

# **When art contributes to the integration of refugees through intercultural communication: an illustration with the documentary film "En cours".**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The project coLAB, funded by the Council of Europe and the European Union, aims to promote the integration of refugees through education. During one year, five refugees taught at Université Clermont Auvergne. In order to keep a record of this experience, a documentary film was made. The preparation and shooting have fostered the development of intercultural communication between the film maker and the participants and created the conditions for integration. The place of documentary film as a artistic tool for intercultural mediation will be examined in this paper.

**Key-words :** refugees, integration, intercultural communication, mediation

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 2018, four European higher education institutions have come up with the idea of promoting the integration of refugees through education. For one year, they assigned courses to refugees, recruited on the basis of their skills and expertise, the vast majority of whom had not previously worked in the country. During one year, five refugees taught at the University of Clermont Auvergne (UCA). In order to keep a record of this experience, the communication service of UCA made a documentary film : « En cours »<sup>1</sup>. It highlights the daily life of the refugee teachers throughout the year to illustrate their integration. During the filming, a form of exchange and sharing was created between the teacher-refugees, the film director and the project coordinator around a common object: the documentary. It was together that the script was written. On the basis of the discourse of the film's stakeholders (director and teacher-refugees), combining participant observation and semi-directive interviews, we will examine the place of documentary filmmaking as a tool for intercultural mediation.

## **2. THE DOCUMENTARY FILM, A TOOL FOR INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION**

The media are involved in migrants' integration. They can intervene before arrival in the host society and play a preparatory role (Belabdi 2011). They can also contribute to integration when migrants are already on the territory, mainly in three ways (Bérubé 2009: 185): "as an agent of information, as an agent of linguistic immersion and as an agent of socialisation". Moreover, since integration is a reciprocal process and the host society has a role to play in integration, the media also intervene at this level, in particular by playing on the image and representation of migrant populations. In recent years, this has resulted in particular in the transmission of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en-cours.uca.fr/film-documentaire-en-cours-184096.kjsp>

prejudices and stereotypes. In the case of the documentary created around the coLAB project, we will show how not only the three roles of the media in the integration of migrants defined by Farrah Bérubé (2009) are fulfilled, but also how the film positions integration in this reciprocal process in a positive way. In doing so, it takes part in the intercultural mediation process, which consists in "establishing (or re-establishing) sociability links between people from different cultures" (Plivard 2010: 23).

Considering the role of information transmission first, the preparation of the documentary allowed the refugees to acquire a better knowledge of the host society and in particular of its social practices. The film director and the viewers are also involved. "How to present oneself in front of the other, what subjects to talk about and how to talk about them, what distance to respect, what gestures to adopt? "are questions that the teacher-refugees asked themselves at the start of the project and which were answered during the preparation of the documentary. With the preparation of the lessons, they had wondered about pedagogical practices, about the relationship with the students. With the film, they asked themselves about the uses and social practices of the host society because its members would be the spectators. As for the film director, because he also asked questions, because he observed, he completed his theoretical knowledge of the migration issue and the situation of refugees. And the audience will gain knowledge through the screening and the debate. Therefore, the role of socialisation agent exists: social links have already been created between the filmed, the filmmaker and the coordinator. Links will be created, thanks to the emotional function of the film, between the filmed and the spectator. And this was made possible because the film acted as a joint project: everyone had the same objective and together they had to achieve it. Only the role of language immersion agent benefited the refugees more, since the discussions with the director gave them the opportunity to practice the language during the preparation and filming. This will also be the case when they take part in discussions after the screening.

The documentary made around the coLAB project helps to tell the story of the integration of refugees into society. By examining the way in which intercultural communication gradually developed during preparation and filming, we showed how the film participates in a mediation mechanism in its "creative" component (Six 1990). It involves "the elaboration of the social bond between different actors or between actors and objects in order to compensate for non-existent or imperfect forms of communication" (Ghosn 2015: 29), it creates new links that did not previously exist between people or groups from which both sides benefit (Sani 2015) and indeed it contributes to the integration of refugees. On the one hand through the reflexivity that it has helped to create among them, which echoes the definition of mediation as "a process that promotes the emancipation of the person through speaking out" (Caune 2010: 3). On the other hand, thanks to the communication, which gradually developed during the filming between the director and the teacher-refugees, and which will be possible during the screening between the latter and the spectators.

In this mediation process, human intervention is fundamental. The mediator is the one who creates the conditions for exchanges to take place and for links to develop, whether or not they have already existed. He or she must be able to "develop a capacity for distancing himself or herself, allowing not only to be aware that the other person may be the bearer of different values but also to take a step back from his or her own frames of reference" (Plivard 2010: 23-26). In the coLAB project, occupying "the position of a third party and the role of bridge between different cultural universes" (Cohen-Emerique and Fayman 2005: 171), the project coordinator assumed the role of intercultural mediator. In turn, he was the one who listened, reassured, questioned, accompanied and discussed with one or the other. He is also the one who organised

the first meetings and initiated contacts. He is the one who has accompanied the process of reflexivity among the refugees, who has led them to ask questions about themselves and others, to reconsider their place in society. He intervened directly with the refugees and the director. He created bridges between them, enabling them to develop communication. He also created bridges between the refugees and the host society, enabling them to understand a certain number of codes, practices and customs. He is the one who will not (or hardly) appear in the film, but without him the film would not have existed. He gave meaning to the making of the documentary, transforming it into a common object around which intercultural communication could develop. He is at the heart of the device whose hybridity is revealed: technical device and human intervention participate in intercultural mediation, confirming the role of mediation as a "human and technical facilitator" (Rouzé 2010: 10).

Integration is a social process, it is impacted by the measures put in place by public policies, which play an important role in the journey of refugees (Frattini 2017; Kreienbrink 2017). However, while reception programmes include language courses and support towards employment, they do not include (or include few) opportunities for intercultural encounters. In this article, we have approached documentary film as a tool for such encounters and have shown how participating in its production has a positive impact on the integration of refugees. We also stressed the importance of the human factor and the role of the mediator. This paves the way for the invention of original intercultural mediation schemes, complementing the classic schemes involving social workers. This is all the more important since mediation can be considered "a determining factor in social integration policies and is necessary both to enable foreign citizens to exercise their rights and enjoy the same opportunities as native citizens, and to foster cultural integration through reciprocal knowledge and exchange between different cultures" (Sani 2015: 2582).

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The documentary film has become the thread of a European project on the integration of refugees through education. For a few months, it brought together refugee-teachers, the film director and the coordinator around a common goal, beyond the teaching experience inherent in participating in coLAB project. The documentary will propose a new form of representation of refugees in the media, which is known to play an important role in the process of intercultural communication (Larrazet and Rigoni 2014) and in the integration of migrants (Bérubé 2009). However, in its construction phase, it is a reflection on the part of teacher-refugees on their own integration that has taken place. Initially, it was the desire to pass on a message to the spectators, which encouraged them to participate in the film. Then, the preparation and shooting stages created spaces for discussion, meetings and exchanges between the director, the teacher-refugees and the coordinator. They created the conditions for intercultural communication and the development of pluralist integration based on a common language, recognition of cultural differences and reciprocity of exchanges. In the end, the documentary genre reveals all its relevance in the role of intercultural mediator as its approach makes it possible to analyse and deepen exchanges.

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