



by Andreas Karsten

# Wide Angle

## QUALITY OF TRAINING MYTH OR MYSTERY?

The discussion about the quality of non-formal education and training is progressing quickly. At the “Bridges for Recognition” conference in Belgium in January 2005 the trainers present agreed that it was about time for them to voice their own opinion.

**D**o you know how good non-formal education really is? I mean, it must be good – there is an ever-growing demand for it, people feel good and enjoy themselves much more than at school or university, and one can feel, sometimes even see the impact. But do you really know just how good it truly is?

You don't? I don't either. And I don't believe anyone who says they do. Like many good things in life, non-formal education is slightly absurd: One reason it's so good is that nobody is tested to see what they have learned. No tests, no grades. It puts people's minds at rest and makes participation a choice rather than a duty. That freedom has a price, though: it makes it rather difficult to analyse the level of quality of learning.

That's the crux of non-formal education. You can't start giving people grades to show how very well they have done on your training course, because if you did they wouldn't do well anymore. Yet, as more money and hope flows into the sector, pressure and demand are increasing to prove how good this whole non-formal education business is. The whispered stories of success; are they myths to be disproved or the truth wrapped in mystery?

For quite some time these questions have been at the centre of discussions in pubs and meetings alike. Where else could the debate progress better than in Leuven, the city of beer, at “Bridges for Recognition”, the latest conference to promote recognition of youth work across Europe?

Consequently, it was right for more than 45 trainers to agree there and then to voice their own opinion more strongly.

We the trainers, and our qualifications, have been discussed for quite some time. Irritated and agitated, we reluctantly followed the process, usually pointing out that defining quality standards (not to speak of quality assessment!) is against the nature of non-formal education. After all, what good is non-formal learning when it all becomes formalised?

On the other hand we claim that trainers and teachers are alike; that educators have an enormous amount of responsibility. Responsibility for the money which they spend and which others, of course, invest. But we especially mean the educational responsibility, constituting a power which is easily misused and sometimes even abused.

Who can blame the rest of the world for wanting some measure of accountability? We tell parents that something magical is going to happen to their kids, asking them to entrust their children to us for training courses, youth exchanges, and even outdoor education activities. We tell funders that non-formal education stabilises democracy, promotes human rights and human dignity, facilitates intercultural communication and produces mature young people with social skills unheard of, and invite them to finance our educational programmes. We tell politicians that our work complements formal education to a near-perfect match, and call for more recognition and support.



# MYTH OR MYSTERY?

**O**ur call has been heard: The sector of non-formal education has grown in terms of financial investment, political recognition and educational influence. This, in return, has given rise to a demand hardly any of us imagined in the beginning and which almost everyone tried to ignore for a long time. As a result people also want us to prove that our work is as good as we say - and make others believe.

This is a request no one can sensibly argue with as it's by all means justifiable. People want to see that their money is money well spent, and that their trust in our educational skills is based on fact rather than hope. From this point of view it seems just a little inconsistent to me to categorically refuse accountability for the trust we previously requested with such insistence.

My feeling grew stronger that the youth movement, once so successful in lobbying for the recognition of non-formal education, was disconnecting itself from the change and progress made over the past years.

But in the spirit of Alan Kay, the trainers attending "Bridges for Recognition" decided to predict the future by inventing it themselves. After all, who is better qualified and trained to set quality standards and criteria for non-formal youth trainers than us?

Our ad-hoc "hot-issue" workshop was joined by a surprising number of stakeholders: researchers, trainers, and representatives from international institutions, national agencies, the European Youth Forum and national governments. There was clearly support for the idea!

And the result is not bad either: The workshop drew up a proposal for an open, transparent and inclusive process to establish an occupational profile of non-formal youth trainers - a first at European level - and a proposal to the Training Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission which can't be ignored.

Of course, this proposal, which can be read and discussed on the you@etv virtual platform (<http://communities.trainingvillage.gr/youth>) cannot provide answers to all the questions arising. Neither can I, to be honest with you - I don't even know all the questions which have to be asked and answered. But I believe in the truth of the following words by Sir Arthur Charles Clarke: "The only way to discover the limits of the possible is to go beyond them into the impossible."

It may seem impossible today to think of a reliable and adequate set of quality standards and a just and open system of quality assessment in non-formal education. But the day will come when we know better.

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Reference :



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the Limits of the Possible.