

Young People and Interculturality:

A written and visual narrative-based approach

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Contents

Introduction	5
1. Inspiration: the Intercultural Cities Travel Booklet.	6
2. The framework: ICC, RECI and the European NET- IDEA project.	7
3. Illustrations and comics as an interculturality tool for young people.	8
4. Implementation: workshops in Bilbao, Castelló de la Plana, Donostia-San Sebastián and Tenerife.	10
5. Visual and written narratives: exercises and methodologies.	13
5.1. Ice breaker: young people as the protagonists.	14
5.2. The comic.	15
5.3. Pills - scriptwriting.	22
5.4. Micro-stories.	23
5.5. Maps and skyline.	25
5.6. Photovoice.	27
5.7. Visual thinking.	28



Introduction

The number of cities committed to promoting intercultural policies continues to rise. More than 160 cities worldwide are now involved in the Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities Programme (ICC).

These cities share a number of challenges as they progress on their 'journey' to becoming more inclusive and intercultural. One fundamental challenge, however, is particularly difficult for the majority: the construction of narratives.

How can the impact of populist discourse – which aims to generate fear, reinforce prejudices, stigmatise certain people or groups, or directly spread hate speech – be countered or reduced?

In recent years, both the ICC programme and RECI (through the publication of materials, training and workshops) have been working on generating content, resources and practical tools to help cities construct effective narratives. Examples include this guide ['Claiming the power of](#)

[dialogue: Toolkit for antirumours dialogue'](#), and the Spanish article ['Migration and integration: Which alternative narratives work and why?'](#).

This document, entitled 'Young People and Interculturality: A written and visual narrative-based approach' aims to contribute to the body of work on intercultural narratives and its practical applications, using concrete methodologies and experiences. More specifically, this project uses illustration as a tool to create narratives and explore, raise awareness of, and promote respect for cultural diversity. It provides inspiring resources that can be used to prompt reflection, dialogue and shared learning through creative exercises and techniques. These activities have been designed to foster critical thinking, empathy and curiosity, harnessing the potential of visual arts as a vehicle for intercultural expression.

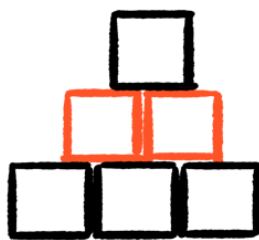


1. Inspiration: an intercultural cities travel booklet

In a context of increasing anti-diversity and anti-immigration rhetoric that stigmatises certain groups, spreading messages inciting fear and hatred, intercultural cities' interest in the creation of narratives is growing. On the one hand, this interest stems from the need to better communicate the values and principles of interculturality and the impact of narratives on government policy. On the other, it represents the **now-urgent need to proactively lead the discourse on diversity and interculturality.**

The [#anecessaryjourney](#) initiative was launched by RECI with the support of ICC to provide a shared framework for all cities. Rather than a traditional communications campaign, this project was process-driven; intended to raise awareness, develop skills

and construct intercultural narratives in the medium term. The [Travel Booklet](#), produced in collaboration with illustrator **Miguel Gallardo**, plus a video and some short video 'pills' were all created under the framework of this initiative. The booklet narrates Mila and Melo's journey to intercultural, inclusive cities as they advocate for equality, the recognition of diversity and interaction. Designed to promote debate and critical thinking, this tool employs various techniques and features characters from diverse backgrounds. There was a consensus that the tool should be easy-to-use and suited to youth work, given that artistic creation is a fun and appealing way to prompt debate, learning and participation among young people.



2. The framework: ICC, RECI and the European NET- IDEA project

Over two years, five RECI regions (**Barcelona, Bilbao, Castelló de la Plana, Donostia-San Sebastián and Tenerife**) have taken part in a European project entitled NET-IDEA (Network of European Towns for Interculturalism, Diversity, Equality and Anti-discrimination), along with **11 cities and 5 countries**: Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Germany and Poland (all ICC members).

The project has reinforced the role local authorities play and the policies they promote from an intercultural perspective, for and among young people especially. It has also had a clear impact on citizens' participation in, and awareness of, equal rights and the fight against discrimination. Various RECI regions organised creative processes to raise awareness and provide training to young people on intercultural coexistence. A total of **207 young people**

have taken part in these workshops.

The workshops provided a space to share and hear reflections on the value of cultural diversity, expressing these reflections creatively through methods promoting social coexistence, designed specifically for young people.

Similarly, the project reinforced a cross-cutting approach to the intercultural perspective, through both local government and social entities working with young people.

Internationally, the project fostered an exchange and awareness of young peoples' work experiences in other contexts. The young people also took part in an **international meeting where they worked on the antirumours approach**, resulting in a [manifesto](#) written by the young people themselves.



3. Illustrations and comics as an interculturality tool for young people

Education in the arts plays a crucial role in **encouraging people to be creative and think critically**. Cultivating these skills is more important than ever in our rapidly evolving world where innovation and adaptability are prized.

- **Creativity** is the capacity to generate original ideas, think original thoughts, and tackle challenges from novel perspectives. Transcending the limits of traditional art forms, this is a skill that permeates different facets of life.
- **Critical thinking**, meanwhile, involves the analysis of information. It questions presumptions, making informed judgements instead. It teaches people to evaluate problems, consider several

points of view and arrive at reasoned conclusions. When they participate in artistic processes, young people develop the skill to think critically, problem solve and express themselves in unique, innovative ways.

It has been shown that artistic interventions – such as mental health promotion through the visual arts – reaches diverse sectors of the population. **The use of non-verbal communication transcends language barriers and cultural differences in safe, non-stigmatising spaces.** This is true of vulnerable young people like unaccompanied migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, etc.

“Art incorporates all the important factors required in critical thinking – observation, reflection, interpretation and application” (Desirée Hugo).

Images assist learning processes, improving attention, understanding, reading comprehension and recall. Graphic representations are also useful in identifying feelings and emotions, enabling an improved **understanding of the workshop participants' psychological reality**.

Formats like comics are an effective tool for synthesis: an entire world-view can be represented in a limited number of vignettes. The informative capacity of comics is particularly useful in tackling complex themes like migration, cultural diversity, identity and coexistence,

prompting reflection and empathy. They can also convey values and knowledge in suitable language in a fun, attractive context.

Creating comics is an ideal way to equip young people with skills in communication (writing, reading and revising) and art (drawing, painting), alongside the emotional, affective skill required to bring meaning to their creations. From a communication perspective, it develops multi-modal skills, compelling young people to use a medium different to that which they have used throughout their education (writing).





4. Implementation: workshops in Bilbao, Castelló de la Plana, Donostia-San Sebastián and Tenerife

These cities have worked with young people on subjects such as the coexistence of diversity using images, illustrations and comics. The cities provided **spaces of reflection and work, adapted to the young people's needs and context.**

The following elements of the work carried out by cities may serve as inspiration:

- **Format:** the various regions held four or five workshops for young people, lasting two hours per session on average. All regions agreed that a single session of awareness-raising activities is insufficient to achieve lasting change. However, maintaining participation between sessions is a challenge: artistic creation is introduced as a fun, appealing way of

encouraging participation between sessions.

- **Young people and creative space:** in Castelló, an 'unlikely' space of participation was created: a working group of people of different backgrounds (educational, social, cultural, religious), all with one shared objective: working with young people. Promoting a cross-cutting approach, the strategy provided a working context unlike any that those present would generally experience; a genuine wealth of perceptions and experiences that could be taken into account when coming up with collaborative working proposals. Similarly, it fostered the creation of new participatory spaces in which interculturality is the common theme.

- **Professionals.** The professionals involved in workshop development had backgrounds combining artistic technique (photography, collages, drawing, collaborative video, etc.) with social participation, promoting a critical approach. This encourages the creation of a collective discourse on the themes tackled at the various sessions: identity, sense of belonging, narratives, etc.
- **Municipal team presence.** All workshops have been closely monitored by someone from the municipal team, from planning and design to development and assessment of the process. This strengthened links with certain third-sector social entities with creative backgrounds (not a common occurrence), educational centres and also staff from different municipal departments.
- **Institutional recognition** After the workshops had finished, some of the cities held public events attended by political leaders. This official recognition is fundamental; it places value on young peoples' efforts, increasing levels of motivation, celebrating their achievements and giving them recognition. At the same time, it contributes to improving citizens' perceptions of the relevance of programmes for young people and investment in the same. Overall, this type of recognition can enhance the continuity of such programmes and strengthen links between young people and government, fostering a sense of belonging and increasing confidence in public bodies.
- **The exercises.** The workshop organisers carried out different exercises and used different methodologies in each region. This will be further explained in the following section. Next, we outline some ideas that were key to the success of the sessions:
 - > **Graphic recording** of sessions in-situ: visual thinking is a useful tool to visually present concepts that may be difficult to understand. It is also used to express the group's ideas and contributions. This tangible product strengthens the perception of the usefulness of shared time. It is also used to summarise previous work in the following session.

- > **Professional illustration.** When the sketches, illustrations or comics were returned to the young people in a professional format (digitalised, with the layout done) the effect was wholly positive: the young people felt as though their ideas had been heard, respected and even visualised professionally.
- > **The territory.** All cities worked in the context of their own reality, producing micro-stories, illustrations and even a skyline to represent their reality of the city in which they all coexist.
- > **Reflection and critical awareness.** A space was dedicated to reflection in every session, ensuring each person's opinions were taken into account. Encouraging critical thinking was the ultimate objective of these sessions.

To summarise, cities interested in working with young people and creating narratives should follow these recommendations:

- > In terms of the format, a number of **consecutive sessions (minimum 4-5) should be planned for reflection and joint working** to achieve sustainable and significant changes.
- > Try to make contact with less-represented young people: engaging them in training activities promotes **interaction between young people from diverse sociocultural contexts**. To do this, it may be necessary to map out different organisations and work with different local government departments.
- > Dedicate resources to **finding and selecting the right professionals with a background in the arts and knowledge of the intercultural perspective**.
- > Technical experts should **monitor the work** to guarantee: that the established objectives are achieved; the quality of the work; and that it is approached from an intercultural perspective.
- > Work on **institutional recognition to reinforce the commitment** to youth policy from an intercultural perspective.

**Visual and written
narratives: exercises
and methodologies**

5. Visual and written narratives: exercises and methodologies

5.1. Ice breaker: young people as the protagonists

The team in **Bilbao** worked on an exercise entitled '**The architects of the future**'. This was an exercise in recognition, in observing how we present ourselves to the world, pointing out our preferences and wishes and examining the elements our identities are composed of, expressing them in self-portrait form.



Starting with a blank sheet, each young person created their own avatar as a way of showing themselves to the world. Next, they all swapped their portraits/masks, working on empathy and their ability to put themselves in the position of others. This exercise took place in the first of four sessions, and served to demonstrate that **cities are composed of the people who inhabit them, and that young people also construct their cities: they are the architects.**



In the first session in **Tenerife**, the illustrator created **caricatures of some of the participants**, presenting them at the end of the session. This initiative was received with enthusiasm and acceptance, stirring up motivation among participants. At the next session, each young person was given a personalised label with their name and caricature, which they wore during the activity. At the end of the session all participants asked if they could take their labels as a souvenir. In one of the working groups, the caricatures were integrated into the final micro-story (see more in point 5.4), representing a group of young people as minor characters in the story.



5.2. The comic

The comic is a literary genre characterised by the use of graphic elements and shorter texts, with content laid out in vignettes or frames. The illustrations are a fundamental part of the narrative in this visual format. They are also sequential and may include dialogue, descriptions and sound effects.



01

Search for reference points

In **Castelló**, four sequential sessions were planned, resulting in the creation of a comic or visual narrative with a social impact.

The first session was dedicated to **sketching out interculturality, analysing and contextualising how it has been approached using visual language and narratives**. It was mainly done through searching for reference points, enhancing participants' understanding and the representation of notions such as equality, interaction and the value of cultural diversity.

They were shown comics by authors and artists from culturally diverse backgrounds, offering unique perspectives on their views and cultural/migratory experiences. Examples included Marjane Satrapi, Rocío Quillahuaman, Zainab Fasiki, Rowandissa and Lena Marhej, among others. They also shared sources, archives and websites providing materials and resources such as Wiriko.

By gathering and analysing these reference points, the participants gained a richer, more nuanced view of how diversity is represented in comics, encouraging reflection and dialogue on the subjects in question, and also identifying new reading resources for young people.



02 Character design

In Mexico, **alebrijes** are fantasy animals created by mixing different animals together.

Alebrijes were created for different purposes: in **Bilbao**, the exercise was used to prompt **reflection on diversity**, seen as a sum of parts that generates new, often much richer realities. To create the creatures, they produced a magazine with sheets cut down the middle: on the left was a head, and on the right the back of the animal. New animals formed as the pages turned.



In **Tenerife**, *alebrijes* were used as **a tool to create the characters in a comic**. Various art resources were used in the session such as magazines, coloured pens and paints, fostering creativity. Before starting, the group reflected on the concept of “character” and their own diversity, taking examples from different cultures (such as the Mexican *alebrijes*, the philosophical concept of *Ubuntu* and the Japanese concept of *Uchi-Soto*, prompting reflections on the relationships between people’s interior and exterior worlds.

Drawing on these ideas, young people were invited to create their own free-form characters, connecting what they had learned with artistic creation. This dynamic allowed them to explore themes of identity and cultural diversity through art.



03 Story creation

In **Castelló de la Plana**, Joseph Campbell's '**The Hero's Journey**' schema was used as a basis for the creation of the story. Common across times and cultures, this narrative structure can be summarised as: a hero or heroine leaves the ordinary world to confront an adversary, then returns home, deeply changed as a person.



The journey is divided into several stages, generally including:

- > The hero or heroine is given a challenge or an invitation to leave their everyday world behind. They may initially doubt or reject the adventure.
- > They find a guide or mentor who offers them advice, tools or training. They embark on the adventure, delving into a new world with a new set of rules.
- > In this new world, the hero or heroine confronts challenges, forms alliances

and meets adversaries. They prepare for their biggest challenge: facing their fears.

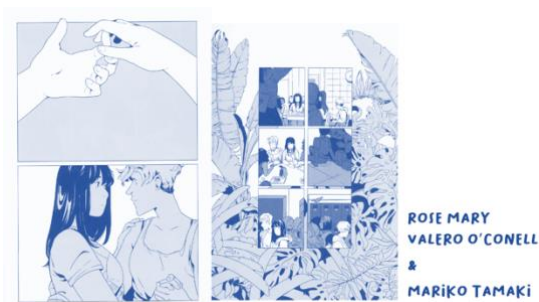
- > After passing a test, the hero or heroine receives a reward, which may be an object, wisdom or experience.
- > The hero or heroine must then return to their original land, often facing new challenges on their journey. The story culminates in the hero or heroine tackling one last test, symbolising their transformation.
- > They return home a changed person, with something valuable to share with their community.



This schema is used in a variety of narratives from ancient myths to modern films, and offers a structure that helps to develop stories of personal growth and transformation.

04 Creative graphics in comics

Creative graphics are an essential tool in comics, used to effectively convey stories and emotions. In **Castelló de la Plana** they explored various artistic techniques: engraving, collage, typography, drawing, use of colour, etc.



- **Use of colour.** Colour can influence the tone of a story. More limited colour palettes and strong contrasts can help to emphasise key moments. Colder colours convey sadness, whilst warmer colours evoke happiness.



- **Typography and lettering.**
Experimenting with different lettering

styles and sizes is recommended. The typography and lettering used can reflect the characters' personalities or the tone of the story. The use of speech bubbles and text effects is another resource for consideration.

- **Textures and patterns.** Illustrations can be enriched by adding textures or patterns. This could be done with collages, watercolours or digital techniques.
- **Integrating different media.** Combining comics with other art forms like photography, digital illustration or painting can create unique visual effects.



05

Fanzines

A fanzine is an independent (non-professional) **publication** created by fans to share a common interest. They tend to be produced in short runs and **may include a variety of content including illustrations, comics, stories, poetry and reviews.**

Fanzines are often handmade using photocopiers and digital printing, giving them a unique, personal feel. They are distributed informally: self-expression and creation are the very essence of a fanzine, produced outside the confines of the traditional publishing industry.



Some of the strategies used were:

- **Creative collaboration**, encouraging the exchange of ideas and perspectives.
- Different forms of **art and design** – illustration, collage and photography – were used to convey messages, making the content more accessible and attractive.
- The fanzine was displayed at public events held to raise awareness of the process. As well as giving **visibility** to the young people's work, this opened up a space of **dialogue** to discuss the themes tackled.

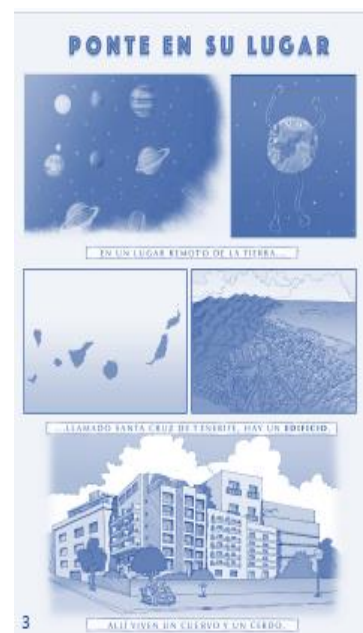
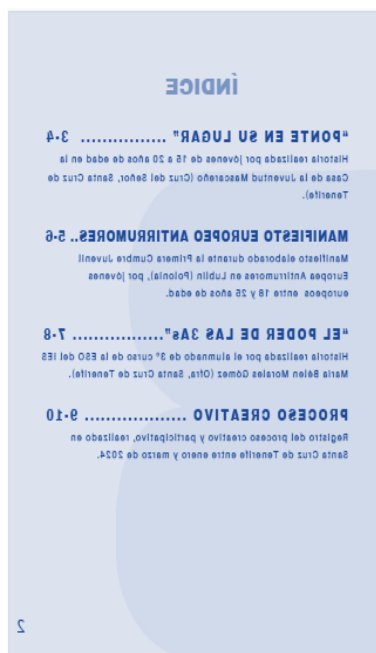


Fanzines or publications collating the products produced over the course of the sessions were made in both **Bilbao** and **Tenerife**. This meant that young people could take away their own fanzine (used as a resource to tell their stories or share ideas) when the sessions finished.



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5.3. Pills - scriptwriting

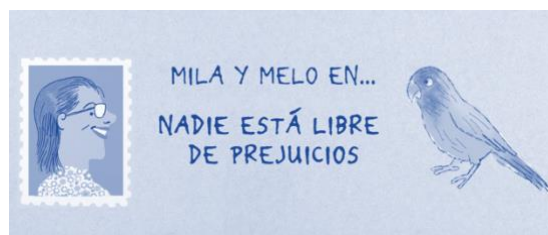
A 'pill' generally refers to a short piece of content; whether text, visual or audiovisual.

Pills are **small vignettes or graphic scenes that rapidly and concisely synthesise a concept, story, joke or message**. Brief and independent by nature, a pill is a piece of standalone content, or rather, it can be understood on its own, without depending on other vignettes or episodes. The main features are:

- > **Brevity:** The narrative or message is condensed into one single vignette (or a limited number), quickly conveying the concept.
- > **Visual impact:** Due to the short format, pills tend to use clear and effective images and compositions, with few distracting visual elements.
- > **Humour or criticism:** Many pills, above all in comics, tend to be humorous, ironic or satirical in tone. This makes them a powerful tool for conveying messages in a lighter, more subtle way.
- > **Thematic versatility:** They can tackle any subject, from trivial to profound, personal to universal.

- > **Visual and narrative economy:** Pills are compact narrations; they lack the space for lengthy character developments or complex plots. They distil one moment or one idea.

The cities introduced the format using pills created in the RECI campaign #anecessaryjourney, generating debate and offering inspiration for the participants to create their own dialogues and pills. In some cases they drafted dialogues to be animated later, using characters from the Intercultural Cities Travel Booklet. In others, the young people created short comic strips with dialogue and messaging surrounding themes of integration, racism, prejudice, inequality and discrimination.



You can see animated pills from the #anecessaryjourney campaign here: [Pill 1/ Pill 2/ Pill 3/ Pill 4](#). This exercise (along with the preview of the pills from #anecessaryjourney) prompts a reflection on everyday situations in which prejudices based on age, background or sex generate stereotyped images that do not correspond with reality.

5.4. Micro-stories

A micro-story is an extremely brief narrative (text) that tells a story in very few words, generally no more than 200, and some even shorter. In spite of their brief nature, **micro-stories have all the fundamental elements of a story:** characters, a conflict or situation and a conclusion, though at times these elements may be condensed or implicit.



Some features of micro-stories:

- > **Brevity:** The writer is forced to be concise and precise because they are limited in length.
- > **Economy of language:** Every word has a clear purpose; there is no space for unnecessary details.
- > **Impact:** They often seek to generate a strong impact on the reader; whether surprise, reflection or emotion.
- > **Suggestion:** Information is often presented implicitly, enabling the

reader to imagine how the story may end.

In the context of an awareness-raising campaign in their local area, the young people in **Tenerife used the micro-story as a tool to create their narrative.** They based it on the products they had created in previous sessions (characters, spaces and key concepts). The process began with a debate where they agreed on the idea, principle or feeling they wanted to reflect in their campaign, analysing which emotions or reflections they wanted to stir up in the readers of their micro-stories.



As part of the **magic box** exercise, each participant selected three words at random, using them to create micro-stories with the characters designed previously. The young people could choose to create standalone stories or continuations of stories written by their colleagues, encouraging collaboration and the exchange of ideas. These short narratives

were all recorded then debated as a group, identifying the most recurrent characters, predominant settings and key ideas. The group agreed on three main characters, the context and a message reflecting the essence of the campaign.



To finish, they created their final micro-story using the role-playing technique. The participants played the characters and interpreted the scenes, helping the group

to visualise the story, shape the dialogue and reflect on how they felt as an audience, seeing and hearing the micro-story in construction. This approach allowed them to experience the narrative from within, amending the story to guarantee they conveyed a coherent message.

The value of this technique resides in the fact that it not only raises the awareness of the audience seeing (or reading) the micro-story; rather, the value resides in the creative process itself. The combination of reading, debate and role-playing allowed participants to examine key themes in depth, develop critical thinking skills and generate empathy whilst they structured their narrative as a group.

5.5. Maps and skyline

Bilbao: an intercultural skyline



A city's skyline is its profile. In this case, the young people recreate their homes using recycled materials, cardboard and boxes. A collective skyline of the city is then created using the houses and buildings they constructed. This intercultural city is defined by the people who inhabit it; their varied backgrounds are considered a rich and positive asset.



It aims to transmit the concept of a city being a sum of its parts; every person is an essential element, and so too are the places they create to meet, socialise and live together. All the cities – Bilbao in this case – have drawn on the architectural trends and needs of each era. Similarly, the city can become a melting pot of cultures and world-views.

Community map, Tenerife



The group of young people work together on a mute map of the city, drawn out on a large sheet of card. They then have to identify and mark the places they frequent for leisure activities, regular routes they take and the places where they meet their friends. This leads to a participatory analysis of the ways different places across the city (Santa Cruz de Tenerife in this case) are used and perceived:

Where do you go with friends? Are the most frequently visited places multicultural? Do these places encourage coexistence? Are some spaces only used by people from certain backgrounds? If this is the case, why do you think it happens?

The aim is to understand why some spaces are more commonly used than others, and work out whether this encourages or limits intercultural coexistence. To this effect, upon completion of the community map, participants split into groups to carry out a more in-depth analysis of a specific space. The key objective is for the groups to identify what a space has – or should have

– in order for it to be attractive to young people and promote interculturality.

Each group shares their reflections and proposals for improvement of the spaces analysed at the end of the session. These recommendations are collected by the facilitator. They then draft a manifesto with key points for creating and transforming spaces that appeal to young people and promote intercultural coexistence.

The map is then digitalised by the illustrator, creating a concrete result or product of the session.



5.6. Photovoice



Photovoice is defined as a **participative methodology enabling people to identify, represent and improve their community through photography - the *lingua franca* of the activity**. The photographs (taken on mindful walks to capture everyday surroundings or images based on themes established by the group) seek to encourage a critical dialogue on socially relevant themes as seen through the eyes of the participants.

The methodology also seeks to put these proposals in front of policy-makers as prompts for social change.

In the city of **Castelló** they used Photovoice within the framework of the communication campaign **"BE EVERYTHING, BE BELONG"** from the European NET-IDEA project. The project was also supported by the [JRInside Out Foundation](#) programme.

Young people with culturally diverse backgrounds from different social and educational settings in the city were encouraged to participate. The group of young people taking part in each session debated the concepts of 'identity and sense of belonging'.

What does being from Castellón mean? What defines where you are from? Can you be from two different places at the same time? What elements does a city need in order for you to feel included in it?



The sessions resulted in a **community exhibition** that showed what an intercultural city looks like, composed of realities as different as all the people living in it; together, they form the city. They decided on a city centre location: the *Mercado Central* indoor market.

5.7. Visual Thinking



Visual thinking is a methodology consisting of using images, drawings and visual schemas to organise ideas, solve problems and communicate information more clearly and effectively. The key concept behind it is that people process visual information faster than text. When complex concepts are expressed visually, it facilitates understanding and analysis. It is also a useful tool for:

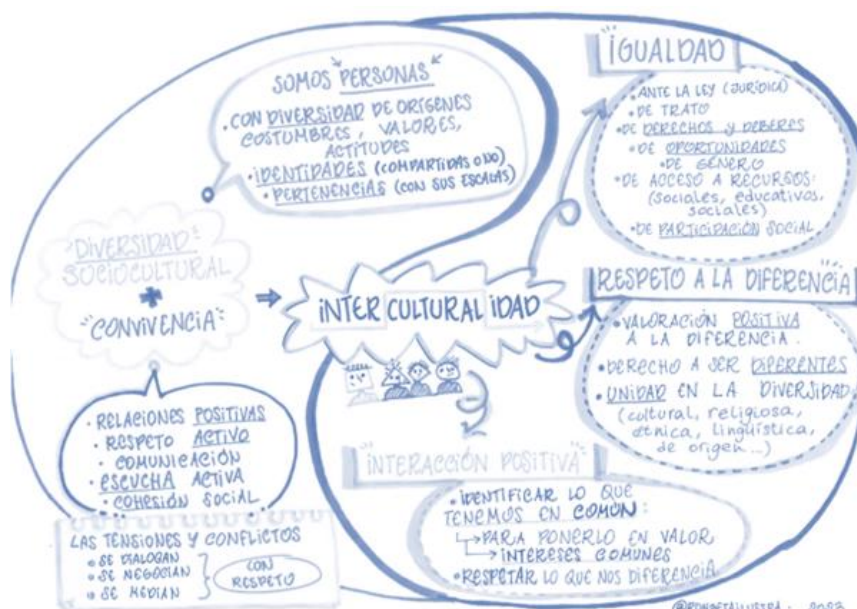
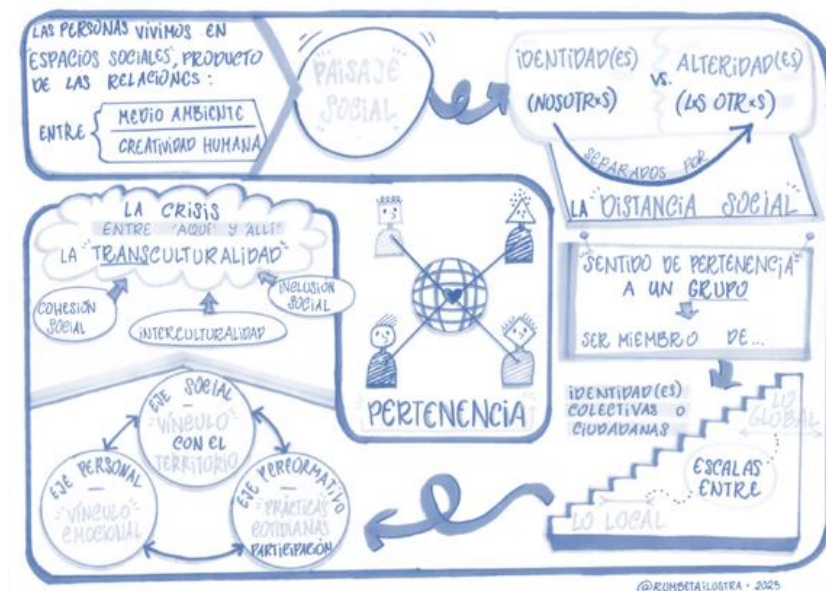
- > Clarity: It helps explain complicated ideas.
- > Memory: Visual information is easier to remember.
- > Creativity: It fosters new connections and ways of thinking.

This methodology has been used at different times for different purposes in **Tenerife**:

- **Illustrations prior to sessions:** A professional illustrator prepared a key concept for discussion in each session, creating a visual schema and presenting the central concept.

- **Real-time graphic recording:** As sessions progressed, the illustrator captured (graphically) the ideas emerging from participants' conversations. She then created graphic portrayals of the group of young people's contributions, facilitating comprehension and analysis of the themes in question. After the debates, these schemas were shown, gathering together their impressions and contributions. They worked with key concepts such as identity, sense of belonging and cultural diversity. When discussing cultural diversity, they discussed the concept of interculturality and everything the term encompasses.

- **Participative dynamics:** Activities were implemented in which the participants applied this methodology. A world map was created where each young person pinpointed their own and their parents' places of birth, as well as other places they had lived. All the points were joined together at the end of the session, forming a shape that represented the group's many connections, highlighting the level of diversity present.



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