

# It's alright—Youth work works in mysterious ways

An interview with Howard Williamson and Paul Kloosterman  
by Darko Markovic



*In his energising opening speech at the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, Paul Kloosterman shared his view that we do not have a problem of recognition of youth work, but rather of our awareness of the recognition that is there. After sharing an amusing video of Lionel Richie he invited the whole audience to sing "It is me you are looking for!" in a very self-affirmative way. However, in his following plenary speech Howard Williamson replied to Paul's attempt with a more sceptical quote from U2 "...but I still haven't found what I am looking for", pointing out the necessity to find the "common ground" in European youth work as a path to its better recognition. In this double interview, Coyote explores their different views of some of the major convention topics: the essence and impact of youth work, the recognition debate, revolution in education, looking for a common ground, fear of "instrumentalisation" and many more.*



 **Howard**

*"Not everything that is important can be measured and not everything that can be measured is important."*



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If you could choose to share a room and have a chat about youth work with Lionel Richie or Bono Vox at the convention, who would you choose?

**Howard Williamson**

**CBE (Professor of European Youth Policy, University of South Wales)**

Ah... I think I would choose Bono. Not for any musical reason, but Bono was actually a member of the UK Government's Costello Committee that I referred to in my talk. I think he turned up to one meeting. So, I'd probably find out whether he really knew anything about critical social awareness and active citizenship.

**Paul Kloosterman,**  
**(Youth Worker and Freelance Trainer)**

To be honest, I think Bono would be more interesting to talk with than Lionel Ritchie. Bono has some connections to other things than only music. I have never been a fan of Lionel Richie. I chose his video, because I found the clip very funny and I took one sentence that I turned into "It is me you are looking for!" at the convention. That was a very nice one, but that's where it stops.



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illustrations by Marlies Pöschl

**Paul**

*"We should get out of that 'Calimero role': we are small and they are big and that's unfair."*

What was the highlight of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention for you?

**Howard**

I think the highlights were the three personal stories about the meaning of youth work, personally delivered by individuals from different parts of Europe. Of course, that's what we really know. When you do this kind of thing for and with young people, you never quite know what is going to happen, but if you do it well, it is not going to produce bad results; it is going to produce good results. Well, the challenge is to win the political support and political understanding. And seemingly wonderful personal stories are not always enough. But they are enough for me.

**Paul**

There were a few highlights. One is of course meeting all these people and to have very interesting talks and feeling that spirit. Yesterday someone was talking about the situation in Hungary and said: "If we don't take any more initiatives and we don't have hope for better things, where will we be?" At the beginning of the convention, Howard was summing up all the problems of how youth work is not recognised... which is all true, but it is also terrible. I think we have to go on believing that youth work has a unique role and that we have to fight for that. And I got lot of messages like that here. We need to tell our stories and to think how we can better communicate our messages and get out of that "Calimero role": we are small and they are big and that's unfair. Maybe we as youth workers identify ourselves too much with our target group, with being a "victim", being powerless... But we should also be the advocates of young people and that requires us to be proud of what we do and tell good stories about what we do that are understood by others.

There have been demands for better recognition of youth work for many years. Many things have happened in the period since the last convention in Ghent, but was there any shift in the recognition debate?

**Howard**

Well, the youth partnership will certainly claim that there's been significant development in recognition, with published materials saying that we are on the "Strasbourg process". Are we going somewhere? I am a little a bit more sceptical. I don't think we can actually produce our own recognition. I think we have to engage with employers, with teachers, with police officers, who can see the value of youth work in different ways in relation to their own agendas. And I know certain forms of youth work in certain places are well recognised by local political authorities and other professional groups. But at large we tend to talk to ourselves far too much and we don't talk out there and find what other perspectives and what other priorities are.

**Paul**

All my years in youth work have always been about the recognition. Lots of things that we work on in youth work get recognition, but maybe not because of youth work so much. If you look at the debates in education or debates in other sectors, such as in companies and how they value certain skills and competences is changing; there is a lot that is changing right now. If you follow the discussions and TED talks about companies and how they want to change their attitudes towards their employees and what they value as competences, I think it has a lot to do with the much more holistic way of looking at people that we have already been using for years. So, I think the rest of the world is coming closer to non-formal education and youth work. Also when you look at formal education there are also people who want to make changes there and who are talking about the things we have been doing for years. So the rest of the world is coming closer, not because we are shouting so much, but now we have to be able to say:

"Hey, we are here and we are doing that and we are specialists in that." I think we are specialists in lot of things formal education needs at this moment. So, it is the rest of the world that's changing and moving towards us.

**Paul**

*"It is the rest of the world that is changing, that is coming closer to us and to what we do in non-formal education and youth work."*



Illustration by Bianca Gainus



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Talking about the very purpose of youth work and its aims, should youth work be more about supporting young people's revolution or providing them with navigational capacities?

### Howard

There is always an issue about which step you want: to help young people fit in or to support young people in being critical? And it is never something you can decide in advance. You have to work with different groups of young people; some of them are very angry at the society in which they live and they want revolution or certainly want change, usually in their favour, of course. And there are other groups of young people who are perhaps almost too accepting of the status quo. I think you have to work with young people in terms of supporting them in providing the critical edge. But what is revolution? As we learned in some countries in the world quite recently, they had revolutions with great optimism and now circumstances are worse than they ever were before. We have to be sceptical about the concept of revolution, but certainly I want young people to speak up when they can and I think sometimes young people become co-opted into the system too easily.

### Paul

I don't see these as contrary things. I think youth work should be the place where young people can work on their issues and what they see as important and what they think is their passion, the things that really concern them. At the same time, when they do that I think it helps them to navigate in society. As I said in my intro speech at the convention, dealing with ambiguity and change is for me one of the most important competences that people should have nowadays; more than ever you need to be able to deal with uncertainty, to deal with change and having no answers. Traditional formal education only educates you in having the right or the wrong answers, and that does not help you at all. There is no right or wrong answer; there are many, many answers to questions. If you are able to deal with that ambiguity you will be able to navigate in the society much better. So, I think it is not such a contradiction. When you give young people space in youth work to work on their own things and do it together, they will run into lots of things which they will need to find the solutions for and find out that there are many answers. So, if youth work can contribute to the competence to deal with ambiguity and change, I think it contributes to navigating through life.

I also think in a way that we are in revolutionary times, but it does not mean burning down government buildings; it is another kind of revolution. There is so much change going on which is very revolutionary, which has to do again with the same competences for dealing with ambiguity and change.

### Howard

"Youth work works in mysterious ways."

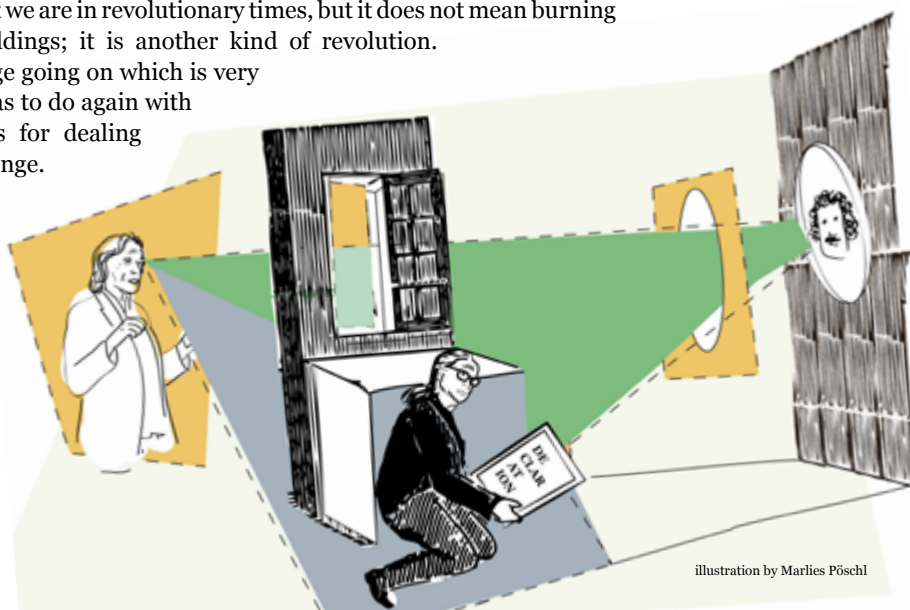


illustration by Marlies Pöschl



Illustration by Aline Rollin

There is growing evidence (research) that youth work has an impact, but somehow it is still hard to pin down "what makes this difference". What are the critical elements that produce this impact? What do you think?

### Howard

There is the famous statement that not everything that is important can be measured and not everything that can be measured is important. Youth work works in mysterious ways. Young people may have a pretty bad experience with something in youth work, but it triggers an interesting reading of something more about an issue and that takes them further in a positive way. There are a lot of stepping stones and lots of linkages. And my view has always been that if we offer quality experiences, quality opportunities and quality engagements with young people then it's unlikely to produce poor quality outcomes. It will rather produce good quality outcomes, but whether it will be in relation to jobs or families or personal self-confidence or something else, we simply don't know. We certainly don't know in what time periods those good things are going to happen. What I can also be sure of is that there are often a lot of things that come under the banner of youth work that are not of very good quality. When you have poor quality interventions with young people's lives, you are pretty sure that you will have poor quality outcomes. So, my view is we've really got to strengthen and be sure of the quality of what we offer to young people.

### Paul

I always find it difficult with the idea that we have to deliver outcomes, learning outcomes that make an impact. I think that is very hard to measure. I don't think at the end of the project or training course you can exactly say these are the outcomes, this is what people learned. People have experiences, and learning does not go in a straight line – you do this, you do that and the outcome is there. Human brains function in much more complex ways, which are also beautiful. So, if youth work has as a result that young people see different ways of developing themselves and different ways of learning, and are able to deal with ambiguity, that is not something you can measure. I love to hear that there are stories; I think stories provide lots of evidence and they can convince people.

It is the holistic approach that we have in youth work, where competences in creativity or social competences are recognised more and more as being very important. And, except in some new schools, young kids do not learn or develop them at school.

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The second convention was very much focused on finding the common ground rather than “celebrating diversity” in youth work across Europe. But is there such a thing as “common ground” and why is it important?

### Howard

Right now, I really don't know (laughter). We are still working on the declaration text... I think there are two things. One is that out there we look like a pretty chaotic mess; we look like an incoherent mosaic of activities that falls under the broad umbrella of youth work. Does anything say that just any work with young people can be called youth work because you're working with young people? I don't think so. Now we have to look at very different forms of interventions and engagements with young people. Why do we call all these youth work? Self-governed youth organisations, street youth projects, human rights initiatives, more and more online youth work, youth information provision, mobility and exchanges ... these are things called youth work. I think we can actually, with some confidence, say that there is common ground about personal development, navigational capacities, helping young people believe in themselves, connecting young people with spaces and possibilities for exercising their voice and their ideas, etc. So, I think there is common ground. And, I think, in the tough world, where there are austerity measures and other priorities in public policy and allocation of public resources, we need to have a common and shared narrative that we all can sign up to if we are going to win the political championship for what we do.

### Howard

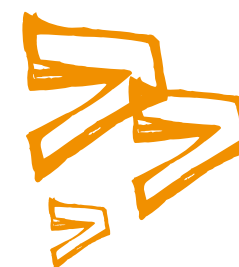
*“We need to have a common and shared narrative that we all can sign up to if we are going to win the political championship for what we do.”*



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Illustration by Bianca Gainus



### Paul

There are of course lots of difficulties to finding common ground, but at the same time when you look at the convention, people are confronted with the fact that while there are differences between countries, you find so much in common. I see that through my work as a trainer. I worked with many groups from many different countries and very different backgrounds. And for me there is the common ground that we work with young people on broadening options for youth and that we have a holistic approach. There is a lot that we have in common, while our situations and histories are very different. I also see more and more that countries learn from each other; especially western European countries should take a step back. Youth work is very present in countries with a long tradition of youth work, like Germany or the UK, but they too can learn from other countries like Lithuania, where wonderful things have developed starting from scratch. I still think we have common ground, with all the diversity.



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Sometimes there is a fear of “instrumentalisation” of youth work for other bigger agendas (unemployment, replacing some social services, etc.) At the same time there are greater social challenges, like boats with refugees in the Mediterranean, in which youth work is not really invited to help. Should youth work respond to these challenges? If yes, how? If not, why not?

### Howard

It is very tricky territory. I have always believed that if we are confident enough in our youth work agenda, we have to have conversations with the police, school teachers, drugs workers, career advisers... Of course it's another version of common ground. We have to see if there is something complementary that we can do together. There is a risk: youth work can proclaim its independence and other people will allege that it is completely irrelevant. If you nowadays say that you are working with young people, when the big issues of our times are youth unemployment or youth extremism, if youth workers are meant to be the experts, you cannot just back away and say “yes, but I don't want to engage with this agenda”. However, there is a risk of becoming a complete slave in somebody else's machine and certainly that's not what youth work should be doing. The key term here is partnership. And so, I think youth workers just have to engage in these debates, otherwise we will marginalise ourselves even further.

In relation to the Mediterranean boats, the response should be many different things. Sometimes youth work has no place at all. But I can imagine that for young people on those boats, young people separated from their parents, coming to a different country, a new strange place, youth workers can clearly have a role in working with those young people in ways that give them strength, belief, direction and confidence to articulate their voice. I actually think these are some of the most disadvantaged young people in our communities. And if we cannot do youth work with those people, then we are doing what some academics say: that youth work gives even more opportunities to the included and happy kids and still ignores the ones who are really tough to work with.

### Paul

I think we do respond already with our work, but we should connect better and not wait to be asked at the moment when there are problems, when there is something that cannot be solved by somebody else. We should be taking the initiative. There are examples of great co-operation in some villages or parts of cities where the police, the health-care system, social care and youth work are working together. I have had experiences that worked very well with youth work in the directing role, because of our more holistic approach that sees young people with all these aspects, we are much better at this and should be leading that kind of co-operation. And I have seen this function in very good ways. If we are there only to solve the most difficult problems, that does not work.

### Howard

*“It is an absolute tragedy to young people in Europe if only 10% of young people get an awful lot of youth work experiences and some other young people are never exposed to it at all.”*

A revolutionary idea appeared in the convention! Just imagine if school becomes optional and youth work compulsory for all, what would happen then?

### Howard

Well... (laughs)... If youth work becomes compulsory for all then it ceases to be youth work in some people's view, because it is a voluntary relationship. There could be an argument that this kind of idea that underpins today's youth work emerged in times when schools, families and work places were very authoritarian. And we might actually argue that youth work needs to become more bounded by its values and become more “authoritarian” about its core beliefs.

It is a bit of a silly kind of scenario, but there could be an argument that if we don't offer formal education as a voluntary option to young people, why should we offer youth work as a voluntary option. Should we say that if both formal and informal learning methodologies and learning and development pathways are important then young people should be required to do youth work from the age of 11, as they are in secondary education?

These are difficult ones to tease out, but nevertheless what we do know is that most of the kinds of youth work experiences talked about here are offered to young people. It is an absolute tragedy to young people in Europe if only 10% of young people get an awful lot of it and some other young people are never exposed to it at all.

### Paul

I think it is not a very realistic idea, but the thought behind it is an interesting one. Maybe in 10 years we won't speak about formal and non-formal education, but we'll speak about education. And many people say that in 10 years schools won't exist as they are now. I think we are on the way to a new form of education. There will be big changes. And for youth work it is important to be there. I am a big supporter of co-operation between youth work and schools; youth workers can really be a great help in creating new forms of education and new kinds of schools, with the expertise we have in youth work. I think we have to show ourselves; we have to shout out more that we are there!

### Youth worker books and TED talks Paul's choices:

- 1 - *Freedom to Learn* by Carl Rogers
- 2 - *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* by Douglas Thomas, John Seely Brown
- 3 - Ken Robinson's TED talks
- 4 - Ricardo Semler's TED talk “How to run a company with (almost) no rules”
- 5 - Brené Brown's TED talk “The power of vulnerability”

### Youth worker books and TED talks Howard's choices:

- 1 - Ken Robinson's TED talks
- 2 - *Moral ecology of South Africa's township youth* by Sharlene Swartz
- 3 - *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck
- 4 - *Woodie Guthrie, American Radical* by Will Kaufman
- 5 - *Youth and Youth Groups* by Josephine Macalister Brew  
<http://infed.org/mobi/josephine-macalister-brew-and-informal-education/#references>

### Paul

*“Youth workers can really be a great help in creating new forms of education and new kinds of schools, with the expertise we have, but we have to show ourselves, we have to shout out more that we are there!”*



Illustration by Vanda Kovács

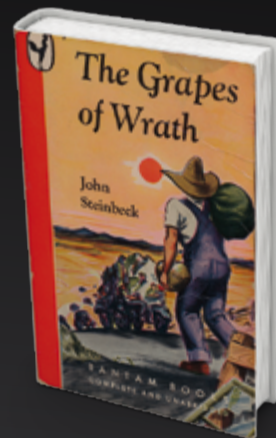


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What are the five books or five TED talks every youth worker should read and see?

### Howard

Anything that has been done by Ken Robinson is worth having a look at, just looking at learning and education and development. That would be number one. Number two would be the book *The Moral Ecology of South Africa's Township Youth* by Sharlene Swartz. It is a fantastic book that uncovers a very different work for young people than most of us are used to. I would always recommend *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, the novel in which young people are finding their relationship to a labour market in California in the 1930s and how, without a collective organisation, more powerful individuals can just pick you apart and exploit you. I am currently reading a book and wearing a t-shirt which says "This guitar kills fascists" with Woodie Guthrie's guitar. Someone has written a book *Woodie Guthrie, American Radical* on why that quite red-neck guy became a supporter of civil rights, migrant workers in Oklahoma, etc. And in terms of youth work books, one of mine I am desperately trying to keep is *Youth and Youth Groups* by Josephine Macalister Brew from the early 1950s. It reminds me why I am doing youth work and sorts out the benefits of being in there and still gives me tips about the methodologies we need to be using when working with young people in their leisure time.



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### Paul

To start very traditional, a very old book I would recommend is Carl Rogers' *Freedom to Learn*, many things that are said now are based on him. Another one is *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* which is full of ideas that we should take up in youth work as well; there is so much going on there and we are a little bit behind. There you find so many connections to what we are doing in youth work already, like self-directed learning, taking one's own responsibility as a learner, etc.

Talking about TED talks, Ken Robinson has three which are very interesting and inspiring and give lots of hope for education. Another one I have seen recently is from Ricardo Semler, who is a famous management guru with very unconventional ideas about how to organise a company, and who has his own schools. And for youth workers and trainers, I like very much the TED talk about vulnerability by Brené Brown. I find lots of connections with the new role of teachers, trainers and youth workers. The capacity to be vulnerable is one that we already have, but needs to develop further to be able to really create free space for young people. It also means that youth workers should not step into the trap of organising everything, but give young people freedom to do it themselves. Then one of the aspects of that role is the ability to be vulnerable.



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Lynne Chisholm

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Our dear colleague and inspiration Lynne Chisholm passed away recently, which was certainly a great loss for the youth field. What is Lynne's legacy that we need to cherish? What were Lynne's messages that we would need to keep in the collective memory in the youth field? What was her impact on the field?

### Howard

Yes, she was a very dear friend of mine. There are three big legacies that Lynne has left us in the youth field, in my opinion. First is the concept of European citizenship in 1996-97 when we were not even allowed to use the concept; it was called citizenship with a European dimension. And she oversaw something called the "DG22 citizenship study" which looked at the impact of European youth programmes on young people's European identity. That really started the whole debate about European citizenship and led to the partnership in 1998 and on to such initiatives as the Advanced Training for Trainers in Europe (ATTE). During her time in the Commission she also led the production of the "Memorandum on lifelong learning", establishing the whole idea of lifelong and life-wide learning in different contexts. And the third thing, where I worked very closely with her, is obviously the MA European Youth Studies. That was the most wonderful learning process that I have ever been involved in and without Lynne it would have never happened. She was always a leader of things and when she would put her mind to it and wanted something to happen, it usually did.

### Paul

By the way, I find it very nice that *Coyote* does this, because that's also one of the things we have to learn in the youth programme is that we are getting older and older and people are passing away. And we have to find ways to honour and remember those people.

I met Lynne quite a few times. and what I admired a lot in her was that she was able to listen to us as youth workers and trainers and communicate what we were saying in a very different language to the political level. I think she has done great work in the Council of Europe, the European Commission and the youth partnership by presenting the outcomes of her research to put them immediately on the political level and that had an impact on policy. There she did great things. And she was strategically very smart in doing that. We need this kind of person very much. And of course, her contribution was in bringing up the topic of research into youth work and all the time telling us how important that was. However it always looked like the meeting of two separate worlds, two cultures, and it was always hard to bring them together, but I think that while researchers should be making a step towards us, we should also make a step towards the researchers. They can help us tell the stories and share the impact of what we do. And there, Lynne has been a big advocate for promoting that co-operation and I think it was very important that she did that.