



The 1st European Youth Work Conference A view from abroad

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I was invited to provide a perspective on the events of the conference from a 'view from abroad.' I had an ideal role: observe, react, learn! I also had a tactical advantage in some ways because I was able to say some things with a degree of impunity – people seem to tolerate such feedback because if my comments are not accurate or applicable they chalk it up to ignorance on my part or political/cultural insensitivity. As an American, I think others find it even easier to tolerate because we have a history of such blunders and insensitivities (I have learned to laugh at some of the peculiarities of being 'American'). So, what follows is one American's impressions on the events of the conference.

One of the first, and not so profound, impressions is how popular music from the United States is interwoven into the cultural fabric of Belgium (and I suspect most EU countries). Given the pervasiveness of music, I will leverage it to both test your 'youth' knowledge and to convey my impressions. Here is how it will work: I will give you a phrase from a song (in the conference I had the luxury of playing the song) and see if you can identify the singer or musical group. The answers are given at the end.

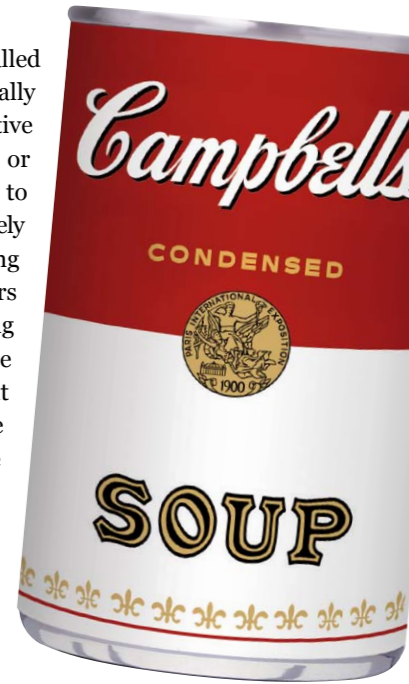
Let's start with an easy song: 'Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try...' Along this theme, imagine with me if youth did not extend well into the 20s or 30s; what if it ended abruptly at age 18 or 16? I am constantly surprised by the broad definition of youth across many European states. In the United States, there is a tendency to draw a distinct line between youth (typically ending with graduation from High School, approximately aged 17-18) and young adulthood. But at the conference, as I forced my mind to accept a view of youth extending beyond 18 and even into the 30s, I wondered about the risks to the youth and to American society if that were the case. Here is one that occurred to me: it would require expending tremendous amounts of energy and resources to create 'youth spaces', a term that I heard repeated at the conference. And if we create uniquely youth spaces, does this create conditions for committing intergenerational marginalisation or, at worst, intergenerational racism? Where in present society can youth and adults engage in interactive citizenship? Besides the family in the US, organised youth activities are one place where youth can experience healthy relationships with adults (equal power). I leave you with a question from this impression: What would be the risks and benefits to EU countries if youth ended at age 18 instead of spending long periods getting ready for adulthood?

Here is the second phrase from a popular song: 'Well I'm packin' up my game, and I'm a headin' out west ... I wanna be a cowboy, baby' (if you guessed the artist for this song you are probably a youth under the age of 30). The cowboy image and lure is one of being on the edge of society, a loner, independent, behaving by his own set of rules. How does this relate to my impressions from the conference you ask? Youth workers are 'edgy', they push the limits, reaching youth often outside of cultural norms – it's okay, I was a youth worker for ten years and think this is a positive quality. The importance of the 'work' of youth work, however, is now receiving greater recognition by many in society and that could threaten the cowboy-like status of youth work, which brings me to the third song and a related point.

This last song is a little challenging: 'Can't take the effect, And make it the cause' (if you guess this one, your musical repertoire is impressive). It seems that the push to professionalise youth work stems, at least in part, from the 'effect' (real and perceived) of youth workers. By professionalising youth work it helps to publicly legitimise and solidify its effect, but it also has the potential to weaken the effectiveness of the work. In the US, there is a strong push by some agencies funding youth work to create professional standards youth workers must meet, such as best practices, ethics standards, minimum requirements, etc. While this may sound positive on the surface, the 'dark side' of such a system of requirements and accountability becomes evident in a controversial policy to improve the performance of schools: the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB). Part of the intention of the NCLB act was to push schools and teachers to improve what they do. The NCLB act is a 'high stakes' policy – schools in which students under-perform on standardised achievement tests over several years are in jeopardy of losing funding. While NCLB was intended to increase the quality of education across the US, especially among schools serving marginalised youth, it can be blamed, at least partially, for a decrease in the quality of teaching and education! Why?

There is a phenomenon called 'Campbell's Law'. It basically states that when quantitative indicators of a practice or other standard are used to make social decisions (namely funding), there is a strong tendency for the indicators to lose their value/meaning and actually degrade the practice or standard it was intended to evaluate (Campbell, 1971). In the US, teachers comment they feel they have to 'teach to the test' – spend time teaching students how to score well on tests instead of teaching them content, practice, and application. Part of the problem with NCLB is that any one student's achievement is the result of many, many factors, teachers being one factor, socio-economic status another. Youth workers face the same dilemma: demonstrate a direct effect of the work. In reality, the effect is a result of a complex relationship between youth, youth worker and society. So let me end with a final, short comment on my time at the Ghent conference.

The field of youth work has changed and needs to change; staying the same is not an option. An intent of the conference was to push youth workers to champion that change instead of letting outside forces determine what youth work is and how it should be done. In the US, researchers are part of the championing process – policy is shaped by empirical research (but only to a certain degree). The methods of championing in the EU countries need to come from those within it, including youth. In the coming years the field of youth work will 'face the music' and it will change. It is my hope that future conferences will continue to put youth workers (and youth) to the forefront of this change.



About the Campbell's Law:

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