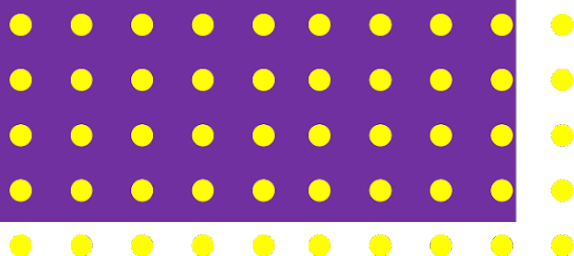




Safe spAcEs For LEarning | SAFE

IO2- The SAFE Boardgame

Summary report Piloting Phase 1
Co-creating the game





Project Partners

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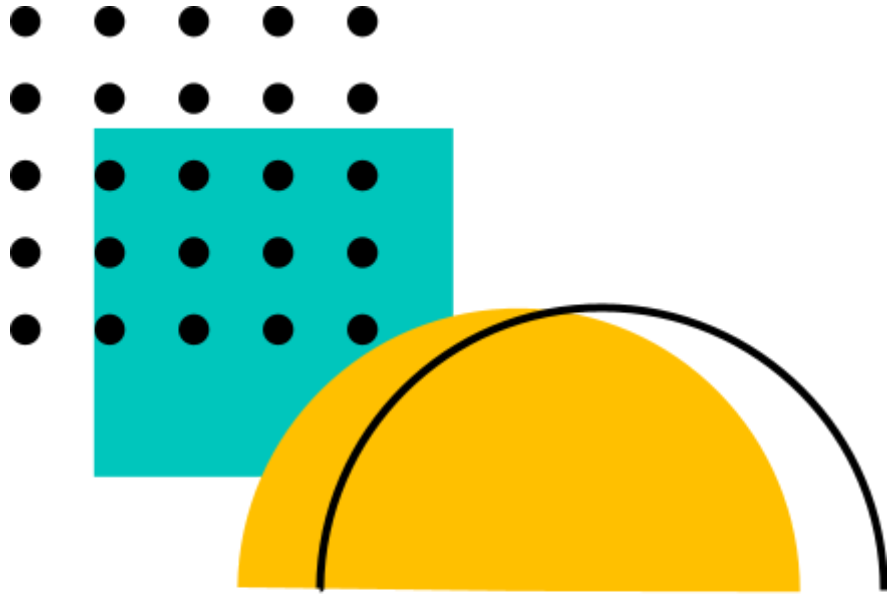
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Part 1- Narrative Report

Participants

The total number of participants in the first piloting phase were 61

In some focus it took part in different groups of learners, starting from learners with very low basic skills, from different economic and professional backgrounds and, in a more general way, learners with a completely different «luggage» (life experience, wishes, ways of living, ...). In other focus it took part educators, teachers that work with youth and students or that work with learners in vulnerable conditions, like homelessness.

One focus group was composed of policy makers, workers for adult education provision and researchers with a European gravitas in matters of creating safe spaces for learning, social inclusion and battling inequalities

Description of the piloting

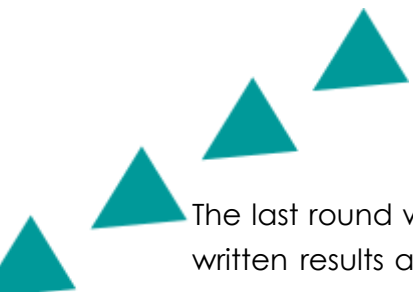
The focus took place either in presence or online.

About focus in presence, it was explained the purpose of the activity as well as the different steps that it was going to follow. The main questions tackled in the workshop were defined through statements. All the participants reacted by asking for a free discussion. Each discussion resulted in a conceptual bullet list and/or phrases with explanations.

The participation was very lively, the contributions intense, diverse and plural. For the moderators it was noticeable that the perspective changed in the individual contributions and the participants spoke from the position as learners and sometimes from the position as teachers (or planners)

As a space, they stayed in one room that is used by some of the participants to work, as they feel that space as a safe one, as well as comfortable. The tables were already put in a circle, this way, everybody was facing the others, providing the exchange of ideas in a freer way.

The phase of the world cafés was also carried by cooperative togetherness and lively discussions, which were very professionally moderated and contained many visible results on tablecloths. The exchange in the individual groups was intense, conversations had to be ended despite interest in further exchange in order to initiate the next round of questions.



The last round was a look at the tablecloths with the request to individually rank the written results according to priorities. The clear messages (i.e. those with many likes) were:

- Safe Spaces have to be as non-discriminatory as possible
- Safe Spaces must be based on mutual respect
- Learning opportunities should be clear and transparent
- Conditions of participation, for example for participants with wheelchairs, must be communicated in advance.

About focus on line, after a brief introduction of the piloting, the group did a short brainstorming session on what they believe is a safe space for learning ((collection of ideas suggested by the matching of the two concepts: SAFE SPACE and LEARNING)

During this first step, participants felt very involved and stimulated.

Then, the facilitator presented the definition provided in IO1

Afterwards, the group engaged in a World Café - in which they role-played: "I put myself in the position of the children or youth I work with....." and answer the three questions: "I am discouraged to be part of a learning process if/ when..."; "For me it's important for a learning space to be..."; "Conflicts and injustices can be resolved when...".

Finally, they were invited to reflect on the most relevant and/or interesting reflections/considerations they encountered while reading OTHERS' POSTS. A dialogue/comparison was activated. The group expressed shared ideas and values.



Part 2- Practical Input

Before the world Cafe

The groups discussed briefly if they think that it is important for learning spaces to be safe spaces and why.

Then the facilitators introduced the topic of safe spaces through the definition provided in IO1.

All participants were encouraged to take part in this discussion, but remained brief.

Their inputs are as follows.

Transparency in the teaching-learning process was emphasised again and again, both in terms of process and responsibilities

Many defined a safe space as a non-judgemental, understanding environment, where freedom of speech is guaranteed, no fear of the possibility of "cancellation" or being scolded because of takes that go against popular narratives. A place where you can say something but where you may also ask. A safe space allows you to learn, show curiosity, and develop new ideas. It allows freedom to explore, to make mistakes and therefore freedom to learn without prejudice

For much safe space is a peaceful environment free from unwelcome distractions. In a Safe Space individuals experience a sense of freedom to let off steam and decompress after a difficult daily routine, being allowed to release any tension, relax and return to a state of calmness.

A teacher said that there are three main variables that shape the concept of Safe Space: program (what is going on), boundary (what is not going on), and time (duration of the activity). He believes that these three variables determine both the objective conditions for safety and shape the perception of the safety of the subjects who use the space - and who interact with each other in a more or less safe way.

Another important aspect was the dialogicity in the teaching-learning process, which is also a space for negotiations. Participants perceive a space for fruitful communication and interaction on equal terms, a common language and common channels of communication.

Someone claims that in a safe space you can have a good performance, the trainer / educator has to feel in a comfort zone. Safety is fundamental, whether physical or emotional. If you don't feel safe, you can't promote some learning



It was also pointed out that in order to ensure equal access to learning opportunities, structural inequalities (for example in gender relations) must be taken into account.

A common theme identified by the individuals participating in the piloting phase was that every learning group should have specific and well articulated rules and limitations applied to all group members and known by everyone in order to be inclusive and safe for all its members.

Physically, a safe space was described as a comfortable space where everyone feels free to do, sometimes, uncomfortable things. It can give you peace, flow, comfortability, blue colour, light, energy, where you can move around

Nowadays spaces should not only be seen as a room, but also be used for online sessions. We are in Zoom-Room, even on learning platforms, where there are forums and places where we introduce ourselves and discuss. These should also be spaces where one feels safe.

In any case, a safe space promotes learning if it allows freedom of expression without judgement, enabling mutual support, honesty and respect in an atmosphere of trust.


After the World Café

In this phase, every participant made a comments on the questions:

1. I am discouraged to be part of a learning process if/ when...
2. For me it's important for a learning space to be...
3. Conflicts and injustices can be solved when...

About **first question**, most said that they are discouraged to be part of a learning process when the teacher's presentation is politicised, when the teacher disregards views which oppose theirs, calls them nonsense, when someone makes learner feel stupid, when someone doesn't have understanding and patience for my way of thinking or for my questions. When the teacher/facilitator is "closed" or does not provide clear instructions and uses a non-inclusive language. In this way learners do not feel stimulated, but judged.

The figure of the educator is very important to encourage learning. It can discourage learners from taking part in a learning process if presents themselves as a figure of authority or as a person who has all the expertise actively discriminates against the members of the group



Others participants said that they are discouraged to be a part of the learning process when there is not enough support, help, or when the provision of the same is directed to only certain members, that is, when there is a difference. In addition, when the content being taught is unclear, not interesting enough, and when there is condemnation if failure is achieved.

Someone said that he feels discouraged when his ways and times to know or understand a task are not respected, or when expectations are too high and goals are unrealistic.

The place where the learning happened it's important. For someone you can be discouraged if there is no quiet and no place to learn or when there is little or no space for public speaking/open up or when the learners are in a new space for the first time (New learning spaces are intimidating for some people). A person can be discouraged to be part of a learning process if the learning group is large. Most learners feel more comfortable in smaller learning groups.

A participant said that the content is very important, as it will fix our attention. Of course, the characteristics of the group are also central, as there is the need of identification with the group. 3 are the main ideas:

- Identification with the group and the topic;
- The importance of the environment (not just physical, but also emotional);
- The importance of the behaviour of who is «leading» the process

Some teenagers said that it's important to be supported (not judged) when you make mistakes and when there is hostility among participant

To the question "**For me it's important for a learning space to be...**", the participants answered a space based on equality, mutual respect and freedom of speech and expression, fair and equal for everybody, open for everybody. It means that sometimes we need to invest some energy and resources to invite people who are excluded and marginalised. It's important to feel that you are welcomed, (with a warm welcome from the people responsible for the learning process) understanding and caring.

Moreover, having the possibility to be able to express oneself in various non-verbal ways seems to be a feature that makes a space accessible to all. Coordinators and educators should use suitable techniques and reinforce multiple modes of expression for the members of the learning group. One of the participants explains: *"Some people are shy and find it difficult to express their opinions in large groups. In such cases it helps to break (the whole group) into smaller groups, where they may feel more comfortable to speak up. But, even for people who do not feel ready to*



express themselves verbally, there should be provision for them to be able to express themselves in multiple ways, e.g. non-verbally, physically, visually."

For much it's important to nurture and enhance the use of empathy among the learning group's members and to have a common language of expression and code of communication

A safe space must have common rules - they have to be flexible, based on respect between educators and learners; and everyone needs to be self-aware of those rules. It must enjoy a certain freedom of choice, be fun, welcoming and stimulate motivation to learn. A place for mutual exchange, ideas and wishes inviting atmosphere (also for break times)


Physically, most of them perceived safe spaces as physical spaces, rooms or classes where they can sit down, decompress and let off steam after a hard daily routine. That's why the space has to have some specific characteristics, functionality, infrastructure and special equipment, when needed, in order to be more accessible, comfortable, and intimate for its members. One individual noted that: *"When we talk about physical spaces, in order to feel comfortable, especially during the initial meetings, and not have anxiety and second thoughts, I need something that I can play with, but at the same time (something that) reminds me of my home. So, I immediately feel very comfortable in spaces where there are cushions that I can hug, squeeze or just hold in my hands. It immediately feels like my personal space."*

A learning space, must be, according to the participants, tidy, bright, i.e. that it is a room where a large amount of natural light can reach and that the walls of that room are light, in addition, it needs to be isolated from noise or any external factors which could interfere with learning and there needs to be fresh air, as well as comfort (chairs, armchairs, etc.), functional, transformable, open, well insulated (when needed), dynamic, connected, It must be accessible for all bodies - disabilities, online accessibility as well, physicality (by gender or size). Someone said that it must be open spaces to explore, but with some cues in the furniture that allow for reflection (e.g. specific images).

Someone pointed out that they must be financially secured (costs should be covered).

Interesting is the definition given by one participant: soft as the spaces in schools where children with difficulties such as autism occupy it often are (without desks, edges, with a lots of balls)

One group summarises the importance of a safe space for learning in 3 main ideas:

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- The safe space must provide comfort and a feeling of «belonging» to that place;
 - No barriers, either physical or emotional;
 - Provide multiple opportunities.

Finally, to the question “**Conflicts and injustices can be solved when...**” one participant said that conflicts arise from:


- topics
- background/identity
- group dynamics

Most said that conflicts and injustices can be solved when both sides admit their wrongs, there are shared values and common goals and they are willing to rectify them using conversation, assertive communication, empathy and sharing. Participants must listen and show openness to negotiation or to give in. This can be if the spaces are poor in hierarchy and discrimination

The role of the coordinator or the educator is of great importance for creating positive experiences and examples for the learning group and for conflicts and injustices to be solved within the group, according to the participants. The facilitators should be free of preconceptions themselves and should use inclusive language from the beginning of the sessions, as one of the participants stated during the piloting phase: *“I have a very good example in mind from my experience in learning groups. The coordinator spoke with me before the first group session to get to know me and learn my pronouns. She didn't want to put me through the process of explaining my identity in front of the whole group , in case I didn't feel comfortable doing so, and she didn't want to mispronounce me herself and make me feel embarrassed. From what I understood she had done the same thing with the other group members. She set the example by using inclusive language from the first session, so the other members of the learning group followed suit.”*

It's important that there is a will from all sides to self-reflect and share our own responsibility in the creation of the conflict or injustice; when we manage to uncover the structural causes of it (not the manifestation only).

We must put efforts to put ourselves in the shoes of others, listen to each other and build trust among each other, to be able to accept our differences and offer understanding and acceptance to each other, despite our differences. We must have trust, and feel safe in order to resolve conflicts.



A participant said that being aware of possible conflicts that might arise from specific topics and to prepare for a debate, open discussion, or learning through conflict - at the end of the conflict, debriefing is important to understand the process and to dissipate issues. Monitoring situations so that you can resolve conflicts.

An example of good practice can be using role models to engage with living/relatable and bring the problem to an abstract level and look at it from a helicopter view - disassociate - understanding from another perspective

The educator should identify what aggression looks like before the work, integrate it into the process to be able to control it.

According to one participant, one must have the awareness and transparency that not everything can be solved and conflicts can at best be integrated into the learning process.

A group asserts that having a class with different personalities, different ways of life and different backgrounds is not always easy. The trainer / educator / mediator has a very important role in the learning process and in creating a safe space for learning. It synthesises the concept in 3 main ideas:

- Importance of DIALOGUE;
- Openness;
- Figure of the trainer as a mediator.

Particularly highlighted were:

- Dialogical principle: spaces poor in hierarchy and discrimination
- Respect (all voices are heard): Establish a common learning culture; agree on common rules
- Agreement that everyone is responsible for the shared learning space.

Further themes emerged

How to organise a safe space

1- One participant recounts the experience of welcoming an autistic child into their facility. Physically, they had to modify the space to adapt it to the child's needs. But they also had to modify their approach to the child: welcoming diversity in physical and relational terms. It was emphasised how the safe space must become a point of reference for those experiencing hardship, and this happens through continuity.

2- One participant reports the experience of a safe place he had been to recently. There was good mood lighting, the rules of engagement were clearly established before the conversation began. Everyone was encouraged to share and engage and was greeted with some form of feedback, whether it was applause, a comment, another story shared.

3- To facilitate the creation of an atmosphere of intimacy, it would be useful to provide for the existence of toys or stress-relieving objects, such as stress balls or pillows. Members of the learning group should customise and shape the space.


4- Another participant's experience is that of also welcoming children's mistakes but without judging (right to error).

Some methodological suggestions and working methods to create a safe space

1- Sometimes, the individuals who express leadership tendencies in a group of learners may do so due to the non participation or the unwillingness to participate of other group members. They take on the unofficial role of the leader to help other people express themselves. However, they should be particularly careful and use appropriate ways to motivate plenary participation, such as asking questions, acknowledging, reinforcing non-verbal modes of expression and creating smaller groups. These methods can also be used by coordinators and trainers.

2- Before any learning process with a new learning group, there should be introductory activities for the group members, like icebreakers.

3- In case the coordinator or educator is not inclusive, it is not conducive to creating good experiences and examples for the learning group, in particular for individuals



who have been discriminated against on the basis of their identity, and they are left on their own to create the conditions for their progress.

4- Strict limits and rules should be set by the coordinator or educator for people who behave in a non-inclusive way and, if they refuse to comply with these rules, it should be best to be removed from the learning group.

5- Coordinators and educators should be free of preconceptions themselves and should use inclusive language from the beginning of the sessions. They could also try to have face to face sessions with each member of the learning group, before the first plenary meeting, in order to get to know all the participants, their personalities, their personal characteristics, their identities, their pronouns etc.

6- In order to have fruitful discussions and the willingness to solve any conflicts and injustices that may appear inside the learning group, it would be useful to create a group chat or a digital forum, where all members could participate and express their opinions.

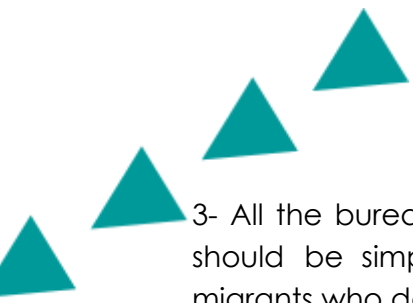
7- For some learning groups it would be better to have individuals, who act as facilitators, eg. translators for refugees or immigrants who don't speak the host country's language or attendants for VIPs. In some cases, assistive technology devices may be required.

8- An important role is played by the coordinator or the educator of the learning group and the climate they want to cultivate within it. They should value an inclusive culture and set the basis for dialogue, discussion, democratic and inclusive processes.

Other comments

1- Sometimes, individuals from privileged backgrounds prefer the stability and the reproduction of sterile knowledge. Whereas individuals coming from less privileged backgrounds have openness to differentiated knowledge, knowledge that follows the progress of society and culture.

2- Sometimes, in order for a space to be more safe and inclusive, it would be more preferable not to use the personal details of individuals (i.e. to protect their anonymity, or to use names chosen by the individuals themselves which may differ from their official identity details). The use of name tags and preferred pronouns for each individual would be also useful.



3- All the bureaucratic processes for enrolling and participating in a learning group should be simpler and friendlier for individuals with disabilities and refugees or migrants who don't speak the host country's language.

4- There should be more safe spaces available and accessible to the public.

5- Emotional aspect of trust is crucial for safe learning space. It would be important to have a somewhat longer period of adjustment to the space where I can actually bond with it/form that trust.

6- One participant prefers to consider the concept of "maintenance". It implies a set of actions necessary to 'preserve' the safe state of a given space. "Maintain" is a more precise verb than the concept of safe space, which, however, in itself could be recognised as a conservative concept. A concept that is rather limiting rather than conducive to the learning process.

7- It's important the commonality between the people who occupy and share a space, a commonality that goes beyond simply sharing a space and presupposes a very high level of relationality between people. Commonality is not always automatic.



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SAFE SPACES FOR LEARNING

