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# Learner Diversity and Identities

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Special Issue:

Addressing Issues of Refugee Integration:  
Insights from the “Curing the Limbo” Project

# The International Journal of Learner Diversity and Identities

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SPECIAL ISSUE: ADDRESSING ISSUES OF REFUGEE INTEGRATION:  
INSIGHTS FROM THE “CURING THE LIMBO” PROJECT



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# Scope and Concerns

## LEARNING AND EDUCATION: THEIR BREADTH AND DEPTH

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“Learning” is bigger than education. Humans are born with an innate capacity to learn, and over the span of a lifetime learning never stops. Learning simply happens as people engage with each other, interact with the natural world, and move about in the world they have constructed. Indeed, one of the things that makes us distinctively human is our enormous capacity to learn. Other species learn too, from the tiniest of insects to the smartest of chimpanzees. But none have practices of pedagogy or institutions of education. As a consequence, the main way in which other species develop over time is through the incremental, biological adaptations of evolution. Change is natural. It is slow.

Education makes human learning, unlike the learning of any other creature. Learning allows humans to escape the strict determinations of nature. It gives humans the resources with which to understand themselves and their world and to transform their conditions of living, for better or for worse.

Education is a peculiarly human capacity to nurture learning in a conscious way and to create social contexts that have been specially designed for that purpose: the institutions of education. Everyday learning happens naturally, everywhere and all the time. Education—encompassing institutions, its curricula, and its pedagogies—is learning by design.

## THE ART AND SCIENCE OF TEACHING

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Teaching happens everywhere. Many people are naturally quite good at teaching. They explain things clearly. They are patient. And they have the knack of explaining just enough, but not too much, so the learner gains a sense that they are gradually mastering something, albeit with a more knowledgeable person’s support. You can find the practice of teaching in action everywhere in everyday life. In fact, it is impossible to imagine everyday life without it. Teaching and learning are integral to our nature as humans.

Teaching is also a vocation, a profession. People in the business of teaching are good at their job when they have developed and applied the dispositions and sensibilities of the person who is a good teacher in everyday life.

But there is much more to the teaching profession than having a natural knack, however well practiced. There is also a science to education, which adds method and reflexivity to the art of teaching, and is backed up by a body of specialist knowledge. This science asks and attempts to answer fundamental and searching questions. How does learning happen? How do we organize teaching so it is most effective? What works for learners? And when it works, how do we know it has worked? The science of education attempts to answer these questions in a well thought-through and soundly analyzed way.

## LEARNING PRACTICES

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Learning is how a person or a group comes to know, and knowing consists of a variety of types of action. In learning, a knower positions themselves in relation to the knowable and engages. Knowing entails doing—experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, or applying—for instance.

A learner brings their own person to the act of knowing, their subjectivity. When engagement occurs, they become a more or less transformed person. Their horizons of knowing and acting have been expanded.

Learning can be analyzed at three levels: “pedagogy,” or the microdynamics of moments of teaching and learning; “curriculum,” or the learning designs for particular areas of knowledge; and “education” or the overall institutional setting in which pedagogy and curriculum are located.

Pedagogy is a planned and deliberate process whereby one person helps another to learn. This is what First Peoples did through various formalized rites of passage, from child to adult to elder—learning law, spirituality, and nature. It is also how teachers in the era of modern, mass, institutionalized education have organized the learners in their classrooms and their learning. Pedagogy is the science and practice of the dynamics of knowing. Assessment is the measure of pedagogy: interpreting the shape and extent of the knower’s transformation.

Curriculum is the substantive content of learning and its organization into subjects and topics—mathematics, history, physical education, and the like. In places of formal and systematic teaching and learning, pedagogy occurs within these larger frameworks in which the processes of engagement are given structure and order. These are often defined by specific contents and methodologies, hence the distinctive “disciplines.” Well might we ask, what is the nature and future of “literacy,” “numeracy,” “science,” “history,” “social studies,” “economics,” “physical education,” and the like? How are they connected with each other and a world in a state of dynamic transformation? And how do we evaluate their effectiveness as curriculum?

Education has traditionally been used with reference formal learning communities, the institutions of school, college, and university that first appeared along with the emergence of writing as a tool for public administration (to train, for instance, “mandarins” or public officials in imperial China, or the writers of cuneiform in ancient Mesopotamia/Iraq); to support religions founded on sacred texts (the Islamic madrasa or the Christian monastery); and to transmit formally developed knowledge and wisdom (the Academy of ancient Athens, or Confucian teaching in China).

Learning happens everywhere and all the time. It is an intrinsic part of our human natures. Education, however is learning by design, in community settings specially designed as such—the institutions of early childhood, school, technical/vocational, university, and adult education. Education also sometimes takes informal or semiformal forms within settings whose primary rationale is commercial or communal, including workplaces, community groups, households, or public places.

## TOWARD A SCIENCE OF EDUCATION

What is this overarching institution, “education?” In its most visible manifestation it consists of its institutional forms: schools, colleges, and universities. But, more broadly conceived, education is a social process, a relationship of teaching and learning. As a professional practice, it is a discipline.

The science of education analyzes pedagogy, curriculum, and educational institutions. It is a discipline or body of knowledge about learning and teaching—about how these practices are conceived and realized.

“Science” or “discipline” refers to a privileged kind of knowledge, created by people with special skills who mostly work in research, academic, or teaching jobs. It involves careful experimentation, and focused observation. Scientists systematically explore phenomena, discover facts and patterns, and gradually build these into theories that describe the world. Over time, we come to trust these and ascribe to them the authority of science.

In this spirit, we might create a science of education that focuses on the brain as a biological entity and the mind as a source of behaviors (cognitive science). Or we might set up experiments in which we carefully explore the facts of learning in order to prove what works or doesn’t work. Like the medical scientist, we might give some learners a dosage of a certain kind of educational

medicine and others a placebo, to see whether a particular intervention produces better test results—such are the formal experimental methods of randomized, controlled trials.

Often, however, we need to know more. It is indeed helpful to know something of how the mind works, but what of the cultural conditions that also form the thinking person? We need good proofs of which kinds of educational interventions work, but what if the research questions we are asking or the tests we are using to evaluate results can only measure a narrow range of capacities and knowledge? What if the tests can prove that the intervention works—scores are going up—but some learners are not engaged by a curriculum that has been retrofitted to the tests? What if the tests only succeed in measuring recall of the facts that the tests expect the learners to have acquired—simple, multiple-choice or yes/no answers? A critic of such “standardized testing” may ask, what’s the use of this in a world in which facts can always be looked up, but problem solving and creativity are now more sought-after capacities, and there can be more than one valid and useful answer to most of the more important questions? For these reasons, we also need to work with a broader understanding of the discipline of education, based on a broader definition of science than experimental methods.

## AN INTERDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE



The discipline of education is grounded in the science of learning, or how people come to know. It is a science that explores what knowing is. It focuses on how babies, then young people, then adults, learn. Education-as-science is a specially focused form of knowing: knowing how knowing happens and how capacities to know develop. It is, in a sense, the science of all sciences. It is also concerned with the organization of teaching that supports systematic, formal learning and the institutions in which that learning occurs.

Too often, education is regarded as a poor cousin of other disciplines in the university—the natural sciences, the humanities, and the other professions, for instance. It is regarded as something that enables other disciplines, rather than being a discipline in its own right. This is often reflected in reduced levels of research funding, lower student entry requirements, and the destination salaries of graduates. Education seems to be less rigorous and derivative. Its disciplinary base borrowed from other, apparently more foundational disciplines—sociology, history, psychology, cognitive science, linguistics, philosophy—and the substantive knowledge of various subject areas, such as literature, science, and mathematics.

For sure, education is broader-ranging and more eclectic than other disciplines. Education draws on a number of disciplinary strands—the philosophy of knowledge (epistemology), the cognitive science of perception and learning, developmental psychology, the history of modern institutions, the sociology of diverse communities, the linguistics and semiotics of meaning—to name just a few of education’s disciplinary perspectives. These and other strands come together to make the discipline of education. In this sense, education is more than a discipline—it is an extraordinarily interdisciplinary endeavor.

## EDUCATION AS THE SCIENCE OF SCIENCES



Education is also the soil in which all other disciplines grow. You can’t do any of the other disciplines in a university or college except through the medium of education. No other discipline exists except through its learning. A novice can only enter a discipline—physics, or law, or history, or literature—through education, learning the accumulated knowledge that has become that discipline. In this sense, education is more than just interdisciplinary. It does more than just stitch together other disciplines. It is a metadiscipline, essential as the practical grounding of all disciplines. Education is the discipline of disciplines.

Education is the systematic investigation of how humans come to know. It focuses on formal, institutionalized learning at all its levels from preschool to school, college, and university. Education is also concerned with the processes of informal learning—how babies

learn to speak at home, or how children and adults learn to use an interface or play a game. It is concerned with how organizations and groups learn, collecting and acquiring knowledge that is applied in their communities, professions, and workplaces. In fact, as knowledge is needed and used everywhere, learning happens everywhere. There is no part of our lives to where the discipline of education cannot provide a useful perspective.

Maybe, then, education is more than just an interdisciplinary place that ties together shreds and patches from other disciplines—a bit of psychology here, a bit of sociology there, a bit of management there. Education should be regarded as the metadisciplinary foundation of all disciplines. Its focus is the science of knowing, no less.

The metadiscipline of education inquires into learning, or how we come to know and be. Education-as-metadiscipline explores knowing and being. It analyzes how people and groups learn and come to be what they are. As such, it is an especially expansive exploration of knowing. It is interested to know how knowing happens and how capacities to know develop.

## **EDUCATION IS THE NEW PHILOSOPHY**



What if we were to think of education in these more expansive and more ambitious ways? If we are to think in these terms, then the intellectual and practical agenda of education is no less than to explore the bases and pragmatics of human knowledge: becoming and identity. Education asks this ur-disciplinary question: How is it that we come to know and be, as individuals and collectively? If this is education’s central question, surely, then, we can argue that it is the source of all other disciplines? It is the means by which all other disciplines come into being.

Philosophy used to claim a metadisciplinary position like this. It was the discipline where students not only thought, but thought about thinking. However, for decades, philosophy has been making itself less relevant. It has become too word-bound, too obscure, too formal, and too disconnected from practical, lived experience.

But philosophy’s metaquestions still need to be asked. Education should perhaps take the former position of philosophy as the discipline of disciplines, and do it more engagingly and relevantly than philosophy ever did. Education is the new philosophy.

## **INVESTING IN EDUCATION FOR A “KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY”**



Add to these expanded intellectual ambitions, widened ambitions for education in public discourse and everyday social reality—and these should be good times to be an educator.

Politicians and captains of industry alike tell us that knowledge is now a key factor of production, a fundamental basis of competitiveness—at the personal, enterprise, and national levels. And as knowledge is a product of learning, education is more important than ever. This is why education has become such a prominent topic in the public discourse of social promise.

The expectations of education have been ratcheted up. More than ever before, people are saying that education is pivotal to social and economic progress. This does not necessarily translate immediately into greater public investment in education (a businesslike approach one would think). But today’s rhetoric about the importance of education does give educators greater leverage in the public discourse than we had until recently.

Stated simply, in a knowledge economy in which more and more jobs require greater depths of knowledge, schools must do what they can to bridge the knowledge gaps. If they can achieve this, they are at least doing something to ameliorate the worst systemic material inequalities. Schools, in other words, have a new opportunity, a new responsibility, and a new challenge to build societies that are more inclusive of social classes whose access to material resources was historically limited.

Despite this, educators struggle to find the resources to meet increasing expectations, despite all talk of a “knowledge society” and “new economy.” We may have listened to this rhetoric with a great deal of skepticism given the struggles we educators face.

Nevertheless, we need to grasp what is rhetorically or genuinely new in our times. We must seize the drift of contemporary public discourse, and position ourselves centrally. Here is our chance: the stuff of knowledge is no more and no less than the stuff of learning. Surely too, this new kind of society requires a new kind of learning and that a new social status is ascribed to education. It is our role as educators to advocate for education and to make a claim for the allocation of the social resources required in order to meet expanding expectations.

## DESIGNS FOR SOCIAL FUTURES: TOWARD “NEW LEARNING”

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How might we imagine a better society which locates education at the heart of things? This heart may well be economic in the sense that it is bound to material self-improvement or personal ambition. Equally, however, education is a space to re-imagine and try out a new and better world which delivers improved material, environmental, and cultural outcomes for all. Education must surely be a place of open possibilities, for personal growth, for social transformation, and for the deepening of democracy. Such is the agenda of “New Learning,” explicitly or implicitly. This agenda holds whether our work and thinking is expansive and philosophical or local and finely grained.

If we were to choose a single word to characterize the agenda of the New Learning, it is to be “transformative.” New Learning is thus not simply based on a reading of change. It is also grounded in an optimistic agenda in which we educators can constructively contribute to change. If knowledge is indeed as pivotal in contemporary society as the “new economy” commentators and politicians claim, then educators should seize the agenda and position themselves as forces of change. We have a professional responsibility to be change agents who design the education for the future and who, in so doing, also help design the future.

You might see this as a sensible conservatism, sensible for being realistic about the contemporary forces of technology, globalization, and cultural change. Or you could see it to be an emancipatory agenda that aspires to make a future that is different from the present by addressing its many crises—of poverty, environment, cultural difference, and existential meaning, for instance. In other words, the transformation may be pragmatic (enabling learners to do their best in the given social conditions) or it may be emancipatory (making the world a better place) or it may be both.

At its best, transformative New Learning embodies a realistic view of contemporary society, or the kinds of knowledge and capacities for knowing that children need to develop in order to be good workers in a “knowledge economy”; participating citizens in a globalized, cosmopolitan society; and balanced personalities in a society that affords a range of life choices that at times feels overwhelming. It nurtures the social sensibilities of a kind of person who understands that they determine the world by their actions as much as they are determined by that world. It creates a person who understands how their individual needs are inextricably linked with their responsibility to work for the common good as we become more and more closely connected into ever-expanding and overlapping social networks.

The issue is not merely one of quantity. It is not simply a matter of providing more education for more people. While many nations persevere with educational structures founded in the nineteenth century or earlier, the knowledge economy demands different and creative approaches to learning. Schools, at least in their traditional form, may not dominate the educational landscape of the twenty-first century. Neat segregations of the past may crumble. Givens may give.

## LEARNER DIVERSITY

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No learning exists without learners, in all their diversity. It is a distinctive feature of the New Learning to recognize the enormous variability of lifeworld circumstances that learners bring to learning. The demographics are insistent: material (class, locale, family circumstances), corporeal (age, race, sex and sexuality, and physical and mental characteristics) and symbolic (culture, language, gender, affinity, and persona). This conceptual starting point helps explain the telling patterns of educational and social outcomes.

Behind these demographics are real people, who have always already learned and whose range of learning possibilities are both boundless and circumscribed by what they have learned already and what they have become through that learning. Here we encounter the raw material diversity—of human experiences, dispositions, sensibilities, epistemologies, and world views. These are always far more varied and complex than the raw demographics would at first glance suggest. Learning succeeds or fails to the extent that it engages the varied identities and subjectivities of learners. Engagement produces opportunity, equity, and participation. Failure to engage produces failure, disadvantage, and inequality.

The questions we face as educators today are big, the challenges sometimes daunting. How do we, for instance, ensure that education fulfills its democratic mission, through quality teaching, a transformative curriculum and dedicated programs that address inequality? Targeting groups who are disadvantaged and “at risk” is an essential responsibility of educators, not on the basis of moral arguments alone but also because of the economic and social dangers of allowing individuals and groups to be excluded.

## EDUCATION’S AGENDAS

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In this time of extraordinary social transformation and uncertainty, educators need to consider themselves to be designers of social futures, to search out new ways to address the learning needs of our society, and in so doing to position education at an inarguably central place in society. Professional educators of tomorrow will not be people who simply enact received systems, standards, organizational structures, and professional ethics.

Indeed, powerful educational ideas—about how people act and build knowledge in context and in collaboration with others, for instance—could well become leading social ideas in currently more privileged areas of endeavor, such as business and technology. Perhaps, if we can succeed at putting education at the heart of the designs for society’s future, we might even be able to succeed in our various campaigns to ensure that education is innovative, empowering, just, and adequately resourced.

Education in all its aspects is in a moment of transition today. The idea of “New Learning” contrasts what education has been like in the past, with the changes we are experiencing today, with an imaginative view of the possible features of learning environments in the near future. What will learning be like, and what will teachers’ jobs be like? Are we educators well-equipped enough to answer the questions we encounter and address the challenges we face? Does our discipline provide us with the intellectual wherewithal to face changes of these proportions? It could, but only if we conceive education to be a science as rigorous in its methods and as ambitious in its scope as any other.

Education’s agenda is intellectually expansive and practically ambitious. It is learner-transformative, enabling productive workers, participating citizens, and fulfilled persons. And it is world-transformative as we interrogate the human nature of learning and its role in imagining and enacting new ways of being human and living socially: shaping our identities, framing our ways of belonging, using technologies, representing meanings in new ways and through new media, building participatory spaces, and collaborating to build and rebuild the world. These are enormous intellectual and practical challenges.

Transformative education is an act of imagination for the future of learning and an attempt to find practical ways to develop aspects of this future in the educational practices of the present. It is an open-ended struggle rather than a clear destination, a process rather than a formula for action. It is a work-in-progress.

The science of education is a domain of social imagination, experimentation, invention, and action. It's big. It's ambitious. And it's determinedly practical.

The Learning Conference, journals, book imprint, and online community provide a forum for dialogue about the nature and future of learning. They are places for presenting research and reflections on education both in general terms and through the minutiae of practice. They attempt to build an agenda for a new learning, and more ambitiously an agenda for a knowledge society which is as good as the promise of its name.



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# Toward a Holistic Approach to Refugee Integration

Thalia Dragonas,<sup>1</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

*Abstract: The present article is the introduction to the special issue on “Refugee Integration.” This article discusses a holistic model of refugee integration into the urban fabric of Athens, Greece, in connection with the project “Curing the Limbo.” It looks critically at the concept of integration and presents the challenges inherent in the process of inclusion in the host society; it frames the work within the Greek enduring migration crisis and the specific sociopolitical context, provides an outline of the multi-partner project and its various components, and introduces the five articles of the special issue, which refer to activities realized by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, one of the four partners involved.*

*Keywords: Holistic Refugee Integration, “Curing the Limbo,” Greek Migration Policy, Collaborative Action Research*

## Introduction

The present special issue discusses refugee integration into the urban fabric of Athens, Greece, in connection with the project “Curing the Limbo: From Apathy to Active Citizenship,” funded by Urban Innovative Actions (UIA).<sup>2</sup> While beneficiaries of the UIA initiative are urban authorities, given the complexity of urban challenges and UIA’s principle for innovative solutions, key stakeholders are involved, such as organizations, research institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil societies that can bring knowledge and expertise on the specific policy issue addressed. The issue in question was the migrant integration policy into the Athenian society, the Municipality of Athens (MoA) was the urban authority that initiated “Curing the Limbo,” and the stakeholders involved were the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (UoA) and two NGOs, the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). In the five articles included in the special issue, we will discuss the contribution of the UoA and, more specifically, the instruction of Greek and English as foreign languages; the provision of audiovisual expression and creativity workshops; the delivery of capacity-building empowering the “Curing the Limbo” team; and the training of cultural mediators. They will be framed within the broader “Curing the Limbo” project and the ideas that have informed it, as well as the context of the migration issue in Greece.

## Integration Challenges

There is no single consensual theory or model of migrant integration. The term ‘integration’ may vary contextually depending on the displaced people’s incentives to flee; on perspectives, values, and interests; as well as on the repercussions of integration at the national and community level. There are a number of definitional issues as regards both integration and displaced people. All related definitions have different connotations, and no one is ideologically neutral (Castles et al. 2002). We use the term ‘integration’ to broadly denote the process by which immigrants become part of a receiving society, incorporating the conceptual

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Thalia Dragonas, 13 Navarinou Street, Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, 10680, Greece. email: thdragona@ecd.uoa.gr

<sup>2</sup> UIA is an initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. So far, UIA has funded seven projects that tackle the complex challenge of migrant integration with methods and tools that intervene upon several dimensions of the integration process, such as identity, psychology, culture, social participation, and employability. These seven projects were realized, besides Athens, by the municipalities of Antwerp, Bologna, Utrecht, Vienna, Coventry, and Fuenlabrada.

which immigrants become part of a receiving society, incorporating the conceptual understanding that there is a critical interaction between newcomers and hosts in a two-way process of adaptation. Migrants are often expected to integrate into the existing society and culture without any reciprocal adjustment, while for “Curing the Limbo,” the interdependence of the actors involved was a *sine qua non* condition.

As far as the definition of migrants is concerned, the changing character of international migration has blurred the boundaries between economic migrants and refugees—the first having, supposedly, taken the decision to migrate freely while the latter having been forced by a compelling external factor. We claim that behind all such displacement, there is always some ‘compelling’ factor having to do with people’s survival. Thus, we prefer to employ the umbrella term ‘migrant,’ used by OECD (2016), denoting permanent and temporary displaced people with valid residence, asylum seekers, or undocumented migrants. Yet, despite the fact that the lived reality and needs of all three groups are similar, not all are subject to the same laws. Consequently, the MoA conforming to the legal term adopted by the state mechanism, in designing “Curing the Limbo,” officially distinguished ‘migrants’ from ‘refugees’ as well as the latter from ‘asylum seekers’—‘refugees’ have applied for asylum and been granted protection benefitting from national asylum laws or EU legislation, and ‘asylum seekers’ have submitted a claim for such protection and awaiting the final decision.

Irrespective of the controversy and debate surrounding the above terms, integration remains important as policy, as a governmental headache, and as a targeted outcome for projects working with displaced people. Effective integration can only take place if the host society provides services, access to jobs, and acceptance of migrants in social interaction. Moreover, migrants with official asylum status are entitled to special protection, involving, among others, provision of social protection and access to social services facilitating thus their settlement and integration. Castles et al. (2002) distinguish between functional aspects of integration, placing emphasis on the availability and quality of social services and on rights and access to them from other less paid attention to, but important aspects of social integration, such as wider societal interaction and sociocultural and civil participation.

Studies that have tried to empirically determine ‘successful’ integration have identified several aspects of inclusion in resettlement settings. Ager and Strang (2008) propose key dimensions of integration under four themes: achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education, and health; assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social connection within and between groups within the community; and structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture, and the local environment. What is important, in regard to these key dimensions, is that integration is both a process and an outcome that evolves over time.

While integration precludes segmentation, in our current complex modernity, migrants may find themselves having access to one sector of society and miss out on broader patterns of integration. They may participate in education but not in the labor market, or they may be included in both but get excluded from participation in social life with the native population. Instead, it is only holistic national strategies that can convey a broad notion of integration process in its entirety. International and European bodies, such as the OECD and the European Commission, have systematically used a discourse on the value of policy coherence in addressing the multi-dimensional needs of and opportunities for migrants (OECD 2018). In a 2016 resolution, European Parliament explicitly urged for a solid, holistic strategy that would make coordinated use of funds and collaborative action in fostering durable solutions that prioritize social and economic integration, facilitate housing, healthcare, education, adult learning, training, and culture, and the establishment of positive links between the host society and refugees/asylum seekers. It moreover emphasized that a long wait for asylum status acknowledgment and exclusion of services has enormous repercussions for the integration process that should begin immediately. These recommendations have largely remained

on the discursive level since member states have been very ambivalent towards the integration of the alien ‘others’ (European Parliament 2016).

## **An Enduring Migration Crisis**

While Greece has traditionally been an emigration country, with the collapse of the communist regimes in 1990, it became, for the first time in its modern history, a country of massive reception of migrants. Large flows of migrants and co-ethnic repatriates came to Greece from the neighboring Balkan, Central, and Eastern European countries, searching for better life chances. Increasing the Greek population by 10 percent, they contributed to a dramatic change in its composition and challenged the Greek society. This sudden and unexpected phenomenon was met with administrative and political confusion with regard to migration policy and with xenophobic and racist reactions on the part of the people (Pavlou 2001; Galanis 2003; Figgou et al. 2011). Yet, despite all odds, it was obvious that migrants were here to stay. They managed, owing to the existence of extensive informal economic activity, demand for cheap labor, and a booming economy at the time, to find work across the Greek economy. After a long period of survival under the precarious conditions and undocumented status, large regularization ‘amnesty’ programs gradually accorded legal status to most of the migrant population and allowed them, despite widespread discrimination in social life and labor market, to find wage work in construction, domestic work, agriculture, tourism, and small manufactures. However, finding a place in the Greek society was largely the result of laborious individual/family strategies of migrants themselves rather than well thought out state integration policies (Kasimis and Kassimi 2004; Gropas and Triandafyllidou 2005).

While Greek society was becoming increasingly multicultural, it remained monocultural in its orientation. Policies wavered between the imagery of assimilation and exclusion. Although the regularization programs did provide migrants with a legal status, they still placed them into a provisional category having to renew their permits and rendered them a distinct category of non-Greek citizens, alien to Greek society, not belonging to the national population, with no political rights and no power to promote their collective claims (Ventoura 2004). Full social integration requires the acquisition of citizenship, and the Greek polity has been, by and large, very slow and ambivalent in providing the mechanisms for social integration that secure access to privileges and prosperity for all. Measures toward inclusion, such as local voting rights and the naturalization of second-generation migrant children taken by socialist governments, were highly debated by conservatives.

The migration story took a turn at the end of the 2000s when the channels and routes of migration shifted from European resource countries to the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Greece, which was entering an economic crisis due to last almost a decade, became the entry point of almost all displaced people using the Eastern Mediterranean route to Europe. Their aim was to head north and, more specifically, to Germany and Sweden, and they had no intention of staying in the country. In 2015, the peak year of arrivals, some 850,000 displaced people transited through Greece. This was a fivefold increase to 2014, accounting for 80 percent of those arriving in Europe (Sakellis, Spyropoulou, and Ziomas 2016). Surging in such a speedy and chaotic manner, the flow was managed by the state as a crisis ‘on the run.’ As regards public response, while only one-third of the respondents of the Political Barometer Polling (2015) were in favor of Greece receiving refugees, the drama of escaping war and persecution and the daily death toll in crossing the Greek-Turkish sea borders triggered, in several instances, solidarity, humanitarian reflexes, and civic engagement on the part of the locals, who, in addition, identified with the Greek refugees from Asia Minor in 1922 (Papataxiarchis 2016; Voutira 2003).

March of the same year signaled yet another turn: the closure of the Balkan route to Northern Europe stranded around 60,000 refugees in Greece. From a transit country, Greece was transformed overnight into a host country, faced with a bifurcated migration reality. One

reality concerned the long-term settled population that had changed the ethnic composition of the citizenry and was still grappling with fully becoming part of society, as, owing to the recession, the number of residence permits issued declined. Another reality dealt with the burgeoning wave of displaced people fleeing war, violence, persecution, and destitution, seeking asylum in a country suffering a dire economic crisis.

The first migration crisis, not having been resolved, was transformed discursively and institutionally into what is known as ‘the refugee crisis’ (Carastathis, Spathopoulou, and Tsilimpounidi 2018), which in effect is a big integration challenge. There are significant differences between the first and second waves of migration. The first was much larger than the second; it consisted of European origin economic migrants of Christian religion who arrived in Greece at a time of prosperity. In contrast, newly arrived displaced people differ ethnically from the European stereotype, are largely Muslim, many qualify for international protection, and knocked on the door of Greece at a time of severe economic crisis and of a steep rise of the far right. When comparing the dominant nationalist discourses on the first and second migration wave, regardless of factual data, it is evident that they systematically differentiate between the assimilable of the first wave and the non-assimilable of the second (Athanasίου and Tsimouris 2013).

The state apparatus was overwhelmed once the borders were closed. People’s reactions, fueled by nationalistic and populist discourses, dramatically changed from the benevolent hospitality witnessed in the earlier days to increasing discontent and pessimism about the integration potential of migrants in Greek society (Georgakopoulos 2017). The migration crisis in Greece soon morphed into a broader European one, heightening widespread anti-migrant sentiment and sparking the infamous deal between the EU and Turkey, aiming to curb the influx and to prevent unchecked arrivals of refugees entering Europe (Christopoulos and Spyropoulou 2019). Hence, the following years 2016 and 2017 were marked by a sharp decrease of new arrivals, while 2018 saw a new rise that dropped significantly only with the advent of the pandemic.

The state mobilized efforts, with European Commission emergency support, to address the needs of those who had no choice but to remain in Greece. Amidst a striking level of disorganization across the entire response to the migrant and refugee crisis (Kingsley 2016), accommodation centers were set up on the mainland and reception ones on the islands. The situation, being quite different in the two types of structures, has been far from satisfactory in both. Tensions and compromise over safe access to water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities and incidents of sexual harassment and violence within centers have been reported (Amnesty International 2018). The limited number of specialized services, slow processing of asylum applications, and lack of sufficient interpreters have been perpetuating insecurity among refugees. Traumatized by the conflicts experienced in their countries and by the sudden breakdown of family and community structures as a result of forced displacement, refugees have been living in Greece through the added stress of uncertainty and constant waiting. The psychological toll has been immense, triggering a sense of powerlessness—a characteristic of a life in limbo.

Integration, which has never been high on the government agenda, became a pressing issue for both newcomers and the host population. While there is no doubt that the refugee issue is very complex on a micro, meso, and macro scale, the Greek authorities have continuously found themselves on the back foot as new variables continuously changed the facts on the ground. According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which compares policies of migrant integration across five continents, Greece scores below the international average, and the approach to integration is classified as being ‘equal only in paper’ (Solano and Huddleston 2020). Success in this policy area would bear enormous dividends for individuals and their families but also for the broader communities in which they settle. Failure, however modest and episodic, feeds the narrative about the newcomers’ inability to integrate and fuels political divisions and mistrust toward the government (Papademetriou and Katsiaficas 2018).

An important policy measure toward a coordinated approach was the establishment of a Ministry of Migration Policy in 2016 that was tasked to manage the humanitarian crisis and to build

a comprehensive and effective integration plan. Owing to a high degree of centralized governance, municipalities have a limited role in migrant integration. However, the MoA was forced to act since 40 percent of the overall number of the newly arrived migrants and refugees landed in Athens. The first step toward integration was the transfer of as many people as possible from camps to subsidized accommodations. Apartments offer greater dignity and independence, providing people with a sense of normalcy and facilitating access to services and education. While the accommodation was initially designed for six months on the premise that refugees would manage to make a living and pay for their rent, this initial planning was silently extended. Moreover, cash assistance was provided in the form of prepaid cards to the vast majority of refugees, enabling them to flexibly meet their individual priorities while stimulating the local economy (Abrahams 2017).

As far as education goes, refugee children were initially provided non-formal education in the accommodation centers with the aid of NGOs. In 2017, the Ministry of Education designed a special education program that was offered in the afternoon, and a year later, children started enrolling in the morning school (Scientific Committee in Support of Refugee Children 2017). Greek language classes for adult refugees have been provided for years by NGOs, volunteer associations, and lately by university departments, but the field of language education addressing migrants and refugees is fragmented, depending on ad-hoc initiatives taken by institutions or individuals (Kantzou et al. 2017). The rest of the domains of integration have equally been managed in a fragmented and ad-hoc fashion. All efforts have largely operated as emergency measures that differ from a consolidated strategy, ensuring sustainable and successful integration.

### **“Curing the Limbo”: The Sociopolitical Context**

The implementation of a holistic integration paradigm was the big challenge for the “Curing the Limbo” pilot project, inevitably framed within international and national developments of the migration issue. It was launched in late Fall 2018—a year that witnessed a new rise in migration and asylum-seeking flows, reigniting once again the need for emergency measures. At the time, the radical left (SYRIZA) was in power that, far from dealing efficiently with the migrant issue, held it high on its agenda. In regard to the Municipality, the mayor, belonging to the center-left, appointed Deputy Mayors for Migrants and Refugees and for Innovation. The “Curing the Limbo” initiative fell under the jurisdiction of the latter.

In June 2019, a right-wing government (New Democracy) came to power, introducing amendments in migration policy and asylum that lowered protection standards and created unjustifiable procedural obstacles for those seeking international protection. A more punitive policy on asylum was introduced. The Ministry of Migration was repealed and subsumed to the Ministry of Citizens’ Protection, adopting thus a more securitarian approach, and seven months later, it was awkwardly re-established as the Ministry for Migration and Asylum; the decree allowing asylum seekers to obtain a social security number was revoked; and refugee rights, benefits, and accommodation were restricted. As stated by the Minister for Migration and Asylum, “our aim is to grant asylum to those entitled within 2–3 months and, from then on, we cut any benefits and accommodation, as all this works as a pull factor...Greece is cutting these benefits, anyone after the recognition of the asylum status is responsible for himself” (Asylum Information Database 2019, 217). In a year’s time, every economic inclusion indicator measured by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) showed outcomes had worsened with the only exception of the slight increase of bank accounts from 4 to 5 percent (Hernández 2020). Progress toward access to formal education also stalled. The situation in the islands was getting increasingly explosive as problems were not being resolved. Both the inhabitants and the asylum seekers were involved in protests and clashes with the local police—the first claiming their “island back” and the latter demanding better living conditions.

Before any meaningful dialogue could be established, Turkey unilaterally opened up its western borders to asylum seekers in February 2020, leading the government to secure the

Greek borders through military forces to suspend any new asylum registrations for a month and to engage in unlawful pushbacks (Asylum Information Database 2020). In this already tense climate, following doubts as to the NGO's transparency in dealing with EU funding, new legislation was introduced exerting restrictive control of NGOs working on migration and asylum, undermining their independence and operations.<sup>3</sup>

The pandemic changed things yet again. New arrivals plummeted, but tension continued in the islands as strict lockdowns were imposed in the reception centers, reaching a climax by the end of the summer when a fire broke out in the notorious camp of Moria in Lesbos, which left more than 10,000 people homeless (Hernández 2020). In regard to the developments in the MoA, the new mayor elected, backed by the conservative party, exhibited a diminished interest in refugee matters and discontinued both the position of Vice Mayor for Migrants and Refugees, who was replaced by an executive municipal counselor, and that of Vice Mayor for Innovation.

## A Holistic Integration Project

In response to the unprecedented number of migrant and refugee arrivals, Athens established the Athens Coordination Center for Migrant and Refugee Issues (ACCMR) in 2017 as a coordination hub for efficient collaboration between the municipal authorities and stakeholders operating within the city. It was meant to create conditions for the smooth integration of newcomers, promote social cohesion, and deal with emergency situations (ACCMR, n.d.). Furthermore, ACCMR played an instrumental role in the creation of the Cities Network for Integration, consisting of seventeen municipalities across the country that aimed at jointly designing and exchanging good practices in the field of migrant and refugee integration. While these initiatives are commendable, they were far from providing a holistic approach. It was “Curing the Limbo” (2018–2021) that took a step forward, designed as a pilot intervention aspiring to come up with a well-orchestrated integration strategy.<sup>4</sup> At the onset of the project, the number of displaced people in Greece amounted to 64,000, 17,600 of whom were living on the islands (UNHCR 2018). The challenge was no longer to provide basic emergency services to newly arrived families and individuals but to pave the way for long-term integration. The project targeted migrants in the MoA area who were vulnerable, under risk of being marginalized, and stranded in Greece. These migrants had received asylum or were waiting for the outcome of their application, out of activity for at least a year, waiting in camps or in temporary shelters, and seeking housing. The expected outcome was to assist refugees' transition from their suspended state of limbo and from their being passive recipients of benefits to engaged and responsible citizens of Athens as their new home. A total of 350 Arabic, Farsi, and French-speaking refugees enrolled in the program, 45 percent of whom were from Afghanistan, 25 percent from Iran, 9.7 percent from Syria, 5.1 percent from Iraq, and the rest mostly from Sub-Saharan African countries (Cameroon, Congo, Guinea).

The aim of “Curing the Limbo” was, in line with Castles et al.'s (2002) definition, to cater both for the functional and the social aspects of integration via a nexus of resources. It tried out a circular, dynamic model, whereby refugees were provided affordable housing, psychosocial support, Greek and English language learning, classes in information and communication technologies, job counseling and job search assistance, opportunities to become socially active by interconnecting with active citizens groups, and, in turn, be in a position to retain the accommodation provided and prepare for independent living. To this end, “Curing the Limbo” relied on a dense ecosystem of citizens' initiatives, NGOs, social economy organizations, private employers, property owners, and institutions in a mutually beneficial process where education, active citizenship, employment, and housing were in a dynamic dialogue. Despite the interconnectedness of services offered, refugees were free to design their own “menu of options” and decide to engage in whichever activity,

<sup>3</sup> Joint Ministerial Decision, No 3063; Law 4686/2020, Article 58

<sup>4</sup> See: [www.curingthelimbo.gr](http://www.curingthelimbo.gr).

depending on their needs and on their individual and family situation. Choice and empowerment fed into each other. The integrated model was best served in the common physical space, the “Limbo Exit Lab” provided by the MoA that served as a hub, and with which all participants strongly identified with. The combination of activities taking place inside the premises of the Lab with those across the city increased refugees’ integration prospects.

Projects are living organisms in harmony with their environment, constantly changing, growing, and adapting to expected and unexpected developments. Changes on the political front that impacted the project fall within the category of expected developments. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, was an unprecedented event that coincided with “Curing the Limbo’s” second year and had a direct effect on the implementation of the project. The lockdowns enforced in March and April 2020 and November 2020 to May 2021 imposed social isolation for eight months in total and generated a lot of anxiety, exacerbated uncertainty, and exposed the vulnerability and inequalities plaguing this particular social group. All activities were adapted to an online mode, and creative solutions were sought to continue helping refugees exit their limbo state and pave the way to their long-term integration.

Housing, employment counseling, and activities engaging active citizens in collaborative projects with refugees will only be presented briefly in this introductory article. The following articles comprising this special issue will develop some of the activities implemented by the UoA in depth.

### *Housing*

CRS, a “Curing the Limbo” partner and one of the world’s largest private, voluntary organizations supporting international relief and development work, was in charge of assisting refugees in moving out of emergency housing to subsidized housing solutions as a stepping stone toward independent living. A significant number of refugees were not aware of how to find housing, and many were staying in apartments for the first time. A Social Rental Agency was thus developed within the project to act as an intermediary between the renter and the owner and address the barriers refugees face in accessing affordable housing. The program offered owners and tenants a range of support services from tenancy agreements and legal rights, connecting utilities, and maintenance tips to household finance planning and cash support to create sustainable linkages and tenancies. Toward the goal of neighborhood integration, matches were struck between refugees and local families or individuals, enabling refugees to practice Greek, obtain support for day-to-day activities, and facilitate engagement in civic life through volunteerism in their neighborhoods. To reinforce autonomy, refugees were actively engaged from the earliest stage, had a say in the selection of apartments, and were empowered to make informed decisions, while they had to gradually contribute to the amount of money provided by CRS for their monthly rent (CRS 2021).

By the end of the project, the majority of refugees stated that they felt ready to sustain their apartment beyond the project’s support, while a significant number either renewed the apartment lease with their landlord or rented elsewhere, fulfilling thus one main objective of “Curing the Limbo,” which was to assist refugees in transitioning to independent living. At the same time, another hopeful sign was that the majority of tenants would rent again to such a population group, reinforcing thus the two-way process of integration (Papadopoulos et al. 2021).

### *Employment Counseling*

A prerequisite for the sustenance of accommodation and hence independent living is that refugees find a job and be able to support themselves. To this end, IRC, an international NGO that responds to the world’s worst humanitarian crises, helping to restore health, safety, education, and economic wellbeing, provided an employment services support program. A “strength-based approach” was

used that involved the inclusion of the refugees in the design and follow-up of their own employment plan. This allowed them to realize their strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and skills, along with the right to help themselves and become independent, thus bolstering agency. The employability of the refugees was targeted through one-on-one job counseling, job readiness training, weekly “job clubs,” outreach to employers, and soliciting job interviews with interested refugees, organizations of community engagement events, job fairs, and informal career coffee chats with potential employers. Such activities were meant to bridge the gap between potential employers and refugees on the basis of a reciprocal approach to integration (IRC 2021).

In focused group discussions exploring the refugees’ experiences regarding the implementation of the employment services, they spoke about the huge lack of job opportunities, bureaucratic barriers, discrimination against refugees, and lack of funding opportunities for those who wanted to open up their own businesses. On the other hand, they stated that participation in employment services helped them in feeling ready to apply for jobs and to become more independent. While the consequences of the pandemic on refugees’ employment statuses were grave and only a small number managed to retain a formal or informal job, there was overall satisfaction with the employment support received (Papadopoulos et al. 2021).

### *Active Citizens and Refugees Getting Together*

The MoA’s initial idea in designing “Curing the Limbo” was sparked by the prospect of capitalizing on an important existing resource: *synAthina*, a successful community building MoA initiative. This initiative, which facilitated communication among organizations, citizens, and local communities, served as a blueprint for social connections between the newly arrived refugees and groups within the community. *SynAthina* identified neighborhood priorities and combined them with the skills and ambitions of refugees in joint projects—the *Co-Athens* initiative. They aimed at creating an interpersonal space feeding an ongoing dialogue, strengthening social cohesion, and empowering both the refugees and the community, faithful to the concept of reciprocal adjustment informing the project. Examples of such projects include the creation of a local football court, a cooking training program, a green energy cooperative for the utilization of renewable energy sources to get lower-cost electricity, neighborhood story sharing involving participants in creative expression, the exercise of performance techniques (street theater, dance, acrobatics), and others (*synAthina* 2021). These projects exemplify Cummins’ (2004) notion of empowerment in the best possible way, whereby collaborative relations of power are achieved through the transformation of coercive relations of power, manifested in macro-interactions between subordinated communities and dominant group institutions, into collaborative micro-interactions between locals and refugees.

### *UoA Initiatives*

The UoA initiated a number of activities that fed into the cyclical nature of the project. These were the provision of a psychosocial support service, Greek and English language learning classes, audiovisual expression and creativity workshops, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) classes, training in cultural mediation, the development of e-material for the advancement of legal and civic knowledge (Street Law), capacity-building training strengthening collaboration between the partners and coherence of activities, and training in networking and empowerment strategies addressing personnel working with refugees within or outside the project. Not all of these activities are described in depth in the articles constituting this special issue that elaborate on Greek and English language learning, the delivery of audiovisual expression and creativity workshops, the training in cultural mediation, and the process of capacity building.

Thus, a brief description of those UoA activities, not analyzed in full, deems necessary. Refugees’ first contact point with “Curing the Limbo” was the psychosocial support service. The scope of the project and the “menu of options” were explained to refugees that approached

the “Limbo Exit Lab,” and their needs, interests, and previous experiences were collected through an interview with the psychologist or the social worker responsible for the service. Subsequently, an individual action plan was drafted. Refugees were welcomed, but not mandated, to be engaged with the intervention and processes involved. The psychosocial support service invited them into the dialogue, and it was the refugees that made their own decisions through a personal contract. In this relational process, their commitment was a *sine qua non* condition for the success of the intervention on the individual level, as well as for the project as a whole. The service played a very central role, constituting the link between the refugees and all the activities offered by the project. Individual and group meetings were held, and refugees interacted, reflected upon their experiences from the project, and exchanged useful information. Follow-up meetings were held regularly by the service which, only if asked, intervened and played a more active in-between role.

Empowerment entails that refugees and their communities should be supported to know their rights. A platform was created based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Greek Constitution that served as an informative digital space for human rights on issues mainly concerning the everyday life of refugees and migrants.<sup>5</sup> Following the principles of Street Law, this information was provided in a form and language that could be understood by people with no legal background. Thus, each human right was introduced by a small vignette, and it was explained why and where it would be useful in the refugees’ everyday life, the problems they might face, and the possible solutions. The content was translated into the five languages spoken by the refugees participating in the “Curing the Limbo” project—Farsi, Arabic, French, English, and Greek. We envisioned this as the first step in a long process where we would like to see refugees being offered greater opportunities to participate in shaping the decisions that impact their human rights.

Access to the information society increases displaced peoples’ connection, communication, education, community empowerment, and more. Focusing on the intersection of the human and the digital, the ICT courses used methodologies designed to cater to the needs of travelers and displaced people. A hands-on program was created to foster the development of digital skills of beginners and advanced learners. ICT training provided refugees with opportunities for professional development, enhanced their communication skills, empowered them, and hence contributed toward their integration into Greek society.

In line with “Curing the Limbo’s” mission of opening up to society, UoA offered intensive experiential training in networking and empowerment strategies to personnel working with refugees within or outside the project. Participants with different professional backgrounds, knowledge, and expertise came together to discuss the complexity in the management of refugee issues and the role and effectiveness of organizations in networking as a relational web of connections that are context-dependent and responsive to changing conditions rather than an alignment of organizational parts (Belden-Charles, Willis, and Lee 2020). The workshops took place during the lockdown period, and they provided a supportive environment where participants connected as they shared their anxieties and difficulties in remaining responsive to refugees, communities, and the changing needs and resources as they engaged in a process of continuous learning and transformation.

There is a great deal of overlap in all UoA activities, sharing commonalities in principles and methodological approach. This is no coincidence. All those in charge of the various activities had bi- or multi-partite previous collaborative experience in matters of social inclusion of marginalized population groups. This richness was woven together, maximizing the power of the group. The UoA activities did not follow an expert-driven approach, as was also the case for the rest of the “Curing the Limbo.” They prioritized understanding and responding to refugees’ needs, building on their assets and what each one had to contribute toward the emerging

<sup>5</sup> See: [www.CtL-HumanRights.ecd.uoa.gr](http://www.CtL-HumanRights.ecd.uoa.gr).

“Curing the Limbo” community. As capacity building and empowerment are positioned at the heart of societal change, active participation, skill acquisition, and meaning-making processes constituted a common thread running through all the activities designed by the UoA. They were considered prerequisites for refugees exiting the limbo phase, becoming capable of independent living with dignity, and finding a place in the Greek society. Collaboration, dialogue, and acknowledgment of multiple perspectives among the service providers but also between the latter and the service recipients formed an intricate web of relationships.

The methodology adopted by the UoA, seen fit to address complex societal problems, such as refugee social inclusion, was that of action research, linking practice and ideas in the service of positive change. A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge and liberate ways of knowing in working with people in their everyday lives. This orientation also benefitted the mission of the UIA Initiative, which is to test new, unproven, and innovative solutions to address the complexity of urban challenges. Within the action research practice, communities of inquiry and action, who were involved in the “Curing the Limbo” activities, engaged in cycles of action and reflection. In the action phase, they practiced and gathered evidence, while, in the reflection stages, they made sense together and planned further actions. The cycles of action and reflection integrated knowing and acting, promoting the notion of circularity inherent in the design of “Curing the Limbo,” eschewing the linearity that disorients so many change efforts (Reason and Bradbury 2008). Since action research is a call for engagement in collaborative relations, it is collaborative action research (CAR) that best described the opening up of communicative spaces in which dialogue and development would flourish (Ness and von Heimburg 2020). In following the CAR approach, the co-construction of knowledge and practices were in constant dialogue. Meaning-making and ‘human becomings’ were placed at the center of attention, making participation in change processes possible.

CAR’s cyclical approach was also applied to the experiential learning process (Kolb 1984), cutting through all UoA activities. The experiential learning cycle provided learners a framework to follow that began with concrete experience, moving them through making time to reflect, think about, and analyze the experience, and then guided them to take what they learned into the next experience. Through this process, learners were engaged intellectually, physically, socially, and emotionally in a collaborative dialogue with the instructors/facilitators and among themselves. Learners, in the widest possible meaning of the word, whether in the language classes, in the creative workshops, as mediators-to-be, or as participants in the capacity-building and networking trainings, were responsible for co-creating learning through real-life projects and situations.

CAR and experiential learning cut through the next five articles. In their article, “Responding to the Challenges of Adult Refugee Language Education through Action Research,” Evdokia Karavas, Maria Iakovou, and Bessie Mitsikopoulou (2021) narrate the dynamic process of designing, implementing, evaluating, and redesigning a Greek and English language program. In each phase of the process, decisions were taken and tested with the engagement of all agents involved. UoA’s university personnel, instructors, coordinators, and refugees were engaged in an ongoing dialogue fulfilling the mission of the project. The authors explore the challenges encountered in this process, the action taken to address each one of them, the way this action was monitored, and how it was evaluated, leading to the transformation of practices. These challenges were the development of an appropriate and flexible language curriculum framework, the reinforcement of learners’ motivation in sustaining class attendance, the emergency remote learning (ERT) adjustments required during the first lockdown, and the design of a blended learning approach in the subsequent period. A critical role in meeting the above challenges, played the use of placed-based pedagogy connecting learners to the community.

Language learning was extended to experimentation with multimodality. In “‘Here We Speak with Images’: Co-designing a Language and Photography Course for Adult Refugees,” Argyro Soultani and Maria Leonida (2021) refer to the combination of English language teaching with photography. In line with the concept of multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis 2009), the pedagogy

employed aimed to embrace and promote the diversity defining learners in “Curing the Limbo,” introduce alternative forms of learning and engagement, and create different modes of expression that promote active citizenship and learning. The authors experimented with a model of collaborative co-teaching where, depending on the task, degree of combination between the two subject matters, and amount of improvisation, they tried out “parallel teaching,” “alternative teaching,” and/or “team teaching.” As with all UoA activities, this multimodal learning experience was based on active participation and the CAR principles, whereby reflection and redesign were interlinked in a dynamic dialogue.

Art-based practices have been shown to empower displaced populations to deal with resettlement in their host country. Participation in the audiovisual expression and creativity workshops offered refugees, via the media of photography, video, and music, the opportunity to experiment with self-expression, develop competences and acquire new skills, form social and vocational networks, visit museums and galleries, and discover the city of Athens and its urban life. The workshops were designed on the basis of arts-based action research and participatory arts methodologies. Evangelia Kourti and Maria Pesli (2021), in “Audiovisual Workshops for Refugees: A Creative Space of Identity Negotiation and Belonging,” discuss the process by which trust was built in the context of a supportive and safe environment where participants were able to express themselves; relationally engage in sharing needs, ideas, and feelings; explore their creative potential; and look deeper into issues of identity and belongingness.

Alexandra Androusou (2021), in “Worlds Never Apart: Bridging Communities by Engaging Refugees in Cultural Mediation,” looks at one more aspect toward social inclusion. This time, refugees were trained to become cultural mediators and assume the role of meaning-making agents. Cultural mediation, not being a recognized profession, is often mistakenly considered by employers as synonymous with translation. Yet, cultural mediation extends beyond interpretation that passively conveys the message from one language to another. It, conversely, contributes to the shaping of exchanges between two worlds—the one of the refugees and the other of the dominant culture. The use of the Greek language is a *sine qua non* condition for mediation, but it is not enough. Cultural mediators-to-be had to learn how to relay meaning across languages or within the same language. They were introduced to the idea that relaying messages involves negotiation, interpretation, and the construction of meanings for participants in a communicative event in ways that are appropriate to the context of the situation and meaningful to the parties involved. Thus, training imparted tools for the ‘decoding’ of cultural customs and habits of the daily life and of the history of the host country. At the same time, it offered trainees the opportunity to reflect on their own culture, needs, rights, and interests of both parties and act as a ‘go-between,’ building bridges across differences.

The final article in this issue refers to the challenges inherent in a multi-actor project, such as was “Curing the Limbo.” Collaborative action does not ‘just happen.’ It takes a lot of preparation and time. Thalia Dragonas and Charalampos Pouloupoulos (2021), in their article “‘Curing the Limbo’: The Challenges of a Multi-Partner Collaboration,” discuss the trials and tribulations of a new organization in the making. They describe, in detail, a three-year capacity-building intervention aimed at enhancing collaborative processes between partners with diverse perspectives and multiple voices. They highlight the relational dynamics within and between the partners involved, the effects of the social and political forces at play, the administrative and bureaucratic obstacles, the many challenges encountered, and the practices adopted toward social organizing and change.

All of the articles included in this special issue make a case for the foundational role of integrating knowing and acting and of active engagement and collaborative learning in creating the conditions for an integrated approach in refugee social inclusion. In closing, we caution readers that when articles are read separately, the holistic quality of the project’s design gets lost. This is also true for the UoA activities when seen outside the overall project. Each UoA activity, as is the case with every other activity in “Curing the Limbo,” is only a part of an interconnected dynamic whole where all actors within the project (service providers and recipients) and across the host community interact and mutually shape each other.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Thalia Dragonas:** Professor Emerita, Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

# Responding to the Challenges of Adult Refugee Language Education through Action Research

Evdokia Karavas,<sup>1</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece  
Maria Iakovou, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece  
Bessie Mitsikopoulou, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

*Abstract: Arguing that action research is an appropriate methodological framework in integration projects owing to the unpredictable challenges associated with the particular group of learners, this article focuses on the process of designing, implementing, evaluating, and redesigning a Greek and English language program for the purposes of the “Curing the Limbo” project. It highlights crucial decisions that were made and tested with the involvement of relevant stakeholders in order to respond to the imminent communicative needs of adult refugees, leading to the goal of inclusive integration. The article also addresses the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.*

*Keywords: Refugee Language Education, Action Research, COVID-19 Pandemic, Curriculum Development, Emergency Remote Teaching, Blended Learning*

## Introduction

*There is no such thing as teaching without research and research without teaching. One inhabits the body of the other. As I teach, I continue to search and re-search. I teach because I search, because I question, and because I submit myself to questioning. I research because I notice things, take cognizance of them. And in so doing, I intervene. And intervening, I educate and educate myself. I do research so as to know what I do not yet know and to communicate and proclaim what I discover.—Paulo Freire (1998, 35)*

Like many other host countries, Greece has found itself in an overwhelming crisis that it is struggling to cope with. With a population of 11 million and still trying to recover from a crippling economic crisis that lasted for a decade, Greece is now faced with an unprecedented flow of refugees that must be catered to at an economic, political, social, and educational level. Today, it hosts more than 118,000 refugees and asylum seekers, and the numbers continue to increase. In 2019, Greece saw a rapid increase in asylum seekers month by month, with the total arrivals reaching 57,000—more than a 30 percent increase as compared with 2018 (Jalbout 2020).

Since 2016, in response to the continuing influx of refugees, the Greek Ministry of Education developed a program for the education of refugee children ages 4 to 15 with the cooperation of major humanitarian NGOs. However, the education of adult refugees has been widely neglected, and, as a result, NGOs, vocational training centers, and universities have undertaken, on an ad hoc and nonformal basis, the task of catering to the educational needs of the adult refugee population. As Kantzou et al. (2017) highlight, there has been no project by the ministry of education that addresses the need for language education of adolescent and adult migrants with refugee status. In a similar vein, the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR 2017) reports that a significant gap remains in the provision of preschool education, senior secondary (over the age of 15), higher education, and vocational training, whereas the European Commission, in an overview of refugee and adult education in Europe, states: “most educational initiatives are organized by NGOs in large cities and are mostly targeting refugee children and less adults...Despite such efforts the adult education

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Evdokia Karavas, Zografou University Campus, Department of English Language and Literature, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, 15784, Greece. email: [ekarava@enl.uoa.gr](mailto:ekarava@enl.uoa.gr)

field in Greece has not come with a clear agenda or a plan regarding this issue” (see Zarifis 2016). In addition, there has been no nationwide research concerning language education for adult refugees and immigrants (Kantzou et al. 2017).

It is against this backdrop that the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (henceforth NKUA) and, more specifically, members of the Departments of Greek Philology and English Language and Literature (the authors of this article), were invited in 2018 to participate in the “Curing the Limbo” project and were charged with the responsibility to design, develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate a Greek and English language education program for adult refugees who have been granted asylum status and are living within camps or in apartments in the area of Athens.

Our experience with the design of Greek and English courses for adult refugee learners in projects previously implemented by the School of Philosophy of NKUA and funded by the Danish Refugee Council certainly provided a solid basis for the development of a language program for the “Curing the Limbo” project. These included the *Eleonas Projects (Eleonas I and II)*, with the official title “Reinforcing Third Country Adult Nationals with Basic Communication Skills in Greek and English” (August 2016–March 2017), and the *FLEARS project* (Foreign Language Education for Adult Refugee Students, June 2017–February 2018). The lessons learned from these projects served as important input for the design of the language curriculum for the “Curing the Limbo” project (see Mitsikopoulou and Karavas 2021).

Despite our previous experience with the development and provision of language education courses for adult refugees, however, we were well aware of the fact that “there is no such thing as a typical migrant” (Beacco et al. 2017, 4), and, as a result, the particular target group necessitated the development of tailor-made and differentiated courses adjusted to their different histories, needs, challenges, and aspirations. As a UNESCO report on education in the context of forced displacement argues:

One-size-fits-all policy solutions pose grave risks for educational outcomes, as well as for linguistic and cultural diversity. Language planning, as a process of moving towards consensus on the aims, models, and hopes for languages and their speakers, must engage the positions, views, and needs of relevant stakeholders and take into account the larger social, historical, and political context of learning. (UNESCO 2018, 6)

In addition, another challenge we faced concerned the development of language courses that would facilitate the achievement of the “Curing the Limbo” project’s main aim, which was to implement a dynamic and innovative model for integration that allows refugees to become socially active by encouraging them to build relationships with active local citizens. As stated in the project documentation:

[A]t the core of the project lies the recognition that integration is inseparable from education, employment, housing, community and active citizenship—these are all elements that CtL [“Curing the Limbo”] brings together in order to develop mechanisms that help refugees leave their limbo status and gain autonomy in their everyday life. (Polyak 2018, 10)

The project adopts a concept of integration that is understood to be a two-way process involving mutual accommodation and change on the part of both the migrant and the host society (see Dragonas 2021; Ager and Strang 2008; CoE 2004). According to Krumm and Plutzar:

The notion of integration as a two-way process is important and is regarded as an essential element in ensuring sustainable results...In the process of integration both sides, migrants and the receiving country, are open to creating new common ground for living together, respecting the already formed identity. This gives migrants a chance to make use of

resources they bring with them and to expand their identity, acquiring new concepts and a new language; at the same time the receiving country will see migrants as people enriching its linguistic and cultural dimensions. (Krumm and Plutzer 2008, 1)

Taking the foregoing into account and given that “action research is linked to the fundamental principles of quality adult education” (Alidou and Glanz 2015, 41), we present the process of designing, implementing, evaluating, and redesigning a Greek and English language program for the purposes of the “Curing the Limbo” project, highlighting crucial decisions that were made and tested with the involvement of relevant stakeholders in order to respond to the imminent communicative needs of our adult learning group while also achieving the goal of inclusive integration.

### **Action Research and the Language Program of “Curing the Limbo”**

From the onset of the “Curing the Limbo” project, an action research approach was adopted, which constituted the common thread that was interwoven through all the project’s activities. In this way, a research culture became a defining feature of the project in which research and documentation is an integral part of its everyday operation. The focus was placed on a continuous development loop and real-time change, meaning that activities were introduced to the project, reviewed, and adjusted on the basis of the data collected. Thus, each step was planned, implemented, evaluated, and redefined or redesigned through evidence-based results, rendering the process of implementation dynamic and adaptable. A strong and defining feature of this process was the participation and meaningful engagement of beneficiaries, which was in line with the project’s overall aim of empowerment. This, in turn, helped to adapt and adjust implementation during its course, resulting in a circular design that continuously assessed whether new services were effective and useful for beneficiaries. As a result, using action research meant that beneficiaries had a meaningful say in how these processes were shaped in terms of topics and scope (see UIA 2021).

This approach proved valuable in developing and continuously improving the Greek and English language program and is considered an essential feature of good-quality adult literacy programs in multilingual contexts, which, according to Alidou and Glanz (2015, 20), “use action research to work systematically and continuously on improving their practice.”

Adopting the view of Kemmis and McTaggart (2007, 279), we consider action research a social and education process that involves the investigation of actual, and not abstract, practices because “focusing on practices in a concrete and specific way makes them accessible for reflection, discussion, and reconstruction as products of past circumstances that are capable of being modified in and for present and future circumstances.” In conducting action research systematically throughout the life span of the project, we focused on: (1) the active participation of stakeholders (teachers, project partners, learners) in defining the direction of the research and in drawing conclusions from it, (2) the use of action-based methods (activities and experiences of participants alongside the use of more formal research methods such as questionnaires, journals, feedback sessions, etc.), and (3) conducting action generating research directly aimed at generating medium- and long-term plans, ideas for new activities and initiatives, solving problems and finding new resources or partners (see Tacchi, Slater, and Hearn 2003).

In implementing the action research approach, we followed a series of steps that included: (1) defining the problem/issue to be addressed, (2) reflecting on how to best address it, (3) planning a new way of dealing with it, (4) implementing and monitoring the alternative approach, (5) evaluating our action by collecting related evidence from beneficiaries and stakeholders (coordinators and teachers) and (6) subject to results being satisfactory, introducing a change in practice.

In the following sections, we demonstrate how action research assisted us in the continuous improvement of the language program using evidence-based results. We present a series of issues and challenges that we encountered in the development and implementation of the language program and discuss how we planned to address them, how we monitored and evaluated our proposed actions, and how we finally changed or adapted our teaching practices.

## First Challenge: Developing a Language Curriculum Framework

One of the greatest challenges we faced from the beginning of the project concerned the development of a curriculum that could be common to both languages, could be used as a tool for the design of focused tailor-made syllabi by instructors, would be at the same time generic and flexible, and would facilitate the achievement of the project's overall goal of inclusive integration.

### *Reflecting on How Best to Address the Challenge*

Our decision to design a curriculum common to both languages—Greek and English—was influenced by our participation in the development of the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum for Greek state schools and inspired by our conviction that languages are not compartmentalized “subjects” but components of an individual’s plurilingual repertoire—a view espoused by current policies on the promotion of multilingualism in Europe (see Dendrinou and Mitsikopoulou 2004; Piccardo 2016; Piccardo and North 2019). A common curriculum would ensure common aims and objectives for language learning, the development of syllabi and materials for both languages on the basis of the same organizing principles and rationale (following the Common European Framework for Languages levels of competence), and the development of common projects between language classes and student groups (see Mitsikopoulou and Karavas 2021). An additional benefit of a common curriculum for both languages was that it would enable Greek and English language instructors to work together, support each other, and share examples of good practices used in Greek and English classes.

Given the linguistic, cultural, educational, and social diversity of our student group, it was necessary to design a curriculum that would act as a framework of orientation for the whole learning and training process—one that would “encompass (i) policy, (ii) guiding principles, (iii) course contents, and (iv) pedagogical approaches from macro to micro level” (Alidou and Glanz 2015, 169). The curriculum needed to focus on the practical and immediate communicative needs of refugees and the real communicative situations that refugees will face in Greece, in which knowledge of both languages is needed. According to Krumm and Plutzar (2008), the different circumstances, family situations, learning experiences, “communicative” worlds of refugee learners, and the real needs and capacities of migrants to participate in the life of society should become the starting point for curriculum design. In deciding on the immediate and practical communicative needs of our refugee learners, we consulted quantitative data that was collected by the project management team as part of the baseline survey of beneficiaries (e.g., age, sex, country of birth, educational background, language learning experience, socioeconomic status).

A solid starting point for the development of the curriculum was the English language curriculum for Second Chance Schools, which was co-designed by one of the authors of this article (Mitsikopoulou 2010; Mitsikopoulou and Sakelliou 2006). This curriculum guided us in adopting the development of learners’ multiliteracies (see Kalantzis, Cope, and Harvey 2003) and the development of their intercultural competence (see Byram 1997; Deardoff 2006, 2016) as the central aims of our common curriculum framework. What remained a conundrum was how to incorporate in our curriculum mechanisms that would empower our learners and boost their capacity to become socially active by building relationships with active local citizens.

### *Planning Action*

In addressing this challenge, we first conducted an extensive review of literature on adult education, refugee education, and experiential and community-based learning. A pedagogy that seemed promising and appropriate to our goal of developing active citizenship, promoting democratic practices, an ethic of care for others and the community, and creating bonds with the local community was place-based education (PBE) (Sobel 2005). According to Woodhouse and Knapp (2000, 4), PBE is inherently multidisciplinary and experiential; reflective of an educational

philosophy that is broader than the notion of “learn to learn;” and primarily concerned with connecting place with self and community. In PBE, curricula are structured around authentic investigations or projects that bring students out into the community, help them develop partnerships with community organizations and individuals, and provide them with relevant knowledge and experiences to contribute to the betterment of their communities (Demarest 2015; Smith and Sobel 2010; McInerney, Smyth, and Down 2011). As a result, PBE formed the third theoretical foundation of our common curriculum framework, in addition to multiliteracies and intercultural awareness.

The next step was to operationalize PBE in our curriculum. Task-based and project-based learning became the suggested methodology for the implementation of the curriculum. In order to guide our instructors in the design of tasks and projects that would bring learners outside the classroom walls and interact and cooperate with local citizens, we cooperated closely with *SynAthina*, an initiative of the Municipality of Athens aiming to bring together, support, and facilitate the work of local citizen groups engaged in improving the quality of life in the city. An example of these collaborative actions included a visit to Bostani, an initiative aiming at connecting cultivators who respect the environment with people looking for quality and tasty products produced by ethical and sustainable processes. Language work preceded and followed the scheduled meetings and visits (for activities in the city, see Iakovou, Karava, and Mitsikopoulou 2021).

The curriculum was organized around thematic areas that put into practice these three pedagogies (multiliteracies, intercultural competence, and place-based) for which indicative multimodal genres, lexico-grammatical features, and project ideas were suggested on the basis of which teachers were invited to develop their own syllabi.

### ***Monitoring the Implementation of the Common Curriculum***

Effective change in practice is synonymous with continuous and systematic teacher education. Although the Greek and English language instructors had completed postgraduate studies in teaching Greek or English as a foreign language and had extensive teaching experience with adults and socially vulnerable students, implementation of the common curriculum posed a great challenge for them. Methodologically, teachers—especially the Greek language teachers—were accustomed to a more teacher-centered focused approach to teaching. Secondly, the curriculum necessitated a much more active and creative role on the part of teachers, viewing them as designers of learning who are actively involved in the selection of learning experiences and the design of units of work that are appropriate to their class and school profile. This new role is consistent with a multiliteracies pedagogy, in which, as Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 11) point out, the teacher is “a designer of learning environments, an evaluator of their effectiveness, a researcher.” Teachers were not only expected to become designers of syllabi and learning experiences but were required to develop their own materials and tasks based on and tailored to students’ needs. Thus, instead of using off-the-shelf textbooks, teachers created repositories of resources consisting of worksheets, handouts, texts, and projects developed by learners.

These new roles and responsibilities, coupled with new pedagogical approaches espoused by the curriculum, necessitated systematic and intensive teacher training. From the onset of the project, a tailored and focused training program was developed and materialized, aiming to acquaint teachers with the theoretical principles of the curriculum and their practical implementation, with the procedures for needs analysis, processes of action research, and tools and resource repositories for developing materials appropriate for the specific target group. The training program that was delivered throughout the life span of the project was structured, focused, and more top-down in the beginning but gradually became more bottom-up, focusing on the particular problems and issues faced by teachers when implementing the curriculum and teaching different groups of students. Apart from face-to-face training sessions, in order to build a community of learning and practice and to offer continuous support to teachers, we set up an e-class in which teachers could use the forum to post the concerns and challenges they face and seek advice and could share their materials and ideas.

### *Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Common Curriculum*

In order to collect information on the implementation of the curriculum and to identify issues of concern that would form the focus of the following training sessions, a number of data sources were requested from teachers. More specifically, at the end of each week of classes, each teacher was asked to upload a teaching log stating the aims of each lesson, the materials and tasks/projects used as well as a teaching journal in which they described the issues they faced in designing and delivering lessons, how these were dealt with, and their overall feelings and impressions of working in this new teaching context. Apart from offering us a glimpse of how classes functioned and how the curriculum was put in practice, these data sources proved valuable in redesigning our training program and adjusting the curriculum.

At the end of each cycle of classes, a more structured course evaluation questionnaire was administered to learners (translated into their respective native languages), and a specially designed program evaluation questionnaire was administered to teachers with open-ended questions focusing on all aspects of the program. On the basis of the analysis of teacher journals and teaching logs, we were able to identify how well the teachers understood and put into practice the theoretical foundations of the curriculum as well as the challenges and issues that they had to deal with. All this information collected through the various data sources was included in an end-of-cycle evaluation report, which also contained our own reflection and evaluation of the effectiveness of the curriculum and the language program, more generally.

The results of the learner course evaluation revealed that in their majority, they were very satisfied with the performance of their teachers, the methodology followed, and the tasks and activities they were required to complete. However, the analysis of teacher journals and their responses to the end-of-cycle questionnaire highlighted a perennial problem that all teachers, regardless of the language taught, faced: lack of student motivation, rather high dropout rates, and inconsistent class attendance. Moreover, learners' participation in the out-of-class citizen-led activities was rather poor. This gave rise to another challenge that we needed to deal with through action research.

### **Second Challenge: Motivating Students and Sustaining Class Attendance**

Although instructors meticulously prepared learners in class for their visits to and participation in citizen-led projects supported by *SynAthina* and designed related projects, learner participation in these visits was very poor. Around 30 percent of the class turned up on the days and at the times designated for these visits, causing considerable concern to teachers because most of the students were unable to complete their projects after the visits. The issue of dwindling student numbers in class and students' inconsistent attendance was a recurring problem encountered by all teachers in the language program. It was an issue that created problems for the lesson planning process and forced teachers to make on-the-spot decisions and adapt activities and materials to the level of learners who were present each time in class. Teachers also mentioned in their journals and during our face-to-face training seminars that the problem of dropout rates and variable class attendance was particularly acute among female students.

Irregular class attendance is not a phenomenon specific to the language program of the "Curing the Limbo" project. Benseman (2014) mentions that many studies have identified barriers that prevent or restrict refugee students' attendance at classes, which include lack of childcare facilities, caring for family members, health issues, attending paid employment, transport difficulties, and gender barriers. These are certainly barriers that our learners had to face; yet, we needed to find a way to attract more students to our language program and to sustain our learners' (especially our female learners') motivation and class attendance.

### *Reflecting on How Best to Address the Challenge*

Many hours of our training sessions were dedicated to finding solutions to this challenge. After consulting the relevant literature and carrying out a survey on learner attendance numbers with other partners of the project who offered classes and services, we decided, on an experimental basis, to develop synergies with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (an NGO that was an official project partner and that offered job counseling services and job search assistance to beneficiaries) and with an instructor who offered creative expression and audiovisual classes.

### *Planning Action*

#### **Greek and English Classes Focused on Employment and Business**

Our partners from IRC encountered difficulties in attracting beneficiaries and keeping their attendance levels high mainly because of the beneficiaries' limited language proficiency. Although the services and support that IRC offered were directly linked to our learners' livelihoods because the vast majority could not find employment, learners' lack of basic language skills in Greek or English hindered their participation in the activities designed by the IRC and created communication problems with IRC members. We thus decided to join forces and offer focused job employment classes in Greek and English. Both Greek and English language teachers cooperated closely and developed a common syllabus and common materials for A2 language proficiency learners that focused on job-/profession-related vocabulary and language functions needed to write a brief CV and/or a cover letter to present themselves and to take part in a job interview. The teachers also selected and worked on text types related to finding employment (job descriptions, job advertisements, job applications, CVs and resumes, cover letters, etc.). At the end of each week of classes, a member of the IRC also participated in classes carrying out related activities in which students used the language they had learned over the week.

#### **English Language and Photography Class**

The NKUA, apart from Greek and English classes, also offered classes on audiovisual creative expression (photography, video, and music; see Kourti and Pesli 2021). Irregular participation and student dropouts were recurring problems in these classes as well. Learners registered for these classes on the basis of a past hobby or because of an interest they had had earlier in their lives. A few students took up the full range of audiovisual classes. However, when barriers related to housing, employment, or family issues appeared, the first classes they dropped out of were the audiovisual classes. Especially in the photography classes, the instructor faced communication issues with the learners. The very low level of language competence (either in Greek or in English) of the learners rendered the explanation of aesthetic terms or technical terms very difficult, if not impossible. The instructor used both languages and body language and expressions to get her message across but was not always successful. Learners also faced difficulties in following the class owing to their limited language proficiency and had struggled to express themselves and describe their artistic artifacts to the teacher and other students in class. Lack of sufficient language resources was certainly an obstacle to the successful delivery and functioning of the course.

An English instructor and a photography instructor decided to co-design and coteach a language and photography class following Content and Language Learning (CLIL) principles (see Soutani and Leonida 2021). Weekly meetings were arranged between the two instructors and the coordinators of the language program, who offered ideas and support to both instructors. These meetings also provided us with a means of monitoring the implementation of this course.

After experimenting with different tasks and topics for a few weeks, the photography and English language instructors finally decided to opt for a project-based course with elements of task-based teaching. Projects (e.g., developing a recipe video) became the main organizing principle of this course, whereas the topics for projects were derived from the common curriculum of the language program.

### ***Monitoring the Implementation of the Experimental Courses***

Both synergies were supported by the language program coordinators, who organized weekly feedback and support sessions with the course instructors. Teaching logs and journals were maintained by the instructors of both courses and were regularly reviewed by the coordinators in order to propose solutions to problems faced or to provide ideas for the next stages of each course. In the language and photography course, the instructors had introduced a lesson “feedback and evaluation” technique whereby at the end of each lesson the learners were asked to write on post-its how they felt about the class they attended and whether they found it interesting, useful, easy to follow, and so on and then place the post-its on the whiteboard and try to express their feelings orally to the rest of the class using English. Apart from providing feedback to the instructors on the usefulness of lessons, this activity also prompted learners to practice their oral skills.

### ***Evaluating the Implementation of the Experimental Courses***

A focused end-of-course evaluation questionnaire developed by the course instructors and translated into the students’ respective languages was administered to students. The results of the questionnaire and the analysis of the teacher journals and logs highlighted a very encouraging finding for both courses. Students were very satisfied with both courses, their content, methodology, and their teachers. One of the greatest achievements of the language and photography course was that most learners were female, participated in the course actively, and were consistent in their attendance. In both courses, class attendance was more than satisfactory.

In the Business English and employment course, a job fair was organized in the same building where the course was taught by the Athens Coordination Centre for migrant and refugee issues of the Municipality of Athens. Many labor recruitment agencies and personnel officers from companies related mainly to tourism and food services took part. Learners visited the job fair, spoke to personnel officers, and successfully took part in job interviews on the spot using the language they had acquired in class. Despite its success, this course could not be continued because students lacked the necessary language skills and competence to deal with more challenging issues and aspects of the services that IRC provided.

Although the language and photography course was planned for one cycle of classes, it was actually offered for three cycles because student motivation and participation were high. Word of mouth brought an increasing number of students into the course, and throughout its three cycles, student attendance was regular and female student attendance exceptional. A coherent and tightly knit group of students was formed who enjoyed the classes and developed both their technical and oral skills. Despite its success, the course had to be discontinued because the program was reaching its end.

### **Third Challenge: The First COVID-19 Lockdown**

Collaborative action research was also put into practice to address the challenge of the first lockdown in March 2020 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Coinciding with the beginning of the fourth 60-hour cycle of lessons, in this unprecedented world crisis, in which the vulnerable have become even more so, we found ourselves continuously analyzing, redefining, and monitoring the implementation strategy for maintaining language instruction throughout the lockdown.

When the lockdown was announced, there was minimal readiness to move the project's activities online. There was provision only for face-to-face lessons in the Serafeio building in the center of Athens, so the move to remote teaching caught everyone unprepared. This was equally challenging for both instructors and learners. Most instructors had no prior experience in typical distance education, let alone in emergency remote teaching (ERT). ERT is understood as being very different from organized e-learning, not planned in advance, and involving a sudden shift from traditional teaching to a remote one in view of emergency situations (Affouneh, Salha, and Khlaif 2020). A survey of refugees' technological devices revealed minimum resources; very few learners had computers or tablets, poor or no internet access, and/or only mobile phones, some of which were old and others more advanced. A brief overview of the related literature revealed that in other parts of the world and in cases of similar vulnerable learner populations, the same four themes prevailed: "poor to no internet access, financial constraints, lack of technological devices, and affective or emotional support" (Alvarez 2020, 4), indicating a broadening of the digital divide (Archambault and Borup 2020).

In addition, several of our learners had such limited knowledge of Greek or English that they needed the help of translators, who were in short supply, in order to understand online messages and instructions. What is more, although it was clear to us that in these conditions a structured online delivery of courses was impossible, we had to deal with the project administrators who "accountable to bureaucracy, fantasized a standard e-learning provision of classes in order to fulfill requirements for documentation of what they considered 'proper' teaching" (Dragonas et al. 2020, 53).

### ***Reflecting on How Best to Address the Challenge***

During the lockdown, the only means of ensuring continuity of Greek and English language classes was the activation of alternative approaches on the basis of creative problem-solving and other types of delivery modes in the context of emergency teaching (Motteram, Dawson, and Al-Masri 2020). New delivery modes had to be quickly prepared and, in alignment with the collaborative action research methodology adopted in the whole project, instructors had to be trained to make adjustments as to how, when, and what to teach. With no prior experience in online education, instructors could only draw on the principles permeating their face-to-face teaching, such as flexibility in designing appropriate language learning experiences. Because it could only be assumed that most of the learners had only a mobile phone available, instructors had to be quickly immersed into the principles of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and the use of social media.

### ***Planning Action***

The authors of this article trained language instructors in the use of mobile devices and the design of online materials for language learning in order to introduce them to the principles of mobile learning and its methodologies and pedagogies. Characterized as learning "on the move," not limited to a particular place, mobile learning has been found to allow language teachers to personalize instruction, and to enable language learners to self-regulate their learning and to develop conversation skills and a sense of collaboration through sharing (Sha et al. 2011). In this particular case, however, mobile learning was not to be used as a supplement to face-to-face teaching but as the main delivery mode. WhatsApp and other social media were used during the pandemic to support language teacher development (as is the case of Zataari refugee camp in Jordan; see Motteram, Dawson, and Al-Masri 2020) and gender equity initiatives aiming to enhance girls' education in the camps (Dahya et al. 2019).

In preparing the transition to emergency teaching, language instructors had to contact individual learners, schedule teaching hours that would suit most of their learners, and locate or develop (for the first time in most cases) online teaching materials taking into account their learners' language proficiency level. Overall, they managed to contact 103 learners and

embarked on a two-week trial. Immediately, instructors started experimenting with new delivery modes, using social media tools, primarily Viber and WhatsApp, to contact their learners and share materials with them. They used WhatsApp and Viber groups to do many activities typical of Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as sharing materials, giving information about the activities, having a discussion, providing answers to learners' questions, and giving personal feedback to individual learners. As Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) reported, during the pandemic, English language teachers used social media, such as WhatsApp and Viber, as if they were typical LMS systems to provide remote education.

The lessons that were prepared by our instructors differed significantly from face-to-face lessons. They focused on one or two learning activities that could be easily accessed, and their duration was much shorter than the regular teaching hour. These learning activities drew on multimodal understanding to enhance learners' comprehension of the task.

### ***Monitoring the Implementation of the Designed Action***

Training sessions were organized between the academic coordinators, the language program coordinators, and the instructors, lasting at least three hours a week and taking the form of reflective accounts that aimed to support language teachers, help them make adjustments and take informed decisions in planning and implementing their lessons, and provide a safe environment for them to share their experiences, feelings, and frustration. One of the most common concerns was the extent to which they fulfilled their role as language instructors. Because they were experienced teachers, they gradually became more confident. Suggestions with ready materials to be used were given, materials were exchanged, as well as Web 2.0 tools to be used. Extensive documentation was recorded by instructors every week, with screenshots from social media applications, online bulletin boards, and other materials to be used, which became the topic of discussion in several of our training sessions.

### ***Evaluating the Implementation***

Overall, it was a stressful period in which implementation strategies were continuously reassessed, and changes were made when necessary. The exchange of personal experiences served as valuable feedback for the other members of the group. Paradoxically, learners came closer to other learners and their instructors, allowing them to "enter" their private space. The community building that took place during the pandemic lockdown also fostered closer bonds among the instructors who were supporting each other and exchanging examples of good practices. In fact, the psychosocial support provided to learners by their instructors during the lockdown proved to be more important than progress in language proficiency. A number of learners had difficulties accessing the learning materials, yet they appreciated their teachers' concern for them and responded positively to their messages. The experience of the lockdown raised a number of issues concerning alternative modes of teaching and learning post lockdown and laid the foundations for blended learning, which was introduced in the next phase of the project.

## **Fourth Challenge: Creating a New Normality after the First Lockdown**

The comeback into the language classroom, as a physical space, after the first lockdown, posed severe constraints on how teachers, learners, and the project, as a whole, would address that new reality. The constraints were imposed by the national authorities and were compatible with the announced measures for school opening: complying with rules of hygiene, wearing masks indoors and outdoors, maintaining social distancing, as well as predetermined and fixed sitting for both instructors and learners in the classroom, keeping face-to-face lessons shorter so that the classrooms could be decontaminated for the next group of learners.

***Reflecting on How Best to Address the Challenge***

A number of changes were adopted to address this new reality:

- a) a shorter duration of face-to-face classes while keeping the numbers of learners in each class to a minimum;
- b) the location where the courses were held, complying with governmental rules for the pandemic;
- c) the content of the courses to meet the new requirements and conditions (e.g., no lessons in the city, no visits, no pairwork/group work activities, etc.).

***Planning Action***

Drawing on the experience developed during the lockdown described previously, in the period following the lockdown, we headed for a tailor-made blended learning mode that was learner—not technology—driven (Salaberry 2001). Once again, the challenge was how this delivery mode could be both supported by our learners and compatible with their real needs as far as the continuation of their participation in the program was concerned. After our persistent suggestions, tablets were bought by the program and given to learners. Under the unfavorable conditions of the pandemic, blended learning was not merely a motivating factor or a supplementary means for conversational opportunities to learners (King 2016), but a necessity, a sine qua non on our way to achieving a kind of normality, and a response to our initial prerequisites:

- a) for the implementation time of the courses: 2/3 of the initial class time (i.e., 4 hours) was scheduled to be delivered face-to-face and 1/3 (i.e., 2 hours) through asynchronous online sessions in which specially prepared digital materials for our learners would be used.
- b) for the location of the lessons: the face-to-face part was held in a larger space on the ground floor of the Serafeio building, making it possible to maintain larger distances among the learners and their instructor. This dramatically changed the dynamics of a communicatively oriented language classroom that was based on collaboration and pair/group activities, but meticulous adherence to the rules for the pandemic was achieved.
- c) for the course content: lessons were redesigned to meet the requirements of a blended delivery mode, aimed at providing friendly and useful lessons that would increase learners' motivation to participate while also serving the objectives of the common curriculum under these particularly demanding and unprecedented conditions for the teaching process. Preparation courses for language certification exams in both languages were created. The co-teaching model for English language and Photography classes was strengthened. A new collaboration of language courses with the ICT seminars was initiated as an attempt to develop learners' digital skills and ensure optimum use of the tablet and digital materials. The preexistent collaboration with the housing pillar of the project (CRS) was encouraged so that additional online practice in oral language use would be provided for the learners living in apartments where they had a stable internet connection and, thus, more opportunities to support a blended learning model. The PBE component of the common curriculum was replaced by remotely activated projects that were developed in the form of virtual visits to different attractions of the host city, such as online museums.

***Monitoring the Implementation of the Blended Learning***

Given the fluidity of the situation attributable to the pandemic and the characteristics of the specific audience, the implementation of blended learning was considered as one of the greatest innovations of the language program but also as one of its greatest challenges. The program's readiness at this point was somehow improved in comparison with the previous lockdown period, yet learners' poor technological equipment and their unfamiliarity with distance learning systems prevented them from recognizing it as an integrated part of the educational process.

The motivating factor for learners during the blended period proved to be the preparation for Greek and English language certification exams. The fact that the exam preparation classes focused on specific types of tasks made instructors' preparation easier because they could focus on past papers and simulation practice and did not have to prepare new digital materials for their learners. Seven of the seventeen language courses offered in the last two cycles (6th and 7th) focused on preparing students for the language examinations, A1 and A2 levels for Greek, B1 and B2 levels for English. Students' motivation was enhanced to the extent that more teaching hours were requested (there were even 9-hour classes per week instead of the initial 6-hour scheduled). Learners started to study more systematically despite the difficulties brought about in their daily lives by the lockdown and were always available for face-to-face lessons via Zoom in order to best prepare for the exams.

### ***Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Blended Learning***

It is undeniable that the changes brought about by the blended learning model in the design and implementation of language courses have affected both the objectives of the curriculum and our expectations about how to realistically define the outcomes of the learning process. On the other hand, even in this way, language courses continued for those who were able to support this learning mode. Unfortunately, those who made it to the end were very few because there were very few learners who could perceive the asynchronous teaching part as a continuation of the real-time classroom learning and even fewer who welcomed such a learning combination. All learners stated that during the last two cycles they preferred to have more opportunities for face-to-face learning, even with limitations, than working at home with asynchronous learning methods. The classroom fulfilled its basic role as a place of socialization and as a basic shell of protection from the difficulties and problems they encountered in the real world. On the other hand, our instructors pointed out how well prepared they were to cope with the ever-changing needs of their audience thanks to the flexibility offered by the curriculum, their communication with the scientific team, and the intensive training they received during the lockdown.

In any case, the fluidity of the situation, the uncertainty of how the courses and the program as a whole would eventually evolve (one week before the end of the seventh cycle, the whole program reentered a distance mode owing to the second lockdown), and the fatigue all parties experienced do not allow us to proceed to make conclusions about the effectiveness of a blended learning model in an integration program, such as "Curing the Limbo". Therefore, as one instructor rightly puts it, "pandemic may not be the issue." The most important challenge to address during the whole duration of the program has been how to support instructors in order to be flexible, to reflect, and to redesign. Our intervention program, with its action research methodology, seemed to be in the right direction for this cause.

### **Afterthoughts about Adult Refugee Language Education**

The language program of the "Curing the Limbo" project underwent significant changes owing to the pandemic, starting with the delivery modes: the first four 60-hour cycles ran with face-to-face classes, the fifth during the first lockdown through remote learning, whereas the sixth and seventh adopted the blended learning model. The success in managing all these changes was the result of hard work, systematic teacher training, and the action research methodology, which provided the methodological framework within which action was continuously planned, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. The results of the evaluation were put into practice in the next cycle of lessons, providing insights as to how to best plan integration courses. In fact, one of the lessons learned was the need to incorporate the refugees in this design to take into account their real needs and wants. For example, to increase women's systematic participation in any integration program, provision for childcare services need to be made. Although principles of adult learning are an important

consideration when preparing an adult integration course, they are not enough. The particular adult group has unique characteristics that need to be openly and directly addressed (e.g., lack of a house or a job, different school culture, etc.), so their participation in the design of their program is a prerequisite for the success of any language program.

The remote teaching and the blended learning adopted during the pandemic also illustrated the importance of integrating digital literacies in the language curriculum (Mitsikopoulou 2022). The development of basic digital skills and literacies together with language skills enabled refugees to become autonomous learners and gave a new impetus to the way the blended courses were implemented.

Another important outcome of this language program was the role of the place-based pedagogy in connecting learners to the community. According to Education for Migrants and Refugees Discussion Summary (Commonwealth Education Hub 2017, 6), community-based projects “represent the best way to work towards key issues such as sustainable peace; learning to manage cultural, ethnic and religious diversity; strengthening impetus on humanitarian efforts while tackling root causes; combatting xenophobia, racism...and valuing migration as ‘a positive choice vs a necessity’ and as a means ‘for the enrichment of culture and civilisation.’” Still, however, this connection does not necessarily run smoothly, given their experiences from more traditional educational systems. In connecting language courses to place-based pedagogies, there is a need to make aims and expectations clear at the beginning so that learners have a clear picture of what is to be achieved through these collaborative projects.

Overall, the action research methodology employed in this project shares many features with Freire’s theory of teaching and learning as identified at the beginning of the article, starting with problem identification and problem analysis, moving to the creation of a plan of action to address the problem, implementation, analysis, and evaluation of the action. Most importantly, over the two years of the “Curing the Limbo” project, this methodology has illustrated in the best possible way that:

Thinking critically about practice, of today or yesterday, makes possible the improvement of tomorrow’s practice. Even theoretical discourse itself, necessary as it is to critical reflection, must be concrete enough to be clearly identifiable with practice. (Freire 1998, 43–44)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Evdokia Karavas:** Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Zografou University Campus, Athens, Greece

**Maria Iakovou:** Associate Professor, Department of Greek Philology, Section of Linguistics, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Zografou University Campus, Athens, Greece

**Bessie Mitsikopoulou:** Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Zografou University Campus, Athens, Greece

# “Here We Speak with Images”: Co-designing a Language and Photography Course for Adult Refugees

Argyro Soultani,<sup>1</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece  
Maria Leonida, Centre for Education and Intercultural Communication, Greece

*Abstract: This article focuses on the process of co-developing and co-teaching a course for adult refugees that combined English and audiovisual expression offered within the “Curing the Limbo” Project. The article highlights the challenges and stages the cooperation of two instructors from different academic fields went through as they struggled to find a mode of work that would benefit learners in expressing themselves using English and photography. The process, supported by an action research methodological paradigm, will be exemplified by an analysis of the weekly journal kept by the instructors throughout the duration of the course. Additional data on learners’ engagement were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.*

*Keywords: Language, Photography, Co-teaching, Media, Refugees, Literacy, “Curing the Limbo”*

## Introduction

This article examines the co-teaching process of an English language instructor and a photography instructor, who cooperated in the development of an “English and Photography” course for adult refugees for six months. This combined course was part of the European pilot inclusion program, “Curing the Limbo” (2019), which aimed at helping refugees who were granted asylum to integrate into the host society.

The rationale for offering a combined course was based on the fact that after the completion of the first eight months of the project, there were concerns about the participation and the engagement of language learners in the courses offered (Greek and English language courses, audiovisual expression courses). Certain repetitive patterns of learners’ resistance (Suh and Shapiro 2020) were observed, such as irregular attendance, high attrition rates, low participation, and distrust in the methodology used, especially the lack of coursebooks (see Karavas, Iakovou, and Mitsikopoulou 2021). Refugee learners with low literacy often lack a learner mentality and are unfamiliar with learner-based pedagogy (Ćatibušić, Gallagher, and Karazi 2019).

Following the action research methodology employed in the entire project, it was decided to design a new course entitled “English and Photography” to combine action and reflection “in the pursuit of practical solutions” (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 4). This article describes the process of co-teaching and the stages an English instructor and a photography instructor went through, aiming at encouraging and sustaining learners’ motivation, participation, and engagement. The background of the two instructors was itself a challenge as it involved formal education and practice in the field of EFL for the English instructor and experience in teaching audiovisual media to a variety of target groups for the photography instructor. The article draws data from the weekly journals kept by the two instructors, the needs analysis questionnaire, the end-of-the-course evaluation questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews with participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Argyro Soultani, Zografou University Campus, Department of English Language and Literature, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, 15784, Greece. email: argsoultani@gmail.com

## Creating a Common Ground for Language and Photography

To create a joint course, the researchers followed a collaborative process under the general principles of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), which is known to build intercultural skills in migrant learners through experiential methods (Marsh 2002). It is important to note that the instructors were not familiar with each other, had no experience in co-teaching, and the course did not take place in an institution that supports co-teaching approaches; thus, everything had to be built from scratch.

Cook and Friend (1995, 2) define co-teaching as the situation in which there are “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of learners in a single physical space.” The roles of each instructor and the space each one occupies in class are vital (Bouck 2007). Space takes both a literal (the physical presence) and metaphorical meaning (the roles and domains they represent). A high level of collaboration and balance between the instructors is described by Mewald (2014, 8–9), as “positive social interdependence,” where they have common complementary goals, invest in a positive atmosphere in the group, allow themselves to influence others and become influenced by others, build relationships of trust, and are aware that their performance may affect the other’s performance.

To our knowledge, there is no extensive literature for co-teaching arts and languages. However, concerns about combining media with language are not new. They were thoroughly developed by the British Film Institute (BFI 2000), mainly addressing language teachers. In the field of non-formal education, Ewald in the USA extensively used photography to encourage expression, writing, and self-confidence in disadvantaged youth groups (Ewald and Lightfoot 2002; Ewald, Hyde, and Lord 2011). As Triacca (2017) mentions, the use of photographs in class stimulates deduction, hypothesizing, and imagination. Photography holds the promise of supporting readers and writers, especially reluctant learners, because it allows them to work with images and ideas (Zenkov, Harmon, and van Lier 2008).

In Greece, Theodoridis and Leonida (2012) systematically developed concepts about how audiovisual expression constitutes an alternative, multimodal communication system based on the user’s ability to “read” and “write” images, which nurtured the collaboration. Taking this last view into account, the common course acknowledges that photography has its own dynamic as a representation system (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996) promoting multimodal meanings in class (e.g., through the development of learners’ multimodal stories; cf. Wiseman, Kupiainen, and Mäkinen 2015), which may make the classroom more democratic and inclusive, enabling marginalized learners to present their histories, identities, languages, and discourses (Archer 2014).

Combining music and drama was described by Zimmerman Nilsson (2016). One of the patterns in her empirical material is of interest to us: creativity as a problem solver. The demanding criteria of traditional language learning may be seen from a new point of view through the lens of “visual solutions.”

Another relatively recent area of co-teaching related to artistic practices has been in the area of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) subjects. Wu, Cheng, and Koszalka (2021) remind us that integrating language arts into traditional STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) models offers the opportunity to help learners develop skills in articulating the relevance and meaning of subject matter as they experience STEM learning (Duerr 2008). Also, they refer to such attempts as being able to dissolve the boundaries between conventional disciplines and then organize teaching and learning around the construction of meaning in the context of authentic, real-world themes (Exter, Gray, and Fernandez 2020).

Adler and Flihan (1997) focused on how disciplines blend with other disciplines, developing a scale for an interdisciplinary continuum, the first and last stages of which are of interest to us. The Pre-disciplinary Stage connects a subject within a lesson to real-world examples, using everyday knowledge as bridges arousing student interest in the subject. At the

other end, the Shared and Reconstructed Stages involve increased interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary practices. Shared instruction refers to two subjects within the shared lesson mutually supporting each other. Reconstructed, the highest level on the continuum, means teaching concepts beyond each discipline, requiring a synthesis of multiple fields into a lesson.

An interesting categorization of co-teaching models was suggested by Cook and Friend (1995), which was later expanded (Cook and Friend 2004). These models, which informed the present study, include one-teach-one-observe; one-teach-one-assist (or one-teach-one-drift); station teaching; parallel teaching; alternative teaching; and team teaching. In one-teach-one-assist, the one teacher takes the lead role in presenting the lesson, while the other provides support. Station teaching, parallel teaching, and alternative teaching approaches include assigning learners to different groups, each group being taught separately, albeit at the same time and space. Team teaching involves multiple teachers actively teaching in close association with each other. Perry and Stewart (2005) expanded the conceptualization of team teaching, defining it as a continuum of collaboration, the low end of which included group planning but individual teaching, while the high-end involved co-teaching, co-planning, and co-evaluation.

Furthermore, Sands, Kozleski, and French (2000) attempt another categorization, identifying four co-teaching models that focus on practical issues: tag team (one teaches a part of the lesson and the other follows), speak-and-add (one teaches, one adds information), speak-and-chart (one teaches, one records on whiteboard, etc.), and duet (teachers work in unison, finishing each other’s sentences and ideas).

The above models indicate a concern about how disciplines merge beyond their boundaries, creating new concepts of disciplines and, ideally, how they may work together in real-life situations during learning and problem-solving sessions in various contexts (Choi and Pak 2006; Godemann 2008). Despite the extensive literature of models and approaches, there is limited research about how educators practice transdisciplinary teaching on a day-to-day basis (Thomas and Watters 2015; Wong, Dillon, and King 2016), and how instructors systematically cross disciplinary boundaries while planning, teaching, and working together; this is what we want to address.

## **Co-developing and Co-teaching the Language and Photography Course**

This part of the article describes the development of co-teaching in the joint “English and Photography” course. The co-teaching spanned three phases: familiarization, confirmation, and maturity. These phases coincide with the three cycles the course was taught. The reasoning of planning, implementation, and reflection on the outcome (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005) constitute the three axes around which the present article is structured. As expected, it was not a linear process since stages overlapped even within the same lesson. The phases are related to two modes of delivery (face-to-face and online) due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants were French, Farsi, and Arabic speakers from Congo, Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria. They were enrolled in a sixty-hour beginners’ course. Their educational level varied from illiterate to tertiary education graduates. The needs analysis questionnaire revealed that the majority wanted to learn English to be able to immigrate to another country, communicate with speakers of other languages, and facilitate their everyday life. Most learners had already attended some English classes in Greece or their home country. Participants were quite interested in photography but with no artistic or professional background.

### **First Phase: Familiarization**

During this phase, the instructors sought to define their roles, explore common goals, and experiment in collaborative practices.

### *Planning*

To initiate the collaboration, instructors searched for common ground by discussing their practices and philosophies (Pratt et al. 2016). The photography instructor focused on hands-on methodologies, devices used, and outputs produced in weekly lessons. The English instructor presented a general profile of the language learners, the methodology applied, and the application of audiovisual material. The regular language courses of the program were to produce small multimodal projects as a final outcome for each cycle while photography courses would use them systematically as a means of expression and as a tool for observation and collaboration among learners. The way sociocultural topics were approached through the language and photography course entailed a number of similarities and differences. Both subjects dealt with sociocultural topics; however, in the regular language courses, language constraints impeded the instructors' engagement with the students, while in the photography courses the focus on memory through image-based activities promoted informal discussions on topics such as family and friendship.

In this phase, the aim was to enable learners to investigate visual and verbal aspects of their everyday life and become aware of their learning practices. Planning involved the use of activities from the Photography Instructor's toolbox, which were combined with language activities. This toolbox is an expanded "digital" version of a set of activities already existing in the Curriculum for Audiovisual Expression for Compulsory Education (Theodoridis and Leonida 2012). Basic concepts of photography (frame, shot size, light, point of view) and storytelling would be introduced in an experiential manner, aiming to connect learners to their surroundings through observation, creating a know-how to be applied in all multimodal projects. Thematically, we would draw from the first unit of the language curriculum, "Me and the Others," which was designed for the language classes in "Curing the Limbo" (Karavas, Mitsikopoulou, and Iakovou 2019), addressing the basic aspects of oneself, everyday life, social connections, etc. that could be easily expanded for the purposes of the new course.

A weekly journal was kept by both instructors, in line with the overall methodology of "Curing the Limbo." Owing to co-teaching, a common digital document provided a "nonhierarchical reflective environment" (Casale and Thomas 2018, 262). Each instructor noted every step in designing and delivering classes, the way they were dealt with each, and their impressions of working together. Information was collected on the learners' backgrounds and their relations to the English language and photography through a needs analysis questionnaire. Additionally, an evaluation questionnaire was developed to be delivered at the end of the course.

### *Implementation*

Course planning was a flexible ongoing process carried out on a weekly basis to converge the goals of the two subjects into joint class activities. In the introductory lesson, an interpreter helped with potential communication problems. Initially, the one-teach-one-assist model was selected. As the photography instructor mentioned in the journal, "Exchanging roles worked well even at this initial experimental stage in which we used activities trying to identify learners' level of competence in both subjects" (Journal 1, Week 1). The flexibility of exchanging roles led us to the exploration of what learners themselves found interesting, promoting a learner-centered pedagogy. We opted for the introduction of a single thematic project per session rendering each session self-contained, and in this way, we overcame discontinuity related to irregular attendance.

The photography instructor experimented primarily with visual activities, while the English instructor worked with weaker learners to help them with the language. For example, in the "Mobile Phone Icebreaker," learners from different language levels were accommodated. Pairs of learners

chose a preferred aspect of each other’s appearance in a close-up shot to present it in class using their smartphone (Figure 1). Everyone managed to present their picture in a single word, phrase, or even facial expression. The English instructor observed learners’ encouraging reactions: “they actually asked to talk about more things than the ones they had on their photos and wrote plenty of things on their notebook. Surprisingly, even the passive—up to that moment—interpreter asked to participate in the self-presentation exercise” (Journal 1, Week 1).

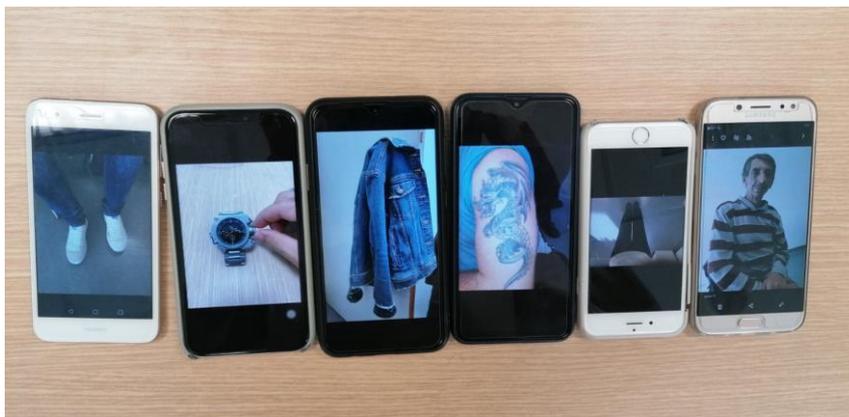


Figure 1: Smartphones Displayed for Group Viewing and Commenting  
Source: Soutlani and Leonida

Soon, a different point of view between the two instructors regarding photography and language emerged. The language instructor was more concerned with the linguistic goals of self-presentation, while the photography instructor focused on selecting and interpreting images for storytelling. Once a communication gap occurred, they tried to fill it in by drawing on the learners’ multilingual repertoires or by using body language. Both instructors commented on the need “to define their roles better and to design activities that would allow a smoother transition from one task to the other” (Journal 1, Week 1). To establish a sense of equality, both instructors were involved in constant observation of each other’s classroom routines and ways to provide feedback (Cook and Friend 1995).

Instructors gradually followed complementary versions of the speak-and-add and speak-and-chart models. Words derived from specific photo descriptions were written on the board and explained by the English instructor. These words would then be used for a more complete interpretation of their photos (Journal 1, Week 3). From Week 3 onwards, instructors’ awareness of each other’s routines started to develop. As the photography instructor mentioned: “The productions which connect photos to captions and associations between photos are building on a common goal” (Journal 1, Week 4).

Another successful activity focused on selecting and describing renowned Greek photographers’ work from art books (Figures 2 and 3). Learners were asked to select a photo and present it to the rest of the group. Roles were reversed, and learners became presenters talking about the theme and feelings that triggered their choice. Despite their limited language means, they were fully engaged and found ways to make connections with their childhood and family. As the English instructor wrote, “More advanced learners helped weaker ones through the preparation stage with vocabulary, and some learners even rehearsed their presentation” (Journal 1, Week 9). This activity increased both learners’ and instructors’ confidence in what they were doing in the course.



Figures 2 and 3: Learners Taking an Active Role by Becoming Presenters  
 Source: Sultani and Leonida

Team teaching was also introduced when the instructors were faced with a growing number of newcomers and with difficulties related to diverse language competence. However, the English instructor reports: “learners are overwhelmed by the two sources of input, and it is necessary to follow a parallel approach to keep some balance” (Journal 1, Week 6). The “distinction between the two instructors is sometimes lost in team teaching when trying to explain something to learners of various language competence levels” (English instructor, Journal 1, Week 4). An example of a parallel teaching task came with an image editing application that combined the two subjects and activated learners. According to the English instructor, “learners really liked ‘Pic collage,’ and they tried to make appropriate captions for their photos. In class, the photos were ‘read’ by different learners, who made an effort to read the caption, not just repeat the word” (Journal 1, Week 6).

### **Evaluation**

In the first phase of familiarization, instructors were concerned with how to balance their respective roles and with their physical coexistence in the classroom. The main question for the photography instructor was “how visualization promotes language learning,” while the main question for the English instructor was “how photography can be part of the language learning process” (Journal 1, Week 1). Personal reflection space was created in co-teaching during the lesson. Co-planning made both instructors more aware of the learners’ needs and the particular features of each field. As the English instructor stated even from the second week, “The course seems to be gradually taking some form, and both instructors work hand-in-hand to build the next lesson plan, to keep the language aims, and to link them to the corresponding photography goals” (Journal 1, Week 2). It was soon realized that the learners’ limited language and literacy level posed constraints, which could be overcome by focusing on personal and visual expression. Although it would be easier for the photography component to focus on different topics, it would be impossible for the language component as “it would be overwhelming for the learners” (English instructor, Journal 1, Week 2). On the other hand, the need for language learning often became a priority leaving “no time for clear media literacy” (photography instructor, Journal 1, Week 2). Visual tasks enhanced learners’ interests and helped them remain focused. According to the photography instructor, “when the lesson started with a photography task, learners managed to overcome any frustration felt by language weaknesses” (Journal 1, Week 2).

The combination of co-teaching and multimodal learning facilitated different learner styles and helped learners, especially women, become more confident. As reported by the English instructor, “two of the initial female learners improved a lot. The first became more autonomous and active in the lesson, producing complete sentences in English by herself. The second also improved to a great extent, but she still asked for help” (Journal 1, Week 7). From Week 4 until the end of the cycle (Week 9), there was a consistent number of participants (ten to twelve). The English instructor notes (Journal 1, Week 7):

Our class is getting bigger...and it is very satisfying to see the same people returning, sending homework, informing us about their absences. This behavior is very different to the other classes I have taught. I am not sure whether it is the level, the character, or the nature of the course, or maybe a combination of all, but this group is developing a momentum despite their difficulties.

Learners were encouraged to offer their feedback by writing or drawing their comments anonymously on post-it notes at the end of each lesson. Although learners could not elaborate, these notes were consistent proof of the positive atmosphere in the lesson. For example: “I like teachers” and “I like very good English lesson.” Learners compared the course to other courses they had attended and developed an awareness of the lesson style. “Here we speak with images, here it is different. I learn to communicate and talk to people,” said one learner during class.

## **Second Phase: Confirmation**

This phase, which coincided with the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, created a number of challenges but at the same time developed instructors’ confidence and a stronger relationship among group participants.

### ***Planning***

Face-to-face lessons were abruptly interrupted by the quarantine, which coincided with the beginning of a new cycle of lessons. The lockdown in March 2020 created the need for a new mode of course delivery, transforming the learning space and calling for a re-design of the course with the use of available digital tools in the context of emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al. 2020). Taking into consideration the learners’ low ICT skills and lack of equipment, the instructors decided to focus on mobile-assisted learning, which is portable and flexible. Furthermore, mobile learning allows on-the-spot creation of content and promotes interactivity, enabling communication among two or more people in synchronous or asynchronous contexts through the use of a variety of tools (recordings) and modes (Strasser 2020). Instruction was primarily conducted through a WhatsApp group with which learners were familiar.

Planning started anew as instructors cooperated to reorganize the type of lesson (synchronous or asynchronous), define the duration and the types of activities, and keep the learners engaged in this new form of learning. The challenge was to adjust the photographic and language components into the image exchange and short messaging of WhatsApp.

### ***Implementation***

Applying the method of trial and error, we redefined our roles in this rudimentary lesson, incorporating the role of a mobile learning facilitator (Makoe 2012). In the beginning, the one-teach-one-observe model was used with the division of the synchronous lesson on WhatsApp into two parts: the first focused more on language, while the second focused on photography. This division prevented the instructors from losing focus. Overall, the co-teaching model

evolved into speak-and-chart as the linearity of social media messaging created a “board” where photos, comments, and voice recordings would develop in time, open to all for synchronous or asynchronous study and feedback. Two specific tasks from the first cycle, the description of photos and the sound recording, were sustained to assist the slow-paced revisions. In each lesson, a theme, such as “my portrait,” “the view from my window,” and “my everyday routine,” was initiated through instant image capture and sharing, creating an observe-and-shoot style of the lesson well served by WhatsApp. Images were followed by text message exchange, accompanied by reactions (mainly descriptive or emotional). The situation led to a “lesson” that would be best described as a “meeting” with short learning units. Portraits often with a dramatic or funny aspect would initiate phrases like: “I feel very-very nice,” “you look upset,” and “what is wrong teacher?” Additionally, the established habit of observing artists’ photos supported oral descriptions of the portraits’ images and their backgrounds.

There were parallel teaching occasions, similar to an onsite lesson, where weaker learners had to be assisted individually. As the English instructor stated: “When two regular participants stayed in the call, we chose to do parallel individual teaching to help them move on” (Journal 2, Week 4). As the projects were short and simple, the social media environment and the physical distance supported a unified approach. Once the pattern was established, the photography instructor would often engage in language issues and the English instructor engaged in initiating photographic activities.

### *Evaluation*

Lockdown was a forced break from regularity that offered space for reflection. It was evident that co-teaching models were transferred and adapted in the online class in an attempt to manage the new digital space. Language level was again a defining factor in selecting models along with learners’ participation. The course was set online “in an unstructured way first, but learners soon realized what they had to do, as we insisted on the use of language and image collage, which they were already familiar with” (English instructor, Journal 2, Week 2). Again, initiating a photographic task usually engaged learners and allowed them to participate. Co-teaching gave space for immediate feedback for both language (e.g., vocabulary, pronunciation) and photo shooting matters to all learners with more opportunities to participate actively. As the photography instructor noted: “There was a pattern of photo shooting and description. I reacted to their photos (orally or in written) pointing out a couple of details such as ‘I like the white window lines and the grey curtain’” (Journal 2, Week 2). Physical distance also imposed individual action on the part of the instructors. Although they planned together, they were urged by the circumstances to act individually in the social media chat. This would have been impossible if they had not developed an awareness of each other’s subject and practice in the previous phase.

The learner’s need for communication was evident: “It was clear and at the same time touching how much they wanted to share their moments with us (their lunch, house, etc.)” (English instructor, Journal 2, Week 2). An attitude of sharing was established: “When someone wanted to say something, they would take the initiative. In one instance, a learner turned her camera on, showed a photo, and said ‘I see my child playing’” (photography instructor, Journal 2, Week 2).

A core group of four learners regularly replied, logging in for at least one hour, while others participated more occasionally. However, as previously noticed in class, there was a short attention span, weak memory, and many linguistic difficulties that impeded communication.

The photography instructor reported on an illiterate student: “he did not attend regularly, and it was not possible to understand why. It is noteworthy that he asked me beyond teaching hours to talk to his sister in French to confirm his need for small written and sound recorded phrases” (Journal 2, Week 5). In an informal needs analysis conversation, a female student admitted that “because of the stress we have in life, we can’t concentrate much, but we learn more in class than on the internet.” Her constant participation, though, proved that she acknowledged the need to continue learning under those demanding circumstances. The smartphone screen also revealed the

learners’ responsibility and immediacy in their options (pictures, words, etc.) without the same level of guidance offered in a face-to-face class. The constant communication with the learners during such a difficult time raised their motivation to return to the onsite lessons and enhanced the overall bonding. The sense of accomplishment, even at a basic level, boosted instructors’ confidence for the next phase.

### **Third Phase: Maturity**

Returning to a face-to-face delivery mode shortly after the first pandemic lockdown, instructors reached a level of maturity as for the efficiency to improvise and to adjust their co-teaching practices into their learners’ needs.

#### ***Planning***

The main goal of the course in this final cycle was to employ models tried in the first phase, such as one-teach-one-assist and parallel teaching, and to work toward the merging of the two subjects in one co-teaching model (team teaching) by trying out projects with more layers and connections between expression and imagery. To achieve this connection, we focused first on themes related to the lockdown and safety measures to comprehend the new reality and to process it by using different tools (video, photos, recording). Emphasis was placed on sound recording for oral language practice.

#### ***Implementation***

The move from one co-teaching model to the other was fast and completed with less effort than at the beginning of the first phase. Theater activities were systematically introduced as warm-ups, making connections with the previous lesson, and relating body movement to language and photography activities. The bonding developed during the lockdown allowed the narrative tasks to become more personal. Emphasis was placed on the description of oneself through the use of personal questions and mini projects about their past, present life, and future aspirations. The severe social problems our learners faced, primarily concerning housing and unemployment, were enhanced by the pandemic and influenced their performance and participation. In an attempt to address this challenge, social problems became part of our storytelling activities, acknowledging learners’ everyday life as a source of their learning.

An activity that required synthetic teaching models was the collective interview: “The idea about the interview came up naturally this time because we realized that learners cannot give a good description of themselves” (English instructor, Journal 3, Week 4). In this task, learners interviewed their classmates and the instructors in turns with a video camera. The English instructor set the linguistic component of the activity (such as pronunciation and fluency, formation of questions, elicitation of answers, etc.), while the photography instructor introduced the audiovisual component (aesthetic of interview, roles during an interview, framing body language, etc.). This activity promoted peer teaching and boosted learners’ confidence. Learners “used all the vocabulary and linguistic means they had available, and at the same time, they learnt a lot of useful information about their classmates. Several learners were initially reluctant to participate but, once they got the floor, they started answering questions with honesty” (photography instructor, Journal 3, Week 5).

#### ***Evaluation***

Having established a co-teaching mentality, instructors in the third cycle focused on the impact of this course on learners. For this reason, they employed two additional ways of collecting data, which allowed the triangulation of data gathering. The end-of-the-course evaluation

questionnaire illustrated that the greatest majority of learners (over 70%) were highly satisfied with the course and enjoyed the class activities. Semi-structured interviews, conducted toward the end of the course by the English instructor, also showed that the majority of learners acknowledged WhatsApp as a learning space and that its use enhanced their motivation. They also appreciated co-teaching and receiving feedback from two different instructors. As a learner put it, “I want to learn English, and I want to learn new technology.”

The equal contribution of both instructors in team-teaching activities set the basis for the equal participation of learners. It gave them space to share life moments and to express themselves in authentic activities. The focus on their actual life (past, present, or future) triggered reactions of sympathy and compassion among learners and created a sharing atmosphere in the classroom. Learners expressed a feeling of accomplishment, as stated in the interviews: “Now, I know how to take good photos, and you let me learn English.” Most importantly, it was noticed that learners did not simply remember what they learned about the English language but focused on the process (e.g., how to make a photo-comic or a digital collage). Hence, it can be inferred that multimodal hands-on practices are memorable and create a flexible background for learning through a holistic approach.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The selection of the action research methodology in the project greatly affected co-teaching in this course. Both developed in parallel: co-teaching offered instructors the flexibility to observe the two subjects interacting with each other, design, put lessons into practice, and reflect to initiate a new action research cycle.

An ongoing challenge in all three phases of this course was the arrangement of space. Literature often refers to co-teaching types based on the topography of the classroom and the positioning of the teachers and learners during an activity. Complying with Mewald’s (2014) positive interdependence, the instructors valued each other’s discipline knowledge and provided a space for one another in the classroom (Casale and Thomas 2018). Space management depicted the teaching positioning. The pandemic proved to be a defining factor of the co-teaching space. On the one hand, it imposed the creation of a virtual learning space reaffirming the instructors’ confidence. On the other hand, a new spacious classroom after the lockdown facilitated more complex co-teaching models and tasks, such as the collaborative interview. From the simpler models of co-teaching that were merely disciplinary, we partly reached what Adler and Flihan (1997) call “reconstructed,” referring to the highest level of interdisciplinarity in which there is a synthesis of two disciplines in one lesson. The short videos about the quarantine experiences, photocomic, and interview, which are all activities from the last cycle, reached a relative unity of planning, goals, and outcome. In all these activities, both instructors functioned as co-planners using synchronous and asynchronous means (Pratt et al. 2016).

This interdisciplinary co-taught course also allowed the instructors to work as facilitators to encourage learners to be responsible for their learning. The multimodal syllabus developed in this course offered space for both learners and instructors to make choices to promote discussion and negotiation (Archer 2014), changing power relations in the classroom. The sharing attitude held by both instructors worked as a live example of mutual respect and participatory processes. At the same time, visual communication created a “democratic” basis for all participants and provided creative ways to overcome irregular attendance and language difficulties. Sharing experiences through visuals was a safer way to address personal moments—even through a single photograph. Additionally, the composition, description, and interpretation of images seem to cultivate soft skills, such as understanding taxonomy, practicing storytelling, developing interactional skills, appreciating senses of humor, and creating mutual understandings.

In conclusion, the development of this interdisciplinary co-teaching experience went through various stages fed by the instructors’ continuous negotiation throughout the process (Stewart and Perry 2005). Both instructors committed themselves to planning together to equip learners with

linguistic and audiovisual means of self-expression. Co-teaching and co-planning were adjusted in synchronous and asynchronous contexts as learners were in flux. This article has aimed to extract certain conclusions for interdisciplinary co-teaching, bringing to the foreground a two-fold process. Concerning the teaching of photography, it can be concluded that there were several occasions where language issues would deserve attention in order to enhance personal expression. On the other hand, language teaching may be enriched by the use of audiovisual tools that enable the construction of multimodal meanings. In practice, this article illustrates what “speaking” with images means and how the liberating power of the audiovisual tools can benefit language learning in multiple ways for vulnerable groups of learners.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Argyro Soutani:** PhD Candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

**Maria Leonida:** Filmmaker, Media Literacy Tutor, Director of Karpos, Centre for Education and Intercultural Communication, Athens, Greece



# Audiovisual Workshops for Refugees: A Creative Space of Identity Negotiation and Belonging

Evangelia Kourti,<sup>1</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece  
Maria Pesli, Media Artist and Arts Facilitator, Greece

*Abstract: This article addresses the role of audiovisual expression and creativity workshops (music, video, photography) during the “Curing the Limbo” project for adult refugees in social integration. Audiovisual workshops and the produced artworks contribute to the discussion of the ephemeral, complex, yet dynamically shifting notions of refugee belonging and identity within the current historical and sociopolitical context. Here the focus is on the photography workshop, where participants worked systematically on ideas and the themes of “self” and “home” through visual storytelling. Looking through the lens of their photographic and linguistic artworks and referring to discourses on art and migration, the article examines whether and how the processes unfolding within the workshops opened up new possibilities and perceptions of identity and belonging, potentially shaping counternarratives of forced migration.*

*Keywords: “Curing the Limbo,” Refugees, Audiovisual Workshops, Action Research, Identity, Belonging, Photography, Storytelling*

## Introduction

*Art is a means to approach the unfamiliar and broaden our comfort zone...Slowly, smoothly, invisibly, styles and patterns, dimensions and shapes, are being added to our inner—already complex and multiple—identities.— Susana Gonçalves (2016, 6)*

Migration is a complex economic and sociopolitical phenomenon that is firmly intertwined with political agendas, international and national governments, and regional authorities. Thus, for any attempt to talk about the migration issue in Greece, it is vital to keep in mind the specific sociopolitical context that Dragonas (2021) refers to.

“Curing the Limbo” was a European pilot project, a holistic intervention for the social inclusion of refugees granted or having applied for asylum in Greece, designed and implemented to primarily address their resettlement period and provide refugees with initial housing services, psychosocial and professional counseling support, Greek and English language classes, information and communications technology (ICT) courses, cultural mediators and audiovisual (A/V) expression and creativity workshops (see Dragonas 2021).

The satisfaction of needs that facilitate inclusion span material assets, knowledge and skills, recognition of personal attributes, and other resources, which may deliver a sense of security and agency, indicating belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011). The facilities that “Curing the Limbo” provided constituted a nexus of resources vital for the integration process. The A/V workshops were one of the activities implemented by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (UoA).

Employing photography, video, and music, the A/V offered an opportunity for adult refugees to acquire new skills, advance self-expression, form social and vocational networks, visit state cultural institutions, museums, and galleries, and discover the city of Athens and its urban life, with the aim of promoting social integration. The present article contributes to the discourse on the critical role of creative activities in the active engagement of refugee populations.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Evangelia Kourti, 13A Navarinou Street, Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, 10680, Greece. email: ekourti@ecd.uoa.gr

## Arts and Refugees

Art motivates us to ask questions, to comprehend and contextualize complex and abstract ideas, engaging us in deeper levels of connection compared with other forms of representation (Wilson and Flicker 2014). As a reflective space of one's emotions and thoughts, the arts can prospectively raise questions of identity and belonging, foster intercultural dialogue and understanding, contribute to reciprocal community knowledge, and enhance appreciation of diversity and social justice (O'Neill 2008, 2010). Furthermore, the arts open up possibilities for a shared cultural citizenship, that is, the right to equality in a participatory democracy, regardless of race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation, and the "ability to influence one's destiny by having a significant voice in basic decisions" (Rosaldo 1994, 402). Likewise, O'Neill (2010) considers the arts and culture as integral to processes of belonging, defining cultural citizenship as the right to dignity, visibility, and representation, promoting the maintenance of a lifestyle, and preventing marginalization, stigmatization, or assimilation by the dominant culture.

Artistic and creative practices and arts-based research methodologies are principally employed when it comes to social work with vulnerable groups and refugee communities. Although arts, culture, migration, and social integration have been examined in contemporary academic discourses, existing studies show that art forms such as music, theater, photography, video, and painting, provide immigrants and refugees with a "creative space for exploration and expression of identities" (McGregor and Ragab 2016, 7; Martiniello 2019). In the case of newcomers, various art forms are used by institutions as a means of motivating, empowering, and supporting interaction with local communities; building networks and friendships; learning languages; and speaking openly and sharing feelings, thoughts, and issues important to them (O'Neill 2008, 2010; Lenette 2019). Moreover, the arts can potentially act as resilience apparatuses initiating and affecting personal and social growth (Williams and Drury 2010; Worrall and Jerry 2007).

Refugees undertake long and highly hazardous journeys, experiencing a prolonged state of emergency and anticipation, a period of limbo, referred to here as waiting, before they are able to resettle. This period of waiting includes time on routine bureaucratic tasks and more long-term and "open-ended forms of waiting, for regularisation, justice and uncertain futures" (Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021, 3). On arrival in a host country, multiple issues and insecurities arise, such as food, clothing, housing, language comprehension, access to social services, healthcare, education, asylum bureaucracy, cultural barriers, financial stress, and so forth (Gillespie et al. 2016). Refugees may experience an intense feeling of unexpected loss (safety, home, family, identity) and stress about their future. Considering that control of time signifies relations of dominance and power (who keeps whom in waiting), in the case of refugees, the manipulation of their time with prolonged periods of uncertainty, dependency, and illegitimacy keeps them in a state of foreignness and racialization (Khosravi 2021). However, this enforced period of waiting does not necessarily mean that it is perceived passively nor does it prevent people from responding dynamically. Khosravi (2021) provides examples of active movements and initiatives of refugee populations in various parts of the world and explains how waiting can be a dynamic process and can generate wakefulness and open up possibilities and potentialities for a different future, thus stimulating action.

Art-based interventions and creative initiatives can provide alternative potentialities while offering space and time for inspiring hope and resilience. Additionally, art practices offered to refugees in non-art institutions have been acknowledged as an effective alternative therapeutic approach in comparison with more traditional medical cures (Alexander, Arnett, and Jena 2017; Toll 2018). Arts-based practices are also used broadly by scholars in refugee research in order to stimulate critical thinking, evoke reflection, question stereotypes and social discrimination, and open up possibilities for social action and change. They are recognized for strengthening the voices of marginalized social groups, particularly asylum seekers and refugee communities, affecting

social integration, justice, and change (O’Neill 2010; Leavy 2015; Lenette 2019; Nunn 2020). Social integration is considered as a complex, dynamic, bilateral, two-way process of multiple layers of engagement, involving both migrant/refugee populations and society in the form of networking, fueling collaboration and synergies between state and private organizations, citizens’ initiatives, and social activities. In such cases, interaction is a key mechanism for reciprocal adjustment and transformation (Saharso 2019; Spencer and Charsley 2021).

## Belonging and Identity

Bell (1999, as quoted in Croucher 2004, 41) asserts that “one does not simply or ontologically ‘belong’ to the world or to any group within it. Belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction.” In a changing world of increasing economic and digital communication and (inter)connectedness, the complex notion of belonging has become a field of multidisciplinary studies from political science to sociology, social geography, psychology, philosophy, education, migration, religion, gender, youth, and cultural studies.

The term refers both to belongings (possession of something) and to belongingness (awareness of where one feels they belong) and takes into consideration the multifaceted diversities, social, and individual attributes that affect it, such as aspects related to nationality, locality, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, linguistics, class, culture, and age. These multiplicities open up and dynamically construct new possibilities of identity and belonging, depending on new social relations, groups, collectivities, and solidarities formed by individuals in specific locations and times (Halse 2018). This variability makes belonging an active, fluid social process, defined each time within a dynamic context and process for each person or community. In the case of people on the move, such as migrants, asylum seekers, and refugee populations, the sense of belonging and identity inevitably become subjects of continuous negotiation and reconstruction.

Belonging as an urge for home (“feeling at home”) is an emotional, ontological request, and in that sense, it integrates home and the need for a safe space—a protected interpersonal environment that fully respects diversity and enables individuals to explore ideas openly without fear of judgment (Yuval-Davis 2011). Furthermore, the concept of the safe space comprises a sense of hope for the future, an essential element for all arts-based projects addressed to people from the migration–asylum–refugee communities’ nexus. The benefits of a safe place for newcomer refugees and migrants prove vital during and after their resettlement in the new country. A protected space enables the development of relational bonds through regular meetings, which, together with practices related to creative processes, can shape and open up possibilities of belonging (Toll 2018; Nunn 2020). On the other hand, the concept of belonging incorporates its opposite, nonbelonging, as “inclusion entails exclusion, if only by default” (Jenkins 2004, 102). The pairs of belonging–inclusion versus not belonging–exclusion, in the case of migrant and refugee populations, signify the boundaries they face in relation to mobility and other classifications such as national, social, cultural, religious, gender, class, and age. They are at the heart of the politics of belonging, including migration policies and bordering (Croucher 2004; Yuval-Davis 2011).

Similarly, if one shifts the focus to the individual classifications that also facilitate the knowledge of the self and one’s identity through comparisons, similarities, and differences (Jenkins 2004). Reflecting on the work of George Herbert Mead, who developed the concept of self on the argument that we cannot perceive ourselves if we cannot see how others perceive us, Jenkins (2004) defines identity as the human capacity to comprehend the world around us, a mechanism to recognize “who is who” and “what is what.” Thus, self and identity are intertwined in mutual and constant interaction with the social world, the social structures, and social behaviors (Stryker and Burke 2000). Individuals may self-define on the basis of who they are, but such self-definitions and choices are affected and shaped by their surrounding social environment, social structures, networks and behaviors, and the groups they belong to and identify with (Stets and Serpe 2013).

However, the self does not encompass only one identity but multiple, with variant meanings and self-structured hierarchies, some perceived as more salient than others depending on the expectations attached to them and in relation to the social structure, culture, and groups to which the individual belongs (Jenkins 2004; Stets and Serpe 2013). Multiple identities are a resource, strengthening the feeling of self-efficacy, self-image, and self-esteem (Thoits in Stets and Serpe 2013). Identities, however, are fluid and may alter across time and space following changes occurring at the individual, social, political, economic, and cultural levels (Stets and Serpe 2013; Saharso 2019) on a micro(local) and (macro)global scale.

The identities of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers undergo constant mutation during their long journeys, which may last years until they reach their destination (Chambers 1994). Flum (1998, as cited in O'Neill 2010) has shown that young migrants' embedded identity—the product of a relational web—increased their motivation to adjust to and accommodate the new culture while maintaining their old. Exploring the new culture on an individual and collective basis engaged them in processes of social integration and helped them draw from both cultures in negotiating identity and maintaining a sense of continuity between their past, present, and future.

### **“Curing the Limbo” Audiovisual Expression and Creativity Workshops**

The A/V workshops aimed, as did the other activities in the overall project, at engaging refugees in activities that would motivate them to actively participate in processes of social integration. A first priority was to create a secure and supportive environment, a culturally safe space, “an environment, which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity” (Williams 1999, 213) on the premises of the “Curing the Limbo” project, the Limbo Exit Lab in Serafeio building (see Dragonas 2021). This spatial stability contributed to the gradual development of strong relations of mutual trust and confidentiality between participants and workshop facilitators.

The core philosophy of the A/V workshops was human-centered, placing participants' needs, desires, and abilities at the center of the process, providing space, tools, knowledge, and care to its participants. Drawing on the groups' dynamics in a joint learning process, the goals, the learning material, and overall educational approach were adjusted in line with a collaborative action research methodology (employed in the rest of the activities carried out by the UoA in this project). A/V workshops used art in various forms (photography, music, video) as the basis for inquiry, intervention, and knowledge production, allowing for deeper research insight, interpretation, meaning-making, and creative expression (Wilson and Flicker 2014; Leavy 2015). The aim was to increase the motivation and empower participants to develop their creative potential, competences, and interests with respect to their diverse origins, language, and culture.

The activities of A/V workshops consisted of six cycles, of sixty hours each, and were addressed to refugees granted asylum in Greece. Participants' national origins were diverse: Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Congo, Eritrea, Cameroon, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Algeria, Burundi, and Somalia. In total, 295 refugees, the majority of whom were male, registered in the A/V workshops and attended more than one cycle.

The workshops' facilitators<sup>2</sup> were invited to design a curriculum (with activities inside and outside the Limbo Exit Lab), aiming not only to acquire new skills but also to engage them in creative activities and social interactions that would mobilize and empower them. The ultimate objective remained that of helping refugees discover the city, the city's history, and the contemporary urban, social, and cultural life to acquaint them with various citizens' initiatives and networks (vocational, cultural, environmental, sports, etc.), thus promoting social integration in their new life. In line with the collaborative action research methodology employed, cycles of action and reflection integrating knowledge and action followed each other. In each cycle, every workshop worked on a given theme and addressed topics related to the city of Athens, its life, buildings, markets, and people.

<sup>2</sup> The audiovisual workshops were conducted by facilitators Christos Pieridis (music), Stelios Oikonomidis (video), Maria Leonida (Photo I), and Maria Pesli (Photo II) and coordinated by Anastasia Vlachaki.

Evidence was gathered from the facilitators' detailed diaries, which, for each class, reported, at the end of each cycle, all the good practices, tools that worked (or did not work), in order to help replan with the scientific team the following cycles' objectives, goals, approaches, practices, and curriculum. Implementation was strongly affected by participants' absences resulting from the precariousness of housing and employment, health issues, cultural and language barriers, and their involvement in other "Curing the Limbo" activities.

Activities and artworks created in the A/V workshops by the participants were exhibited in "open-doors" presentations at the end of every cycle at the Limbo Exit Lab. They were shown in music and cinema festivals, presented in radio programs, and uploaded on websites. The final decisions on what should be shared publicly and which parts were confidential and were to remain in the class were taken by the participants.

During the lockdown period in the spring of 2020, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical contact was suspended, the call for art was imperative as never before, especially for the most vulnerable. Under these difficult and testing conditions, it was imperative to keep the workshops going, recreating a safe "virtual home" in order to deliver a vital creative space for everyone involved, both participants and facilitators, thus helping to reduce isolation, improve confidence, combat stress, enhance resilience, and, at the same time, explore new pathways to communication and creativity. Participants were living under various conditions in Athens (family flats, communal houses, shared rooms in camps, homeless). Confined in the camps and their apartments, they had limited access to information technology, used low-cost mobile phones and old laptops, and faced many difficulties in connecting to the internet. The major priorities and challenges set for the team of A/V workshops were to remain personally motivated and transmit this to the participants, keep the groups connected and active as frequently as possible, provide easily accessible tools, impart new skills that would encourage them and help them stay strong and productive, inspire them to be creative with every means available, and be flexible and adjust to the group's dynamics, allowing the maximum possible participation. Online meetings and classes with the help of various tools, like LMS (Learning Management Platforms), blogging sites, and social media, were organized. "Home" was the central topic in all workshops held online during the lockdown. Participants viewed their relationship with facilitators as something more than a formal class and, regardless of whether they could attend the online courses, they wanted to keep in touch purely for human contact and communication.

The participants in all workshops succeeded in producing distinctive artworks during these harsh conditions. The lockdown activities and creations were presented by A/V workshops at an international conference on resilience (Pesli et al. 2020), and the artworks produced during that time were presented online in an international research and artistic project called "The City Calls Back" funded by Stegi-Onassis Cultural Center in two phases.<sup>3</sup>

Given the very extensive nature of artworks produced, we choose to limit ourselves to one of the three media used in the A/V workshops, namely, photography. Thus, the next section focuses on photography workshop II, where participants worked systematically on ideas and themes of "self" and "home" through visual storytelling.

## **Training in Photography and Storytelling**

The objective of photography workshop II<sup>4</sup> was to train participants in the medium and art of photography and storytelling through images, reinforced through experiential exercises, relating, communication, trust-building, and, ultimately, group bonding. The acquisition of technical skills, as well as knowledge of aesthetics, was another objective of all six workshops.

<sup>3</sup> See Phase I: <https://backtalks.city/project/athens-tessellation/>; Phase II: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_b0JIQvAQyU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_b0JIQvAQyU)

<sup>4</sup> The photography workshop II was conducted by coauthor Maria Pesli.

The photography workshop presented, in an “open-doors” format, four hundred photographs in various photo series, accompanied by twenty-seven short stories. Sixty-four participants (fifty-two men and twelve women) registered in the six cycles, but only one-third completed the full training. Ages ranged from very young to middle-aged, although most were in their mid- or late 20s.

Certain educational practices were used in each cycle: learning by doing; codesigned teaching and analysis; hands-on equipment from the very early stage on; systematic use of equipment (cameras, laptops, projectors); a variety of shooting exercises; photographic walks to different environments and city locations; reviewing, commenting, and discussing the produced creative material; reflecting on feelings and thoughts through writing exercises; and peer-to-peer as well as group conversations, leading slowly to the creation of a portfolio of individual and collective artworks to share with the public in the “open-doors” presentations and shows.

The core curriculum of the photography workshop revolved around two axes, the technical/aesthetic knowledge of photography and that of storytelling, so participants would be able to develop personal (autobiographical) narratives in the form of short stories and also to create a series of photographs under a given theme in conjunction with their written work. One fundamental element of the educational approach followed in all photography workshops, inspired by participatory and community art, was to pay attention to creative activities processes and not focus on the production of artworks.

The experiential creative processes, because of the time given within a safe space, stimulation through visual and storytelling exercises, interactivity, discussions, the relations formed between the participants, allowed the group and individual dynamics to evolve. This is why one of the most fruitful processes in the workshop was the projections of the participants’ exercises in almost every class, usually the last hour, when everyone relaxed as everyone commented on and discussed their ways of seeing, questioning their way of thinking, reflecting on their (own) gaze as it was imprinted in their images. The fact that they were the holders of the camera and in control of their own representation motivated them to participate consistently in the shooting exercises in anticipation of their screened images and the group commentary, a practice that intensified toward the closure of each cycle. The exhibition of their work and conversations during the screenings helped them to gradually build confidence and see themselves as creators. Thus, although it was not compulsory to participate in the final “open-doors” presentations, almost all spent considerable time preparing toward the closure of the cycle. Furthermore, as documented in the facilitator’s diaries, during the screenings, participants initiated conversations inspired by the creative process on social, cultural, religious, political, historic, and sometimes even philosophical issues.

The routine of a repetitive cycle, open-ended in a continuously evolving spiral, inspired by the action research methodology, included artwork creation, artwork projections and screenings, commentary and reflection on the artwork, revision of mistakes and achievements, and new goals. This consistent repetition of continuous shooting work led gradually to the building of self-confidence and self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-image. It encouraged improvements in their techniques and aesthetic forms and advanced their critical thinking in spheres beyond the workshop’s educational framework. Decisions like what was included and excluded within the frame of a photograph could reveal the photographer’s mind, indicating personal idiosyncrasies, cultural background, or sociopolitical position. Of value during the viewing processes of their own photographs in the workshop was that participants realized they were in control of their gaze and representation, able to “depict their own lived experiences rather than being the ‘object’ of others’ gaze and framing” (Lenette 2019, 143). This process fostered individual and collective reflexivity that touched on their sense of identity and belonging, evident in most of the artworks and short narratives. Slowly, participants learned how to articulate meanings through photographic narratives, often in the form of visual (and linguistic) metaphors, evident in certain artworks that address issues of forced migration, loss, memory, origins, nostalgia for one’s motherland, and hope for the future. Photography, as a creative process, became a point of reference, a plane of (inter)connectedness with the city of Athens and its citizens but also a vehicle for the expression and sharing of personal feelings, thoughts, and aspirations.

Storytelling was a parallel activity in the photography workshop. Drawing on the tradition of quick automatic writing practiced by Surrealists to evoke unconscious feelings and thoughts, together with the usage of word and phrasal prompts, imaginary short letters to a past and future self, mini-interviews, and in-depth personal conversations improvised and codesigned by the group were ways of providing the participants with extra tools of expression and a means for reflexivity. The self-narrative texts, part of which accompanied their photographs in a form similar to photovoice (Latz 2017), were the result of this complex process. During the last days of the workshop's cycle, before the "open-doors" presentations, they revised their artworks and texts and made the final decision on what they were going to present. An oral ethical agreement was concluded between the facilitator and the participants on not recording omitted narrative parts anywhere else, not even in the workshop's diaries.

### *Artworks and Personal Narratives*

The following five artworks are examples of how participants from diverse backgrounds started to recognize new possibilities in their identity and belonging. All participants created a series of photographs depending on the workshop's theme and developed short personal narratives.

#### **"Looking in a Mirror of My Thoughts and Feelings"**

H. T., a thirty-seven-year-old man from Iran, who had lived five years in Greece without learning any Greek or English, epitomizes how the mirroring process, through his photographs and texts, enhanced his self-awareness, revealing the significant role of the photographic walks in the city of Athens in the process of opening up new possibilities of temporal belonging through the relations, connections, and activities made during training. His interests, however, revolved mostly around ancient sites, history, and the old buildings of the city, with which, as he stated, he felt a rather nostalgic connection. They reminded him of the history and "glory" of Iran, as he often said. This is why he wanted to capture the grandeur of Athens. He was very careful in his framing to include volumes and shapes, lines of geometries he perceived around him. The diptych (Figure 1) and the excerpt that follows are from the themed work "Self-Portrait, Resonant of the City" realized in November 2019.

When I walk around Athens, the history and power of this country is in my mind. What I enjoy in the city is the freedom, the girls that are free to wear what they like, with or without hijab, the kindness of Greek people, the sea, the Acropolis and all the historical sites...I love taking pictures of Athens because they can show my feelings and connection with the city. When I look at my pictures is like looking in a mirror of my thoughts and feelings. (H. T. 2019)

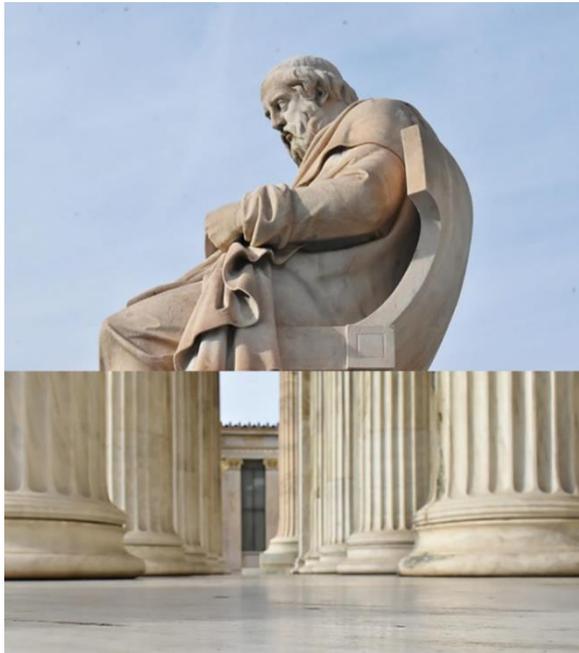


Figure 1: Self-Portrait, Resonant of the City  
 Source: H. T. 2019

Of interest is an excerpt from the narrative he wrote ten months later, while attending the workshop in July 2020, on the group theme: “I am here and now.” Here he speaks openly about being in complete denial through all the years he was here, from learning the language to meeting his asylum interview dates, trying unsuccessfully to go to Germany. He shares the last conversation he had with a refugee trafficker and talks about how the experience of the photography workshop and “Curing the Limbo” program affected his decision to stay. In fact, he describes all those dynamic factors mentioned before as prerequisites and variables affecting his sense of belonging (and nonbelonging when these are missing):

[I told the trafficker] ‘Help me to leave this country.’ And he asked me ‘what you are looking for in your life, think of here as Germany,’ so, what is next! The old man said that if you do not find yourself first, even going to America is pointless. I thought a lot about what this old man said and I applied for a passport and was accepted, and now I am attending these classes and I just realized that many of life’s criteria that interest me a lot, are in Greece. Greece has an ancient and great history like my own country, Iran, and has noble and very kind people. I am trying to create a calm and pleasant life for myself in this country now, with the help of this institution [“Curing the Limbo”] and my own efforts and experiences I have already gained. (H. T. 2019)

### “I Feel Like a War-Torn City”

A similar, exemplary shift of narrative is found in the texts of K. I., an 18-year-old boy from Afghanistan. In his first text written for the group work on a “Self-Portrait, Resonant of the City,” he speaks of the dissociation he experiences, sad feelings, described by using visual and textual metaphors (“I feel like a war-torn city”) but also of his resilience through photography, his increased strength, self-confidence, and self-esteem, evident in the second text he wrote ten months later during the workshop with the theme “I am here and now.” At the same time, he made it clear that he saw his future in Afghanistan, so his narrative shift did not necessarily mean a change in his sense of belonging.

This resonates with what Yuval-Davis (2011) calls the fluid concept of belonging, which is an active social process defined each time within the dynamic sociopolitical and cultural context, where identity and community are continuously negotiated and reconstructed.

The photograph shown here is from the “I am here and now” theme (Figure 2). It is from the last cycle where K. I. shared more personal and some abstract images. When he first joined the workshop, he was still going to school and did not have much time. He was shooting what was close to his camp, mostly graffiti and buildings. His work had only a few technical flaws. He refrained from shooting people because he was afraid that they would complain, as they had done in the past while walking in the city. During the lockdown, he shot very few images of empty streets near the camp where he was staying at the time. He wrote two to three sentences, one of which was “I take pictures as a tourist.” There was a sense of disconnection and loneliness in his photographs. He also verbalized how he was missing his family. During the last cycle, he was comfortable talking to strangers and capturing them in his photos. However, he chose more experimental images for his series of photographs, except two, one is shown here. The first excerpt is from the cycle “Self-Portrait, Resonant of the City” and was written ten months earlier, in relation to the second one from the cycle “I am here and now:”

I am always dreaming, yet here I feel a sadness. I feel like a war-torn city. Before the photography workshop when I was looking at my selfies I was focusing only on my body and I didn't care showing anything else. I was taking pictures at random. I didn't ask why I am taking these photographs. What is it hidden? What else is there to capture? My dream for the future is to become a youtuber. (K. I. 2019)

I came from Afghanistan three years ago. At first it was very difficult for me, it was very difficult to communicate, but now I am comfortable and happy, I can now do things I could not do, and photography helped me a lot. It helped me connect more with people, talk to people, take pictures of people. It helped me learn things I didn't know. For example, I became very sensitive about the future. What should I do. Well, I really like football...And I would like to become a photographer and YouTuber. In the future I will go to Afghanistan. (K. I. 2019)



Figure 2: Self-Portrait, Resonant of the City  
Source: K. I. 2019

### **“When I Look at my Photos, I See a Strong, Smart, and Practical Woman”**

This reflexive process and new relational framework photography provided allowed other participants, like A. T., a young Syrian woman in her early thirties, to recognize and recompose her multiple identities, strengthen her self-image, and increase her self-esteem. Moreover, the storytelling practices offered her an opportunity to speak about herself in a way she had never done before in the class:

I feel great harmony with the art of photography, I love it and it is one of my hobbies. When I take a self-portrait, I feel very confident and able to do what I want. Then when I look at my photos, I see a strong, smart, and practical woman. My pictures sometimes show me a glimpse of my past and other times of my future, what is in store for me. Often, I see in them my goals that have not been achieved yet and that I seek to achieve. (A. T. 2019)

When A. T. (Figure 3) spoke about herself, her interests, and her dreams, she was reflecting on her other identities apart from that of a refugee, about which she rarely spoke. This stripping off of one's refugee identity was common with other participants in conversations inside and outside class, who expressed frustration at being called by a term that connotes their legitimate status, with all the negative connotations attached to it by the mainstream media, which treat them as a homogenous group, disregarding the immense diversity of refugee communities. The photographs in her series are all from the city center. She was attracted by the shop windows but also by their interiors. What was interesting is that she shot hidden corners, not noticeable to the rest of the group, and she felt proud of this. She preferred colors, was very careful with her frame, isolating her subject; it took her time to shoot in order to find the right angle.



Figure 3: Self-Portrait, Resonant of the City  
 Source: A. T. 2019

Through the short personal narratives, the notion of belonging arises as a relational attribute in a dynamic process of connectedness to the social world and experiences of everyday life (Calhoun 2003; Halse 2018). Similarly, new possibilities of identity occur on the plane of artistic expression. The artworks provide a scene through which our true selves reconstruct as we experience art (Loewen 2012).

**“Where Are You From?”**

Y. J., a young man in his early thirties, had studied law in Syria. In his short but condensed narrative provided further on, he touches on major issues related to forced migration, belonging, and identity, epitomized in the title he gave to his work, the photo story “Where are you from?” He points to the normality of his life in his country until war, a major cause for forced migration, disrupted it. The experience of fleeing his country was not, however, the reason to feel disempowered because he quickly rebuilt resilience in a way that Williams and Drury (2010) describe concerning the response

and recovery of people following emergency situations and disasters. It is the emotional intensity of traveling toward uncertainty caused by migration and bordering policies that made him call for his identity and belonging, only to realize their mutation, as Chambers (1994) describes it. These included the deprivation of his human and citizenship rights, excluding him from the experienced social world, an understanding of the policies of migration and bordering (and of international protection laws and human aid), and the dynamics emerging from the new temporalities (relations, occupations):

Life was simple to me as if it was a growing plant under a shining sun, until the war started in my country and I had to leave my home. I felt sad but I thought I can face the new situation since the same sun will rise above my head and the same earth would embrace my loneliness. What happened next shocked me. I was totally a stranger, lost, struggling to find my way through this earth. I lost the feeling of equality ever since someone asks me 'where are you from?' I understood that what evaluates my social status depends on the piece of earth you are born. I understood that a piece of paper called passport could save your life from a destructive war otherwise you can be stuck under a deadly bomb without having the permission to move or travel. I thought it was only a bad 'joke.' Was it just a distant beautiful dream I could not reach, to have a small rest ever since I left my lovely home behind me? Then I saw life from a different perspective. So, here I am, starting fresh anew again. (Y. J. 2019)

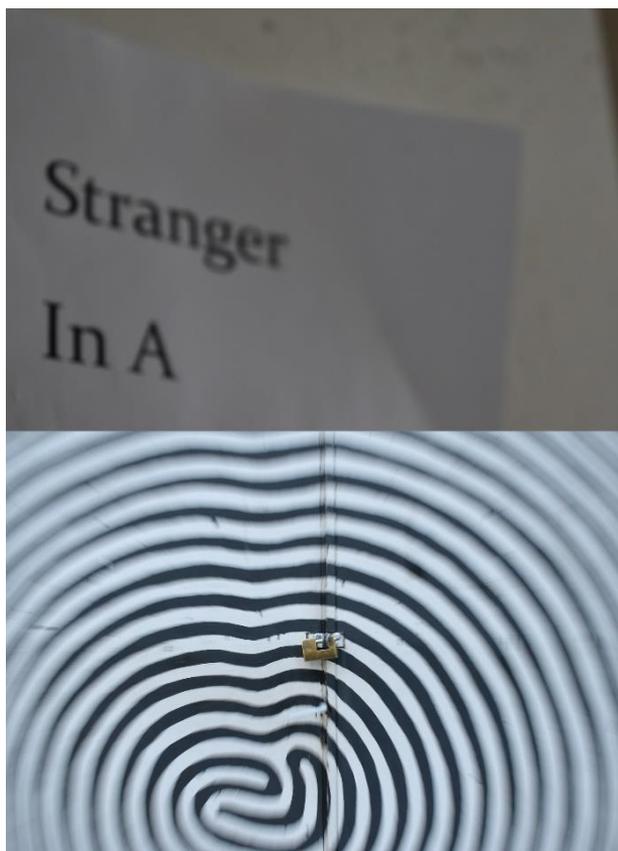


Figure 4: Where Are You From?  
Source: Y. J. 2019

Y. J. participated in only one cycle. Despite having no previous experience, he made no mistakes from the start, technically or aesthetically. He had an obvious preference for abstraction and macrophotography with closed frames. When taking photographs, he forgot about himself and that he was in a workshop's exercise. He was totally absorbed when working, and his story did not need any editing. This is the case for all seventeen photographs in his photo story (Figure 4). He knew precisely what he wanted to say and how to say it but was unsure of what he wanted to do in his life, as he confesses in his narrative.

### **“Home Memories”**

A. A. is a man from Iran in his late forties, who had lived in Greece for fifteen years yet did not speak the language well. Intriguingly, as revealed in his text, he slowly created an installation during the lockdown without even knowing of its existence as an art form (Figure 5). He used and printed photographs found on the web to represent his childhood visually because as a resident of Greece for fifteen years, he had no access to his personal family albums. He started this work with a simple storytelling exercise at the beginning of the Web workshop, about “home and memory.” When discussed, sometime after the completion of the online workshop, it emerged that his urge to speak about his childhood and the past had been a passive need waiting for a trigger like the workshop to bring out. He was completely aware that he was recomposing his past, his memories, and his life, and thus the arrangement of objects he chose to include in his installation constituted a reconstruction of identity and belonging. For example, the carpet, which reminds him of Iranian carpets, the photo albums he has from his life in Greece, objects like vases (not visible in the selection here) that also relate to the Middle East. A. A. asked to exhibit his text in Farsi (Figure 6) along with his photo series. He called his first installation work “Home Memories:”

A journey through time with photographs recalling memories from the past, reminiscent of my childhood, from which I have so many memories and thought to portray with objects and old pictures. However, since I left my country many years ago, I don't have access to my old personal photographs, so I searched in the web to find images that would remind me of my own childhood and the games I used to play.

I chose to change into black and white the photographs I discovered, to be alike my childhood's images, then I printed them and photographed them. Yet, I didn't feel the same emotional bond through this process, so I came up with a new concept. I hung the photographs on a line with pegs and took shots of them. Furthermore, my inner sense urged me to another creative and inventive idea: I thought that two photos on the foreground should be seen clearly focused and the rest on the line blurred, as an analogy to my strong memories and the faded ones. Naturally, I wanted to take these photographs outdoors, nevertheless because of the corona virus measures, I did this at home. (A. A. 2020)



Figure 5: Home Memories  
Source: A. A. 2020

#### در مورد عکس خاطره و گذشته

برای بازگشت به گذشته توسط عکس، که نشان از خاطرات ما و گذشته ما باشد، از نظر من لازم بود که از اشیاء و یا عکسهای گذشته ای که داشتم عکسی تهیه کنم، مخصوصاً برای من که دوران کودکی ام پر بود از خاطرات. اما چون سالیان طولانی بود که از کشورم بیرون زده بودم و عکسهای کودکیم در دسترس نبود به ناچار به عکسهای اینترنتی رجوع کردم چرا که میدانستم عکسهایی در اینترنت هست که کودکی و بازیهای کودکانه مرا بیادم بیاورد.

از درون عکسهایی که پیدا کردم آنهایی که سیاه و سفید نبودند را سیاه و سفید کردم تا به مانند عکسهای کودکی خودم شوند و سپس پرینت گرفتم و از آنها عکس گرفتم ولی با گرفتن عکس از آنها من احساس نزدیکی به آنها نمی‌کردم و این احساس مرا واداشت تا کمی تعمق کرده و ایده ای از خود نشان دهم به خاطر همین عکسها را بر روی یک طناب با گیره لباسی آویزان نمودم و از آنها عکس گرفتم ولی باز هم احساسم، مرا به ایده ای پر بارتر و خلاق تر میکشاند به خاطر همین گفتم خوب است که یکی، دو عکس شفاف باشند و بقیه کمی محو شده که حکایت از خاطراتی دور و نه خیلی شفاف باشند (براحتی جزء آن به یادم باشد) بخاطر همین یکی دو عکس را در جلوی دوربین قرار دادم و بقیه را بر همان طناب که حال دورتر بودند گرفتم و به این تصور که کودکیم را با خاطراتی روشن و نیز کمی محو شده به نمایش بگذارم.

البته دلم میخواست که این عکسها را در بیرون از منزل و در فضایی باز بگیرم ولی به خاطر قرنطینه و برنامه کرونا نمیشد پس مجبور شدم که در درون خانه این کار را انجام دهم.

Figure 6: "Home Memories" Narrative in Farsi  
Source: A. A. 2020

## Reflections on the Workshop's Processes: Limitations and Strengths

The short texts written by participants showed how they reconstructed their self-image, brought forward their multiple identities, revealed their sense of belonging (or nonbelonging), employed memory (what they used to do, think, feel in the past), their relations to their present life in Athens, and aspirations (dreams of the future). This brings to mind an argument by Kuhn (2007, as quoted in Latz 2017, 9), that “the photographic medium, its form, is critical to memory work and the performance of memory.” In writing the texts to accompany the photos, the refugees became conscious of the processes related to belonging and identity formation.

The storytelling exercises were multilayered, occurring at different phases of the workshop. They tried to avoid imposing preset ideas and directed answers on participants through questions or discussion subjects, even the usage of certain terms in English. Additionally, the use of terminology, regardless of the reason (technical, aesthetics, theoretical issues), risked creating distance, and, additionally, each time had to be explained and analyzed according to cultural and lingual specifics of groups. For instance, the word “portrait,” “self,” and “identity” were unfamiliar to most of the participants, partly because of their varied educational backgrounds and ages.

Not all participants attended regularly or acquired similar levels of understanding and knowledge, often owing to harsh living conditions (homelessness, lack of finance, job mobility). Within this polyglot environment, limitations occurred for those who did not speak adequate, or even any, English or Greek. However, linguistic barriers did not prevent eager participants from wanting to learn and create artifacts. Thus, in the cycle of “Self-Portrait, Resonant of the City,” a female participant from Afghanistan (N. Y.) relied on the help of co-nationals and Google Translate to understand what was being discussed in the class. As she pointed out, this linguistic barrier motivated her to concentrate fully on what she wanted to express, grasp, and focus when attempting to take representative self-portraits.

Importantly, there were social, cultural, and religious differences among different groups of participants, not obvious to those who did not speak their language or understand their social and cultural hierarchies. Thus, Afghan participants who grew up in Iran were reserved about speaking openly in front of Iranian participants on adversities and discrimination faced in Iran. Similarly, three ladies, two from Afghanistan and one from Syria, were uncomfortable speaking openly about their feelings in front of the men participants and very careful in the choice of words used to speak about themselves in class conversations. This changed when they had the opportunity to write about themselves, where they were more open in sharing their feelings.

The outside activities in the city were the most popular during training and inspired stimulating photograph-artworks. Their projection sparked interesting conversations about personal connections with the city, the history and culture of Athens and Greece, cultural differences, feelings, and thoughts about living away from their country, family, and friends. During relaxed moments looking at their photographs, observing and mining their own insights into the world, their sense and perception of identity and belonging began to open up new possibilities. This process was unfamiliar to them; they had not expected to reflect on their photographs, having never previously spent time examining their own point of view, photographically or metaphorically speaking.

## Conclusion

The photography workshop, like those for video and music, provided an environment for participants to express their truths, realities, creativity, visions, and hopes in photographic and lexical artworks, music, and videos. It is important to mention that a prerequisite for joining the A/V workshops was for participants to have obtained or applied for asylum, which excluded a few newcomers without such status. The limited provision of interpreters created barriers in communication and unequal treatment for participants unable to speak English or Greek. Inconsistent workshop attendance occurred when it overlapped with Greek and English language

workshops, which were a priority. A few participants prioritized the A/V workshops envisaging future employment prospects, leading to concern about how best one could equip them technically and how a vocational support network for self-sustainability could be created by the end of the program. Initiatives taken in that direction included bringing them in contact with other Greek professionals and visiting relevant cultural states and private spaces.

The evaluation process, held at the end of each training cycle, revealed that the expectations of participants before the training concerned an enhancement of their professional skills, leisure, or hobby. They genuinely felt satisfied with their achievements. They appreciated all workshops and were very happy to share publicly their works with family, friends, and a small audience attending the “open-doors” presentations at the end of each training cycle. Some of the participants have now left the country, whereas others stayed and took advantage of the project’s employment services to get a job and settle down on a more permanent basis.

The visibility of their artworks and personal narratives became vital throughout the project. At the end of the “Curing the Limbo” project, the outcome of the participants’ work has been uploaded onto a virtual museum at the project’s website<sup>5</sup> and a photobook (Art of Coexistence 2021) was published featuring the work produced in the photography workshops. Attempts to distribute their achievements and the workshops’ activities had been taken through social media as well.

One of the questions that emerged during the writing of this article concerned the impact of “Curing the Limbo”’s A/V workshops in the lives of the participants following the program’s completion. It is unknown whether the feelings and perceptions expressed in these artworks/personal narratives continued since the original sociocultural and economic milieu (“Curing the Limbo”) no longer exists. When spatial, material, social, individual relations change, the understanding of belonging changes too, shifting from a more concrete idea to one of flux and instability, informed by the politics of identity and belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011). Uncontrolled factors force migrants–refugees to renegotiate their identity within the ongoing process of relocation and reformation of relationships, leading to new readings concerning “belonging” that must consider these changing life experiences (Youkhana 2015). The dimension and quality of belonging has to include the temporary, ephemeral, and multiple belonging.

The artwork produced by refugees during the workshops represents records of individual and collective memories of new and real, but also imaginative worlds and identities. They record ephemeral, spatial, relational, and cultural belonging and map refugees’ journey in search of a new safe home and even a reconstruction of identity. The artwork may be an archived memory of a recomposed self, which may not have occurred if the overall “Curing the Limbo” project and A/V workshops had not occurred. The value of the artworks produced lies in the historicity of their documented self-narratives and images, now archived, shared, and remembered. The visual and textual stories are lived experiences acting as counternarratives challenging any dominant culture that frames refugees as voiceless victims. They showed us how it is possible for individuals to (re)define their own identity in periods of crisis and how art can provide a safe space for transformative possibilities in these renegotiations and reconstructions. The findings of the whole experience acquired during the A/V workshops are multilayered and complex. The visibility and dissemination of it may contribute to the discourses around the role of art interventions in the social integration of forced migration populations and could potentially generate further research and actions. The sustainability and continuation of such projects is also of vital importance for long-term observations on the social impact and two-way social integration of forced migration populations.

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://curingthelimbo.gr/>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Evangelia Kourti:** Professor, Social Psychology and Media, Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

**Maria Pesli:** Media Artist and Arts Facilitator, Athens, Greece



# Worlds Never Apart: Bridging Communities by Engaging Refugees in Cultural Mediation

Alexandra Androusou,<sup>1</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

*Abstract: The present article outlines the fundamental pedagogical and methodological principles that guided the concept, design, and realization of a training for refugees as cultural mediators. This project was conceived and led by a team of experts at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens as part of the “Curing the Limbo” project. This article describes the various implementation stages as well as the changes introduced during the training of cultural mediators. The goal was to create a feeling of belonging despite the participants’ linguistic, cultural, social, and political differences. Through the collaborative and experiential procedures and based on Paulo Freire’s theory, we have created communities of learning and practice to ensure that learning takes place collaboratively to empower both trainees and trainers.*

*Keywords: Cultural Mediators, Refugees, “Curing the Limbo,” Communities of Learning and Practice, Paulo Freire*

## Introduction

This article<sup>2</sup> describes an initiative that was conceived and led by a team of experts at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (hereinafter, the NKUA team) to train mediators as part of a program entitled “Curing the Limbo” (see Dragonas 2021). Training adult refugees in mediation was considered an important component of the application submitted to the EU Urban Initiative Actions (UIA). The goal for this was that once trained, these individuals would work for the project by supporting its actions. For the NKUA team to be true to the goals of this project, namely to enhance social integration of refugees through education, it was important to build a relationship of trust and maintain ongoing communication between members of the dominant group as well as between the various minority communities (Androusou 2016; Dragonas, forthcoming). In this context, minority communities refer to the various refugee groups, while the dominant group refers to the host society.

As part of a multifaceted approach to training, which emphasized mobilizing refugees and transporting them from a state of inactivity and resignation to a state of creatively transforming their experience into meaningful existence, the NKUA team came up with a training program that was comprised of learning English and Greek (see Karavas, Iakovou, Mitsikopoulou 2021), participating in audiovisual workshops (see Kourti and Pesli 2021), and engaging in cultural mediation. It is quite evident that cultural mediators act as the go-between different worlds and temporalities. They are the glue that binds together refugees who “are stuck in camps, waiting” (Khosravi 2021, 203) and members of the Greek society, that is, scholars, educators, new scientists, and NGO personnel—all of whom oversee the organization of solidarity interventions (Androusou and Iakovou 2019).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Alexandra Androusou, Navarinou 13A, Athens 10680. Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. email: [alandr@ecd.uoa.gr](mailto:alandr@ecd.uoa.gr)

<sup>2</sup> This article was translated from Greek into English by Effrossyni Fragkou.

<sup>3</sup> The author has extensive experience in issues pertaining to refugee children education due to her partaking in different roles and various responsibilities. Most notably, she designed and implemented a program for training cultural mediators in the minority communities of Thrace (Androusou 2016; Dragonas, forthcoming). In addition to her participation in a project designed to educate both mothers and their children in the camp of Elaionas (Androusou and Iakovou 2019), the author sat at the Committee of Supporting Refugee Children Education of the Ministry of Education (2017) and Religious Affairs of Greece from 2016 to 2018. Her experience was valuable in designing and implementing the project on cultural mediation described in this article.

The process of coming together and mediating is neither simple nor without problems (Papataxiarchis 2016a, 2016b). In the Greek context, the presence of the ethnocultural ‘other’ has been more prominent during the past twenty years; yet the Greek culture, while increasingly multicultural in composition, remains monocultural in orientation. Against this backdrop, intercultural relations and intercultural communication were at the heart of the original planning of the overall project. Our goal was to highlight existing problems in refugee integration while building bridges that would allow trainees to come together and work collaboratively in materializing this multifaceted project of refugee social inclusion.

This was an ambitious project by all accounts, and several obstacles were encountered during its implementation (see Dragonas 2021). It became increasingly clear that the success of the initial design depended largely on all actors involved working collaboratively, providing each other valuable feedback. It is worth noting that our methodological approach to refugee social integration differs greatly from the currently existing one. More specifically, in Greece, since 2015, refugee inclusion and social integration have been the NGOs’ turf for which social integration can be achieved merely via the provision of goods and services. Most NGOs have been rather disinclined to dig deeper into the stereotypes held by the host society and have tended to apply culture-free methodologies already used in other parts of the world in need of humanistic aid. As a result of such an a-cultural and a-political approach, NGOs have been using interpreters to perform the complex work of cultural mediation as cultural mediators.

## Defining Cultural Mediation

All around the world, there is increasing recognition for cultural mediation—an approach that goes beyond purely providing translation or interpreting services—meeting the needs of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Cultural mediators work with a wide variety of organizations, including NGOs, hospitals, healthcare centers, and police, providing assistance to displaced populations in areas including medical and para-medical services, health promotion, psychological services, as well as legal advice. International organizations such as the Council of Europe or the High Commission for Refugees have been clearly stating the importance of cultural mediation. Relevant Greek literature (Papataxiarchis 2016c) also reflects the vital role that the cultural mediators are asked to perform, especially in areas such as mental health (Giordano 2008). In Greece, cultural mediation is not a recognized or officially accredited profession. Consequently, defining the necessary skill to become a cultural mediator remains a grey, unregulated area where employers are stepping up to fill the gap by providing their own operational framework (as is the case of NGOs). Given the ill-defined profession of cultural mediation, “Curing the Limbo” embarked upon a special mission to introduce a different definition for training mediators.

Our starting point is that cultural mediation is not merely language interpretation. Cultural mediation is the ability to translate within a specific context, that is, to create the necessary conditions for all parties involved—in our case, refugees and members of the host society—to understand each other. Good command of the Greek language is naturally a *sine qua non* condition, but it is not the only requirement. A cultural mediator needs to possess the tools to decode cultural habits, everyday life, and the history of the host country while mastering their own culture, history, and geography; hence, they must be able to navigate through several circumstances, each representing a different reality. In other words, cultural mediation is a multilayered process whereby cultural mediators can critically evaluate and decode attitudes, habits, and behaviors; transfer meaning by explicating; and bridge communication between all participants involved so that they can interact effectively, understand the specific situation, and respond to it. To achieve this, knowing a linguistic code is not sufficient. One needs to be able to identify and ‘read’ the signals provided that make up each communicative act—to interpret them while mutually negotiating the information provided (Rozakou 2020).

In other words, cultural mediators are the missing link between members of the host society and people who have found their way into it. These people do not speak the language of the host society, are unfamiliar with the cultural and historical elements that make up the host society's fabric, and are unable to interpret everyday life, namely how the administration, educational, and healthcare systems, among others, work.

Furthermore, it is critical to point out both the significance and evolution of cultural mediators, especially within an ever-changing and multifaceted dynamic that includes notions of movement/residency as well as choice/necessity. During the last decade, refugees that landed in Greece consider the country to be a place they have either chosen to enter intentionally or a place where they may be awaiting approval for moving toward a more permanent residence in one of the Western European countries. In that sense, and as cultural mediators may belong to the former or the latter population group, their role becomes exceedingly important. Since cultural mediators are also refugees, their own sense of self, place, transiency, and residency may also be evolving. This often translates into their respective roles as cultural mediators becoming idiosyncratic, challenging, and even unpredictable (McAllum 2020). The intent of this work, as it relates to cultural mediators, has become a central focus of concern precisely because of the fluid nature of transiency/residency. We have, therefore, remained hyper-vigilant in the ways in which cultural mediators identify their own similar, often traumatic, migration journeys and experiences with those of the people they are hired to help. For us, establishing a level of trust and communication among all parties concerned has proven to be pivotal. Cultural mediators are critically important in establishing boundaries and professional distance in their communication and involvement with refugees they serve and, in doing so, engage in reflection and self-assessment of their own circumstances.

If the cultural mediation framework as described above is accepted, we then need to define what it means to train cultural mediators. What should the aim of the training be? How is one to create an appropriate curriculum? What type of pedagogical means does one need to design to create training activities? How can one select the subject matter and communicative framework to incite the participants' interest and co-construct the body of knowledge and skills that will allow cultural mediators to develop a deeper understanding of how mediation works while analyzing their own perception of the 'other' (that is, the members of the host society) and of the refugees they are called to assist? This is a real challenge on both a political and pedagogical level.

Having an academic or empirical knowledge of the refugee condition does not suffice to meet the challenge described above. Instead, one needs to view the refugee condition from various angles to comprehend the social, economic, and political reasons that resulted in the 2015 migratory flows and the humanitarian governance of the refugee crisis at the international level. One also needs to critically analyze the conditions created by policies implemented at the government level or by NGOs, as well as those shaped by the social and political biases against refugees (Christopoulos 2020). In other words, when designing such projects, the academic perspective requires a reflective analysis of the data provided by the host society—in our case, the Greek society—especially with respect to relations of power and social hierarchy. In the training described herein, reflection was the main tool used by trainers to design the curriculum and adjust it to new realities and necessary changes.

### **Implementing and Reflecting upon a Curriculum in the Making**

Our project for training cultural mediators assumed that social integration relies on reciprocal communication and mutual perception of the 'other's' point of view. As a result, our proposal was based on data collected directly from the field, using a bottom-up approach and following the requirements of critical-collaborative action research (Tsafos 2016). This approach utilized ongoing feedback to ensure that the content of the training program met the needs of the participants. The project was continuously reframed to capitalize on the participants' experience and on the evolving group dynamics.

The aim of this initiative was to co-construct knowledge regarding the host society, shedding light on how the ‘other’ perceives the various aspects of social reality and their position vis-à-vis the members of the majority community. Our intent was not to ‘instruct’ trainees by imparting knowledge and skills, that is, by using an expert-driven understanding of their role. Imparting communication techniques was the easy part. What was difficult was to define in advance the necessary knowledge each participant was in need of to be effective in their role. It is of importance that the minority community members were given the opportunity to reflect upon their own cultural baggage, process it, and explore ways to bridge the gap between their experience and their understanding of the host society.

In conceiving this project, we were guided by a basic principle, namely that it is imperative to question concepts such as cultural superiority and culture as a coherent whole and a cohesive text (Plexoussaki 2002). In a nutshell, this program was all about empowering the participants to develop a critical understanding of their role (Freire 1971). Therefore, we refrained from using terms such as ‘instruction’ and ‘training,’ as working with adults presupposes dealing with individuals who already possess a body of knowledge—a set of perceptions and attitudes that have been shaped by the reality or realities they have experienced. What we proposed instead was for all parties to reflect upon the role and the needs of the ‘other’ and to transform them into a new experience.

The intent of the article is not to offer an overall evaluation of the cultural mediation training in terms of educational outcomes. This difficulty is the result of the delayed start of the implementation owing to administrative reasons, which in turn resulted in important time gaps between the various phases. However, data collected from the trainers’ journals and meeting transcripts, as well as information drawn from the systematic monitoring of the trainees, contributed to an understanding of the framework within which this training took place while revealing what was really at stake in training cultural mediators in the Greek context, as well as of the way the process unfolded.

Here we will outline the fundamental pedagogical and methodological principles that guided the formulation, design, and realization of the project; the various implementation stages; as well as the changes introduced along the way. The training unfolded in three phases: one phase of in-person interaction, another of blended learning, and a third one online.

We will also present the project’s educational goals and the methodology we used, the educational materials we developed, and the practices that were implemented in addition to our basic reflective approach. In doing so, we attempted to introduce our targeted audience, that is, our refugee participants, to an educational experience that was equally rich for both the trainees and the trainers.

The legacy of this project is the interaction between the various stakeholders and our collaborative effort to understand and analyze respective needs. Actually, this is the methodology we utilize in designing the academic curricula to train future teachers.

## **Designing the Project: Pedagogical and Methodological Assumptions**

The pedagogical and methodological assumptions of the training project make use of Freire’s (1971) critical pedagogy. Freire’s work greatly influenced the development of critical pedagogy by criticizing the technocratic approach to curricula and by proposing alternative solutions (Tsafos 2014). More specifically, Freire (1971) believed curricula should not be designed solely by experts; instead, shaping a curriculum must be the result of a collective process whereby all stakeholders, namely educators, learners, specialists, partners, as well as members of the community, can all contribute (Tsafos 2014). This approach is what guided the development of the cultural mediation training in question. We posited that each element that made up the content of our program should reflect a broader understanding of the refugee condition while taking into account the specifics of the Greek context, the prevailing Greek discourse on foreigners and refugees (Archakis 2020), and the mediation needs as defined by the various stakeholders. This approach, known as critical pedagogy and critical action research, goes

against a cause-and-effect positivist reading of social phenomena by attempting to grasp, as much as possible, the social realities and the roles assumed by all those involved. Imparting communication techniques was the easy part. The difficult part was to define in advance the necessary knowledge each participant was in need of to be effective in their role. In other words, emphasis was placed on understanding the context into which social phenomena are produced and re-produced while appreciating their historical dimension.

To sum up, social events and educational actions are not shaped in a historical and cultural vacuum. They stem from a dialogic relationship in time and place. As a result, every educational process extends far beyond pedagogy. Learners, for their part, must discover the link between the educational process and the historical, political, and social framework into which this process takes place. If this link is not found, the educational process will not be understood; the acquired knowledge will be sterile and, thus, non-functional (Freire 1973). The goal of every pedagogical process practice encompasses a critical praxis, thus leading to emancipatory knowledge. This kind of knowledge will, in turn, lead to critical thinking and will unearth the web of social relations that are founded in social inequalities (McLaren 2010). In his work, Freire (1973, 96) proposes what he calls “problematized education,” which, in its capacity as a humanitarian and liberating act, demands that “the oppressed fight for their inexorable emancipation.” Emancipation presupposes that oppressed subjects critically assess their current condition and take action to reverse the existing status quo.

Against such a backdrop, our own training program was founded upon the idea of emancipation and critical consciousness of the role of cultural mediators. By critical consciousness, Freire (1997) understands the process by which the oppressed are no longer passive recipients of the partaken knowledge. Instead, the oppressed are the “knowing subjects” able to reach deeper knowledge of the reality that is shaping their lives but also of the possibilities to change such a reality (Freire 1997), hence his proposal for an education that is founded upon the struggle that aims at emancipatory knowledge. This type of education highlights its political dimension as a means of attaining justice.

Dialogue is at the heart of Freire’s theory as it is the only way for educators to understand how learners view the world and to structure the educational content and process by utilizing this knowledge. As an act of pedagogy, dialogue can be defined as a horizontal relationship between educators and learners whereby the latter is not reduced to the role of the receiver, but instead, they engage in a dialogue with the educator and together, embarking upon an act of co-creation (Gergen 2009). An education designed to free humans from their oppressed condition should combine theory and practice (Freire 1997). In that respect, the pedagogy behind our training program combined critical investigation and utilization of the trainees’ culture and language. The goal was to promote a deeper understanding of people’s everyday reality and their respective standing within society. This went beyond developing linguistic competence in our cultural mediators.

For the purposes of the training project, we appreciated trainees’ previous knowledge and experiences. As such, we were then able to build on the existing capital by expanding and enriching it. Our motto was: “we do not educate; we simply train by building on the existing knowledge thus empowering participants.” In adult education, empowerment is one of the pillars of Freire’s (1994) educational model. In his writings, Freire (1994) identifies three stages of empowerment education. The first stage is based on collaborative action and consists of trainees exploring topics that may be of mutual interest and concern. During the second stage, trainees present trainers with the issues that need to be addressed as they emerged from the consultation process during the first stage. This second stage is all about empowering trainees through critical analysis of the selected topics. The third and final stage requires trainees to take action. Learners are asked to come up with solutions bringing about change, leading thus to transformation of the current conditions. Undoubtedly, such an educational process promotes empowerment leading to a critical analysis of issues that are of interest to learners. These qualities are realized once learners take action through positive change with a view to transforming current conditions (Freire 1973).

## Setting up a Community of Learning and a Community of Practice

As stated earlier, this project represented a collective action that relied on the interaction between the team of trainers and the various groups of trainees. Our goal was to create a feeling of belonging despite the important linguistic, cultural, social, and political differences among the participants. We used collaborative and experiential procedures and worked in smaller groups. We aimed to create communities of learning and communities of practice, ensuring that learning takes place collaboratively as a means of empowering learners.

The term “community of learners” was first used in the early 1990s and has since become a synonym of educational reform. It breaks free from the traditional view of learning as an individual process and incorporates the sociocultural dimension of learning. Seminal papers, such as “Cognition in Practice” by Lave (1988) and “Situated Learning” by Lave and Wenger (1991), have contributed to such a shift. Many scholars and practitioners operating in the field of education were fascinated by the idea that knowledge and the process leading to its acquisition are “cultural practices” (Wenger 1998). Accessing knowledge through communities of learning has revolutionized the educational landscape by making collective human experiences the starting point of every educational process. In fact, the notion of a community of learning brought to the fore a holistic approach to learning and to experiencing things whereby action “(such as learning) rides on a dialectic of individual and collective, each of which presupposes the other: an individual concretely realizes an action, the possibility of which exists at a collective, generalized level” (Roth and Lee 2006, 28).

The training lasted three years. This duration was comprised of several interruptions that occurred during this time for reasons that were already explained. During that period, we succeeded in shaping a community of learners and a community of practice. This reinforced our team and provided mutual psychological support. This team<sup>4</sup> was entrusted with the task to implement the first phase of the project, as well as the second one, which involved face-to-face and online instruction. During the third phase, one of the two trainers as well as the coordinator resigned to be replaced swiftly by two educators who had the same educational background and extensive experience in teaching refugees.<sup>5</sup> The intervening team proved to be very committed to the cause, working collaboratively, respecting each other’s voice, taking into consideration each other’s point of view, and reflectively and critically approaching their respective roles. The refugees themselves played an active role in this process.

As stated previously, the goal of this project was to empower participants in recognizing the importance of their role and interpreting it into their own experiences. Refugees working as mediators are often underestimated, but their presence is essential if the gap that separates them from the members of the host society is to be bridged. Our work was built around four axes. The first axis aimed to address the role of the cultural mediator, issues that pertained to professional ethics and role boundaries, communicative skills that are necessary for cultural mediation, as well as the methodological models and strategies for mediating culturally in a more systematic way. The second axis was geared toward familiarizing participants with various cultural aspects of the host society in a dialectic way that welcomed the culture of the other. The third axis involved a hands-on approach by exploring the city of Athens, its structure, and its social fabric with a view to familiarize learners with its history and culture. The fourth axis consisted of running a specialized language workshop on how to use Greek in various cultural mediation settings.

<sup>4</sup> Alexandra Androusou: academic supervisor responsible for the training, educational psychologist. Trainers: Ariadne-Daphne Stergiopoulou, coordinator, social anthropologist; Olga Dima and Panagiota Malkogianni, MA in teaching Greek as a second/foreign language.

<sup>5</sup> The team for the third phase included Alexandra Androusou, who was the academic supervisor responsible for the training, Olga Dima, Irianna Vasileiadi Linardaki, and Panagiotis Markopoulos, all of who possessed an MA in teaching Greek as a second/foreign language. Many of the ideas in this article have been discussed during our meetings. I am grateful to them for our excellent collaboration and their commitment to our common cause.

## The Three Phases across Eighteen Months

The above-mentioned axes correspond to three distinct phases. Each phase was structured differently to reflect the profile of the participants and their individual needs. The first phase served as a pilot phase for the subsequent ones. The targeted audience were immigrants who had arrived in Greece prior to the 2015 refugee crisis and have been residing in the country ever since. They have already been working as interpreters for their respective communities. The topics covered during the first phase were the following: the role of the cultural mediator; codes of ethics and standards of practice in cultural mediation; basic communication skills; basic translation and interpreting skills; mental support for all stakeholders and self-care for cultural mediators; and ways and techniques for effective mediation. Participants in this phase were mainly working as interpreters for various NGOs. Some of them were working for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees or were activists with extensive experience in the field. Each topic described above was explored through an ongoing self-reflective process. The NKUA team compiled the material used in this phase together with the feedback provided by the participants to develop the curriculum of the training.

At the end of phase one, a focus group was used to explore the participants' reactions to the training. Trainees had appreciated the type and quality of knowledge they had acquired and how it had contributed to the development of a professional identity. It was reported that the training program instilled a sense of professionalism in participants while helping them to become more visible and respected in the various, often hostile, settings they are called to serve. The intervention team also perceived this phase as valuable insight into the actual conditions in which cultural mediators operate and the wide range of scope for cultural mediation.

During the second phase, we introduced an action research approach. Our goal was to relate the action research method to the project's initial phase. In line with the principles governing the action research methodology, we utilized findings collected during the pilot phase. The team of trainers came up with a series of topics that ranged from daily life challenges to accessing key public services, navigating in the Greek healthcare and educational systems, and familiarizing oneself with Greece's legal and judicial machine. These topics were not carved in stone: instead, they would change and/or adapt accordingly in line with the action research methodology. By the end of this phase, participants were to have acquired appropriate methodological tools, become acquainted with Greek culture and history, and gained the ability to manage a variety of complex situations. In other words, they would be in a position to mediate.

In the second phase, there were sixteen participants in total originating from Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Cameroon, Iran, and Afghanistan. It was a highly heterogeneous group with very few members having a sufficient understanding of the Greek language. Despite language barriers, trainers purposefully avoided the use of English as a lingua franca since communicating in one's own language is a prerequisite to performing cultural mediation. However, learning the Greek language was equally necessary. Thus, training comprised language workshops in Greek and theme tours of Athens to develop a sense of belonging and provide opportunities for socializing. Additionally, participants benefited from a short hands-on experience in the field by working on the basis of simulated scenarios and under the supervision of their trainers. These activities fulfilled the scope of cultural mediation as the construction of 'cultural bridges,' bringing together refugees and members of the host society. As such, this experience allowed trainers to get a glimpse of the participants' culture that proved to be highly rewarding.

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out while the second phase of training was taking place, thus preventing on-site meetings and in-person training. The momentum was greatly affected, and the number of participants decreased despite efforts to keep the communication going by online means. Twelve out of the sixteen participants completed the full training and received a certificate of attendance. Regardless of the circumstances, the initial goals of the project were achieved.

If we were to evaluate the second phase of the cultural mediation training program, it managed to retain its innovative character insofar as:

- It prioritized participants' experience by putting it in context. This meant that instead of adopting a top-down approach, we opted for bottom-up planning.
- We operated outside legally-established working/office hours. Classes and activities were scheduled during the weekend or in the evenings to accommodate those who were holding day jobs.
- We offered lively four-language workshops throughout the whole phase.
- We created a support network for cultural mediators comprised of experts and professionals operating in the field (guest speakers from the healthcare sector, education, and legal aid).

The third phase ran from December 2020 to April 2021. During that time, Greece was under lockdown, and workshops had to be conducted remotely. Online distance learning allowed us to broaden the range of the target audience, as participants from all over the country could attend. To be able to take this training online, participants had to have the necessary technical equipment and be able to speak and understand Greek at a satisfactory level.

Our main goals and principles for this phase remained the same as in the previous ones. However, we had to change the means for reaching our pedagogical goals as well as our methodological approach to teaching. More specifically, city tours were substituted by presentations that provided participants with useful information; skills were imparted and consolidated via appropriate online activities; a repository of digital material was created to enhance learning; participants were introduced to the Greek folk culture, such as songs about migration, uprooting, and displacement as experienced by Greeks throughout their history thus drawing a parallel between them and today's refugees; etc. Presentations and discussions on cultural differences were made possible through digital narrations, PowerPoint presentations, music, and other means of expression. Each participant would take the floor and speak about themselves and about they saw in the others. This resulted in broadening the scope of the training for both trainers and trainees. New bridges were built between Greece as a host country and the refugees' home countries, as well as those countries they had transited through or had stayed in camps (as was the case with Turkey and Jordan) before ending up in Greece. This ongoing dialogue between the local and the global participants shaped the identity of the mediators as persons that embrace otherness and difference, who are flexible and able to approach things holistically.

The third phase was the most successful of all, exceeding our expectations, especially if one is to consider the extraordinary circumstances under which training took place. Success can be attributed to several factors, namely the participants' communication skills; their motivation in attending regularly; their level of engagement; and the special bond that was formed among the trainers, all of whom were like-minded, close associates of the scientific advisor. Finally, trainees were equally enthusiastic about the training, thus forming a strong group dedicated to collectively achieving the goals of the project.

It soon became obvious that this final phase proved to be the most informative one for the overall endeavor. All participants attended a total of 150 hours of training and supervision three days a week for three to four hours. Each session was comprised of several interrelated thematic units. Online meetings evolved into online workshops on intercultural communication and understanding, and each workshop fed to the other in a circular fashion. The first three-hour session was dedicated to Greek language learning, whereas the remaining two hours were devoted to the history, culture, and society of both the host and the country of origin. Each participant would, in turn, be assigned a task based on each week's topic and would be asked to analyze and present cases that required mediation or work on activities that aimed at consolidating language and specific terminology. What we proposed was an open curriculum, adjustable to the needs of the participants. As part of their mission, all three trainers

collaborated with experts in human rights and asylum issues (namely the Greek Ombudsman for Children's Rights and a lawyer specializing in Asylum Law), school principals, and heads of Directorates for Primary and Secondary Education in Greece, mental health experts, etc. Each one presented case studies that pertained to their field of expertise and worked with our trainees in developing short simulation scenarios that required cultural mediation.

At the end of each week, all three trainers would meet with the scientific advisor for a three-hour session during which they would review the journals kept by the trainers, provide feedback, reflect upon the process and the pedagogical outcomes of the week, and make necessary changes in the curriculum. This approach would take into consideration participants' needs as well as questions and concerns raised during training and translate them into necessary amendments in the curriculum.

As far as teaching was concerned, we opted for an approach that comprised:

- Case studies, learning-by-doing workshops, discussions, and analysis of cases in sub-groups
- Website content analysis (such as official/institutional websites); exposure to culture via the use of archival material, such as songs, photos, films, and other audiovisual material; digital tours of sites of cultural and historical interest, such as museums, war memorials, and others
- Presentation of one's country of origin, history, and lifestyle
- Activities aimed at expanding the breadth and depth of the participants' knowledge in any given topic
- Useful material providing information on human rights, legal issues, Greek administration and its institutions, the relationship between the Greek state and its citizens, etc.

The cyclical rather than linear structure of the third phase allowed trainers to work with a dynamic, constantly evolving interdisciplinary curriculum. This curriculum was co-designed with the help of trainees by utilizing their feedback, questions, concerns, as well as their need for further knowledge. The themes that were selected for each phase would focus on refugee needs and the issues with which cultural mediators are confronted in their work. For their part, trainers and curriculum developers had to constantly update their knowledge and understanding of the refugee condition and adjust training content accordingly. In doing so, trainers would engage in a dialogue with the people operating in their field, thus incorporating their experience, knowledge, and understanding of the host country into the curriculum. The conditions of lockdown facilitated a learning-by-doing approach that was based on simulation.

The training material was original, multimodal, dynamic, and adjustable to specific mediation situations and settings. As such, it could not be reduced to a simple manual, class notes, or a users' guide. Based on the theory of multiliteracies and critical literacy (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) as well as transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1991), the curriculum follows the principles of adult education.

## **Drawing Useful Lessons and Paving Ways for the Future**

To assess the project's outcomes, we used a focus group methodology. Participants met for an hour and a half to review all positive and negative aspects of the subject matter, the implementation, and the *modus operandi*. The following excerpts from discussions that took place during the focus group reveal the way participants perceived the project. Their comments suggest that the curriculum touched upon key issues for refugees; it addressed specific needs while providing the necessary tools for their professional life in a wholly different way to that they were used to up to now.

The excerpts provided below show how successful the communities of practice and the communities of learning were even when working remotely. In conditions of lockdown, our trainers succeeded in creating an open framework for learning as well as an inclusive teaching process. It is worth noting that the participants highlighted concepts such as time and space (geography and history) that were considered to be useful knowledge. Such comments suggest that social integration depends on a person's effort to situate oneself in time and space and that this is a two-way process: positioning oneself within the host country, acknowledging one's cultural roots, and working through the experience of being a refugee and that of being uprooted.

The excerpts below describe a process that lifted barriers and paved the way for participants to integrate into the host society and to shape a professional identity as cultural mediators:

Thank you, COVID! If it wasn't for COVID I would not be able to join you. I live in Crete. There is so much I can say. But I will choose one thing. My all-time favorite. I would join the sessions right after work. I was very focused, and I wouldn't miss a single word that was said...for anything in the world...My mind would not drift. No matter how tired I was, at the end of the day I was excited. I feel more confident now. I can speak without being self-conscious. I am no longer shy. I am a different person now. Some things, I knew already. But I wasn't expecting to learn so much. What I learned here I couldn't have learned it at work. This is all very useful. (O; a woman from Syria who works as an interpreter for a local municipality)

Thank you for everything we've experienced together. No complaints here...All the information we got was very useful. At work, when I explain to people the things I know thanks to this program, the history of Europe, for instance, I realize that Greeks don't know these things. Now I know things kids learn in school. The street I live in is called Charilaou Trikoupi.<sup>6</sup> Now I know what it means. Why it is called like that. I also learned my rights. We have rights, you know...For instance, I now know that if you have a SIN number you have access to healthcare. Now I know what I can say to the police. (M; a man from Afghanistan who works in a restaurant)

## In Lieu of Conclusion

Training cultural mediators within the "Curing the Limbo" project was an important pedagogical as well as political experience for all parties involved. Our plans for the training of cultural mediators coincided with major political changes: a new Greek government as well as a new City Council for the city of Athens. These changes were reflected in our training as it was necessary for us to take stock of the new realities in the field. The theoretical foundation of this project implied that training cultural mediators would be a systematic, exploratory investigation of what cultural mediation is about, what is meaningful about it, and how future cultural mediators and trainers can engage in mediating. By trying to understand how others view Greek society and what it means to be integrated into it, we ended up questioning our own perceptions of and about the host society. Drawing from previous pertinent research (Frangiskou et al. 2020), we decided to examine the institutional, political, and social framework of migrant and refugee integration.

Data collected from the first phase of the training allowed us to trace the development of the path refugees take and to identify the following: What are refugees really missing in order to be able to understand the Greek context? What difficulties have they encountered? What were the obstacles they had to overcome to work as interpreters or cultural mediators?

In the second phase, we had to deal with a diversity of linguistic backgrounds and with participants with limited command of the Greek language. This led us to restructure the content of our training program. *In situ* visits to museums, archeological, and/or historical sites were

<sup>6</sup> Charilaos Trikoupi was an emblematic Greek politician of the early twentieth century. He served as the country's Prime Minister for seven terms and has left an important political legacy.

used to incite linguistic awareness in our learners along with the cultural and social aspects of the experiential activities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and imposed lockdown interrupted our initial planning; the project was temporarily suspended due to the participants' lack of access to the internet. Training resumed three months later, but this affected our ability to reconnect with participants and establish group spirit.

Phase three was designed to be implemented online. Participants in this phase were highly motivated, came from a variety of professional backgrounds, and resided in various cities from all over Greece. Sessions were held systematically three times a week. This allowed trainers to go deeper into the various aspects of mediation. We were also able to trace the shift in attitudes vis-à-vis the other for both the trainers and the trainees. In this phase, we tested several pedagogical techniques and created a virtual, online space for collaboration that promoted dialogue and mutual acceptance of the 'other.' The training challenged participants' fixed ideas and beliefs and functioned as a workshop that tested cultural differences and interpretations, provided opportunities for problem-solving, created bridges, and shaped a community of learning and practice.

Throughout this initiative, many obstacles and challenges were encountered in regard to hurdles to the implementation, development, and expansion of the training process. These challenges cut through a range of areas and practices, such as:

- Collaboration with the rest of the partners of "Curing the Limbo" (see Dragonas and Pouloupoulos 2021)
- Dealing with bureaucratic rigidity, delays, and inconsistencies in regard to implementation policies
- Difficulty in finding participants willing to become cultural mediators; difficulty in adjusting our own criteria to selecting successful candidates; ongoing political changes; and work associates dropping out of the project
- A series of frustrations to which one must add the psychological burden of dealing with the sensitive topic of migration and displacement and of being forced to operate in precarious conditions, including the COVID-19 pandemic

In other words, we had to do without many of the certainties we took for granted, be it of a political, scientific, educational, or partnership nature. If we stayed true to our original focus, it is because we had a solid methodological basis (Fine 2018). Within this methodological framework, each step was necessary; each reflection and feedback was useful; and each mistake, miscalculation, or shortcoming was a valuable lesson leading us to the next level. As stated earlier, fragmentation in the implementation of this initiative and time gaps between its various stages make it impossible for us to provide a systematic evaluation of the project's learning outcomes. Instead, we managed to collect sufficient evidence that supports the future implementation of similar initiatives.

The path from being a refugee to becoming integrated into the host society is not an easy one. It requires facilitation and support. Mediation is fundamental in bridging the gap between the two states of being. Mediation is not only about the 'other;' it is mainly about us—as members of the host society. Moving from interpreting to mediation means grasping the affinities of two opposite poles, identifying relations of power, analyzing stereotypes, and understanding pre-defined roles and patterns.

It seems that action research is the only methodology that secures building a solid bridge that brings together worlds currently apart. The goal would be to avoid parallel monologues: on the one hand, refugees, their discourse on the hardships they have endured during their displacement, and the difficulties they are faced with in their new home, and, on the other, members of the host society, that is, the imperial 'we,' full of certainties and a sense of superiority, even if manifested indirectly. Mediation carried out using an action research methodology is not a unique way out of this 'we versus the other' conundrum but the sum of multiple interpretations and multiple

temporalities. This ongoing renegotiation of the curriculum and the corresponding methodology provided us with a useful lesson: how to survive quicksand, how to absorb shocks, and how to embrace change. In the face of adversity, as experienced in Greece for the past decade, this process made us stronger, as similarly described by Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos (2018). The lesson learned is particularly useful in training tomorrow's educators and in producing scientific knowledge and scholarly work that incorporates the social and historical framework while proposing curricula based on open learning processes.

The state of precariousness with which the refugee status is associated was aggravated by conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic were felt all over the world. However, those who were more vulnerable were affected the most. For refugees, everyday life has become even harder since restrictions to accessing the city, the market, hospitals, and education resulted in exclusions from all of these places and activities. Children could not continue with their schooling (Children's Ombudsman 2021). Greek society reverted to old racist patterns. Islamophobia is increasing around the world—a new political landscape has emerged since the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan and the Americans withdrew from the country. This new reality provides little hope for a European agenda centered around the importance of refugee integration, and this is all the more true in Greece. Any discussion on and about mediation should take into consideration this new reality as well as current European policies.

Our own legacy is the experience we gained through training mediators in an ever-changing landscape. We gained considerable knowledge and drew immense satisfaction for being able to help adult refugees in challenging times (while waiting to be given asylum status or while being in transit toward new destinations). This experience provided us with food for thought, especially with respect to learning how to mediate with our own preconceived ideas, society, taboos, and stereotypes. Our refugee participants were already transiting countries and states of being in search of a better life. Our journey of discovering ourselves as viewed by the 'other' has just begun.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Alexandra Androusou:** Professor, Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

# “Curing the Limbo”: The Challenges of a Multi-Partner Collaboration

Thalia Dragonas,<sup>1</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece  
Charalampos Pouloupoulos, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece

*Abstract: The present article describes an organization in the making, in the context of the “Curing the Limbo” multi-partner project, addressing the inclusion of refugees in Greek society. It discusses a capacity-building intervention that lasted for the entire three-year duration of the project, aiming at enhancing collaborative processes between actors with diverse perspectives and multiple voices. It highlights the relational dynamics within and between the partners involved, the effects of the social and political forces at play, the many challenges encountered, and the practices adopted toward social organizing and change.*

*Keywords: Multi-Partner Collaboration, Capacity Building, Group Dynamics, “Curing the Limbo”*

## Introduction

The objective of “Curing the Limbo” was to develop a model of integrated mechanisms, procedures, and services that would allow the inclusion of refugees in Greek society. Yet if this was to be served efficiently, an equally important target was the inclusion of its partners in the organizing process and structure. It is this latter target of achieving a generative multi-partner collaboration that is addressed in the present article.

“Curing the Limbo,” like all organizations, was not a rationally designed, closed system in which the partners and the individuals got together to fulfill the goal of refugee integration in the city of Athens. It was a constant process involving the construction of ongoing and ever-changing patterns of human interactions, meanings, negotiations, conflicts, and ambiguities. The present article addresses the dynamics that were developed within the organization during the life of the project. Our analysis is informed by those movements in organizational development that are concerned with the interdependent actions of the participants with each other and their surroundings (Whitney 2020). Thus, as the dynamics within the partnership are inseparable from the wider social and political context, we will be analyzing internal dynamics in reference to the external ones, drawing from social constructionism, organization development, and group psychodynamic concepts.

## The Partnership

This was the first time that the Municipality of Athens (MoA) initiated any kind of multi-actor collaborative partnership. Refugee integration is a complex issue that cannot be tackled efficiently by means of single actor initiatives alone. Such endeavors lead, as a rule, to fragmented action, often lacking a long-term perspective. A sustainable approach to refugee integration is necessarily holistic and builds on interorganizational collaboration between public and civil actors that have the experience and the know-how in the various aspects of social inclusion. This was the goal of setting up the “Curing the Limbo” partnership.

As described in the first article of this special issue (see Dragonas 2021), the partnership included the MoA, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (UoA), the international NGOs Catholic Relief Services/Greece (CRS), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and synAthina, the latter being an initiative that brings together actors who are not formally

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Thalia Dragonas, 13 Navarinou Str., Early Childhood Education Department, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, 10680, Greece. email: thdragona@ecd.uoa.gr

organized but who belong to local communities and who can play an important role in refugee integration. An additional partner was the Athens Development and Destination Management Agency (ADDMA), the operational arm of the MoA, responsible for the organizational and financial management of the project. Although all four partners had a successful history of refugee integration, they also had distinct itineraries and bore different organizational identities, perspectives, backgrounds, and cultures. The heterogeneity of the actors involved in this collaborative partnership enriched the project yet also served as a source of tension because they did not always hold similar perceptions of the shared situation.

The MoA operates on the basis of slow bureaucratic processes, characteristic of Greek civil service, with no history of collaborative ventures and little scientific or administrative experience in running large-scale European-funded projects. The staff hired specifically for the implementation of “Curing the Limbo” were not employees of the MoA, were mostly young and relatively inexperienced, and were caught between the rigid mechanisms of the municipality and the relative flexibility of Urban Innovative Action (UIA), which has expertise in promoting pilot projects for sustainable urban development. The MoA, being the lead partner, had the heavier role in the project, yet its staff had the least experience required for the purpose.

In contrast, the UoA staff was composed of academics who were older and who had international experience and a significant record of implementation. However, the disadvantage was that they were working part-time, based outside the premises of the project’s center (Limbo Exit Lab). Without the physical nearness, UoA’s academic staff missed out on the day-to-day running of the project. UoA, being a state university, is very slow and inflexible in the financial management of research funds, leaving all those involved in the project frustrated.

On the other hand, CRS and IRC, like the rest of similar nonprofit entities, are independent organizations that are quick and flexible in decision-making and in the management of funds. CRS has been involved in emergency shelter response, and IRC has implemented programs supporting refugees and their livelihoods. Both NGOs’ staff in the project were young and competent in their own domains, but during their full-time presence on the premises of the Limbo Exit Lab, they were accountable to their own organizations and not to the project manager. This created confusion over who was accountable to whom in relation to project results.

The synAthina initiative did not constitute an independent partner because it has been operating under the previous administration of the MoA, retaining a semiautonomous character, its management team composed of externally hired young activists, bringing together, supporting, and facilitating citizens’ groups engaged in improving the quality of life in the city.

The ADDMA was not directly involved in the project’s implementation, but all partners were dependent on its administrative efficiency because it was responsible to UIA for the management of the overall project funds.

The preceding description conjures up a complex scenario, with each partner carrying its own know-how, experience, and culture, some being primarily accountable to their mother organization rather than to the management of the project. In addition, there were several divides between partners’ organizational structures in terms of flexibility, staff experience, age, full- versus part-time status, and unequal distribution of salaries—some being paid exorbitantly more than others. Thus, it was clear from the very beginning that the task ahead was to build on partners’ prior work and strengths and construct complementarity on the basis of differences.

There are numerous studies on the impact of diversity in the fields of management and human resources, psychology, labor economics, and political economy literature. Potential negative and positive channels of the influence of diversity on organizations and their outcomes have been identified. On the one hand, there may be communication difficulties leading to poorer outcomes and differences in worldviews, causing intragroup conflict and reduced trust, whereas, on the other hand, teams with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ideas may promote creativity and innovative thinking and thus feed organizational cohesion (OECD 2020). Our approach was informed by Lewin’s ([1946] 2008) work, going back as

early as 1946, postulating that differences can be an important threshold to collaboration and that what renders a group cohesive or not is not similarity or dissimilarity but rather the interdependence of its components.

## Year One

The creation of a common ground to forge synergies, ensure smooth delivery, and achieve multi-partner collaboration was spelled out in the project design, which included a provision for extensive training in capacity building. It was to be facilitated by the authors of this article (to be called facilitators hereafter). The facilitators' mission was to set in motion a process identifying what organizational capacities to target for strengthening and applying strategies most likely to build these capacities.

Borrowing from Dougherty and Mayer (2003), organizational capacity was conceived as the combined influence of an organization's abilities to govern and manage itself, to build meaningful relationships, to develop resources, and to thus improve the delivery of its mission. There is no universal standard governing all organizations, and organizational capacity is by no means fixed. It is developmental and changes over time depending on transformations internal and external to the organization (Evans, Raymond, and Perkins 2015).

Three capacity-building workshops were conducted in the three and a half years of the project: in the beginning, a year later, and six months before the end, in which fifty-five members from all partners involved participated.

The need for creating meaningful coherence in order to achieve coordinated action across partner boundaries was clear from the very beginning. The facilitators were well aware of how challenging it is to create opportunities for collaboration when partners have different agendas, skills, orientations, etc. Even before this practice was put in place, they grappled with a way that would best introduce the general orientation of this multi-actor partnership. Facilitators had to find answers to questions and dilemmas. How would the group process be premised over the traditional vision of individual action and responsibility? Without disregarding the importance of individuals, how would they function within the broader context in which they were to participate? How would partners understand the power and the need for a relational, dialogic process? How would agency and authority reside not with the individuals but rather in relationships among all those involved in the running of the project, with other organizations, and the wider community? How would the project get "in dialogue" with the internal and external forces? How would it be in line with the principles of democratic, relational leading, avoiding centralized autocratic management, as well as the occasional chaos of *laissez-faire*, according to Lewin's classical theory on leadership styles (Lewin, Lippitt, and White 1939) more than eighty years ago? Answers to these questions were not easily forthcoming and remained a big challenge along the project's life—both at the group and at the individual level.

During the first exploratory meetings, when partners and individual members first came together, they experienced the primary tension that stems from uncertainty and is a natural part of initial interactions. After the project was launched, all concerns were directed toward task structuring, self-organization, and meaning-making within each partner organization. Partners were struggling to define their own tasks and to make the best plan for the activities under their purview so as to fulfill their role as indicated in the project proposal. Calls for staff attrition, keeping deadlines, and planning steps to be taken worried each partner individually and absorbed their energy. No one realized that even if they were effective in self-organizing, coordination and communication flow among partners was imperative to manage issues and achieve success for the organization as a whole. Hence, a culture of collaboration and networking had to be created among the various project partners.

“Curing the Limbo” was not a project funded to offer stand-alone services to refugees but rather to come up with a comprehensive model and test innovative solutions for integration where education, housing, job counseling, community, and active citizenship would be brought together in order to develop mechanisms that would help refugees leave their limbo state and gain autonomy in their everyday life. If this was to be achieved, the partners responsible for each component also had to come together, coordinate their actions, and organize in terms of collective intelligence.

However, those responsible for the overall management of the project, lacking relevant experience in how group processes influence program effectiveness, wavered between the conviction that the organization as a whole would evolve in a promising direction, as a result of simple interaction and goodwill, and the expectation that the facilitators of the capacity-building training would magically provide top-down solutions to everything. The latter alluded to the basic assumption of “dependency,” as described by Bion (1961) according to which the members of a group can remain passive while their security and protection are provided by an external object. Yet, it was clear that they were in deep need to move beyond day-to-day task performance toward an environment that would facilitate dialogue, collaboration, and co-creation, but they did not know what steps to take in this direction. This created insecurity, anxiety, fear, and ambivalence.

As aptly phrased by Gergen, if organizational vitality originates in the confluence of relationships, specific practices must be put in place (Gergen 2009). This was the task of the capacity building lying ahead. The aim was to get partners and individuals within the partnership to engage in processes that would allow them to connect, confront, and commit. Hovelynck et al. (2020) suggest that these are the three core processes for generative multi-actor collaboration: connecting as a precondition for generative confrontation, and the dynamic between connecting and confronting, allowing commitment to develop.

The first capacity-building training took place from October to December 2018, spanning sixty hours over eight meetings. Its primary objective was to bring all those involved in the project together in an organized fashion, promote connectedness in view of enhancing group formation between the partner organizations and their members, and help develop identification with the project. The methodologies adopted were those of Experiential Learning and Participatory Action Research, employed in all the activities of the UoA in this project, whereby cycles of action were followed by cycles of reflection with room for dialogue and development (see Dragonas 2021). The specific goals of the capacity-building training were communicated to the participants as follows:

- Build a collaborative intervention team
- Enhance capacities so that the members individually and the team as a whole can act as agents of positive change
- Deepen the understanding of the refugees’ condition
- Develop skills relating to program design and implementation
- Build capacities at the organization and staff level to face challenges and solve problems in working with refugees
- Improve dialoguing, decision-making, and organizational skills
- Advance democratic leadership, open communication, and sustainable development

Everyone was invited to participate—from those working in the field, the project manager, and the administrative staff to the vice mayor of innovation. Some would never come in contact with the refugees taking part in “Curing the Limbo,” but this was irrelevant for the group formation process. The starting point in the process of the new organization development was bringing to the surface the underlying participants’ needs and the exploration of their experiences, beliefs, and feelings. Training was designed as a collaborative learning process to help members share individual values, goals, and priorities that would gradually develop into common goals, driving the group as a whole.

A wide array of themes cut across all capacity-building training, as depicted below:

- Holistic strategic planning
- Group dynamics
- Identity and culture
- Roles in organizational settings
- Communication and operational functions
- Relational leadership
- Project management
- Generative change
- Accountability
- Development of policies and methods to support refugees
- Organizational mapping and networking

Group formation between the various organizations and their members constituted a multi-level and complex endeavor. The fact that staff recruitment was not completed at the onset of the training added one more layer of complication because there was a sense of missing links. There was only a full house during the last meeting of the first workshop.

The two facilitators worked jointly, providing a model of coaction. The format of the experiential learning workshops followed a succession of plenary sessions and small group discussions. A number of tasks and tools were used that helped participants get to know each other, improve social connectedness, and get them to focus on the same issues. Such tools included the “personal map” to improve social connectedness (Bridger 2001), SWOT (Valentin 2001), and PEST (Carruthers 2009). The latter were used to orient participants toward identifying the strengths and weaknesses, the threats and opportunities, internal and external to the new organization, as well as the relationships between these factors. They were not, however, used in the classical organizational development fashion interested in the diagnosis of the factors and forces that limit performance and in the formulation as a precondition for successful change interventions (Anderson 2017). Rather, they were used as a means of engaging participants in a safe and stimulating environment that would inspire reflection and expansion of the boundaries of what is possible and encourage the emergence of a collective “future-forming” practice (Gergen 2015). The project’s prospective logo instigated lengthy deliberations that provided participants with the opportunity to discuss the identity of the newborn project and to share their vision. Another task was to take a photo or choose a literary piece reflecting the refugee crisis to be brought to the workshop and shared with others, thus encouraging participants to release their creative energies and help them understand, define, and communicate in images and words issues in the migrant/refugee world that were affecting them.

Training aimed at enhancing and further developing the ability to change, develop networks, and achieve sustainable development in the context of a turbulent environment, such as the refugee crisis. Roles, communication issues, means for crisis management, and coping with emotions and dilemmas relevant to the new working environment were discussed and explored. The need for networking between and within the organizations constituting the partnership was prioritized. Participants were urged to reflect on what their roles might be and how they might facilitate the project’s development. The challenge ahead was the joint creation of a new organization that would offer constant learning opportunities; operate on the basis of open democratic dialogues, making use of the viewpoints and talents of all members; and support and empower them within a holding environment. In spite of the divisive forces generated by adaptive challenges, such as productive conflict (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009), members had to remain engaged with one another.

In such an environment, individuals and groups that originated from distinct organizations could work together to fulfill their mission even if they came from different professional and personal backgrounds, had different experiences, and held opposing views and perspectives. Issues that emerged from the discussions concerned power dynamics, social change, and autonomous versus collective decision-making.

Therefore, the training process aimed at facilitating the transition (Amado and Ambrose 2001) from old practices to a “new organization” that could better serve the mission of the project. Although there was a lot of sharing of ideas and enthusiasm in certain moments, the facilitators felt that the participants were afraid of change and reluctant to move from the “I” (whether that of the individual or that of one’s organization) to the “we” position of shared meaning. At the end of the seventh meeting, it looked as if participants experienced difficulties in conceiving “Curing the Limbo” as a shared project of interdependent processes, in coming up with initiatives inspired by coaction, and, ultimately, in developing a common narrative. In retrospect, the experience with this first workshop showed that the expectations of the facilitators were, maybe, too ambitious. It was only the beginning of a difficult three-year process.

In adopting a psychodynamic reading of the unconscious processes that were taking place, the facilitators identified defensive mechanisms that were at play when issues such as power, authority, responsibility, and accountability surfaced. Denial was the defense that was more often used by those responsible for the project management who were uncomfortable with the leadership role.

### ***Organizational Conflict***

While “Curing the Limbo” had passed the formative stage of development, joint sense-making proved hard to achieve. The management team was getting impatient because they were unaware that collaborative action does not “just happen” and that it takes time for participants to be able to listen to and understand different agendas. Difficulties persisted in developing a shared frame. A telling example was the difficulty in coming up with a viable organization chart. During the first round of capacity-building training, the notion of organizational structure was introduced, premising a team-based structure where partners would be working toward agreed-upon goals while working on their individual tasks. Several meetings were subsequently held between the key persons in the overall project management and the facilitators, with no success in concurring on an organization chart. Meanwhile, the four partners were individually proceeding with their tasks, but joint decision-making was avoided.

An additional difficulty was the rigid institutional background and the demanding bureaucratic procedures of the MoA and the UoA, both public law legal entities. This limited the options for flexible solutions and was often the cause of underlying disparity between the actual needs and the project demands.

Conflict and criticism were not welcomed, and those who had a cardinal role in the management of the project had difficulties envisaging its constructive role (Barker, Wahlers, and Watson 2001). There was a lack of convening power outside the capacity-building training that would bring partners together to engage in real discussions on both unifying and divisive issues. This was a sign of persisting low trust between the various groups and the management team, as well as toward the facilitators.

### ***Organizational Defenses***

In situations of conflict and low trust, organizations tend to resort to organizational defenses that inhibit organizational performance (Argyris 1990). Isabel Menzies-Lyth (1960) introduced the concept of social defenses in organizations. She provided compelling empirical evidence on how those who work within an organization may create social structures that mitigate their anxieties.

Informed by psychodynamic theory, she postulated that in any group of individuals that gather together for a stated purpose, there exists a conscious, task-oriented group and an underlying, unconscious group. The functioning of the latter may jeopardize the requirements of the task (Menzies 1960). Menzies-Lyth was not referring to psychic defenses that are operated by individuals alone but rather to the impersonal elements of institutions that exist separately from the people in them and that are utilized by people to buttress individual defenses.

Accordingly, in “Curing the Limbo,” the bureaucracy and the distant authority of the MoA, and the demands of UIA for a set of reports and deliverables, filled those responsible for the project management with anxiety. In order to cope, they adopted defensive practices, as described by Menzies-Lyth, which constrained the fluidity and responsiveness of the organization and were detrimental to the work. Such practices were systematically resorting to ritual task performance, strict instructions and procedures, and limited decision-making. However, to what extent bureaucracy was the actual cause of frustration and denial or merely an easy excuse to circumvent interaction, remains an open question.

Moving beyond individual and collective unconscious anxieties, and in taking a social constructionist perspective, we look into relational coordination within the organization of “Curing the Limbo” and the defenses that surfaced when participants felt insufficiently valued and affirmed and hence alienated and antagonistic. Noonan (2007) talks about certain ways of thinking about and relating to others that get reinforced, creating vicious cycles of behavior that he calls “defensive routines.” Defensive routines are patterns of interpersonal interactions that people create to protect themselves from embarrassment and threats that arise when they feel their abilities are not positively evaluated by a colleague or authority figure. Whether actual or perceived, what is under attack is one’s sense of competence. Likewise, in the organization of “Curing the Limbo,” key persons in the management of the project were not feeling confident enough in their leading role, vacillating between the style of command and control inherited from past assumptions in leadership roles and the kind of leadership that results from the relational process.

Thus, a defensive routine that masked threats to competency was adopted by having regular, twice a week monitoring meetings of a ritualistic and standardized character that remained entirely superficial, focusing on technicalities and bureaucratic issues. In these long meetings, defensive reasoning and behavior prevailed, and there was awkwardness and reluctance on the part of the participants to expose their weaknesses. Everybody left the meetings feeling tired, bored, and frustrated while fearing to raise deeper concerns that remained “undiscussables,” thus feeding a cycle of disappointment. Every so often, clashes were taking place, but instead of being worked through, steam was released in private conversations that were held behind closed doors and in hallways. The result was that communication was bracketed, and possibilities for collaboration were eroded.

On several occasions, denial of reality was observed in the leading figures that had the tendency to avoid thoughts and feelings, thus provoking anxiety and anger in the entire group. This anger was often indirectly expressed in passive aggressive behaviors (Ashforth and Lee 1990), manifested in intentional inefficiency—inaction or delayed response to work demands, selective memory in setting up priorities, or staying silent when a response was expected. Predictably, these behaviors fed back anxiety to those that originally provoked it, who in turn felt they were unfairly treated. Actors were caught in an entangled reciprocity that damaged unity and work performance. Other times, this anger was projected onto another group or member, avoiding responsibility for one’s feelings, or was displaced toward a less threatening target, such as the capacity-building facilitators. If anger was expressed openly, it could have proved helpful both for group goals and outcome, as Gibson et al. (2009) postulate. Confrontation was necessary for exploring possibilities and developing a vision to which actors could commit, but the primary condition for generative confrontation was, as Hovelynck et al. (2020) would claim, to maintain connection, both in a substantive and in a relational sense. Generative confrontation proved difficult, both at this particular time in group development and along the life of the project.

### ***Individual Progress—Collective Standstill***

Although the organization as a whole was unable to make significant steps forward, self-organization within each partner was advancing in a creative way. Partners were testing their ideas and were fervently involved in pursuits toward fulfilling their tasks. These could include

anything from the CRS designing and piloting an affordable housing model; the UoA team developing a common curriculum for Greek and English language learning; setting up the workshops for audiovisual expression; experimenting with co-teaching language and photography; designing a curriculum for training in mediation or organizing a psychosocial support service; the IRC offering job readiness training using a strength-based approach; synAthina exploring and mobilizing the neighborhoods of Athens and holding public events. Members' allegiance to their respective partner was solidified. Refugees were increasingly engaged in the activities and services offered by each partner and provided positive feedback.

However, partners preoccupied with their individual advancement were failing to take into account that steps toward coaction were needed if the holistic model was to be fulfilled. Expectations and uncertainties about how specific viewpoints and organizational culture would be received in the heterogeneity of this multi-actor group led to hesitation to move forward with new training in capacity building that would foster cohesion.

### *Gradual Internal Changes and Abrupt External Events*

Despite conscious and unconscious conflicts, two significant developments toward partner collaboration took place well into the first year of implementation. Two teams were put together that went beyond the surface structure prevailing thus far, bringing representatives from all partners together into a coordinated course of action.

The first team was the "case management team", following the progress that refugees enrolled in "Curing the Limbo" were making and collectively addressing issues and decisions related to improving reception of services. This exchange was based on differentiated needs as expressed by refugees. The second was the "monitoring and evaluation team" that developed a theory of change by discussing expected outputs, outcomes, and impact of the project and how it was to be operationalized in terms of performance measures and indicators to be collected. Both teams brought to the fore an awareness of mutual dependencies between partners, joint ownership of decision-making, mutual understanding, shared sense of purpose, and joint inquiry.

Whereas these two teams were making progress toward cross-partner collaboration, the rest continued to pursue their individual goals. According to a member of the "case management team," "this was [an initiative] aiming to move things forward and was also appreciated by the refugees themselves. In addition, being part of this team bonded us as colleagues;" however, she admitted that the need for this team was not communicated efficiently to the group as a whole (Papadopoulos et al. 2021, 30).

While the project was grappling with moving from unilateral initiatives toward a domain of partner interdependency, a major external event occurred in July 2019. Local, national, and European elections were held in Greece. Changes in the external environment always affect the functioning of an organization. Often, governmental policies affect organizations, staff, and service users. Political changes in Greece from a radical left to a conservative party brought the management of the refugee issue under a much more conservative agenda. Amendments in migration policy and asylum were introduced, lowering protection standards and creating unjustifiable procedural obstacles for those seeking international protection (see Dragonas 2021). These changes distressed all those working in the "Curing the Limbo" project who were committed to the cause of refugee protection and integration.

As regards the MoA, the new mayor, backed by the conservative party, no longer held the issue of refugee integration high among his priorities. The position of vice mayor for migrants and refugees was discontinued and replaced by an executive municipal counselor. Also discontinued was the position of vice mayor for innovation. The latter affected the project directly because she was the one that had initiated the "Curing the Limbo" project, it was her office that was based in the Limbo Exit Lab, and it was she who had an eye on the day-to-day management. Her inspiration was sorely missed.

New teams took over at the mayor's office and the ADMMA administration, necessitating an adjustment period between May and September. These changes caused significant delays in the sign-off processes and in decision-making. For almost a year, the project was no longer an asset for the new administration, and those responsible for its management felt marginalized, their insecurity was exacerbated, and the organization was destabilized.

## Year Two

It was at that time that the second round of capacity-building training took place. Shorter than the first one, it was held over two days in September 2019. Emphasis was placed on the internal and external changes and obstacles encountered during the first year of implementation. The political developments and the new policy toward migrants and refugees filled participants with anxiety. So did developments in the new MoA administration and the effect it would have on the staff, service users, and the project's goals. Issues concerning the internal functioning of "Curing the Limbo" were, however, the primary concern. Participants identified certain unresolved problems as still impeding group cohesion; these included limited flexibility and satisfaction with the working environment; unclear role definition for some; lack of an organization chart; the project's indistinct identity; discrepancies between everyday duties and the project's overall mission; restricted application of innovative practices; excessive bureaucracy; insufficient interaction with the refugees participating in the project; and diverse partners' organizational cultures. It was clear that participants anguished over certain difficulties noted at the onset of the project a year ago. They were then asked to split up into five groups, each of which was to discuss the problems identified and their causes and possible solutions, adopting the subject position of each of the five stakeholders involved with the project: the funders, the management, the staff, the refugees, and the locals. A very rich collage of subject positions emerged from the dialogue as participants listened to alternative voices. Awareness was raised that subject positions are relational categories that may seem value-free but that, in reality, are imbued with power, obtaining their situational meaning in relation to other possible subject positions and discourses (Billig 1991).

Fearing that the group was constructing for itself a "problem/difficulties" narrative, the facilitators moved to an alternative approach, informed by "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life" (Cooperider, Barrett, and Srivastva 1995; Camargo-Borges 2019; Trosten-Bloom and Lewis 2020), enabling participants to surface stories of success, appreciation of each other, and co-creation of a new understanding of what is good and positive. The aim was to put relationships first by inviting participants to talk about what fills them with pride in their own experience. They selected affirmative topics and members from each partner drew attention to the progress achieved, highlighted the innovative solutions prioritized, and the initiatives taken for cross-partner coaction; yet, not everyone in the group was ready to take this path. In many instances, instead of sharing pride, they preferred to share grievances. Discourse vacillated between satisfaction and discontent. Expectations had not been met for several of the participants, and disappointment surfaced yet again. One key participant broke into tears; tension was released, and feelings were aired, bringing relief to the group. Participants left the training feeling they had taken steps forward.

However, once participants were on their own again, they had difficulties self-organizing as a group without directive or facilitative leadership. The individual purpose of each partner was becoming stronger, but this was not the case for the common purpose of inspiring the organization as a whole. A few months later, the facilitators suggested a follow-up capacity-building training on the issues that had not been dealt with, but there was considerable reluctance on the part of both the management of the project and some partners. Members of synAthina, who at the time were busy launching their new partnership projects between refugees and native active citizens, exhibited a very defeatist discourse, claiming they had given up expectation that a group culture would ever be accomplished. Was this yet another defensive

strategy to cope with anxiety or the expression of a realistic frustration toward the project's management? It was difficult to identify the dominant group processes at the time because the suggestion for a new round of capacity-building training was turned down.

Soon after, in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit not only "Curing the Limbo" but also the entire world. The first universal lockdown was imposed, restricting mobility and preventing refugees from coming to the Limbo Exit Lab, while all partners were faced with the challenge of generating alternate modes of service delivery to meet the needs of refugees and their communities.

In the beginning, everybody was destabilized, although fast adaptation to new methodologies was required. Those responsible for the management of the project resorted once again to denying the severity of the situation, the long-term prospects of the pandemic, and the measures imposed. There was an unfounded belief that we would soon revert to what it was and that there was no need for real internal changes and respective accommodation other than wait and see.

The UoA immediately resorted to emergency remote learning practices (Affouneh, Salha, and Khlaif 2020). However, equipment such as iPads and an internet connection, which were a prerequisite, was not available. The project's management team could not acknowledge the urgency of such a purchase, and ADDMA, after being convinced of the need for this expense, was so slow in carrying out procurement that the iPads arrived two months after the first lockdown. Tensions, frustration, and anger prevailed, and a new crisis loomed within the project.

Another round of capacity-building training, at this specific time, would have helped partners come together, express their fears and anxieties, dialogue on alternative modes of integration, and exchange the creative practices they had developed in addressing refugee needs with new online methodologies. Once again, this did not happen. Those responsible for the project's management, instead of instigating such a process, felt threatened by the prospect of bringing everyone together. Thus, the partners were left to their own devices to work through, unilaterally, the challenges posed by this extraordinary circumstance and the feelings it generated. Each partner kept within its own bounds and held its internal meetings that are, nevertheless, remembered as exceptional moments of sharing and release of creative potential. Although the excitement experienced by the individual partners was not shared with each other, the feedback received by the refugees was very encouraging. They said they felt psychosocially supported during a very difficult time when their anxieties and insecurities were exacerbated. "Curing the Limbo" had lost the opportunity for meaningful coherence, shared conversations, and collaborative reflexivity at the large group level.

Following the first lockdown, "Curing the Limbo" tried put its pieces together. Everyone returned to the Limbo Exit Lab but not for long because in the fall, a new lockdown was imposed that lasted until the end of the project in June 2021. Partners continued to further develop their intervention strategies and refine their tools and methodologies. A paradox was dominating group dynamics: while many argued that coaction would benefit the project and would bring satisfaction to all those involved, the act of coming together in a generative process for such a transformation was avoided—as if there were forces compelling the system to retain its homeostatic status and avoid change. As noted in the evaluation report, if actors had been brought together in ways that supported the connection to the shared mission, it would have better-served the project organization and, consequently, achieved greater integration of services offered (Papadopoulos et al. 2021).

### Year Three

The last round of capacity building took place online from September to October 2020 and lasted twenty hours. Despite the resistance and anxiety in coming together, it eventually helped everyone see the whole picture and openly discuss the group's conscious concerns, as well as explore its "hidden agenda" (Smith 1994). Everyone sensed a breakthrough. In view of the five months remaining until the end of most of the activities, the facilitators chose themes and tasks that would bridge the past, present, and future of "Curing the Limbo." Participants were split up into small mixed groups, in which they brought their individual experiences and those of their organizations.

The third round of capacity-building training marked a turning point in the group process. A mapping of what affected program results was constructed, drawing from the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities identified at the onset of the project, their interaction, and their relationship to changes in the external environment. Participants had the opportunity to critically reflect on their entire experience and think through the obstacles encountered and the successes accomplished at the various crisis points. They focused on their strengths and successes while they exchanged the innovative ideas tested and the new models, tools, and practices tried out by each partner. This exchange made the participants proud of their work and helped them better understand and acknowledge the work of the others. They also had the opportunity to reflect on obstacles they had experienced since the onset of the project and discuss alternative ways in which they could have overcome them, which would have strengthened communication and collaboration. While they talked as individuals and as members of their organization, they were increasingly identifying with the overall project. In the plenary session, partner achievements and failures were gradually taking shape as attainments or failings of the project as a whole, and joint sense-making was emerging.

This was the first time that the facilitators experienced the group members connect across differences. As stories were unfolding, the major crisis points that had not been touched on were brought up: the change of the MoA’s administration and its effect on the project’s internal dynamics and the unprecedented experience of the lockdown. There again, participants focused not only on the difficulties as such but on the positive aspects of their handling these difficulties.

Inevitably, participants were concerned with the ending of the project and the next day, both for themselves and for the refugees. They discussed lessons learned and what they could draw from them to design strategies that would reinforce bilateral and multilateral partner connections for the remaining time. Similarly, they discussed strategies for the smooth transition of service users toward greater autonomy, especially because the housing contracts were gradually expiring. Various scenarios were also discussed for the sustainability of the “Curing the Limbo’s” integration methodology.

The third round of capacity-building training was a significant moment when all participants managed to connect the various project components and reflect constructively on their own role, that of their organization, and that of the others. It was clear that they appreciated the generative capacity of the large group and of the organization as a whole.

Two days before the end of the project, the last farewell meeting was held. Participants were experiencing what Tuckman and Jensen (1977) describe as the “adjourning stage,” involving the completion of the task, the breaking up of the team, and the ultimate separation. The task of developing a joint vision, full commitment, and concerted action in this multi-actor partnership was not quite achieved. Tuckman and Jensen (1977) point out that when the task is not completed, mourning may prevail rather than inner satisfaction and group completeness. However, at the meeting, feelings were shared, and a feel-good atmosphere prevailed. Positive feedback was shared equally among individual members and partners. There was recognition that, after a long journey they had, for better or worse, continuously shaped each other, and that shared commitments and practices is the only way to create inclusivity.

## **Conclusion: A Three-Year Process**

Going back to Dougherty and Mayer (2003), from where we started, “Curing the Limbo’s” desired organizational capacity would be to get to a state where the new organization would be able to govern and manage itself, build meaningful collaborative relationships, and develop resources that would improve the accomplishment of its mission. Following a collaborative action research methodology, one can observe three distinct phases that the project traversed. These phases were characterized by intense internal dynamics shaped by the complexities that come with the heterogeneity of partners in multi-actor collaboration, as well as by the external crises that took place in the life of the project.

During the first phase, one of the most important challenges was fostering connectedness and a shared understanding of where the new organization was starting from and where it was going. Negotiation of a common reality and shared ownership of the initiative did not prove easy to achieve. At the time, partners were preoccupied with their individual work plans and their own task structuring. Additionally, the leading management team often found itself stuck in communicative patterns that were loaded with tension and were in doubt as to how to relationally navigate the project.

In response to this situation, the capacity-building training tried to help participants engage in reflection following the action taken in each preceding time period and find new ways to move forward both as members of their own organization and of the newly founded multi-partner one. This required joint meaning-making and, in turn, joint decision-making, which partners were not ready to embark on. As an added level of complexity, the facilitators of the training had a dual role in the project. While both were designing and conducting the training, the first author of this article was in charge of all the UoA's activities, and the second was responsible for the psychosocial service. As much as the facilitators tried to remain outside the group dynamics during the training, their engagement in the project in a different capacity impacted relational trust.

Although one would have expected that, in the second year, partners would have developed a commitment to collective action and a workable collaboration scheme, two major external crises occurred that impinged on the project's smooth operation. The first crisis was the result of political changes brought about by local and national elections that changed the agenda toward refugee integration and introduced administrative changes within the MoA. The volatility of these developments exacerbated anxiety on the part of the partners and insecurity and indecision on the part of the management team. The pandemic with its long lockdowns was the second major crisis that tried the service providers and the service recipients equally. This unprecedented event initially threatened the project's continuity; yet, the system soon found a new balance and moved toward the required adjustments, thus contributing to the project's resilience and strengthening bonds within the partners, but not necessarily between them. During those crisis points, partners were left mainly to their own devices to work out solutions, while the management team was feeling increasingly destabilized.

However, crises often accelerate changes in incentives and motivations, potentially leading to collaborative initiatives. This can well be the case of "Curing the Limbo" because it was toward the end of the project, during the third capacity-building training, when change started becoming apparent. Although it was held online, because it was convened during the lockdown period, participants seemed to value the opportunity of getting together. They exchanged, in a meaningful way, their experiences during the long time that had elapsed between the previous training and the present one. This was the first time that partners reached out genuinely to each other, appreciated the generative power in collaborative efforts, recognized their failures, highlighted the innovative aspect of many of the project's activities, and realized that concerted action is a *sine qua non* for multi-actor partnership. They expressed worries about sustainability and shared ideas concerning how this comprehensive model for refugee integration could be improved and sustained.

The trials and tribulations encountered during these three years highlight the complexity of the dynamics when diverse backgrounds, traditions, and work cultures come together in search of meaningful coherence. There is a lot to learn from this turbulent process that can be transferred to similar endeavors that involve multi-actor partnerships. A sustainable way forward involves reflective practices, awareness of interdependence, connectedness, development of trust, appreciation of all those involved, constructively dealing with confrontation, commitment, and collective responsibility. Achieving all this requires space for ongoing spontaneous and structured dialogue, in small and large group meetings to be convened systematically. In sum, generative multi-partner collaboration and relational leading is a hard job that takes time, thoughtful preparation, and innovative methods.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Thalia Dragonas:** Professor Emerita of Social Psychology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

**Charalampos Pouloupoulos:** Professor of Social Work, Democritus University of Thrace, Thrace, Greece

***The International Journal of Learner Diversity and Identities*** is one of ten thematically focused journals in the collection of journals that support The Learner Research Network—its journals, book series, conference, and online community.

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