

The New Human Landscapes of Iceland: A Worldful of People and Languages

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Abstract

As the world looks today—and maybe always has—the “human landscapes” are in a constant state of change. The movement of people and the changes in the landscapes is a fact that has to be considered in social, educational, and cultural areas and services provided in society. Over the past 15 years the number of people, from all over the world living in Iceland, has greatly increased. Today about 14% of the citizens in Reykjavik are immigrants. The largest groups are from Poland, Lithuania, and the Philippines. When the landscapes change, we have to revise our cultural maps. Since 2008, Reykjavik City Library runs several intercultural programs and, within these projects, tries to create ties between people, life stories, and languages represented in the capital city of Iceland. All the projects are built on collaboration with diverse partners in society, especially the educational sector. In this article the reader will gain insight to some of them—and examples of visualizing the changes in the human landscapes in creative ways.

Keywords: *self-directed learning, diversity, interculture*

Intercultural Projects at Reykjavik City Library

The Reykjavik City Library began its intercultural activities as pilot projects by hiring the author as project manager 2008. The projects are now an integrated part of inter-and-multiculturalism in Reykjavik, in the cultural, social, and educational fields. These inter-and-multicultural projects have been introduced, and in some cases transferred, to other countries such as Belgium, the Czech Republic, Spain, Canada, Greece, and Denmark. The main idea behind the work is that individuals or groups should be seen in a wide context, rather than as “icons” for one nationality or another, and that the projects should appeal to “local people” as well as “global people.”

Desiring to contribute to a vibrant intercultural society, and the development of intercultural competence, the target groups are both Icelanders and world citizens living in Iceland. The goal is to promote awareness of the positive values of cultural and linguistic diversity—values that can contribute to dialogue and coexistence in society.

Cooperation Partners—the Fundamental of the Work

The library puts an emphasis on cooperating with schools, educational, cultural, social institutions, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and individuals from all over the world liv-

ing in Reykjavik. Among our partners are; The University of Iceland, The Department of Education and Leisure of Reykjavik, The Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages, The Red Cross, The Human Rights Office of Reykjavik, artists, social workers, language schools and the two NGOs “Mother Tongue Association” and “W.O.M.E.N. in Iceland” (Women of multicultural ethnicity network in Iceland).

At Reykjavik City Library we use the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural organization) Multicultural Library Manifesto as a guideline in the multicultural projects. The objectives of our work are to:

- Encourage social integration, understanding and respect.
- Introduce Icelandic society to immigrants and vice versa through cultural and social encounters.
- Enhance immigrants’ language skills in Icelandic.
- Enhance awareness of linguistic diversity and intercultural competence among citizens.
- Encourage an open dialogue in society.
- Make connections between citizens through culture and the arts
- Create an informative and dynamic forum of communication for diverse groups in society.
- Break down isolation and encourage compassion towards others.
- Make a visit to the library an integral part of the daily lives of immigrants.

Roots and Wings

There is an old Indian proverb saying: *There are two gifts we should give our children; one is roots, and the other is wings.*

Before returning to Iceland, after 30 years in Denmark, having grown up there from the age of six, I worked as a language teacher for almost 10 years. I was drawn this proverb early in my teaching life, and I choose to implement it into my current professional life. It relates to discussion of languages whether mother-tongues or foreign languages.

You can say that languages are the roots of our personalities and the wings that help us fly, whether native or foreign language we learn to master. Our native tongue gives us the roots to our self-image and other languages we learn bring us wings and help us to connect with the world. This can also be reversed because new languages bring us new roots and a solid knowledge of our native tongue can help to take our imagination anywhere we like, beyond the horizon and further.

At the library we embrace linguistic diversity which is why we have several permanent language projects during the year. We also have festive events on celebration days, such as the European Language Day in September, and the International Mother Language Day, which is celebrated all over the world in February with pomp and splendor. Such festive days give us the opportunity to draw special attention to the importance of languages, as well as the linguistic resources of multilingual citizens. But with projects such as Café Lingua, The Flying Carpet encounters, Reykjavik Safari (an annual culture walk for immigrants in different languages), we try to highlight the richness of multilingualism not only on occasion of the above mentioned “special days.” We need to celebrate the diversity of languages throughout the year and stimulate mother tongue and language skills of children and young people every day.

It is important not to rip people up with roots when they spread their wings and move between countries. Sometimes we forget that those who come into our society, whether people returning, or immigrants and refugees, bring life experiences, stories, life styles, and languages that can enrich the community.

Why roots and wings? These concepts are important in the life of an individual and for the development of self-esteem. It is the responsibility of parents, teachers, and all those working with children in the field of education and culture, to help young people to connect to their roots and to create opportunities to acquire their wings.

Awareness of where you come from, your story, and origin, is what helps you to find your place in life and to create the feeling of belonging, wherever you live. To understand others we have to understand ourselves, and for others to understand us, we need good language skills.

It is not enough to have strong roots, we also need wings. Wings that give us freedom and enable us to dare to get acquainted with new paths and go beyond our comfort zone. The new languages we learn widen our horizons and let us see things from new angles.

A person who masters many languages can be a treasure for most work places. One of the most important capacities of individuals of the future is to keep good relations with others, across cultures, and languages.

By developing and embracing language skills and different forms of expression in the school system, we can educate creative and critical thinking individuals who know themselves and understand the world well. With this we also strengthen democratic and active participation in society. Language skills are one of the most important tools for that purpose.

In the following I will give examples of how we embrace and celebrate that citizens from all over the world, have come to Iceland, and bringing us an ocean of languages and cultural experiences. More than 100 languages are spoken in Iceland.

The Flying Carpet: Intercultural Encounters

The author created a method and has developed it as part of her teaching in Denmark and in the intercultural field in Iceland over the past 17 years. The goal of the method is promoting mutual respect and understanding between people, in a concrete way, and through various means of expression. Everyone involved is to be received with acknowledgement. The cultural interaction should help one develop life-skills that foster the view that diversity makes us richer, rather than seeing it as a cause for conflict. Students, parents, and staff members get an opportunity to introduce their personal culture and interests in a fun and lively way within an encouraging environment.

The emphasis is to not only to work with aspects of national culture or backgrounds, but also individual interests and those things that matter the most in an individual's life. What the participants would like to share, and the ways they would like to communicate who they are, is based on personal choice, and need not necessarily reflect their native culture. Again, nobody should automatically be seen as an icon of any particular group.

The main goal is to embrace diversity, focus on the pupils' strengths, and to enhance intercultural competence in the educational system. During the process the concept *culture* is discussed with the pupils; *what is culture, what is my culture, what makes me proud, what is important in our lives, what do we have in common?* All students take part, and the project is not to be seen as an event of cultivating "othering," where some groups are seen as the "different" ones. The biggest

and most essential question that the children work with is what makes them shine. This is why everybody makes their own Sun, with themselves in the middle, in the first phase of the project, where their strengths appear as the sunbeams.

The project manager assists teachers and students in organizing intercultural encounters in primary schools, elementary schools, and colleges. The project has become part of the intercultural curriculum supported by both the Icelandic Department of Education and the Department of Culture in Reykjavik. About 35 schools have taken part so far. Schools can apply to become an Intercultural Encounter School, thereby making the project more sustainable. Nine schools in Reykjavik currently are identified as Intercultural Encounter Schools.

The Flying Carpet has its own home page with guidelines for teachers: www.flyingcarpet.world. Some comments from teachers and headmasters are to be found here in English: www.borgarbokasafn.is/node/1043. There are videos documenting the method to be found at: <https://vimeo.com/216181451> and <https://vimeo.com/182948112/b4b5a5b759>.

In September 2017 The Flying Carpet will be the Icelandic contribution to the Nordic Language Festival in Aarhus, Denmark, and will take part at the art museum of the city, AROS.

Café Lingua: Living Languages

The Café Lingua is a platform for those who want to enhance their language skills (Icelandic or other languages), a place to chat and communicate in various languages, as well as a gateway into different cultures. One of the goals is to activate the languages that have found their way to Iceland, enriching life and culture, while at the same time to give immigrants the option to express themselves in Icelandic by introducing their mother tongue to other citizens. The linguistic events are held in different places around the city and aim to let everyone interested contribute to the linguistic landscape of Reykjavik. The “unveiling” of the world languages spoken in Iceland by immigrants seems to be a successful way of promoting a positive awareness of linguistic diversity.

At some events a single language is introduced in a lively way by immigrants. At other events, such as Language Rendez-vous, multiple languages are introduced. This model was implemented at the University of Iceland, and has built bridges between multilingual students and the Icelandic students studying languages. There are a wide range of partners in this project, including The Department of Foreign Languages and Icelandic as a Second Language at the University of Iceland, The Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of foreign Languages, and several NGOs. As a result of European grants, The Café Lingua model from the Reykjavik City Library has been implemented in Czech Republic.

The Women’s Story Circle and the New Map of Iceland

The Women’s Story Circle provides a space for everybody on the map and makes a framework where the story of every individual can bloom. This is a project that fulfills the goals mentioned in the beginning of the article. It is a forum where women exchange stories, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. In addition, they take part in creative workshops as well as cultural visits and excursions. A creative writing workshop, a clown course, and a drama course, resulting in a multilingual performance, have also been among the projects. The language of communication is mainly Icelandic, but women participating also communicate in all varied foreign languages.

The Women’s Story Circle was founded in November 2008. Since then several hundred women, both Icelandic and non-Icelandic, have participated in the program, and new participants continue to join. The intention is to connect women with one another and to create a platform for network and friendship. The project is a cooperation between the library and W.O.M.E.N. in Iceland, an NGO whose goal is to unite, express, and address the interests and issues of women of foreign origin living in Iceland.

Two of the works of art were created out of the project are now icons representing multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue in Iceland. They were created using the Australian Aboriginal method of painting with dots. Both paintings are maps, one of Reykjavik and the other of Iceland. What makes these paintings unique is the fact that the women have personalized the maps with symbols that are significant to their lives, be that a connection to their own personal stories, their country of origin, Iceland, or another place in the world important to them.

The map of Reykjavik was made in 2011 and quickly caught the attention of Kaffitár, one of the largest coffee companies in Iceland, who approached to ask whether The Women’s Story Circle would be interested in making a painting, in the same spirit, to be used as the new branding and logo for the company. This led to a fruitful cooperation resulting in shedding light on how diverse backgrounds are now a vibrant part of Iceland’s cultural landscapes.

“A new map of Iceland” is a painting created by 35 women from all over the world. It was unveiled at The National Museum, by Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, former president of Iceland, in the spring 2014. Since then, it can be found on coffee and chocolate packaging, in super markets, and cars covered in the art work.

In addition, the art piece is exhibited on the walls of cafés, with a photo of the women behind it, and a short description, in Icelandic and their mother tongues, of their contribution to this colorful and lively version of Iceland. Everybody seems to adore what visually came out of this warm and creative process—but also the story behind its existence.

We are pleased that the idea has spread. “A New Map of Greece” was painted by students from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in the same spirit as the Icelandic map. In the autumn 2017, The Women’s Story Circle is going to change the world by creating yet another map, this time a map of the world.

A video of the Women’s Story Circle can be found at: <https://vimeo.com/216507392>.

Additional Examples of Intercultural/Multilingual Projects

- “Reykjavik Safari,” a guided walk in multiple languages where immigrants introduce other immigrants to cultural life of Reykjavik in their mother tongue.
- Story telling in different languages.
- A celebration of the International Mother Language Day in February and The European Day of Languages in September.
- “Children teach children languages,” programs where children introduce their mother tongue to peers.

Information about all the intercultural projects of Reykjavik City Library:

The web page of Reykjavik City Library can be accessed at: <http://borgarbokasafn.is/en/content/multicultural-projects>.

In 2017, a handbook with digital guidelines as to how projects have been developed, will be made in Icelandic and English. To share best practice projects in education, the Reykjavik City Library the Ministry of Culture and Education, in cooperation with the Nordic Conference, will feature Flying Carpet projects at a May 2018 international Nordic Conference in Reykjavik.

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