



**Second Forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations
Istanbul, Turkey, 6-7 April, 2009
Working Session 1: Learning About and Across Differences
Monday, 6 April, 15:00 – 16:30**

Organized by the Alliance of Civilizations, ERB network, Network of European Foundations, and ISESCO

Background

The Alliance of Civilizations HLG Report, submitted to the UN Secretary-General in November 2006, underscored the importance of education in “preparing young people for an interdependent world” and called for education systems to “provide students with an understanding and respect for the diverse religious beliefs, practices and cultures in the world.”

Several guidelines drawn up by intergovernmental organizations, as well as world leaders, have spoken of the need for intercultural education and the necessity to learn about and across differences. References in this regard include for instance the *UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education*.

Further, participants at the AoC January 2008 Madrid Forum expressed the strong desire that the **next AoC clearinghouse should be a clearinghouse on “Education about Religion and Beliefs” (ERB)**. Education about different religions and beliefs, and critically thinking about the nature of beliefs, enables populations to deal sensitively and tolerantly with the reality of a modern globalized multicultural world where one will encounter people who believe in many different religions, or people who may not believe in any religion at all. Intrinsic to the goal of educating students about and across differences – including religious differences -- are the instruments of civic and peace education, tolerance and ethics education, as well as global and cross-cultural education. These mechanisms also offer a different way of advancing the ultimate pillar of education to “live together,” especially in the context of some societies where teaching about religions themselves may raise issues of “church-and-state separation.”

Description and Structure of this Working Session

While there will be a focus in this session on “education about religions and beliefs,” the projects presented will also include those that are more general in their coverage but related to learning about and across differences. The session will feature interactive presentations of three projects related to learning about and across differences, contextual discussions and commentary, and an opportunity for participants from the floor to comment and make suggestions on the projects. Three projects will be featured at this session:

- The debut of the AoC’s *Clearinghouse On Education About Religions And Beliefs*. The web-based clearinghouse will feature approaches, consensus guidelines, intellectual and instructional resources, and links to associations/organizations and institutions working in the field of education about religions and beliefs.

- The presentation of UNESCO's *Global Ethics Observatory* is designed to serve as a valuable consultative and comparative resource hub of ethics activities around the world. The Observatory is also intended to become a crucial platform for supporting and advancing ethics activities by assisting Member States and other interested parties to identify experts, establish ethics committees, construct informed policies in the area of ethics, and design ethics teaching curricula.
- *Rafi.ki* is an online community of more than 1100 schools from 101 countries. Using innovative communication and web design software, students and teachers collaborate on curriculum-based projects and work together to become global citizens. Use of Rafi.ki enables people from all over the world to safely cross cultural barriers and establish inter-continental friendships.

Experts on the panel (including a youth representative) will comment on the rationale, relevance and history of education about and across differences globally and in specific areas. Facilitators will guide discussions in small groups about these projects and provide them to a respondent who will sum up her/his comments and suggestions from the facilitators.

Objectives of this Working Session

There are three objectives of this working session:

- 1) To lay out the relevance, rationale and history of education about and across differences globally and in specific areas
- 2) To present related projects of the Alliance and associated partners
- 3) To solicit the comments and suggestions of interested participants on the way forward