

The Anatomy of Distance: Mobile Civic Laboratories & The Pedagogy of the Journey

Name of the organisation

IL VERGANTE

Website of the organisation

<https://ilvergante.com/category/associazioni/ilvergante/>

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Good practice aspect(s)/themes of youth work

- Youth work in rural areas
- Non-formal education/-learning
- Active citizenship/activism
- Inclusion

Good practice category

Concrete tool

Good practice aim & purpose

The Core Vision: Overcoming the “Geography of Distance”

The primary aim of this practice is to dismantle the barriers to democratic participation faced by young people living in rural and peripheral areas. Traditionally, youth work is “static” (linked to physical centers), which inherently excludes those in remote valleys or mountains who lack easy access to urban hubs. Our goal was to flip this script: instead of asking youth to travel to reach a “center,” we transform the act of traveling itself into the “center.”

Strategic Objectives:

- Neutralizing Geographical Isolation: To provide high-quality non-formal education (NFE) in areas where no physical youth infrastructure exists.
- Reclaiming the “Temporal Void”: To transform the dead time spent by students on public transport (buses and trains) into productive, civic-led laboratories.
- Empowering Rural Identity: To shift the perception of rural youth from “passive commuters” to “active citizens” who feel ownership over their territory.
- Innovation in Youth Work: To demonstrate a low-cost, high-impact model that utilizes existing public infrastructure (transport networks) as a venue for social change, aligning with the European Charter on Local Youth Work.

Good practice description

The “Kinetic Hub” Methodology

Our practice, “Mobile Civic Laboratories,” operates through a disruptive pedagogical framework known as the “Pedagogy of the Journey.” It is structured into two main operational pillars:

A. The Physical Kinetic Space: In collaboration with a NGO, we delivered our Lego Workshop on a converted bus into a mobile and civic center. This Bus travels to remote village squares, creating an immediate, visible “heterotopia”—a space that breaks the routine of the village and provides a horizontal platform where youth and educators can meet without the traditional hierarchies of school or institutional offices.

B. The Geography of Transit (Trans-European Rail Lab): This involves utilizing actual transit routes as “living textbooks.” For example, during journeys from Switzerland to Sicily – cooperating with another local NGO, we use the train carriage as a laboratory. Through the “Community Building: Brick by Brick” gamification methodology, we facilitate workshops on European identity, active citizenship and how to ‘build’ future cities/Youth Center and social challenges while the landscape moves outside the window. This allows for:

- Place-Based Education (PBE): Using the local landscape and transit routes to spark dialogue about territory and belonging.

- The Sociology of Mobility: Encouraging youth to “occupy” public spaces effectively, asserting their right to be heard even while in motion.

This model is inherently scalable and adaptable to any region—like the Norwegian fjords or Italian mountains—where distance is the primary obstacle to engagement.

The core innovation of our practice lies in the **Pedagogy of the Journey**: we explicitly target the ‘dead time’ of commuting—typically a social and cultural vacuum—and convert it into a high-impact laboratory for non-formal education (NFE).

During specific trip to a specific place, we utilize the transit time between locations not merely as a commute, but as a citizenship amplifier. The “Kinetic Hub” operates through a structured pedagogical cycle that maximizes the journey:

Phase 1: The Outbound Journey (Preparation & Priming): During the journey toward the destination (e.g., a place of social or historical interest), the train or bus becomes a laboratory. We use this time to set the stage, using gamification and the “Brick by Brick” methodology to introduce themes of active citizenship. The movement acts as a catalyst for creative thinking, preparing the youth for the site visit.

Phase 2: The Site Experience (Active Engagement): Once at the destination, the group engages with the territory—visiting social projects, rural startups, or civic institutions. Because they were “primed” during the journey, their observation is sharper and more intentional.

Phase 3: The Return Journey (Debriefing & Internalization): The journey back is the most critical phase for Non-Formal Education (NFE). We use this time for a structured debriefing. While the landscape moves in reverse, the youth reflect on what they witnessed. This transforms a simple field trip into a

deep learning experience, ensuring that the “Non-Place” of the transport vehicle is filled with collective meaning and shared insights.

Good practice result & concrete effects

The implementation of the “Kinetic Hub” has produced tangible results across social, institutional, and individual levels, transforming the way rural youth work is perceived and delivered:

- Reclaiming “Non-Places” through Pedagogy: One of our most significant theoretical achievements is the transformation of “non-places”. By choosing trains and buses—typically transit spaces devoid of identity—we have turned them into meaningful, relational environments. Through our presence, these anonymous hubs become centers of civic production, proving that youth work can thrive anywhere there is a human connection.

- Increased Accessibility: We have successfully reached “invisible” youth populations who were previously excluded from European programs due to logistical barriers. The “Moving Workshop” model has brought active civic participation to numerous rural municipalities that completely lack physical youth infrastructure.

- Behavioral Shift & Sustainable Mobility: Participants transitioned from being “passive passengers” to “active designers” of their own mobility. By integrating sustainable transport into the core of our active citizenship curriculum, we encourage youth to see public transit not just as a service, but as a sustainable tool for European integration. Evaluation surveys show a significant increase in the sense of “European Belonging” following the Trans-European Rail Lab.

- Gamification & Innovation: Through our “Brick by Brick” methodology, we use gamification to simplify complex social themes. This approach allows youth to “build” their vision of future cities and youth centers physically and metaphorically, making abstract democratic concepts tangible and engaging.

- Cost-Effectiveness for Municipalities: We have demonstrated a highly sustainable financial model. Our workshops are low-cost, requiring only the presence of a facilitator and the use of public transport (often discounted for youth). We have proven that local authorities do not need to invest in expensive new buildings to support youth; by “hacking” existing infrastructure, we optimize public resources and make youth work resilient to budget cuts.

- Institutional Recognition & Scaling: Our methodology was recognized in 2024 as one of the EGL “100 Good Practices” in Belgium. In 2026, we are scaling this as a lead model for the “Rural Youth Goes European” network, expanding the “Kinetic Hub” across the Mediterranean basin to bridge the gap between peripheral and urban realities.

- Inter-Territorial Solidarity: The exchange between rural Northern youth and urban Southern populations (from Switzerland to Sicily/Naples) has effectively dismantled regional stereotypes. It has fostered a unified vision of European citizenship that successfully transcends the urban-rural divide.

Good practice chapter of the European Charter on Local Youth Work

Organisation and practice