



INEPS Youth Congresses: History and projects

Picasso once said about a small 3000 years old African statue: "I know why the artist has done this statue like this". Beyond the words there is a large space for people to understand each other, to share feelings and the sense of beauty.

Seven years ago, Josep Alsina and I realised that we were drawing such a benefit from the INEPS Congresses that it became a crucial moment for our training, as trainers in Productive Learning projects. If it was so good for us, it just had to be the same for students. It became obvious we had to involve them in large multilateral meetings where they could have an irreplaceable experience of co-operation in an international context.

The Youth Meeting of INEPS (YMI) started to be a project. To discover countries, other people's culture, different ways of living, finally would take us to a real dimension of being part of a larger world. The meeting would be organised around productive workshops to give the participants the opportunity to share their ideas, their messages, to create together. The key question for the meeting would consist in finding the ways and the means to help communication among young people coming from 10 or 15 different countries.

The YMI aimed at creating a regular relationship among youngsters of the organisations of INEPS to enlarge the personal galaxy of the participants, and furthermore of the other students of their respective institutions, encourage on them the wish to be full members of an international society. To achieve this, a common understanding is the first basic need.

THE INITIATIVE (Vilafranca, 1994)

There were many other issues on the way: how to help communication among groups before and after the meeting, problems of time, money... Nevertheless, Josep Alsina involved IDAP and the city of Vilafranca del Penedès in the organisation of the first YMI. Seven different groups met for a week under the theme of reforestation. This theme was related to a large forest fire that had happened that year in Vilafranca. Some of the participants were trained to be lumberjacks. This was the first experience of a particular challenge: organise a meeting among young people who were not really able to handle a conversation in a foreign language. Our aim was to give them at least the possibilities to start an exchange and, more than this, to find their ways to prepare together communication products such as a newspaper, a video, and drama work improvisations.

The first meetings were difficult since trainers had to translate in different languages for students. It was long and boring. The real surprise came from the activities: the participants could find their ways to communicate. Part of the meeting consisted in the discovery of the region (Barcelona, an archaeological site, wine cellars...): what makes the region live, origins, traditions, art, economy....



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Every evening a drama workshop made students feel really they were members of a large group

- using body language rather than words created deeper links in a shorter time. The workshops

- reforestation, video, newspaper, wall painting, and photography-,

all ended with products. The YMI was connected with an INEPS Administration Council Meeting, taking place at the same time.

The conclusion of the YMI was a show, a presentation of all the results to representatives of the city and the members of the AC. It was more than a success, a real surprise for all: the show displayed real pieces of art. The meeting had joined the aims we had fixed and beyond, it had produced a totally new human experience. It was then evident we had to continue; those days we wrote: "during these meetings, what is different, foreign, unknown is sought for, and the means to understand one another are always found".

THE INSTITUTIONALISATION (Aarhus, 1996)

The Aarhus Produktionskole suggested to be the next institution to organise a YMI. The first meeting had ended with a precise evaluation (methods, preparation, timetable, dates, themes, participants, activities, communication...) The second meeting could take benefit from that work.

Spring had appeared to be a better moment to hold the YMI's. In April 96, seven organisations were represented. The preparation was based on a tight co-operation between the organiser and some participants of the former edition and the Produktionskole staff. Actually the first YMI had been a marvellous opportunity for trainers to work together, to experience a unique pedagogical experience: the YMI would be the perfect situation to create an international team.

"What should a life qualification school be?" was the main theme. The program included the discovery of the region, visits of alternative schools, creative workshops and the preparation of a large collage gathering all the elements brought by the participants to show their respective backgrounds (schools, cities, countries...) The outcomes of the workshops were presented in a final show. This time the YMI could not be supported by the EU but the Aarhus Produktionskole could find some money to copy the poster and the video, and send it to each participating organisation.

Each student, each trainer still remembers the "ice-breaking" games: 80 participants finding a common rhythm, a common pace, singing together. The evaluation was very positive: it focused on the necessity to develop these activities from the very beginning in next meetings to improve the commitment of the participants and to find a way to have more groups able to be involved.



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THE BROADENING (Paris, 1997)

Paris "Du bist too much" Meeting, April 97, was the 3rd edition. For the first time, the program "Youth For Europe" of the EU selected the YMI and gave enough support for more groups to take part. Sixteen organisations coming from all over Europe could do it. As in the previous times it was a new opportunity to improve the meetings.

According to the results of the previous evaluation, the meeting was divided into two parts : 2 and a half first days for "Ice-breaking" through "adventure learning" (introduced to the trainers by the Finish partners of OMAURA Association in the previous congress of INEPS), music and life all together (including the French students). The students were involved in international "tribes" and had to go through different ordeals and create art pieces together.

The second part, in Paris itself, started with the discovery of the city (a long rally with questions to be answered from hints found in the city). Then the productive workshops on the theme of "Every Day Life" came. The final presentation and the party were an outstanding success. This time the students themselves absolutely demanded to present their training organisation.

The most impressive moment of the whole week was the very first meeting, when 2 students from the Institute for the Deaf (Beroun) launched the communication, teaching the whole group the basis of the sign language. Suddenly 80 participants became trainees, starting to learn a new means of communication.

The idea of a Youth Congress of INEPS (YCI) was first evoked during the evaluation of the meeting: the YCI should be the start for the spreading of the students' works and innovative positions and achievements.

FROM MEETINGS TO CONGRESSES (Gothenburg, 1998)

The First Youth Congress of INEPS was organised in Gothenburg in September 98. As in the previous editions, the students were deeply involved in the preparation of the congress. They were connected to the other members of INEPS through E-mail. The staff of Ungdomsverstaden and Angeredsgymnasiet organised a workshop during the INEPS congress in order to share the preparation. They wanted "to make the YCI part of INEPS" because "the young people's voices were to be heard".

The two parts of the meeting were maintained, allowing the group of over 60 young people to discover Hönö and the Swedish west sea. Three days of ice-breaking, group building and discovery of the islands. The international team of trainers met every evening to share the experiences, better understand the youngsters' reactions and solve everyday life problems.



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The second part, in Gothenburg Youth Hostel was the congress itself. The whole group was invited at the City Hall to welcome each delegation. The workshops of the congress started and the themes were up to the participants. This special point raised a large debate among the trainers: should we let the groups organise themselves and just be "helpers" or should we interfere in the workshop activities to make sure it achieves its goal, in order to make young people feel successful at the end? (The debate is still opened).

Women's situation, trust and respect, sex drug and alcohol, prejudices and mobbing, were the focus of interest for the groups; poems, a survey, a show, and drawings were the results of the workshops. This part of the Congress was a real place for young people to clarify their ideas, to open debates and discussions, and finally to produce something together.

The evaluation lays in a few lines of the final report: "the benefits from such a meeting are much more than we can just present in reports. There is a metamorphosis in the young people (in the older as well); they change in a very deep way. For once they are part of a united world, their level of references change and the event still lives in them long after they come back. In all our nation we have some dark and deep movements aiming to come back to nationalism. Our work goes in the opposite way, and simply goes to what is the best for human beings to share. This is not only a romantic feeling, this is a strong background of my action. We often face situations where we don't know how we could help to transform them, for once we are doing it. That's probably the main concern to me: I've found people and we can reverse the engines together".

As each edition is the opportunity to improve the former one, the Angeredsgymnasiet set up a webboard to enable the groups to carry on the communication after the YCI.

TOWARDS THE WIDE NORTH (Jyväskylä & Kuopio, 2000)

For the year 2000 the Finish OMAURA Association was the organiser of the YCI. Year after year, a new member of INEPS offers to invite the others for the YCI. (This shows, if necessary, the real commitment of the members in this network and the wish to make it a students network too).

Finland, where the "Adventure Pedagogy" had been introduced to INEPS 6 years before, gave the fantastic background of the "wide north" winter to introduce the ice-breaking and building-groups activities. In many ways this last edition took the best results of the previous ones to make it better. The games, the communication system, the possibilities to use Internet, electronic photo cameras, video, and the contact with nature made it very successful. The theme also was thought differently: "Water". Announced well in advance to the groups, it enabled the participants to prepare and bring information art, samples....

Visits, surveys, photos, and a video led to a presentation where all the participants could talk (all the languages were spoken) in speeches always related to the theme. A reception at the university of Jyväskylä and in the town hall in Kuopio, the making of two large snow sculp-



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tures (dragoons) and different experiences (smoked sauna, football on an iced lake..) made each member feel respected, warmly welcomed and living a real exotic experience.

THE YOUTH INITIATIVE (Berlin 2001)

The 2000 YCI is planned to be in Berlin. After being in the 2 last YCI, one of the students of Berlin Hellersdorf Learnshop organisation decided he had to suggest to be the next in charge of an YCI. He presented the idea in the school first, and then to INEPS, suggesting to the board of INEPS to follow his (their) proposition. This particular invitation, in itself, is the best assessment of the whole process: taking benefit from their experiences, some young people feel strong enough to launch the project in their own city. They feel it's their turn and they start to convince the whole network throughout Europe and USA to go for it. There is in this a priceless feedback of years of commitments for the YCI.

This story illustrates the capacity of the INEPS network to set up a youth organisation, to learn from each other, and from experiences, to build and improve, year after year, the idea and its achievements. It has been possible only because it was based on an active and effective network. The commitments of the people in charge, the deep belief in the aims of those meetings were the fuel of it.

The help of the EU have made it possible for more people to be in, and the extraordinary resources of the young participants have made it an exemplary event in youth education in Europe.

In Kuopio it was taken the decision to create a pilot group (PG) to keep the experience going on, according to the former successful activities and choices, and improving the organisation. The PG has the responsibility of the preparation and moderation of seminars and workshops in INEPS Congresses around 4 main tasks:

- Widening the possibilities for more groups to be able to take part in the YCI, e.g., helping find more money for it.
- Help think and organise the communication among participants before and after the YCI and spread the results.
- Think about the rules and the life style in such an international context.
- Improve the working methods including solving pedagogical issues experienced in the YCIs.

It's now been a tradition that the team in charge of the former edition will help the team preparing the next one. This particular point shows what some call "the spirit of INEPS", a community of education workers around the world sharing ideas and pedagogical choices and putting them in practice together. As far as I know, this is rare enough to be mentioned as a main experience in this field and which would deserve to be better known.

Jacques Bonniseau, September 2000