



by Darko Markovic

A step towards the recognition of Non-formal Education in Serbia and Montenegro

This article describes the project on the recognition of non-formal education implemented by my organization Grupa “Hajde da..” in Serbia and Montenegro, from June 2005 to February 2006. It is also about invisibility and accumulated frustration over the years. At the same time it is about personal (and professional ?) experiences from the training room when working on recognition issues. The way I have decided to approach it is to tell you 5 short stories.

Story No.1

One of the most difficult questions in my life

No, it is not a question about the meaning of life, but something much more down-to-earth and what I face on a daily basis. If I were to explain what I do for a living in the simplest way, I'd say, “I work as a trainer in non-formal education”.

A simple and clear statement, isn't it? But just for the readers of Coyote and a little bit beyond this community of practice.

During our local training seminars on the recognition of non-formal education, when trying to explain the reasons why “Hajde da...” group started the project, I usually tell the following anecdote: A situation that I experience almost every day is when I meet some old friend of mine (in particular a person who is not connected to what we call the Third Sector) and s/he asks me about what I do for living. And then I think, if I use the above statement...well, first, the word “trainer” is mostly associated with sports, and second, the word “non-formal education” rings no bells for that person. Oops, it seems I have a problem here. So, I try to explain it using a more familiar association. “I support people to learn in an interesting and creative way”. “So, you are teaching?” they ask. “Not really, although sometimes I give short lectures,” I say. “Then you are some kind of a teacher”. And then I just give up and continue living with a feeling of bitterness and frustration at being invisible, something I've been feeling for years. When I tell this little story to the participants of the local training seminars, I see their smiles of understanding and - recognition!

Story No.2

Labour market

The second situation I told about in the seminars was when I wanted to get registered at the National Employment Service to get my grey-sleeved worker's identity card. As I entered the office, pinned to the opposite wall I saw a photocopied A4 sheet with the following underlined sentence: only school diplomas are recorded. At that time, I was still studying psychology and had only a diploma from my secondary school of mechanics (a field that I left many years ago). Standing there I was wondering: “What about my years of non-formal education, and my extensive work experience as an (inter)national trainer?”. Those competences of mine were (and still are) completely invisible to

potential employers! Again, came smiles of recognition in the seminar group, but this time followed with small sighs of sympathy and worry.

“Non-formal education is something illegal; it is when you can buy a diploma”

Unknown passer-by from Belgrade, interviewed by the course participants

Story No.3

No fear of recognition

In 2002 within the context of the new school system reform in Serbia, the Ministry of Education acknowledged the need for teachers' professional development and the fostering of lifelong learning. In support of this, the Ministry established the system of teachers' professional development, opening up the possibility for non-formal education providers to apply for accreditation of their teacher training programs. Fortunately when we applied with two programmes, both of them were selected. Then, our intercultural learning teacher



training programme “The Alphabet of Tolerance” was realized with many groups of teachers all over the country. During those courses the motivation of the teachers increased significantly – this was certainly a lot to do with their intrinsic motivation and interest in the topic, but finally their efforts were also being formally recognized. It was very interesting that although we got formal recognition for our programmes (meaning our participants getting certificates from us which were officially recognized by the Ministry), still we were not assimilated into the formal system and could maintain our autonomy. That was a very good example of partnership between the formal and non-formal education sectors. Being recognized, for the first time, we saw the benefits for all and it felt very good indeed. Later we also learned a lesson of how political changes could “undo” the positive improvements... but that’s another story.

Story No.4 About the project...

With such accumulated frustration and lack of fear of recognition we have initiated our project entitled “Non-formal education in Europe – a step towards the recognition of NFE in Serbia and Montenegro”, funded by both European Commission and the Council of Europe. The intention of the project was to create a large scale discussion space and be the first step towards better recognition of non-formal education in our country. The main idea of the project was to create networks between different stakeholders, to spread the news about what is going on in Europe within this field, to compare it with the situation in Serbia and Montenegro and see where/how/with whom we would like to go in the future. The concept of the project is presented in the table below using the “legendary” 3P triangle (in this article appearing as a 3P table):

Main People involved	Process in 6 steps	Main Products
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NGOs - Freelance trainers - Business training agencies - Adult education institutions - Ministry of Education - Ministry of Labour - National Employment Service - Schools - Professional Institutes - Employers - Journalists - European experts 	<p>Step 1 – Making Contacts with relevant stakeholders</p> <p>Step 2 – Training for Trainers</p> <p>Step 3 – Local training-seminars</p> <p>Step 4 – Creating our book Non-formal Education</p> <p>Step 5 – Final Project Document with Recommendations for further actions</p> <p>Step 6 – Planning Future actions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training programme for the training module developed - Book Non-formal Education - Created networks between interested people, organizations and institutions - Final Project Document, containing set of Recommendations for further steps



In brief, our decision was to create a larger “front” and be inclusive in the very beginning: to engage all relevant actors in the field of non-formal education (and not only the ones related to the youth field). So, the main challenge of the project was to establish contacts with the long lists of stakeholders and motivate them to take part.

In parallel, a training team (with both international and local team members) developed a nice programme for a two-and-a-half day training seminar covering topics such as :

- Non-formal education
- Recognition
- European educational policy developments
- Quality in non-formal education; the situation in NFE in Serbia and Montenegro
- Social partnership in recognition and
- Recommendations for further steps

A group of local trainers was trained to multiply the course. And that’s what they did nine times all over the country from September to November 2005.



As a part of our training (and project) strategy, a wonderful collection of articles written by European and local practitioners/ researchers/policy makers was published (see picture). The book was distributed to all training participants, as well as to those who could not take part. It is also one of the freely downloadable materials from our website (at the moment it is only in Serbian, but we have planned to make an

English version in 2006, too).

At present all the collected ideas and recommendations from different training seminars are being put together and the final project product, the Report with a set of recommendations for further steps, should be published in March 2006.

Story No.5

From the training room...or how it feels to work in the field of recognition?

Recognition of non-formal education - Where do I stand?

Before I started working on the recognition of NFE, for me as a trainer, it was important to clarify where I stood with regard to this issue. And here it is : “The participants I work with deserve the opportunity to get their learning outcomes recognized. My colleagues and I deserve better social recognition. However, when we fight for recognition, we must also fight for the right of those who don’t want to be recognized. It must be an opportunity based on free choice, not obligation and duty.



Even though we initially thought that the content of the seminars would be quite “dry” and very cognitive, in reality the energy in the training room was rapidly increasing. Thus, you might have simultaneously felt anxiety and excitement, concern and inspiration, clarity and confusion. Very often you might have heard “Yes, but...” statements. And the details and terminology were becoming extremely important. Obviously, when there are people coming from very different organizations/institutions in the same group it can prove difficult to maintain the role distance, go beyond the associated power with those roles and “swim” towards the common interests.

People who worked on the Training for Trainers courses, would easily understand the particular dynamics and state of mind, when what you are talking about is what you can feel here and now. And that aspect was our main ally during our training seminars on recognition.

Although there was generally a very positive attitude towards the idea of lifelong (and life wide) learning and a readiness to discuss the issue of non-formal education and its recognition, there were some typical challenges present within all of the nine training groups. Those challenges were:

1. A tendency to want to put everything “into boxes” and have clear definitions of non-formal education (for example, whether it is defined by interactive methodology or not, whether non-formal education is just about social activism or not)
2. Standardization of the language and need for certain words to mean the same thing to different stakeholders (for example, for some important concepts like “youth work” or “training” we don’t have adequate and widely accepted words in our language)
3. Because of the political context and situation in the country, there were difficulties connecting with the ideas and processes happening in Europe (when you have to spend a couple of days in a queue in front of an Embassy waiting for a visa, it is difficult to feel the sense of belonging to the European community)

1. Power issues and power conflicts between different organizations/institutions, especially when the issues around quality standards and who should define them are brought up (for example, should the quality standards be set by the Ministry or some kind of Association of non-formal education providers)
2. Despite our intention to speak about non-formal learning in a more comprehensive way (as Peter Lauritzen, Head of the Youth Section in the Directorate of Youth and Sports, would say: in relation to Citizenship, Personal Development and Employability), when it comes to the issue of recognition, it was very easy to shift the whole focus only to concentrate on the connection with the labour market.

However, using the power of non-formal methods (and we are no longer absolutely sure they are the property of just non-formal education), we have managed to direct our energies towards some more constructive debates. For example, after the “Stock Market” simulation game and having the opportunity to be for a moment in somebody else’s shoes, it was much easier to think about common interests of different stakeholders. In the last training group in Belgrade the list of common interests in recognition included the following:

- Increase of accountability
- Better quality in education for all
- Greater employability
- Mobility
- Development of young people
- Social and economic growth
- Social partnership in education etc.

On the very last day of the training seminar, participants were asked to think about recommendations (i.e. concrete actions that various stakeholders could undertake) for further steps towards a better recognition of NFE. To give you some flavour of this process, I could tell you that it was very difficult, but creative and there were some really great ideas. Some of the most common ones are directed towards a better organization of providers (e.g. establishing different kinds of associations, networks, even trade unions), a better partnership between the providers and state institutions (e.g. in particular with the National Employment Service, Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Education), better promotion of non-formal education and lifelong learning (e.g. through joint media campaigns, seminars, round tables, conferences), defining quality standards in non-formal education (e.g. amongst the providers and/or in cooperation with the institutions) and many more. You will be able to read about all these ideas in the final project document published in March and downloadable from our website (www.hajdeda.org.yu/nfe).

Instead of a conclusion... we have some **Breaking News!**

Dear Coyote readers, as a direct impact of our training seminars, a serious dialogue on recognition of non-formal education (in particular related to employability) between the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, National Employment Service and NGOs, has just started in Serbia. At the same time, within the frame of newly adopted Regional Youth Policy in Vojvodina, the Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth, with the assistance of “Hajde da...” group, has started to work on the development of a practical model for recognition of non-formal learning taking place within the youth projects in Vojvodina. As you see, the process has started here in Serbia and Montenegro, so stay tuned for some more information about the initiatives in the field of recognition from the Balkans!



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