Focus

Giving Credit

Certification and assessment of **non-formal** education

by Caroline Vink

Certificates, portfolios... Should young people get official recognition for youth work? What is the goal of non-formal education? Caroline's article is Coyote's first contribution to the debate about quality and qualification of European youth work.

"You learn so much. To deal with other habits and customs, how they are different from yours. You learn to negotiate, to put some water with the wine. I asked at school why we have to write a paper. It is so boring, such nonsense. Just let everyone organise a youth exchange and then you can put into practise everything you have learnt in school. Because everything is in it!" (participant in a youth exchange, 22 years)

"Do not then train youths to learning by force and harshness, but direct them to it by what amuses their minds so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each." (Plato)

Credits for European youth work

European youth work is part of the so-called domain of non-formal education. Non-formal education is often defined as being all those activities that young people are involved in after 'school'. These activities take place in various settings: youth clubs, youth organisations and movements, youth centres, community centres, sport clubs etc. What these places have in common is that volunteers, youth leaders or youth workers offer some type of professional guidance. One of the most important aims of these educators is to stimulate young people to participate in their own environment and to teach them how to take responsibility for their own situation. The key words are active participation and social development. Youth work is often defined in the context of, and in comparison to, the formal education system. The formal education system is mostly fact-oriented and focused on cognitive learning and acquiring knowledge. This knowledge and these facts can then be reviewed in tests and exams. Non-formal education on the other hand is process-oriented and based on learning life skills which are more difficult to assess. Learning takes place through experience and through reflections on this experience.

Although both formal and non-formal forms of education prepare young people for the challenges and responsibilities that they will face in adult life, there is growing concern over whether the conventional classroom approach is successful in doing so. Our society is changing very rapidly and is becoming more complex. People have to be much more mobile - occupationally, socially and geographically - than in the past. This requires enormous flexibility and social skills. The formal education system often fails in preparing young people for this challenge. For example, a recent study in the UK shows that two-thirds of people aged between 16 and 25 believe that school does not prepare them for real life (Bentley, 1998:3). Traditional knowledge and skills are no longer sufficient tools. The question is, does non-formal education create alternative opportunities?

Out-of-school based programmes enable young people to be involved in social learning. They acquire 'life' skills and competencies through organising activities, raising funds, solving problems or volunteering in their community. These skills and competencies are essential for their future and should be recognised as such. Social competence is a prerequisite for social participation. This view is also promoted by European institutions like the Council of Europe, the European Commission and the

European Youth Forum. The Youth Forum is at this moment undertaking research into the recognition of non-formal education. Their work will be published in December 1999. However, this approach raises the question of how to value and assess the learning elements of non-formal education. School is, until now, the only place where young people receive official recognition for their achievements in the shape of a diploma. If in the world around us qualities are becoming as important as qualifications, shouldn't we give credit to these qualities? There are already a number of initiatives which are looking at forms of accreditation for non-formal education. In this article some of these examples will be discussed and then the discussion will turn to their implications for European youth work. However, we first need to have a closer look at the 'life' skills and competencies that are part of the non-formal education system.

The strength of non-formal education is that there is a high level of participation by young people themselves. It is easier to be involved in activities in which you can have some responsibility and sense of ownership. As shown by the quote from the young person involved in the youth exchange, it is also highly motivating to have some concrete results - tangible learning. This raises the important element of commitment or 'engagement'. There is not the same pressure to learn as there is in school for example. This type of active learning is also less exclusive than the formal education system. Success or failure in school mostly depends on the cognitive and intellectual capacities of a young person. You can fail or pass the exam. These are not the same criteria as in non-formal learning. In principle, everyone is encouraged to participate and the activities are based on the needs and possibilities of those involved.

What then are the skills and competencies which can be learnt through non-formal education? A striking aspect of non-formal education is that the working methods and approaches are often better researched and described than are the learning elements and outcomes. The methods are active, intercultural or experiential and participant-oriented, learning by doing. The learning elements can be summarised as life skills and competencies. Examples are problem solving abilities, communication skills, flexibility, self-awareness & self-esteem, personal discipline, relationship management, self-management skills, commitment, leadership and negotiation skills. What these have in common is that they can not be learnt through a textbook, they have to be experienced and practised 'in life'.

Systems of assessment and certification

At this moment there are several examples of award and certification schemes for out-of-school based programmes. Most organisations give young people some proof that they have participated in an activity or training programme. Some take this a step further by describing the activities in which the young person has been involved. For instance, the volunteers that have fulfilled two-thirds of their European Voluntary Service receive a certificate describing their activities and role in the project. These are examples of internal accreditation. The type and content of the certificate or award is developed by the organisations themselves.

In some countries models have been developed that are well-established and widely recognised, for example the 'Youth Award Scheme' developed by the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) in the UK. This award is used by more than 1800 educational establishments in the UK as a way of developing personal qualities and skills. The award is not based on factual knowledge but organised around key skills. The participants are highly involved in their own learning through:

- The assessment of their own learning
- The setting of clear and achievable goals
- Identifying, expressing and reflecting on their own view of progress and the development of new opportunities
- Summarising achievements and compiling a portfolio of supporting evidence

Another example - also based in the UK – comes from the programmes of the Prince's Trust. This organisation offers a programme for young people with the aims of developing particular skills and qualities, broadening social experience and awareness and building the confidence and self-esteem of participants. Participants receive certificates for their involvement. These assess the development of core skills, self-awareness, progress towards identified goals and different kinds of achievement.

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What these two examples have in common is that they are already rather formalised. They are systems of external accreditation that use standardised criteria to assess the learning of young people. The criteria are the same for every organisation that wants to take part in the scheme. These schemes are widely accepted and recognised in the UK, even by employers. This raises the question whether such a system is a desired format for all youth work, especially European youth work. It does not leave much room for flexibility because it means that you have to keep records of every activity. Although assessment is clearly not a formal exam, it might be beyond the abilities of certain young people and in fact may contradict other objectives of the programme.

A more useful and workable approach for the assessment of European youth work may be a system of portfolio building. A portfolio is normally used by photographers to show a collection of their work. It could also be a useful model for documenting the skills and competencies that a young person acquires in out-of-school based activities. The young person is the owner of their own portfolio and it documents the different types of activities in which they have been involved. The portfolio could consist of direct and indirect evidence of their activities, such as a collection of reports, assessments written by project leaders or other materials. The use of a 'dossier' or portfolio which summarises the different types of projects and activities carried out by the young person would also help to bring together the wide array of awards and certification models that now exist. The idea is that the portfolio is not brought along during job interviews. 'Owners' use it to assess themselves and to become more confident about their qualities and skills. A feeling of achievement can be underlined with the evidence brought from real experience.

The challenges of certification and assessment

The pitfall in the discussion of accreditation for non-formal learning is that too much focus may be put on the 'certificates'. This often entails a system of standardised criteria. This is, for example, a development that we can see in vocational training where such systems are becoming common practice. In vocational training, questions about objectives are easier to address, it is about learning a trade through practise. But what then are the objectives of out-of-school based programmes? The dilemma for non-formal education is that, on the one hand we would like the learning elements and competencies to be recognised and valued but, on the other hand, we don't want to discourage young people from being involved due to the standards becoming too formalised. The motivation for young people to become active in youth and voluntary work or community-based activities is generally not based on enlarging their career opportunities. They do it because it is a fun way to spend their free time, it is interesting and it allows them to participate and become involved. Too much focus on accreditation could easily have the opposite effect to what we would like to achieve.

The challenge for European youth work, in general, and the institutions involved, in particular, is to look very critically at the strengths of non-formal education and what alternative systems can be developed for the assessment of learning outcomes. It implies that tools of assessment have to be developed which are not specifically related to the content of our programmes but are more focused on the personal development of young people. Also, it will only work if the young people themselves are involved in their assessment. They should be encouraged to reflect, describe, analyse and communicate what they experience in the activities in which they participate. In this respect, it would be interesting to take up the challenge of developing a common 'shell' or portfolio of European youth work activities. This would allow us to better research the value and learning outcomes of non-formal education and to look critically at the ways in which we conduct our programmes. If in the process the voice of young people (on what they would like in terms of certification and recognition for their involvement) is included, European youth work will get the credit it deserves.

Bibliography

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