

FOCUS

Peer training

Education of young people by young people or motivations for volunteering

Peer training accompanies young people on the road to adulthood, while giving them an idea of the role they can play in a democratic society. In this article we consider how, starting from a voluntary social commitment, young peer trainers seek to develop their skills. What are the constraints, limits and particularities of this attractive approach?

For adolescents, the peer group constitutes a vital testing ground for developing emotional relationships and a sense of one's own identity, and plays a major role in the individualisation process, which typifies this period of change (see Gustavo Pietropolli Charmet). There are naturally a number of possible definitions of "peer training"; here we are concerned with **voluntary educational work by young people for young people**.

The peer training approach has already proved its worth in fields as varied as sexual education, health education, prevention of drug abuse, road safety campaigns and action to combat all forms of discrimination.

A certain degree of freedom of speech, the ability to talk the same language as trainees, credibility, a particularly strong force of persuasion, ready-made expertise regarding the youth scene, the capacity to devote oneself to the task in hand, a potential for participating in change and a multiplier effect are all factors which contribute to the success of the peer training approach.

However, that success is jeopardised where the objectives are not clearly defined from the outset with the candidate trainer. Once the methodology has been assimilated, the multiplier effect can begin to function. The young people will themselves organise training sessions within their own environment. The peer trainers will **facilitate the learning process** for their peers through exchanges of experience, role-playing and case studies. However, regular professional supervision remains necessary, and special heed must be paid to young volunteers' expectations.

A study funded by the Institute for Volunteering Research has made it possible to determine the desiderata ("wish list") of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who decide to undertake voluntary work: flexibility, legitimacy, ease of access, experience, incentive (motivation), variety, organisation and having fun.

This article discusses how the peer training process can be developed on the basis of these eight criteria.

FLEXIBILITY

Young people, on whom school and university exams, casual work and first jobs, forming relationships, changing partners and participation in sports, artistic and intellectual activities already make many demands, may regard a commitment to full-scale voluntary work as too binding, and possibly daunting. It is essential that the "command structure" discuss with peer trainers what degree of commitment can be deemed realistic and reasonable, accept their point of view and help them to define their priorities. Similarly, the timing of activities should be adapted to take account of exams, job obligations or holiday periods. Although identifying sources of motivation is a useful exercise, exerting pressure can, on the other hand, only be counter-productive. The solution is to count on young people's sense of commitment and motivation rather than seeking to discipline them.

LEGITIMACY

It would seem that one of the reasons some young people are reluctant to volunteer is the negative, stereotyped image conveyed by some major social causes (perceived as "uncool" or "manipulating"). Certain values are not negotiable, and the candidate peer trainers must be convinced that that is the case. We have observed that, without genuine, deep-rooted belief that the cause, whatever it may be, is just and legitimate and without support and a structured, methodological logic no project can be viable.

EASE OF ACCESS

The difficulties are the same here, whether for project managers or for volunteers. Accessing and distributing information is undoubtedly easier within the voluntary sector. Volunteers who do not belong to a voluntary sector organisation come up against a real problem - where and how can they deliver the programme. (Conversely, there is a strong likelihood that a volunteer who is already a member of an association or other organisation will be less available). The peer training project must accordingly answer a real need experienced by the young volunteer, and arrangements for "reproducing" the programme must be determined in advance.

by Sabine Finzi,
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EXPERIENCE AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Let us take as an example the EPTO, an international network of peer trainers active in the field of combating discrimination. An evaluation report by Dina Sensi on one year's operation of the programme stated:

The PTs [peer trainees] were able to talk about the changes which have occurred in their lives since they became involved in peer training. The responses demonstrated major positive changes in terms of:

personal development, by focusing on self-awareness, listening and empathy for others;
understanding discrimination and racism;
involvement in social activism;
developing skills in communication, management and group training;
significant knock-on effects in the social and professional sphere."

INCENTIVE (MOTIVATION) AND VARIETY

The peer trainer does not receive a financial reward, firstly, for obvious budgetary reasons and, secondly, because of the philosophical investment required. However, although the trainer should not earn any money, expenses incurred in organising a training session should be reimbursed. A number of elements that can give peer trainers some form of recognition have been identified, including attendance certificates, letters of recommendation and invitations to further training seminars, possibly including genuine vocational training sessions.

The variety of the activities is also a source of motivation: participation in selecting and recruiting new candidates, specialisation in team coaching, possible performance of European voluntary service, participation in developing new training materials, participation in and/or coordination of national and international activities, fund-raising, seeking partners, participation in internal and external communication activities, and - why not? - contacts with the media

ORGANISATION

Organisational Structure

Let us again consider the example of EPTO. In recent years the organisation has evolved to keep pace with the project's needs. A permanent structure has been established in the form of a secretariat, which is responsible for administering the programmes on an ongoing basis (grant applications, planning of activities, and so on) and sustaining the training effort. The secretariat acts on recommendations and suggestions made by the programme coordinators, who are the peer trainers' representatives. Each national team of peer trainers is required to appoint a coordinator, responsible for keeping national activities going and for contact with the secretariat. The national coordination function is the key to the programme's success and to effective networking among members.

Regular meetings, a summer conference, further training sessions and frequent communication via an e-group and

conference calls also help to engender a sense of belonging among members of the network

Qualitative support: mentoring, coaching and evaluation

Three processes have proved to be particularly useful in the peer training context. **Mentoring** means that a trainer from an earlier "generation" welcomes and assists someone new to the network, introducing fellow peer trainers and providing guidance regarding training activities. **Coaching** is a more formal process. A trainer from each country is given the specialised training required and is responsible for helping all peer trainers to develop their individual and training potential. Lastly, systematic **evaluation** of activities has been shown to be essential. Learning to conduct an evaluation, to approach an evaluation without fear and to utilise the results in future projects is already a sign of growing wisdom.

From satisfaction to fun

As long as the sense of recognition, and the satisfaction this engenders, exists and participants have the impression not only that they are helping to change society but also that they are on the same wavelength as the group and receive its full backing, then the obstacles described above can undoubtedly be overcome. Isn't it a sign of satisfaction when people are having fun?

The ideal profile of a peer trainer (most frequently cited selection criteria):*

Voluntary commitment
Interest
Recognised position within the peer group
Gift for speaking
Gender balance (diversity)
Ability to listen
Self-confidence

* Peer Group Education: manipolazione o partecipazione? una raccolta di esperienze europee che utilizzano la PGE nella prevenzione delle dipendenze - Claudia Kahr

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