

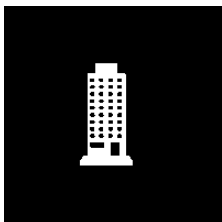


INDIVIDUAL-CENTRED APPROACH TO VALIDATION: THE IWC EXAMPLE

Martin Swart, Learn For Life

The AVA project research on the accessibility, inclusiveness and effectiveness of validation systems in the EU is about to be published. The main challenges highlighted by the AVA survey respondents are the lack of a strategy to outreach to disadvantaged groups, the difficulty in cooperating with other stakeholders as well as the absence of permeability which hinder the progression of the individual in his or her life. By illustrating a successful case from the Netherlands, this article aims to show that if the above-mentioned challenges are overcome validation could act as a springboard for people's lives. Both the AVA research and the following example will be presented at the next AVA expert seminar, which will be held in Oslo, Norway on the 1-2 February 2016¹.

From being isolated to being active via the IWC



The International Women's Centre (IWC) was established in 1985 with the aim of improving the emancipation, participation and integration of women in Den Helder. It is international, meaning that all women are welcome; both Dutch and non-Dutch, as members or volunteers. The IWC offers various courses, activities, training programmes and projects. They allow women to grow and develop in their own way and to identify their personal skills and competencies, so that they can find their way in Dutch society.²

The IWC has 2 part-time staff members (who between them work full-time). In addition, the centre relies on 55 volunteers. Annually, there are approximately 300 participants on the participation ladder and the centre reaches about 2000 women through both their own projects and projects in cooperation with partner organisations. The IWC is financed by the Den Helder city council, as well as small donations from the participants. Occasionally, subsidies are available for projects.

"The women who come to us are usually not Dutch, and have very varied levels of education, ranging from illiterate to university graduates. The women usually start on step 1 of the participation ladder which we work with at the IWC. We developed a test in 2012 in order to determine which step of the ladder someone should start at, called the Tracking System", the IWC director, Marlies Pfann, explains, "They have usually become isolated, because they do not speak Dutch and/or have low self-

¹ More information on: <http://www.eaea.org/en/projects/eaea-coordinated-projects/ava.html>

² IWC (IWC) Website: <http://www.ivcdenhelder.nl/>



confidence. Through various courses and activities, we try to guide them to the next step, and we have developed a unique method in order to do this. Of course, the language lessons are very important in order to reduce isolation, but other activities can help too, such as learning to ride a bicycle, as this reduces dependence on the bus and so increases independence.

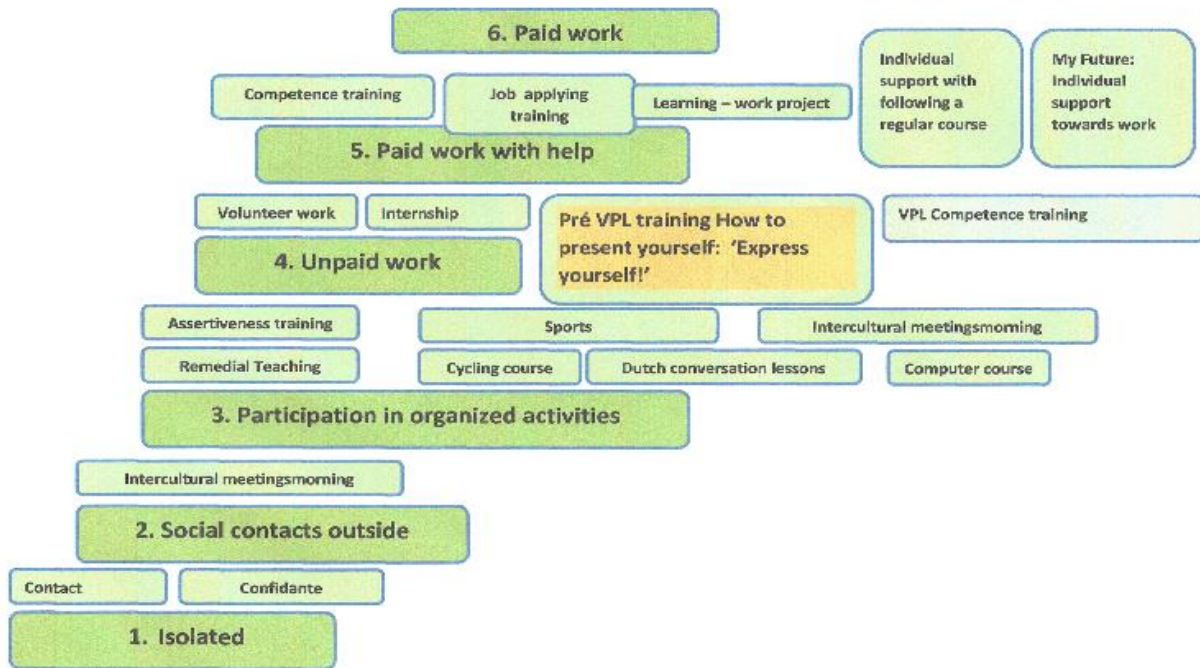
Intercultural coffee mornings, Dutch conversation practice, sports activities, computer courses, assertiveness training and 1-on-1 language training: they are all focused on learning and discovering skills, and above all, increasing self-confidence. To put it simply, it's about going from being isolated at home to being active outside the home, via the IWC. For some people, that progression happens very quickly, for others, it takes more time and there are even some participants who will never reach step 6 on the ladder. We believe it is important to encourage people to at least find unpaid work (step 4). Many women do voluntary work here at the IWC, but we also look for external placements. And we always succeed in finding them!"



The VPL training and the development of a pre-course

The model used at IWC is based on the Swiss CH-Q method (a Swiss vocational qualifications programme that has developed tools to document skills). CH-Q follows the steps of the VPL-procedure: raising awareness, documentation, presentation, assessment and certification.³ A VPL training course at IWC consists of 7 weekly group meetings of 2,5 hours each, during which participants are triggered to gain insights into themselves. The group process is an important element in this. Through self-exploration and reflection, new or potential skills and characteristics are mirrored to the group, but also to partners or possible employers for affirmation. They create a development line and lifeline, as well as a personal and work profile. Intermittent presentations to the group, with feedback, ensure that the participants can take a long, hard look at themselves. The result is increased self-confidence and pride in their qualities, an ability to recognise opportunities and an awareness of how to use them. After the 7 sessions, the participants put together a portfolio, in which they can outline their development, experiences, strengths, skills and competencies, as well as their short and long-term goals. After about a month, the group meets again in order to give a final presentation to one another, as well as the trainer and an assessor, and they are also given a grade. They receive a nationally recognised certificate and are then ready for the next step, which is finding a job (alone or with support).

³ Validation of Prior Learning as a multi-targeted approach for access to learning opportunities for all The Power of VPL, by Ruud Duvekot



The first VPL course was held by Marc Frentrop, an IWC trainer, in 2009. However, since participants found the CH-Q method overwhelming, he adapted it to the participating women’s needs for the following year. He managed to do this while maintaining the quality level of the course.

“At a certain point we discovered that there was stagnation in the step from unpaid to paid employment, because the step to the VPL course was too great. We then decided to create a pre-VPL course entitled Express yourself! (‘Spreek je uit!’)”, Marc explains. “The participants go in search of answers to questions such as Who am I?; What do I want from life?; What am I good at?; What have I achieved?; What’s my position in the group? They do that through interactive presentation training; roleplays using real-life situations, a card game and the game ‘Spider in the web’. They are also introduced to certain ideas which they need to be familiar with for the VPL course. The approach is much more informal than in the VPL course and there is less mirroring to others. Lastly, they work towards a final presentation, which can take a number of forms. This ‘VPL-light’ course tends to work very well.”



Cooperation is the key to assure people's progression

The IWC has a very broad network of social partners, communities' leaders and educational stakeholders. They contact directly companies and potential employers in order to find job places for the women attending their courses. The employers described as open even though the job market in the Netherlands is not at its greatest in the time being. Furthermore the diversity in the workplace is fostered by the Dutch law. The director underlines the importance of being transparent on their objectives: "We have links with a number of employers in Den Helder, such as the police and the defence forces, which allow us to help people on the road to paid employment. However, it should be made clear that we are not an employment agency".

Furthermore, the IWC created a dialogue with key people that work for and represent the migrant communities. After demonstrating the value and the impartiality of their work, they build a trust relationship with them and thus assured their active involvement for the centre's purposes.

Another key group involved in the IWC work is the educational stakeholders. One of the most important recommendations from the first analysis of the AVA survey results is that the dialogue between the formal and the non-formal education systems must be strengthened and this is why at the Expert Seminar in Oslo people working in formal, non-formal and VET sectors will be invited.

"We want to work with people working on validation from all over Europe to formulate recommendations of real added value. We want to find out what the different stakeholders can do and how. Based on the results of this debate, we will then elaborate an Action Plan for validation that to reflects the needs and approaches of the non-formal adult education but contribute to the permeability of validation systems in the EU," declares Gina Ebner, the EAEA Secretary General.



The following three life stories touch upon lot of the above-mentioned points and stress the value of the IWC work. Stay tuned on the [AVA project website](#) to learn more.



You are capable of more than you think

Sabrina Hailand (1978) was born on the island of Curaçao (Dutch Antilles). She went to secondary school there and then studied to be a nurse. In 2008, after 8 years working at a hospital, she decided to move to the Netherlands and specialise as a Nurse Anaesthetist. However, she was told that her qualifications from Curaçao were not recognised there.



“That was a huge disappointment. I was not happy sitting at home and becoming isolated from the society and was introduced to the IWC through people from my church community. I went there in 2011. First, I had an intake talk in order to assess my goals and decide on the best approach. My short-term goal was to become BIG-registered as soon as possible (a registration system for people in the health sector). My long-term goal was to get a job in nursing. I did not need language training as I already spoke the language. I was soon in a position to do the VPL course.

From the start, I experienced the support and encouragement of the other participants and the volunteers, and of course from the trainer. I got lots of feedback from fellow students. You’re not on your own – you’re in it together. That helped me to get a clear picture of what I was capable of, what I wanted to achieve and how I could reach my goals. That was all recorded in my portfolio.

Overall the course was very clear – if anything wasn’t clear then I could always go to Marc (trainer) or Marlies (director). I was a bit lax in finishing off my portfolio but they pushed me to get it done. It wasn’t that I had to do loads of administration: I found it hard to go home and search for all sorts of documents and references from 8 years ago which was my own fault. Since my self-confidence and motivation increased, I was able to become BIG registered.

In spring 2015 I moved to Nieuwkoop and immediately started working as a General Nurse at Leiden University Teaching Hospital through an employment agency.

I still have contact with people from the IWC. I couldn’t have got where I am without them and I am very grateful to them for that. I promote the IWC whenever I can – they really do a good job there. If I’m trying to convince someone to go there, I always say ‘You are capable of more than you think’. The training itself is perfect but the IWC should promote it more, because it’s really good.”



Each tree in the forest is important

Vimala Tharmalingam-Sivanesan (1963) was born in Sri Lanka. She came to the Netherlands in 1995. Her husband had fled here 10 years earlier. In Sri Lanka she was a secondary school maths teacher.

“When the youngest of my three children started primary school, I began to feel restricted in my role as mother and housewife. I began giving children extra lessons in maths – first Sri Lankan children and then Dutch children. However, that was difficult because I didn’t speak the language well. I wanted to have more contact with people. A parent of one of the children I was teaching told me about the IWC. I went there, had a talk with Marlies and told her I wanted to teach maths. Marlies told me that it would be difficult to find a job in a primary school because of my lack of Dutch, but that I may be able to get work in a secondary school. I started studying Dutch in a group, and then did conversation lessons and remedial lesson where I learned mathematical terms and vocabulary. I used to be afraid to speak and I usually stayed quiet in the class, but I learned not to be afraid to make mistakes.



When I first came to the centre, I was very shy. However, the IWC participants and volunteers create an ‘IWC-feeling’ here: Marlies is always eager to help and we support one another to improve. I started working here as a volunteer, giving computer lessons to non-Dutch women. After a while I was able to do the ‘Spreek je uit – Speak your mind’ – VPL course, followed by the VPL competency course. I learned a lot from both courses. Creating a portfolio which catalogues my skills and strengths, I learned to make the most of my strong points and to improve my weaker areas. Most importantly, I gained a lot of confidence and learned that every tree in the forest is important.

After my job seeker training, I did a 6-month work placement with 3 different teachers at a secondary school in Alkmaar. Maths isn’t any different here – I just need to keep working on my Dutch. After 6 months, I was allowed to teach the class on my own. I did a lot of preparation and at the end of the class the students gave me a round of applause. I felt the tears streaming down my cheeks and felt reborn. I’ve now been teaching difficult children at a school in Den Helder, a proper paid job, and I hope to get a new contract shortly.

Looking back, I feel I was very well mentored at the IWC – we got the right training from the right people and Marlies does a wonderful job. She has a huge network which she puts to good use for the participants. For me personally, the process could have been somewhat faster. If there was a good teacher working here who I could do Dutch lessons with, I would.”



Learning through experience always works

Betsie Baanstra (1961) was born in the Netherlands. She was working at Social Services as a Social Law Consultant but became depressed and burned out, which resulted in her losing her job in 2003 and registering for unemployment benefit. This was a big knock to her confidence and she became isolated from society.



“After my burn-out, the IWC was able to give me what I needed, but in a different way to most participants. I went from step 6 to step 1 on the participation ladder: I went in exactly the opposite direction to the one which the IWC participants usually go in. In 2007, in a bid to become less isolated, I responded to a job advert at the IWC. I had heard of the centre but didn’t know exactly what they did there. Despite my recent history, Marlies took me on. I got the job of coordinating the translation project – a job beneath my level – but I was very happy. It was good for my self-confidence. I quickly felt at home here, there are lots of opportunities and I soon started doing other bits and pieces. I’m now responsible for

coordinating the volunteers.

The first thing I did at the centre was following the Marc Frentrop’s VPL course. During the course, you are constantly encouraged to think about yourself and become aware of your own strength. The course helped me to identify a new, attainable goal – to become a VPL trainer myself. It was an important way of keeping my work interesting. Marc is qualified to train new trainers and so I made the most of that.

Observing Marc while he is training, I am learning that, using tips and tricks, you can show participants that all sorts of experiences can count as competencies. As a trainer, you need to show them where their strengths and competencies lie, in order to achieve a defined goal. The backgrounds of the participants are very varied – from highly educated women who are here simply to learn Dutch, to women from war zones who are severely traumatized and have not had much education. But there are also Dutch women who are on step 1 of the ladder. They often have a lot going on in their lives but learning through experience always works. The next step is that I’ll give a session myself, under Marc’s guidance.

The IWC is an open and ‘flat’ organisation – contributing and taking part are very much appreciated. Participants are never left on their own: there is always someone they can talk to before, during and after the course. The best way to approach new participants is to do so personally, speaking from your own experience. There’s a reason I’m inviting you. I believe in you. Don’t give up, even if you go from step 6 to step 1, like I did, you can always climb back up.”