2006, p. 97

¹⁸ Gass, 2006, p.3

Such praxis resonates with critical pedagogy and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*¹⁹ in which empowerment is established as a pillar of education, leading to a sustainable development of the student. In this approach, through dialogue, educators work together with learners to co-build knowledge in such a manner that learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and to become educated citizens of the world, echoing Freire's definition of literacy which implies "reading the word and reading the world".²⁰ Indeed, being literate in a language is complex. In recent years, in a fast-growing global context of multiculturalism and omnipresent technology, language teaching has become more responsive to linguistic and cultural diversity²¹ and the definition of literacy has expanded from a general narrow understanding of how to read and write to a wider interpretation which involves various kinds of knowledge and the ability to situate that knowledge in different contexts.²² The word "literacy" is to be seen in the plural, becoming multiliteracies, defined as "the multimodal combination of linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural and audio modes in texts in response to the changing nature of communication, increased cultural diversity and plurality of textual practices".²³

The MELLIE project pilots

One of the main difficulties that arises for migrants throughout the language learning process is the absence of meaningful relationships in the target language. For many asylum seekers, this results in a lack of contact with local communities, leading to strong social exclusion, language being both the key and the biggest obstacle to integration.²⁴ In the Irish context, a research report commissioned by Nasc,²⁵ as well as a 2018 study by Čatibušić, et al²⁶ have highlighted that provision of language classes is minimal and lacks in continuity as well as authenticity and does not guarantee any contact with native speakers other than the teacher.

The MELLIE project was designed as an alternative to this problem, seeking to ensure balanced exchanges and the co-building of knowledge to enable asylum seekers in Ireland to function as full citizens in Irish society and to develop durable literacies. Using interactive practices as promoted in experiential learning, it gives learners the opportunity to "learn from each others' experiences, being actively and personally engaged in the process".²⁷ This approach ensures that participants build knowledge collaboratively on what they already know, allowing "regular returns to lifeworld knowledge and prior experience".²⁸ Sociocultural studies²⁹ have demonstrated that language acquisition succeeds when learners can participate in the community in which they live and learn as "such an approach involves shifting the focus of investigation from language structure to language use in context and to the issue of affiliation and belonging".³⁰

The MELLIE Project Pilot 1

¹⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970

²⁰ Freire 1985 p.156

²¹ Cazden et al. 1996 pp. 60-92, Gee, 2008

²² Gee, 2008, Paesani et al. 2016

²³ Cazden et al, 1996 p.65

²⁴ Akresh et al., 2014, Beacco, J., et al. 2014

²⁵ Egan and Dunbar 2007

²⁶ forthcoming, 2019

²⁷ Kohonen, 2001 p.23

²⁸ Cope and Kalantzis, 2015 p.15

²⁹ Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000

³⁰ Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, p.156

As part of its University of Sanctuary designation, in which Dublin City University commits to foster a culture of welcome for all, and in particular to expand opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees in the community, the first pilot of the storytelling project was launched in February 2017 for a six-week period. Twenty participants were enrolled from the DCU staff (academic and administrative) and student (undergraduate and postgraduate) body, following a rigorous recruitment process, in which the need for a full commitment was stressed. Ethical and intercultural awareness was also foregrounded as part of the training.

An equivalent number of asylum seekers and refugees from various countries, with a minimum of a A2³¹ on the CEFR in English,³² were recruited in Mosney Direct Provision Centre, situated in Co. Meath, approximately 40 km north of DCU. This particular center was chosen for its vicinity to the university but also because this former holiday camp is situated in a rather remote location. The lack of convenient direct public transport makes it awkward to reach as well as difficult for the residents to leave, should they not have a car. Therefore, the need to provide transport for all the participants became obvious and a bus was hired. This vital element proved to be the main cost of the project, making the whole programme dependent of external fundings. In total, 40 participants met on campus once a week for a 2-hour session during which they were placed in pairs and interviewed one another with the help of a set of guided questions, inspired by the work of Peter Sheekey.³³

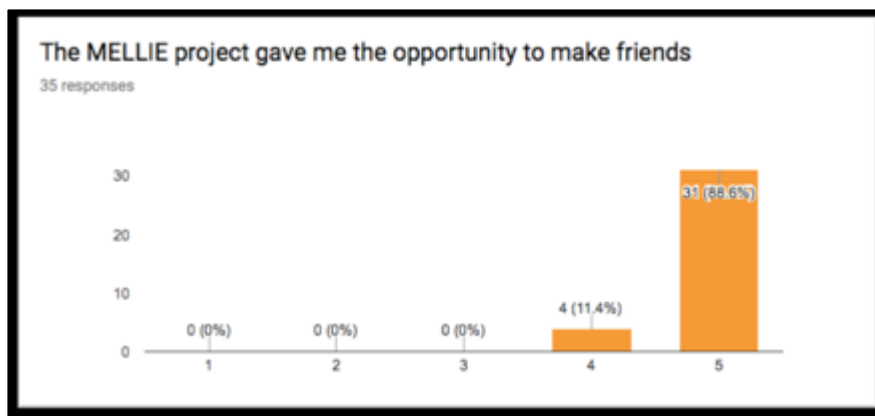
Three themes were discussed during the first pilot: “Arrivals”, relating to first impressions (of Ireland, but not necessarily) but also of metaphorical new departures or turning points in one's life; “Old Town”, referring to places one has loved and that have changed; and, finally, a play, entitled “Éire, land of a hundred thousand welcomes” performed by a local high school dealing with reactions by young Irish people to the so-called “migration crisis”. Each pair was given a notebook in which they could take notes while interviewing their partners and were then tasked with writing, using their notes, their partner's story, bringing it back the following week for discussion and edits. At the end of the programme each participant received a certificate.

According to the results of an evaluation carried out after the last session, conducted with paper and pencil, the pilot project was deemed successful on the whole: 97.1 % thought MELLIE should run again and 94.3% stated that they would be willing to participate again. The answer to the question on “making friends” (Fig.1) was highly positive (88%), thereby reinforcing the sociocultural hypothesis that integration will benefit from the fostering of meaningful relationships.

³¹ Equivalent to upper beginner

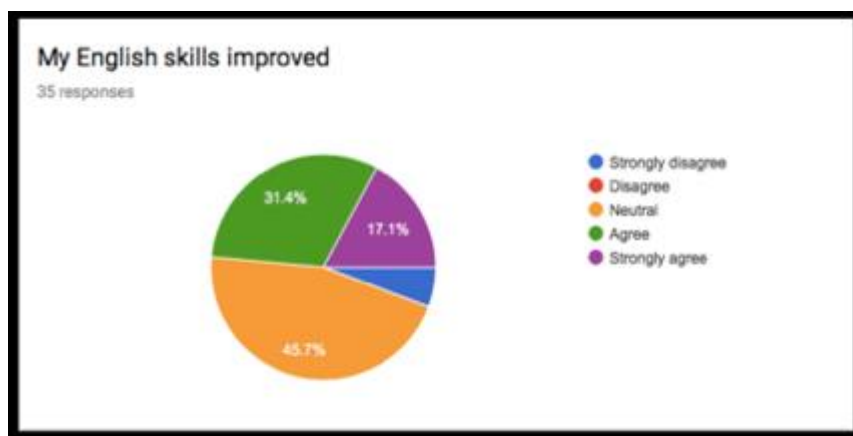
³² Common European Framework of Reference for languages

³³ Sheekey, 2015



(Fig.1) Mellie feedback results on making friends

However, regarding the improvement of overall English language skills, the results were mixed, with a large number of answers being neutral. Although 65.7% of respondents stated it improved their listening skills, only 31.4% agreed and 17.1% agreed strongly that in general, their English skills had improved (Fig. 2). These results could be explained, on the one hand, by the fact the project ran for a limited period of time (91.4% of participants thought it was too short) and on the other hand by the lack of an evaluation tool to measure progress in language acquisition.



(Fig.2) MELLIE Pilot 1 feedback results on English skills

The MELLIE Project Pilot 2

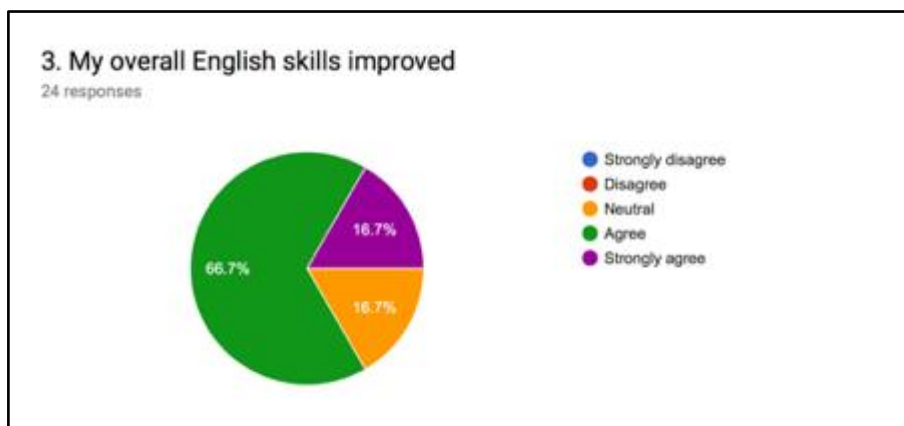
Following the enthusiasm for its first venture, it was decided that the MELLIE project should run again, for a longer period of 11 weeks, with some adjustments. This time it was decided to double the numbers on both sides (40+40), to allow as many participants as possible to take part. This also coincided with the arrival of a substantial number of new Syrian families in Mosney Accommodation Center. To address the findings regarding the lack of measurable improvement in English language, a new focus on language was put in place, including adequate language test tools at entry and exit levels, inspired by the Common European Framework of Reference for languages³⁴ to test the main language competences, listening,

³⁴CEFR

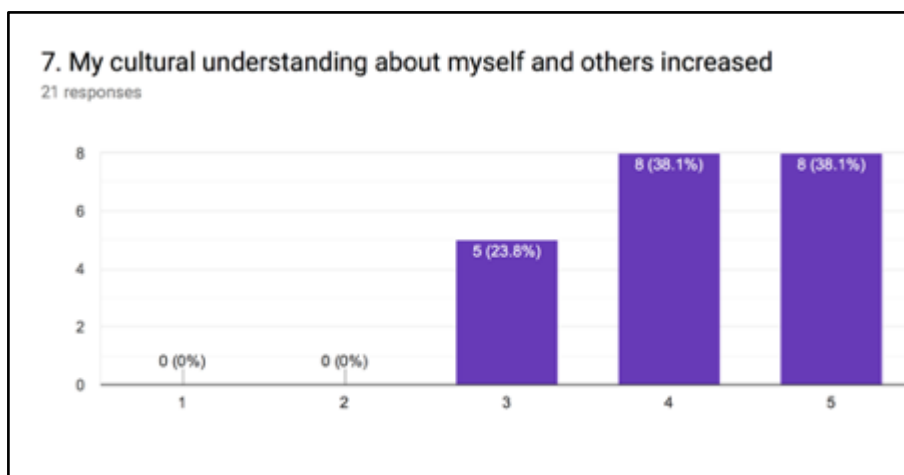
reading, writing and speaking, and thus to allow participants to see their progression in a more tangible way.

A stronger focus on language was also introduced in the training where asylum seeker past participants were invited to relate their Mellie experience, in particular when dealing with new vocabulary. A longer period of time (one academic semester) allowed for more effective relationship-building between the partners and gave the Mosney residents the opportunity to improve their English language proficiency. In addition, the time spent between each interview was shortened, with the two partners interviewing one another on the same theme during the same session rather than every alternate week.

It was also decided, in order to be more democratic and to resonate more strongly with our new asylum seeker cohort, composed for the most part of young adults, to “refresh” the interview themes, by asking all the participants what they would like to discuss and by introducing new topics such as food and entertainment, the role of women in society, or what it means to share; others involved poetry or photography. In some of the sessions, on a voluntary basis, workshops facilitated by participants themselves were included in the programme: from Arabic language for beginners to yoga. This was an attempt to ensure a balance in power in all the interactions, allowing everyone involved to equally share their knowledge and past experience. Through the various interviews and activities, participants questioned meaning and co-constructed new knowledge in tandem. As a result, when the Pilot 2 evaluation was conducted, in answer to the question “*Do you think your general level of English has improved?*” the response was more favourable, with 16.7% strongly agreeing and 66.7% agreeing with the statement (Fig.3). Results on the development of intercultural competences were also encouraging with 38% of the respondents agreeing and 38% strongly agreeing to the statement “*my cultural understanding about myself and others increased*” (Fig.4).



(Fig.3) MELLIE Pilot 2 feedback results on English skills



(Fig.4) MELLIE Pilot 2 feedback results on cultural awareness.

In summary, feedback received after the second pilot indicates both the linguistic and social usefulness of the Mellie storytelling project, reinforcing Sheekey's conclusions in his doctoral thesis that narrative approaches break the isolation which some long-term migrants may face.³⁵

Because we learned many things in this course. It was great to learn English and know Irish culture and make friends and read and write English'

'It was amazing, we learned a lot of things, God bless you'

It was useful. I actually improved my language skills

It was something new'

'It was very good and my suggestion is that you should continue. This is a good opportunity for the people living in D.P'

'I thought before that writing a story is difficult but then I found out that it is not that hard '

'I have learnt many things, it was a good experience to meet new people and to learn about their culture and to teach them about mine.'

(Fig.5) Quotes from Mellie Pilot 2 evaluation, 2018

Limitations

Refugee and asylum seeker participants, whose lives in their country of origin have often been shattered by terrible circumstances, may also face uncertain futures in Ireland, with no guarantee of being able to stay in the country for some, and for others, experiencing major difficulties in finding housing, employment or opportunities to further their education. The very nature of the project, involving a "vulnerable" population, implies having to deal with

³⁵ (Sheekey, 2015)

many variables, including a degree of the flux in the number of participants attending the weekly sessions as well as varying levels of commitment. These can be explained by a variety of reasons, including last minute administrative commitments, relocation to another accommodation center or mental health issues.

The project also requires a certain amount of mediation as some tensions, although rare, may occur between participants from different ethnic groups. Regarding the linguistic aspect of the project, difficulties arose in the second pilot when assessing language levels. One situation involved a discrepancy between the participants' own perception of their level of English, often rather over-estimated, and the results given after the tests were administered by the DCU team. This often led, understandably, to disappointment. Secondly, while the DCU volunteers received some basic training in second language acquisition and testing in advance of the programme, as many were not language professionals, they experienced some challenges in assessing levels of language competence. In these instances, results were monitored, and where necessary, re-evaluated, by the Mellie coordination team .

While most participants attended regularly and developed genuine friendships with their partners through animated conversations while on campus, for most, going home and writing the stories on their own from one week to the other proved challenging. This resulted in fewer narrative accounts being written, and, therefore, with missing data for the researcher.

Finally, although the Mellie project is part of a larger DCU sanctuary initiative, which has become one of the pillars of the university's strategic plan, the project relies solely on donations from individual donors as well as on fundraiser campaigns organised by its volunteers, which may, in the long term jeopardise the sustainability of the project. These issues, as well as the feedback given by participants in the various evaluations of the project, are addressed in the third iteration of the DCU Sanctuary storytelling project, commencing in 2019.

Conclusions

The MELLIE storytelling project has proven beneficial in many respects, and in particular, with regard to enhancing meaningful linguistic and intercultural exchange between asylum seekers and refugees living in Direct Provision and members of the DCU community, leading to a better understanding of the other. Operating as a social and cultural bridge, countering racist and xenophobic trends that have been on the rise in Europe, it aims to foster a culture of welcome and support for those who are keen to integrate and make a fresh start in life in Ireland. Its narrative approach acknowledges the people behind the stories, providing an opportunity to share values, culture and past experience. The medium of storytelling gives a voice to the storytellers, allowing them to construct meaning and knowledge, thus regaining degrees of agency over their own lives as well as reinforcing their individual identities.³⁶

Finally, with a focus on reciprocal teaching and learning, the Mellie storytelling project can be viewed as a tool against what the Nigerian writer Adichie calls "the danger of the single story" by which multiple and therefore less stereotypical cultural representations are the privilege of powerful majorities or elites, to the detriment of those less fortunate who do not get the opportunity to tell their stories from so many different voices (Adichie, 2009). The Mellie project provides a space for these stories to be told and to be heard, breaking the routine and isolation faced by many living in Direct Provision in Ireland.

³⁶ Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000

For us the stories w[ere] an opportunity to get out of our way. We felt that there are those who hear us. We really need someone to hear us. It was a good idea.” (Muhammad, interviewed by Paul*³⁷, April 2017).

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³⁷ Names have been changed

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