THE E-TICK COURSE ON ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

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E-TICK is a new Erasmus+ funded online course delivered by the Irish membership organisation, Comhlámh (2020), in partnership with Društvo Humanitas (Slovenia), Zavod Voluntariat (Slovenia), INEX-SDA (Czech Republic), and FOCSIV (Italy). This course on ethical communication introduces a critical approach to unpacking messages we receive from news outlets, social media, advertising, and even send ourselves with varying degrees of consciousness. According to the course's landing page, the creators imagine that their audience might be potential international volunteers, youth workers, global education trainers, and individuals interested in global issues with a view for social change (E-TICK, 2020). This anticipated group of learners will likely have encountered at least some of the ideas and questions discussed in the course and so would be expected to engage with the material independently with relative ease.

However, the course content is relevant to individuals and groups beyond those imagined by its creators. For the course to be accessible to an expanded audience which could include communications officers, fundraising teams, sports coaches, and managers at all levels, additional support from a facilitator could help to encourage learners to get the most out of the course. This review assesses the E-TICK online course as a tool for facilitators to supplement their work and deepen their own practice of ethical communication.

A course that practices what it preaches

The introductory description to the course hints at the conceptual depth that its four 'piers' will explore and the gracious but uncompromising manner in which the learner will be challenged. As an online resource, it makes use of the opportunity to offer interactive and engaging content to learners along with the ability to track progress while moving through material at the learner's own pace.

Interestingly, although the content of the course is in line with a more radical than 'soft' expression of global citizenship education (GCE) (Andreotti, 2006), it does not describe its objectives or content using this terminology. The course's omission of 'global citizenship' branding is unlikely to be an oversight, but rather evidence of a dedication to GCE principles and clarity for its learners about the subtleties of ethical communication. In spite of an upward trend in the use of 'global citizenship' language, E-TICK opts for strong and inclusive content over buzzwords suggested by some academics to be merely 'empty signifier[s]' not dissimilar to hashtags (Akkari and Maleq, 2019).

Demonstrating a high level of care for its own communication, this course operates according to the values it promotes. Such reflexivity makes it a compelling tool; useful for individuals and groups interested in stepping outside of the echo-chamber to observe the messages embedded in it and explore their ethical implications.

Modeling a measured approach to revealing unseen influences

The E-TICK course is structured using modules that allow learners to build their understanding of communication incrementally. This feature of the course makes it an excellent resource for individuals who are already interested in exploring the ethical dimension of communication, as well as for facilitators looking for resources with the flexibility to focus on one or a few sections that are particularly relevant to their needs. Such versatility is particularly useful when considering an audience of learners who are new and potentially sensitive to topics discussed in the course. Each module, and to some extent the sub-sections within it, can stand on their own making it possible for facilitators to include other activities for individuals and groups who might be resistant to the material otherwise.

The deceivingly bite-sized sub-sections challenge assumptions that a communicator could ever be objective or neutral. These challenges are not brought forth as reprimands but as explorations of common experiences. The approach to raising these challenges in the course is itself a skillful facilitation technique and lends itself to easy adoption by any teacher, leader, or discussion

group. Each challenge is offered as a process that begins with a question. For example, in Module One under 'Shifting Perspectives' one of the first sub-sections is entitled: 'In which reality do we live?' This stark and often rhetorical or ironic question opens a very genuine epistemological inquiry. The question is teased out through an activity in which the learner is asked to listen to a guided meditation that takes them on a 'walk through the park', which seems to anticipate a perceived disconnect between the question and ethical communication. At this point in the module, the challenge to the learners' acceptance of an observable objective reality has already taken place. However, the depth of the challenge will not be revealed until the learner is asked a series of questions which beautifully demonstrate the way in which our 'reality' is influenced by the messages we all receive, internalise, and often reproduce.

This technique of subtly challenging assumptions through what appear to be rhetorical questions and then following them up with activities that allow the learner to recognise and dismantle their own biased communication of messages is repeated in each module. This repetition of process utilises different modes of engagement along the way; some passive, some more active, but all contributing to the effectiveness of the course by minimising the feeling that the learner is just doing the same thing over and over.

Ethical communication, ethical living

In addition to providing content and structure for facilitators themselves to deepen their understanding of ethical communication, the E-TICK course offers material for those facilitators to use in existing courses as well as methods for approaching dense and esoteric concepts. Resources such as the E-TICK online course are critically important in light of growing global support for far-right political groups. A UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) report on global citizenship education notes an increase in the 'expression, visibility, and acceptance of nationalist politics'. 'Manifestations of the increased visibility of exclusionary nationalist politics can be seen through the rise in hate crimes' (UNESCO,

2018: 4-5). The same report cautions against the potentially exclusionary nature of a depoliticised version of global citizenship education in favour of a more critical, politically engaged, and digitally literate one.

The E-TICK course provides a versatile tool for facilitators to critically and sensitively engage individuals and groups with material that invites its learners to consider how communication of all forms is embedded with messages. The course concludes with a poem that serves as a checklist for facilitators and their learners alike against which to measure their intentions. Here we see the final challenge: translating what was learned about the ethical implications of communication to a conscious expression of them that keeps our global social and political ecosystem healthy with curiosity and appreciation.

References
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