

Processing the "Strasbourg Process"

An interview by Darko Markovic

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with Jan Vanhee

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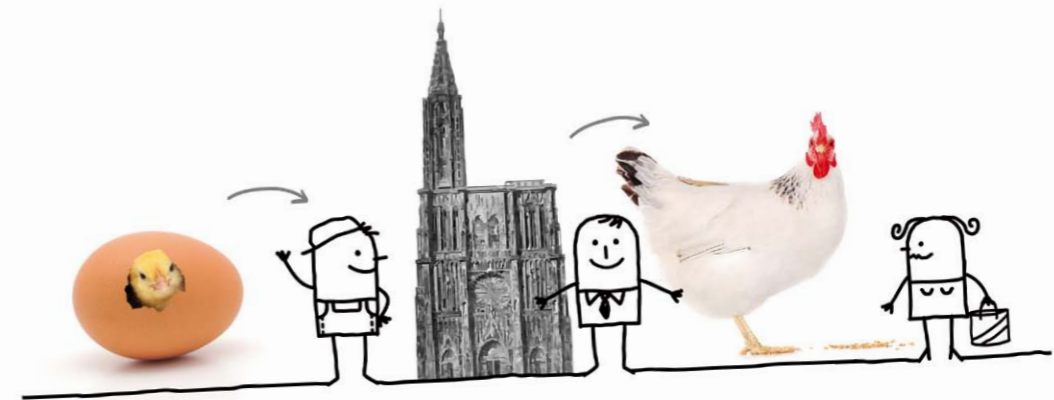
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Close to the end of the symposium on "Recognition of youth and non-formal learning" (Strasbourg, November 2011), the Coyote team interviewed Jan and Manfred who were both involved in the working group on political recognition. They share with the readers of Coyote their views about where to go with recognition of youth work and non-formal learning after the symposium, what the "Strasbourg Process" is and what could be possible follow-up activities at European and national levels.

Q: If you imagine the situation of recognition of youth work and non-formal learning in 2020, what would be the best-case and worst-case scenarios?

Jan: The best-case scenario in my opinion is that all the member states, but also all the states that signed the Cultural Convention, recognise that youth work and non-formal learning are important for the strengthening of democracy in all countries, but this is utopian. However, we are on the way. For example, the symposium is a good initiative to bring people together from different backgrounds and different countries and to take stock of what we have done. Let's hope that in every country we are doing the same exercise, setting up small symposia with different stakeholders: workers, employers, trade unions, social workers, civil society, etc. Today, as Hanjo (Schild) said in the opening session: "There are efforts, but not everybody is convinced." I am not pessimistic; it takes 10 years to introduce one idea! I can prove this with the case of youth work. I have background in youth work and I am convinced of its value. Still, in the White Paper on Youth you couldn't find the words youth work. There was non-formal learning which was linked to education, but it was not a priority. But 10 years later, after hammering the same nail, the Commission mentioned "youth work" for the first time in an official text when they announced the new Youth Strategy. And then it was easier for the Belgium Presidency to pick up this concept and to organise a convention and draft a resolution, and now there is no turning back. But it is not enough to work at just the European level; we have to do it also at the national level.



The worst scenario would be that European institutions become disinterested, but this would be kind of suicidal. I believe that even if we are not working on that, youth workers by themselves will prove its value every day, every weekend, by what they are doing. There will be always initiatives by volunteers and when society does not pay enough attention to recognition, the volunteers will re-invent it. So, I am not so pessimistic.

Manfred: Well, 2020 is not so far away when it comes to development of education systems because it is a very difficult process to change the system and change the minds of the people within this system. In this regard, we have already made some progress and when I look at the best scenario it would be that the overall understanding of non-formal learning and its recognition would increase. That means it should start with each individual being involved in non-formal learning activities that raise her or his awareness of potential learning outcomes. It is also something that challenges youth organisations to increase awareness of the important learning that goes on in their activities. But we also need a stronger, closer relationship and greater understanding in the labour market and in the formal education system. If this can be reached, if recognition could develop at individual, political and social levels, that would be a good scenario and something that we all can wish for. A bad scenario would be if we would keep the systems separate, a bit as they are now, because that would not help any of the actors.

Q: With regards to recognition, where are we heading now? What are the aims now for recognition after the symposium?

Jan: We have to define that together. In the opening plenary session, I said that it is very good to call it the Strasbourg Process. That means we expect commitments from the main stakeholders to have a legal text developed by the Steering Committee and Joint Council and adopted by the Committee

of Ministers, so that there is political backing. We need a core group to lead and guide the Strasbourg Process and guarantee that all the actions from the action plan are taken seriously and implemented. I like the model of "Statement – Action plan – Strasbourg Process – Legal text". I suggested also in the working group that in the EU youth report there is a chapter that defines the new topics that we as member states will ask the Commission to make priorities. We also need our own programme, Youth in Action, as our vehicle, and not Erasmus. We also need to take all the countries on board, because this is the tool we can use at the grassroots level as well.

Manfred: It was very important to have this symposium to take stock of developments, because we have had quite dynamic developments since the first "Pathways" paper in 2004. We have had developments in youth policy, in lifelong learning and there is an overall increase in attention that is dedicated to non-formal learning. But now we have to make these developments sustainable, put some life into them, spread the message and bring people together. So, the symposium was a very important milestone in these developments and now we have to see how to proceed. There are also very interesting developments in Germany and we see that this European debate on non-formal learning is really having an impact on the national development we have in Germany. We have very close co-operation between the Youth Ministry and the *Bundesländer*, which is not very easy in Germany, but they decided to co-operate in the field of non-formal learning. We can see that there is a European impact and European knowledge coming into this process and this is something I could imagine happening in other countries. And it is already happening, for example in the Czech Republic and others and there are many examples at the level of youth organisations. The task that we have at the European level is to observe these developments and create platforms for exchange, for further developments, for intellectual discussions, and to maintain contact with formal education.



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Q: What are the main challenges that we should deal with on the way?

Jan: We should not make the issue of recognition too complicated. It's not so complicated because youth work is the value and is valuable. We just have to recognise this. Those who have experienced youth work themselves know this. It might be difficult to describe, but it could be very important for one's personal development as a human being.

The other thing is when discussions are focused on citizenship and democracy, or nowadays on the labour market, then it becomes very complicated. Then you need some kind of standardisation or standards. When we are presenting ourselves in front of an employer, we know how to explain what we have learnt, like in schools, and what we know, but we are not used to presenting what we have done concretely. This is valuable for an employer to know what you have done in your life, what your contribution has been. We have to help young people to be architects of their own learning; nobody can oblige us to learn something. I think, in our education system, it's good that youth workers are kind of a mirror for young people, enabling them to know what their contribution was to the success of the project.

We need to keep youth work on the agenda because it is not obvious. It becomes obvious when London burns, or when Paris burns or when there are huge problems with the police in Brussels and Antwerp. Then youth is on the agenda, when we are focused on a problem.

Manfred: There are challenges on different levels, as we outlined in the symposium statement. It covers most of the things that we can see as challenges, but also as problems. One important thing is that we continue at European level with close co-operation between education and training on one hand and youth policy on the other hand. It is absolutely necessary that there is a close contact, mutual understanding and concrete co-operation for the upcoming Council recommendation. It is important to have a strong youth programme. We need the support of a strong programme to maintain policy co-operation. At a more practical level, it is necessary to create mutual understanding and a common language between different actors. We have to find ways to communicate and understand each other. And that would be an important step forward in terms of knowing more about non-formal learning, what it is able to achieve and how to recognise it.

Q: What should be the first few steps after the symposium?

Jan: First we have to establish the core group for the Strasbourg Process, then we have to inform everyone systematically: the statutory bodies of the Council of Europe in March, but also at the Directorate Generals' meeting in Denmark in April, the Committee of Ministers, the Committee of the Regions, the Parliamentary Assembly, Members of the European Parliament, the EU economic and social committee. We need to inform them of the outcomes of the symposium, our questions, our action plan and the support we need from them. And I think that we have to set up a dialogue with the trade unions at European level, with employers, but also with the educational system and the social system. We need to tell them what the Strasbourg Process is and what are the needs, expectations and concerns of youth workers, youth experts and youth policy civil servants. I like the term "Strasbourg Process". Everybody knows the Bologna Process, the Copenhagen Process, even outside the European Union. Why not the Strasbourg Process? It is a strong symbol, a strong message.

Manfred: Together with the statement, an action plan has been drafted by the participants of the symposium. It includes an enormous amount of different ideas on how to continue. Now the task will be to check all these proposals and prioritise them and make progress on some of the actions. There are many different levels: at political level, create working groups and coming together with different stakeholders, but also at the youth organisations level to start developments on understanding and awareness, maybe also further development of tools like the Youthpass and revision of the portfolio for youth workers. I am very positive that when we meet at the beginning of next year, we will be able to make an action plan that is very comprehensive, but also realistic.

Q: What is your message to youth organisations and youth workers involved in the process?

Jan: Never give up! It is a long way, it is not easy, but it is so valuable. It takes time to convince others who don't know about what we are doing during voluntary activities or youth work activities. Even in a couple, when one is in youth work

and the other isn't, it is difficult to explain to your partner why you are spending so much time doing it. I hope he or she would never give up the relationship, but it takes time. Also for your family, for your neighbours, it takes time to understand it. And we can't explain it very well... we are playing, having fun and meetings. My message is that it might take time, but don't give up! And one day you will see...

Manfred: The message, which is also for me, is that we are seeing a very positive development in youth work. We have never had such an awareness and general recognition of youth work at European level, due to European co-operation and the focus that has been put on the issue of youth work. So, we should really be aware of this and that it gives a lot of support to the work that is done in youth work. We should use this impulse; we should use this energy and this attention to show that there is very valuable and successful work in youth work, and very high levels of learning outcomes in terms of skills and competences. We should use the power in the debate at the moment for our personal and professional development.

