Quality standards in non-formal education

What's new?

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As youth workers, we are convinced that the work we do with and for young people is making a meaningful contribution to their lives. For the recognition process, it is fundamental to be able to show the contribution made by non-formal education, the quality of the sector and the criteria by which we measure this. Also because, maybe more importantly, it's the core of non-formal education as such to search for ways to offer quality learning experiences to young people and to constantly look for ways to improve the learning offer.

Based on the practice of the Council of Europe Youth Department, a document was elaborated to synthesise the quality standards and related criteria for the activities organised by the Youth Department in 2003, and it is revised regularly. There are 14 standards with corresponding criteria for evaluation of the quality of an activity to be used by all those involved, starting with staff, trainers and consultants, partner organisations and participants. They cover all the stages and aspects of an educational activity.
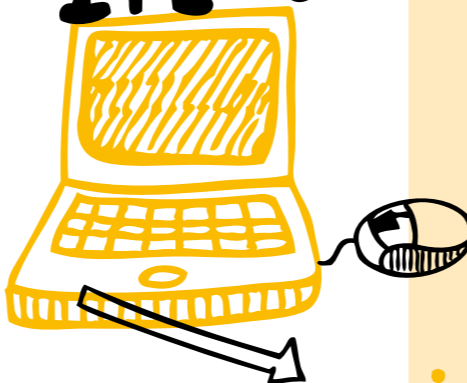
However quality standards and criteria are not only documents to refer to when discussing quality, they are part of the daily practice and reflection that the education team needs to bring alive within the activities of the youth sector.

People, processes and end results are all equally important in non-formal education. The attention given to all of these aspects is fundamental in ensuring quality in non-formal education. But can we prove it? Document it? Show it? Ensure it? Deal with lack of quality? All these are good old questions, but what's new?

IMPLICIT OR EXPLICIT QUALITY

Quality standards and criteria have been elaborated for the use of in-house educational teams and the staff, but also for trainers and partner organisations when working with the Council of Europe. There are also guidelines for participants to evaluate their learning experience. While the document is neither new nor unknown, what it misses is the practice of explicitly reflecting on the guidelines in relation to specific activities with different teams at different moments, particularly planning to increase awareness and knowledge about the activities. The practice often relies on the educational advisor ensuring that the planning and the activity reflect the criteria, rather than the different teams discussing them. While trainers are asked to evaluate activities against quality criteria, teams of study sessions did not do it explicitly until this year. In the educational team, we are hoping that highlighting the standards and criteria in the evaluation phase will encourage teams to reflect upon them in different stages.

Assessing quality is a matter of perception, especially in a highly intercultural environment, so it is clear that it will not be understood in the same way by all the partners involved, bringing even more arguments to the fact that reflection be explicitly included in the process of planning.

This explicit discussion is even more important when new aspects appear, on a more frequent basis, to which the quality standards and especially their criteria, as developed, do not necessarily fit: e-learning, mentoring and coaching and field projects.

Quality standards in non-formal education – What's new?

NEW TERRITORIES TO CONQUER

Since 2005 e-learning has become a constant feature of all long-term training courses of the Youth Department, and more recently is also becoming a feature of different one-off courses. Social media has rightfully also become part of the learning process. This new learning environment and methodology, which spans over longer periods of time, requires specific competences from trainers and learners. It is not always clear how to respect the principles and core values of non-formal education and how they are to be implemented.

A study and a seminar were recently organised by the Youth Department to start working and provide a space for different e-learning providers to share their experiences on the topic.

E-learning is often used in a blended learning context in the Youth Department. It aims to support participants' learning development in between two residential seminars and to support their work in their learning environments. High expectations are placed on e-learning, and rather strong disappointments come up, especially in respect to participation in activities. The meeting and the study concluded that several areas of learning need to be approached differently.

The learning environment needs re-evaluation. We often focus on the online side of it, while forgetting that participants are embedded in their local reality, and learning within a course is often "in competition" with daily life and work. There is no need to question priorities, but giving more options to the learner to shape his or her tempo, learning path and options, rather than insisting on a task-based, time-framed approach might lead to a different dynamic.

Learners and trainers are equally unprepared for e-learning. They cannot readily estimate the time it will take or the technical competence required to manage the learning in one or another environment. The offer of training courses for youth trainers in e-learning is rather limited in Europe, and this is an area that the meeting suggested the Youth Department should take a lead in. In terms of developing learners' competences, suggestions were made to better assess and communicate what e-learning entails and to take into account, when designing e-learning units, that the learning is double sided.

While non-formal education is rich in terms of methods and methodologies applicable for face-to-face encounters, we are unbelievably poor or not creative in using the new opportunities offered by technological development. Webinars, video chats, use of video, shared presentations, Twitter and Facebook integration, collaborative tools, not to mention mobile learning are areas that we still need to integrate into our daily practice. The training course on new media in youth work opened new paths, and while its lessons are still to be transformed into practice, it would be interesting to keep the conversation alive within the trainers' community.
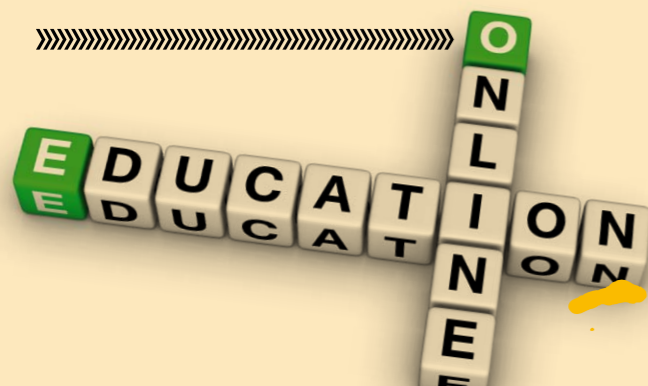
THE FUTURE

To answer these new challenges, the Youth Department plans to continue working: a course on e-learning is to be organised in the coming year and the e-learning platform will be open for the use of study sessions in order to further stimulate and learn from each other. The work on quality standards and criteria for e-learning is to be elaborated further.

Emerging topics and methodologies of delivery in non-formal education will require more and more co-operation with other sectors on a daily basis (namely when working on new media) and will likely become a requirement for success for different activities.

Long-term training courses also involve more and more the features of coaching and mentoring. These have become professions in their own right; they have also become constant features in youth work. The definition of a one-to-one relationship in a training course needs attention at two levels: firstly at a general level, reflecting what is the role of the feature in the general development of the course; and, secondly, between the two persons involved. Often enough, this relationship is either subject to abuse or lacks limits. We all have stories of chasing participants to have a mentoring meeting or having to deal with issues that went beyond our role in mentoring meetings. Perhaps, before standardising the practice in the youth field, we need to create useful guidelines and contracts to save both sides from a feature aimed to support learning but which becomes a burden.

Field projects implemented by participants are also a feature of long-term training courses. For projects like Youth Peace Ambassadors, they are an important contribution to the success of the project overall. Teams often face challenges to create and implement quality criteria that are both reachable and realistic within participants' realities, but that reflect as well the practice in the Youth Department. In other words, are the standards elaborated for the European level applicable at local level? Looking at the 14 standards, none seems unreasonable for the local level. What seems to be more of a challenge is to document these experiences and learning and to incorporate this learning into the youth policy at European level.

THE QUALITY STANDARDS

1. A relevant needs assessment

2. Concrete, achievable and assessable objectives

3. The definition of competences addressed and learning outcomes for the participants

4. The relevance to the Council of Europe programme and Youth Department priorities

5. An adequate and timely preparation process

6. A competent team of trainers

7. An integrated approach to intercultural learning

8. Adequate recruitment and selection of participants

9. A consistent practice of non-formal education principles and approaches

10. Adequate, accessible and timely documentation

11. A thorough and open process of evaluation

12. Structurally optimal working conditions and environment

13. Adequate institutional support and an integrated follow-up within the Youth Department programme and its partner organisations

14. Visibility, innovation and research

(more here: www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Training/Study_sessions/2007_Quality_standards_educ_training_en.pdf)