

Find the youth worker in you:

a competence-based approach to youth worker training

by Stijn Vlasschaert

At Jeugd en Stad (JES - 'Youth and City'), we strongly believe in a competence-based approach to youth work. Through participation in activities that fit with their interests and lifestyles, this approach consciously encourages young people to experiment and test their limits. By doing so they increase awareness of their competences and are stimulated to further develop them. This also creates opportunities for recognition of informal and non-formal learning.

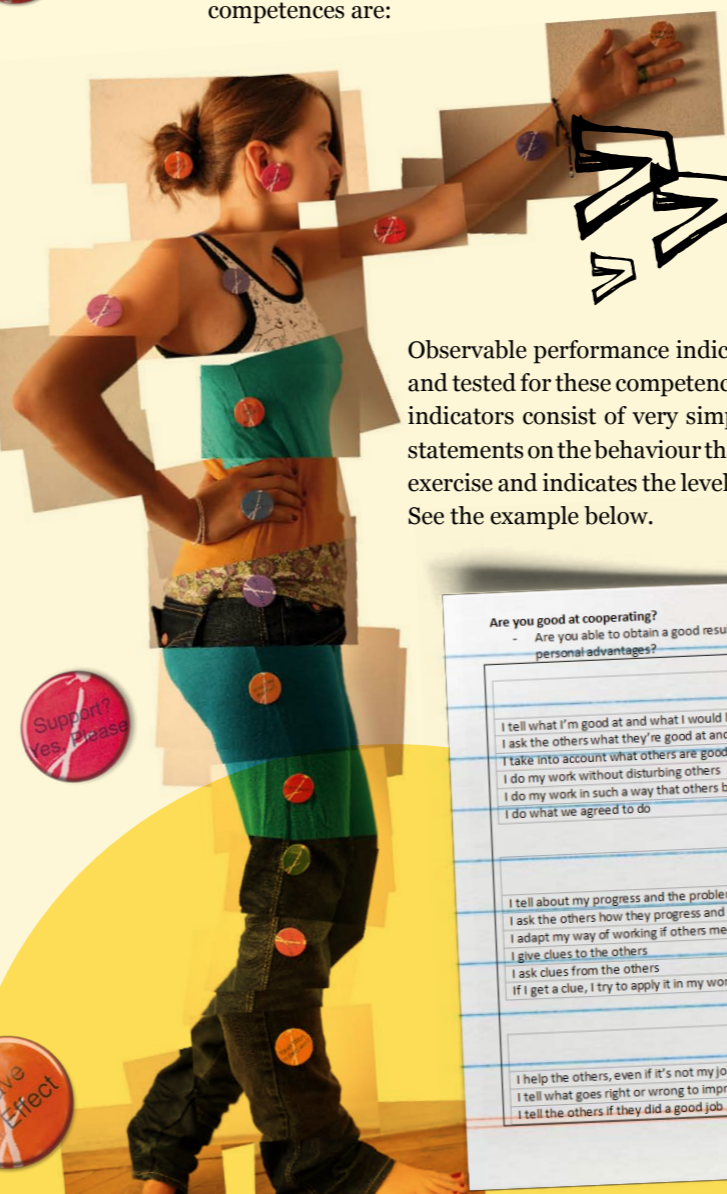
An interesting example of this approach is our local youth work programme. For funding reasons we were left with one professional youth worker instead of two. The young people themselves had to take on the responsibility of keeping the youth work activities going. Our training for youth work volunteers proved to be very helpful in facilitating this transition. The role of our professional youth worker has evolved: young people are now more explicitly encouraged to develop their competences. The professional youth worker coaches the youth work volunteers, helps them to plan, gives feedback, reflects with them on their performance and settles conflicts rather than organising the activities himself.

The computer room is another good example: our youth worker used to be present all the time when it was open. Now this responsibility has been given

to a youth work volunteer. After each session our youth worker and the youth work volunteer reflect on how things went and what can be improved next time.

The shift from just 'consuming' activities to participating in activities is very important in a competence-based approach. In our youth worker training programme, we translated this into a five-phase model: in the first phase young people just consume activities. In the second phase (13 or 14 year olds) guidance is set up to prepare youth for participating in the training programme for youth workers. In the third phase, young people follow the training programme. In the fourth phase, they attend the youth leader training programme and are able to participate in organising activities. In the fifth phase, they can follow an instructor training programme and participate in organisation and management meetings. They can also organise an activity and take full responsibility for it.

Of course we do not push young people from one phase to another. Once we see someone who takes initiatives or shows interest, we try to encourage and give him or her more responsibilities. In doing so, we create a learning space where young people can test themselves, experiment freely and design their own participation and learning processes.



To support the competence identification and development process, we use a concept that links experiential learning to a very clear and comprehensive competence framework. An important criterion for this framework was accessibility for a low-skilled target group, so very simple and straightforward vocabulary was used. The competence framework we developed consists of a set of sixteen key competences selected on the basis of a small survey with employers. The selected competences are:

1. Co-operating
2. Speaking
3. Listening
4. Flexibility
5. Planning and organising
6. Learning
7. Giving feedback
8. Handling feedback
9. Self-reflection
10. Networking
11. Handling authority
12. Respecting rules
13. Handling clients
14. Taking initiative
15. Acting independently
16. Empathising

Observable performance indicators were defined and tested for these competences. The performance indicators consist of very simple and straightforward statements on the behaviour that is shown during a practical exercise and indicates the level of development of a competence. See the example below.

Are you good at cooperating?			
- Are you able to obtain a good result together with others, for example in an organisation or a team. Are you also able to do so if you don't get any personal advantages?			
	Yes	Only if they ask me to	No
I tell what I'm good at and what I would like to do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I ask the others what they're good at and what they would like to do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I take into account what others are good at and would like to do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I do my work without disturbing others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I do my work in such a way that others benefit from it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I do what we agreed to do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you good at listening?			
	Yes	Only if they ask me to	No
I tell about my progress and the problems I meet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I ask the others how they progress and what problems they meet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I adapt my way of working if others meet problems or finish their work sooner or later	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I give clues to the others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I ask clues from the others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If I get a clue, I try to apply it in my work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you good at helping others?			
	Yes	Only if they ask me to	No
I help the others, even if it's not my job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I tell what goes right or wrong to improve our cooperation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I tell the others if they did a good job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Find the youth worker in you



Construction worker
To organise
To co-operate
To work independently



Guide
To be able to take the lead
To have didactic capacities
To guide a group



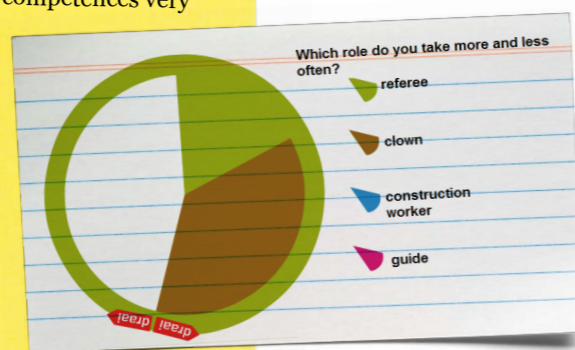
Referee
To make and defend rules
To give clear instructions

To stimulate self-reflection, we also defined the 'roles' of a youth worker and the competences linked to these roles. The roles are illustrated by different characters, which make the competences very concrete and accessible.

Young people get to know these characters and their competences throughout their training and use them to reflect on their own behaviour as well as strengths and weaknesses. The characters are designed using very simple instructions at this site:

<http://www.sp-studio.de>

which is probably one of the most-used character-designing sites on the web. We found it to be really useful in making personalities which would be attractive for the young people with whom we work.



Friend
To be able to listen
To have empathy



Clown
To be able to motivate
To take initiative
To be funny



Inventor
To be creative
To experiment
To be flexible

- Our competence-based approach is inspired by some important preliminaries:
- the force and talents of young people are our starting points (positive approach);
 - young people participate voluntarily;
 - young people are themselves instigators, directors and managers of the competence-based approach;
 - we want to stimulate lifelong learning;
 - the competence-based approach has to be compatible with formal learning (training, education...);
 - we strive for accessible youth work, both in a psychological, financial and geographical sense. This means that everything we do has to fit with young people's lifestyles, interests and pace and does not reduce the 'fun' part of youth work.

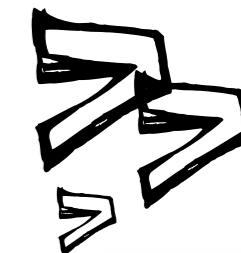
In 2008, 185 young people followed our youth worker training programme, of whom 70% had low skill levels and 46% had migrant backgrounds. Our programme and preliminaries enable us to use a competence-based approach with these young people. Of course, many other competence-based approaches and practices exist, but few of them are appropriate for our target group. The diversity of youth work also requires a diversity of methods and practices that fit with a group's needs and learning styles.

JES is a pluralist non-profit organisation. Our mission is to create equal opportunities for urban young people to actively participate in society. We are based in three Belgian cities: Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent. These cities are characterised by large populations with migrant backgrounds, many school drop outs and a lot of school delay. The level of young people's unemployment and the number of children born in a family where both parents are unemployed are also extremely high.¹ Our main activities include training and guidance, training for youth work volunteers, outreach work, support for youth clubs and youth work initiatives, youth hostels, city adventures, recording studios, multimedia lab, etc. These activities focus on young people between 6 and 30 years old, of whom many are low-skilled and have migrant backgrounds.

More information:

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1. Some facts and figures (source: JES vzw (2009). *Bouwstenen voor een geïntegreerd stedelijk jeugdbeleid*, <http://www.jes.be/expertisecentrum/docs/004.ppt#256.1>, Bouwstenen voor een geïntegreerd stedelijk jeugdbeleid. Date accessed 11/08/10):
 - Non-Belgian population: 28% in Brussels, 15% in Antwerp, 9% in Ghent (Morocco, Italy, Spain, Poland, Turkey, etc.);
 - 18-24 years olds without secondary degree: Brussels: 22,9%, Flanders: 10%, Belgium: 14%;
 - Youngsters that lag at least one year behind in their school curriculum: Brussels: 50%, Ghent: 36%, Antwerp: 39%, Flanders: 21%;
 - Under-25 year olds' unemployment: Ghent: 18%, Antwerp: 19.2%, Brussels: 31.7%;
 - 0-17 year olds living in a family where both parents are unemployed: Ghent: 19%, Antwerp: 24%, Brussels: 35%, Liege: 38%, Charleroi: 40%, Belgium: 18%.