Deciphering recognition

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Political recognition of non-formal education and learning seems to be going well at the European level. Documents and instruments are in place, as are systems and procedures. Nevertheless, the process of recognition was not meant to test the capacity of European institutions to organise, but to help young people to develop their personalities, active citizenship and employment prospects. The thoughts that are laid out here reflect my practical experience as a youth worker and trainer but also as a thinking (and thoughtful) individual.

1 How much recognition do we want?

There are jokes from across the globe that involve three people from different countries; you know them, don't you? They are rather global and admittedly, along with laughter, they use stereotypes and exaggerations. The quality of this article won't increase if I tell any so I'll skip them for now! However, they give me an idea about how to start!

Think: You have reached the age of retirement as a youth worker. You have dedicated yourself to recognition of non-formal education and learning. In your last flight, on your way to be awarded by the "High Commission on Recognition", the plane's engines fail and the pilot needs to land near an island. The hippie in you thinks it's a great idea to stay on that island for the rest of your life! However, in one hour, help will reach you and everybody will be saved. There are three people you have befriended: one is a parent of a young person you know, another one is a politician and the other a businessman. Who would you talk to for this one hour, knowing that you still have one last deed to do for recognition? You can choose only one person… who?

I wish I could hear your answers!

Many non-formal learning and education-based youth projects happen every month and every day! If we agree among us, as practitioners, where we should start (indisputably, we shall reach out to all three "categories" mentioned above at some point, somehow) so that we can have, for example, all projects tuned in such a way that their special character is maintained while parents, businessmen and politicians participate, contribute, or at least become recipients of well-prepared information. Imagine: 1 000 projects in a year; 1 000 or more of these with increased awareness and maybe appreciation! But we need an agreement for that, and dedication.

Or…

We maybe need none of the above! We only need cool, innovative ideas, systematic application and good financial management skills! Stacey (the name is random, the story 100% real) joined the newly formed amateur dance group that was practising in the local youth club when she was 16. It was so interesting for her to streamline her energies into something creative and healthy; something that reinvigorated her "sense of belonging" to a community, a feeling lost during the years of deprivation in her neighbourhood. The group did projects and gave performances. It became known in the neighbourhood and beyond, not only for its aesthetic achievements but also for helping young people to develop initiative, teamwork, leadership and other skills. Stacey is now working at the youth club supporting the group's work and development. Full time. Full stop.

And she is not the only one! Eduard did his European Voluntary Service (EVS) in 2005 in Greece. He had some previous experience in organising non-formal learning-based youth camps around Barcelona but EVS was the turning point in his life, in all aspects. Returning home after his project, he put a plan together to get involved in youth work and policy, as a way to utilise his "European experience". Now, and for some time, Eduard is: a youth worker for the Municipality of Vilanova i la Geltru, advisor for youth policy for political parties in Catalonia, president of a youth NGO, consultant for organisational management and a great example of how far non-formal education and learning experiences alone can take you!

To all youth work practitioners out there! Get your keyboards warmed up by typing down all those stories you come across. They are so needed!

2 Where are we now?

European institutions have probably never thought of the above riddle or heard Stacey's and Eduard's stories. They have definitely, though, done good work in putting the need for recognition in different documents. All bodies, without exception, of the two major European institutions this magazine is supported by have "papered" recognition! It would take a page just to mention titles, so please have a good look at the "Pathways 2.0"[1] document! I would also point out the Agenda 2020 of the Council of Europe[2] and the "Renewed frame-work for European cooperation in the youth field, 2010-2018" of the European Union.[3] In both, the need to further recognise learning outcomes (and the learning providers) achieved in non-formal education and learning activities is explicitly mentioned and member states are invited to do more and to do better.

A good presentation and analysis of the existing instruments and "state of play" of recognition is available elsewhere in the magazine, so get to that!

3 Explaining it to others
(but, have we agreed among ourselves?)

When in the training room, I avoid speaking about laws! Recognition for participants starts from their own achievements, whether it's something they have learnt from participating in an online community or in a youth initiative. It doesn't take long to realise that a large part of what they know is from processes outside the ones they would automatically think of. These are processes in which they engaged voluntarily, thus supporting the finding that "… it is now well established that learning and compulsion do not mix very well since humans exhibit a much higher learning efficiency when learning is voluntary".[4] Then, of course, their reflections are brought in line with the existing framework, namely the "8 Key Competences". This can happen with the company of others ("mirrors", "bodies", you name it!) and illustrative examples by the trainers. So, I'd say, the way I have found that works the best is to let participants discover that there is much more in them to be valued and recognised in terms of learning achievements than they thought and then to link this with the existing framework, processes and strategies.

But, how do the others do it? I've been in sessions where discussions were trapped between the concepts of learning and education, and others that were almost promising that jobs would be waiting for Youthpass holders as soon as the training room door was opened. I cannot imagine at the moment how we, practitioners, can manage to be congruent with reality and participants' expectations while in line with each other when introducing recognition and what comes along with it. I can only suggest that our efforts to make participants and the society around us recognise the value of non-formal education and learning should be inspired by the notions of *libido sciendi* (the desire for learning). Curiosity, the desire to understand, know or discover, remains one of the deepest drives in human nature[5] and we should aim at creating "educable people, well prepared for a life of learning".[6]

Interesting story:
After finishing a presentation on recognition of non-formal education and learning and their impact in social mobility, a high-ranking official of the Council of Europe, full of enthusiasm and positive feelings about his new discovery and with a very good will to understand more, asked me: "Out of 100 youth participating in these activities, how many get a job?" It showed to me, at least, that the more we open up to different audiences, the more prepared we will be with answers and responses.
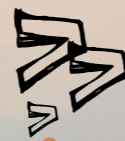
4 Radical views

From Ivan Illich's *Deschooling society*[7] to the imaginary scenario depicted in "School's over",[8] it is evident that learning as we (used to) know it is being challenged. The more society and its actors (including yes, parents, businessmen and politicians) are convinced that there is much to be learned and valued outside the classroom, the more ICTs develop, the more people move around the globe, the more likely it is that institutions of the past will be replaced by action bearing the ideas of sharing, interdependency, symmetry, networking, self-directness and assessment, community, diversity, active participation and learner-centredness. Still, it remains to be seen how much these ideas are shared between people from different disciplines and if learning requires re-thinking from scratch or simply adjustments. The dialogue has already started!

5 Where do we go from here?

For most of us practitioners, it goes without saying that there is more training and more information, more practice and more support, more evaluation and reporting needed.

Some suggestions:

- **A network of non-formal education and learning practitioners promoting their role as providers of valuable learning.** It should strive to achieve consultative status in decisions related to its field. Such a body is definitely needed both for strengthening the identity of the community of practice but also as a specialised advisor to processes undertaken by policy makers.
- **The reinforcement of existing work through publications, seminars or online spaces.** No need to reinvent the wheel. There has been a lot of conceptual work and practice and someone needs to tidy up!
- **Whether it is with parents, businessmen or politicians, keep talking to those with no connection to the field!** After some expected initial frustration it becomes an interesting game!
- **A documentary film.** Documentaries give a certain credibility to the subjects they explore. It's about time! There has been work in the past from which inspiration can be drawn.[9]
- **Partnerships!** Start local; connect with authorities, trade unions, employment services or parents' associations. The work of JES (www.jes.be, www.c-sticks.be) can be an inspiration.
- **Keep doing what you love and keep loving what you do…** and the rest will come naturally.

Pink Floyd's Keep talking *kept me company and also inspired the heading of the last section.*

1. "Pathways 2.0 towards recognition of non-formal learning/education and of youth work in Europe", Strasbourg and Brussels, January 2011.
2. Council of Europe (2008). Agenda 2020, www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/ig_coop/agenda_2020_EN.asp. Date accessed 22 October 2011.
3. Council of the European Union (2009). Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018), OJ 2009/C 311/01, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:311:0001:0011:EN:PDF. Date accessed 22 October 2011.
4. OECD, Center for Educational Research and Innovation – Brain and Learning, as quoted in: Miller, R. et al. (2008) *School's over: Learning Spaces in Europe in 2020: An imagining Exercise on the Future of Learning,* Luxemburg, Office for Official Publications of the EC.
5. Faure, E. et al. (1972) *Learning to be – The world of education today and tomorrow,* Paris, Unesco.
6. Coombs, P. H. (1968) *The world educational crisis – A systems Analysis,* New York, Oxford University Press.
7. Illich, I. (1971) *Deschooling society,* London, Marion Boyars.
8. See note 7.
9. See www.my-learning.gr.