

# What do they think we do?

by Darko Markovic  
darko@innside.co.rs



*“Hey, you’ve done well with Gaddafi out there, but this Assad is tough”, one of my best friends said to me upon my return from a training course abroad. With all these “trainings”, “meetings” and “travelling” somehow my friend became convinced that I actually work for – the CIA! It all started as a bar joke, but it shows the clear lack of understanding of what I do for a living by those closest to me. And he is not alone. My father, a mechanical engineer, has been saying to his business partners, when introducing his family, that his son “is a psychologist, but mostly selling fog”. Certainly, talking about recognition of non-formal education, one could say that this is not the most appreciative environment. Then I asked my 8-year-old son to tell me what he thought I did. “Travelling to different countries, flying by plane and stealing my LEGO blocks”, he said laughing in the back seat of my car. “All true”, I thought, “my office is full of toys and certainly that’s much better than being a subversive element in revolutions all over the world”.*

For sure “youth work has blurry boundaries” (see F. Coussée’s article in *Coyote* No. 16) and “numerous forms”, thus it is often not easy to put in words. In addition, in many countries learning is still considered as the exclusive property of formal education institutions. This all makes it a bit more difficult to position youth work in the social landscape, leaving the dilemma of whether it is more about its identity or – its image. Perhaps we could do a nice self-perception exercise in our little world (read the Declaration of the European Youth Work Convention in Ghent), but let’s see how others see us and if we can learn from it.

After a recent seminar, the hotel manager approached the colleague who was in charge saying: “I don’t want to be indiscrete, but with all these things that you do, do you actually get paid for this?!” He laughed back. I am not on Facebook, but have heard of a fun application about exactly this topic and following this thought, I have asked other trainers in Europe to do a little “research”: to ask those closest to them about what they think trainers do. Receiving the responses elicited tons of laughter and provided good food for thought. Some of the most exciting responses they received you may find below.



**Mother:**

I thought you were working, but you are just cutting papers, sticking them around and having fun.



**Daughter:**

My father is a clown.



**Husband:**

You and your “youth things”...



**Father:**

What?! You mean the government pays you to leave the country all the time on those youth work things!! Be careful, my boy, they might ask you for the money back!



**Friend:**

You are trying to include youth from SEE region in, let’s say, non-governmental sector, which will bring them prosperity, education and democracy, that they normally don’t have, or something like that...



**Daughter:**

You make different workshops, like “My dream job”, for young people to learn what the world is about.



**Friend:**

It seems clear you help people; you show them new perspectives, new ways to look at themselves, to look at their work, their lives. Not paying you a favour I tell you it seems cool. And you in fact “win your bread” with that.



**Daughter:**

I think you work very well and you’re very dedicated, but I think you sometimes work too much.



**Friend:**

You make seemingly unimportant things important. You teach us to listen and that talking is not about filling time, but about making thoughts become truths. I believe you manage to make strangers friends and single people groups.



**Mother:**

You aim at making a difference wherever you are, promote creativity and give hope, promote justice and equality of opportunity for all and motivated by love of people.

It seems, after all, that recognition of what we are doing is on the right path, but there’s a lot more to be done. As one of the colleagues expressed, “when you try to explain what we do, you get to the point only after a couple of beers”. However, if you prefer more alcohol-free strategies, consider taking your beloved ones on a job-shadowing mission to one of your courses. Or perhaps we should consider changing the name of what we do. Recently, during one of those hilarious trainers’ meetings, an idea popped up that we should give up the contested term “trainers” and create a new professional identity and become ... “capacitators®”. Finally, one thing that struck me the most about the above-mentioned exercise is that all the colleagues that did it found it very rewarding and even flattering to receive such feedback. So after reading these, you are strongly recommended to – TRY THIS AT HOME!