

Transcript of ENHANCE Podcast Episode: Participatory learning in practice

Recorded by: SOLIDAR +

Aoife Coyne: I think that it's very important to make participants feel that you actually see them and that them, that you not only know their name but their interest and that also to let them know that you care about them and their perspective. I think that this is something very, very powerful.

Learner participation and learner voice can mean many different things depending on the context, but its impact becomes clearer when we focus on how it's experienced in practice. To explore this, we look at a program that has placed participation at the centre of its work for almost three decades. Peace Studies is a six-month non-formal education program for adults, run by the Centre for Peace Studies in Zagreb. Since its launch, more than 800 participants have taken part, many of them already active in civil society or community-based work. The program invites learners to reflect on themes such as non-violence, social justice, power and activism. A key part of the learning process is concrete engagement. To complete the program, participants move beyond the classroom and work on real-life activities, such as planning a street action, carrying out research, preparing a social media campaign or organizing a public event. These tasks allow them to test and apply what they've learned in a practical way. To understand this approach from the perspective of someone who has lived it, I speak with Nikita, who completed the peace studies programme during the 2020 to 2021 cohort. Their experience offers a closer look at what participation can look like in day-to-day learning, what enables it and how it shapes A learner's sense of agency. This is the ENHANCE podcast, a series focused on learner voice, participation and inclusion in adult education. I'm Aoife, the Communications Officer at SOLIDAR. This series is part of the ENHANCE Project, a project co-funded by the European Union, which works to support democratic practices in education and to strengthen the role of learners in shaping their learning environments. Here's my conversation with Nikita. Thank you so much for joining us today for the ENHANCE podcast. And maybe to begin, I can ask you to introduce yourself a little bit.

Nikita: Yes, hello, my name is Nikita. I'm from Croatia, from a city in Eastern Croatia. I run a community center called Social Atelier, and I mostly work with civic educators, so teachers of civic education, and I work in youth work. Mostly that, but also in the area of human rights, political literacy, volunteering, active citizenship, and a lot of other topics.

Aoife Coyne: Great, thank you. And you took part in the programme with the Centre for Peace Studies. So could you maybe talk a little bit about your motivation to join that programme and



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if there was anything either personally or professionally that particularly stood out to you with the programme?

Nikita: Yeah, there were a lot of things. Peace Studies is one of the oldest non-formal programs in Croatia that still runs every year, especially a program that lasts six months. That is something rare in Croatia, and we already have more than 25 generations of Peace Studies participants. This is one thing that was very important. It is a very respected program and very visible. Everyone working in these topics knows about Peace Studies, so of course there is also the motivation: I want to try it out. Also, as a practitioner of non-formal educational programs, I wanted to see how they actually do it and how they created such a sustainable, long-running program, both from a methodological and a technical side. Of course, that is just part of it. The topics they cover are very broad, from active listening, feminism, workers' rights, human rights, migration, ecology - many topics that are very relevant for working in NGOs or being an engaged citizen. Especially for us, there are topics we are familiar with, but there are also many other subjects that are closely connected and valuable, and which we do not always have time to research on our own. So I saw it as an opportunity to refresh knowledge on topics that are important for my work, but that I do not have time to dedicate to under normal circumstances. I think there is also a component where going to Peace Studies in Croatia is, in a way, a statement, in the sense that it represents a very multi-perspective, critical approach to education. I wanted to experience that firsthand and move away from the more militant national narratives that are still, unfortunately, dominant in formal education. This was an opportunity to experience something truly different.

Aoife Coyne: Great. Sounds super interesting. I suppose your interest covered a lot of bases, both the methodological and the content level, and then as a learner, and then your capacity, I suppose, as a provider. In the application process for the program, I gather that you had to give a proposal of the topics or areas that you would like to focus on as part of the program. So can you talk a little bit about how that was actually implemented in the delivery of the program?

Nikita: Yeah, I remember I was applying together with my close friend, and I remember that we took it really seriously. We prepared carefully, typed our essays, read each other's work, and were really engaged in the process. What I liked the most is that although we wrote essays about topics that are very dear to us and close to us, the process actually made us rethink them. It is one thing to think about a topic in everyday life, and another thing to write an essay, build an argument, consider different perspectives, and then respond to potential criticism. It was a very fun process for us during the application. It was even more important for us to see these topics addressed during the six months of the programme. They were not all covered at the same time, but different subjects included our themes in different ways. At some point we would find ourselves wondering whether they would mention something related to our topics,



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and they actually did. Our themes were addressed, and we had the opportunity to talk about our own process of thinking and argumentation during the programme. This was very empowering for us as participants as well. We invested a lot, but I think we got even more out of it.

Aoife Coyne: Very nice. So then you had this opportunity to contribute or to feed into the program via the application process. But then in the, I suppose the way the courses were run or the way decisions were made in the program, did you feel like there was elements of participation available to you in those levels as well?

Nikita: I remember from the first session, after we met each other, we started with a group co-creation of rules. So we began with self-governance, deciding how we wanted the next six months of this educational experience to look for us. That already set the tone: not only that we could influence the process, but that we were responsible for how these next six months were going to look. The curriculum itself is set, but there was always the understanding that part of what we were going to do was open to participants, both through their contributions and through their feedback, and that the feedback was actually valued. I think this is important, because I do not remember the last time I was in non-formal education where feedback was not gathered, but this was maybe the first time I could see it being systematically taken into consideration, with changes happening during the process itself. So it felt empowering in the sense that we were not doing this just for formality—just because you are expected at the end to ask people how it was and what could be improved. No, this was honestly taken into account, and they tried to address it as much as possible. If something could not be changed, they would explain why it was not possible at that moment, and how it might be addressed in the longer term. I think this also shows a lot about how Peace Studies is set. And of course, the biggest participation comes in the second half of the process, when you start working on your project together with your mentor. We formed groups around shared topics. Each of us had slightly different interests, but whether it was feminism, the anti-war movement, or other themes, we would group together, get a mentor, and work on an intervention, an idea, or a presentation. We tried to bring together each person's perspective to create something that could impact or address a problem in the community we had identified. It required a lot of work, but precisely because of that, it was even more meaningful for the participants.

Aoife Coyne: On that kind of group work and within the group work, how was the experience there and how did you feel like you were able to foster a sort of sense of shared decision making with people in the group so that everyone's voice could be heard?

Nikita: I think they managed this because the important thing is that it lasted six months, and they had the time to do it gradually. First, we just met each other and started sharing



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perspectives, and as time passed, we became more and more oriented towards working together and solving problems. It was a gradual process, and each time the group work became slightly more demanding, in the sense that we had to contribute more. I was especially surprised by how well they managed this, because I attended Peace Studies in 2020 - five years ago now - which was during the pandemic, as everyone remembers. It was the first time that most of the programme was held online. On the one hand, I was very happy about this because I live 300 kilometres away from Zagreb, so it was actually an opportunity for me to participate. On the other hand, I thought it might not be as good as previous in-person editions. But they managed very well to nurture group cohesion even through online tools. When we first met in Zagreb, it felt like meeting old friends, even though we had only ever known each other through the screen. I was very impressed by that. They somehow managed to create a safe space inside an online platform such as Zoom, and we really cared for each other. I know that I sometimes even self-regulated because I felt I was taking too much space and that others also needed the opportunity to speak. I think that is something they did very well: the facilitators shared their trust and sense of responsibility in a way that became almost contagious, so that we all contributed. It was not only the facilitators facilitating - we were all, in a way, facilitating within the group.

Aoife Coyne: I suppose the online format you just spoke about could be one possible barrier to learning participation, but as you explained, that was managed and they were able to overcome it throughout the delivery of the programme. But I suppose there could also be other barriers to participation, maybe around confidence issues, time constraints, or similar factors. Did that come up at all during the programme - barriers that learners face in really engaging and participating, and if so, how were those barriers handled?

Nikita: I don't have the feeling that there were such barriers. Once we overcame the physical barrier of being able to participate from different parts of Croatia, these barriers were not really a problem, partly because of what I mentioned earlier: the group took care of each other. We, as participants, made sure that everyone had the opportunity to truly participate. For example, in group work we would sometimes realize that person X had not had the chance to speak, and we would ask, "Would you like to present this? We are going to be there for you." If someone was shy, did not feel safe, or simply did not feel comfortable speaking, we would support them. In this way, we tried to empower each other to speak up. I also think this was something that the Peace Studies facilitators put as a standard for participants. Maybe that is why we started with active listening exercises and small online group activities focused on how to listen, how to support each other, and so on. This was introduced at the beginning of the programme, and we definitely felt its impact throughout the entire program.



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Aoife Coyne: It's very nice to hear that it wasn't just something implemented in the delivery of the course, but actually something that existed between you as learners. That is really interesting. And I suppose you have both already spoken a bit about how you felt that feedback and learner input were truly integrated into how the programme was delivered. Could you think of a concrete example or a moment where you gave feedback, or maybe another learner gave feedback, and you felt it really had an impact on a decision, an outcome, or the way something was delivered?

Nikita: One of the things I noticed is that, for instance, I would expect the immediate Peace Studies team to know each participant, but even guest lecturers and workshop facilitators knew who we were. They knew our interests, and they knew who had developed certain expertise within the group. I remember that standing out quite strongly: we would meet these people for the first time, and they already knew our names and what we had been working on. So that was very interesting, because usually facilitators who accompany you over six months know you, but guest lecturers often just come in, deliver their session, and leave without really getting to know participants. In Peace Studies, they made that extra effort to prepare not only for the topic, but also for the group. So that is one thing I would say is connected to this question. Also, in terms of feedback, I think we managed to have an extra offline weekend because we, as a group, requested it. Of course, especially during the pandemic, and also when you consider the financial planning of a non-formal programme, this was probably quite difficult for the team to organize, but they found a way. That was something we really appreciated.

Aoife Coyne: Very nice. And then I suppose going beyond the course there is also an alumni network that I imagine you're also a part of. And then how does this allow the sense of participation and engagement with the other learners to continue beyond the course? And what's been your experience in the alumni network?

Nikita: Yeah, the alumni network does exist. It is not as active as we would want it to be, so here I am a little bit critical, and I have always communicated this to the Peace Studies team. We stayed in contact with our generation, and we also had some contact across other generations. But I do think there is still a lot of work to do to build a more sustainable alumni network. At the moment, it is quite informal: when we meet someone and realise, "Oh, you went to Peace Studies, I did as well," there is an immediate connection, because we know we have shared this experience. As I said at the beginning, it is also, in a way, a statement. So when I meet someone who has gone through Peace Studies, I assume that, at least to some degree, they share or value similar principles and perspectives. I did hear that they are planning something bigger this year, so I am very much looking forward to seeing what that will be. I have also used the alumni network a couple of times when I needed to do research, and people were always very supportive in sharing information. So there is activity happening, but I would like to see



something more structured as well - perhaps additional learning opportunities, more expert-focused topics, or specific niches that we could explore together, maybe even organise for each other.

Aoife Coyne: Yeah, I suppose there is always room to develop these kinds of things, so it is good to hear that you also have some critical feedback there. Beyond the course, how did you feel that this experience of participatory learning shaped not only how you see your role as a learner, but also - you mentioned that you are involved in the delivery of non-formal education - how did it shape how you see your role in that capacity?

Nikita: Well, I learned a lot of things. First of all, that when you are thinking about participatory design in participatory programs, you always have to think about how to have a curriculum, but also leave it open enough so that participants can actually influence the outcome. So the question is how to structure it in a way that maybe 60 or 70 percent of the curriculum is fixed, but there is always this 20 to 30 to 40 percent - whatever the percentage is - that depends on the participants themselves. I did introduce this into the way I conduct at least some longer programs. I also learned from practice how much it means that you do not only learn from the program itself, from lectures and workshops, but that knowledge and skills are jointly constructed within the group of participants who are part of the program. We learn just as much from the program content as we do from each other's experiences, perspectives, and prior knowledge. I learned this very directly and firsthand. I also learned how important it is that participants are willing to take responsibility for the outcomes of their process. It was really empowering to be on the other side for a change, partly because I did not have to worry that everything had to be perfect. I could be much more relaxed, but I also got to see how it looks from a different perspective. I do think that long-term programs should include a real-world impact project. This is something that is very well done in Peace Studies, and it should be incorporated into other, at least longer, non-formal education programs. In the last couple of years, I have also come to see - maybe building on this learning, but also going a step further - that there is potential in deliberative pedagogy. That is, applying methodologies from deliberative democracy in non-formal, and of course also formal, education. Participants are exposed to multiple perspectives, they engage in long-term deliberation and dialogue, and then they reach consensus and take responsibility for collective action. I think there is a lot of space to develop this further.

Aoife Coyne: So then reflecting on your experience in the program overall, what do you think were the key elements that need to be in place for meaningful participation in education to truly work?



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Nikita: Probably, I think it is about taking it slow at the beginning: first building up the group, and building a group that trusts each other and can disagree in a constructive way, while listening to each other with respect. That is something that is very important in the first couple of meetings - developing these basic skills of listening to one another and respecting each other even when we do not agree. I also think it is very important to make participants feel that you actually see them and know them - not only their name, but also their interests. When you have such an extensive application format as Peace Studies does, it is important that you actually read it, get to know the person's point of view, and try to incorporate that, not only in answering the question the person is asking, but also in showing them that you care about them and their perspective. I think this is very powerful. In the end, it is also about making participants responsible for the outcomes. This participatory approach is also about co-owning the outcomes of your own educational path. So this is what I would say was most important for me from this experience.

Aoife Coyne: To finish up then, I'd be interested to know if you as a lifelong learner are still looking for more opportunities to learn about participatory processes.

Nikita: Definitely. After Peace Studies, I also took part in an even slightly longer programme, the Academy for Political Development, which is a national political school of the Council of Europe. It is interesting in its concept and somewhat different from Peace Studies. It is more political, of course, but it is also more explicitly focused on bringing together different viewpoints, because through the application process you have to come from different sectors - media, public sector, civil society, politics, etc. - and also represent different political positions, from right to left. In that sense, you actually meet people you do not necessarily agree with. In Peace Studies, everyone is still welcome, of course, but it is a critical educational programme, and most people who attend it do so precisely because of that. Here, however, there are genuinely very different voices, and you learn to dialogue with each other, or at least try to. The Academy for Political Development also has a very strong and large alumni network. We meet every year, with 200 to 300 people in the same place, and continue the discussions there. So there are other programs that are also very interesting in that sense. I myself am increasingly moving into research on deliberative technologies, which is something that is very interesting to me. I guess I am a lifelong learner - these are some of the longer programs I have taken part in.

Aoife Coyne: Thank you very much for joining me today, Nikita, and for sharing your reflections.

Nikita: Thank you very much.

Aoife Coyne: What you've just heard is the ENHANCE podcast, a series focused on learner voice, participation, and inclusion in adult education. The ENHANCE Project is co-funded by the



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