



by Denis Morel

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What role can training play in promoting, encouraging and raising standards in youth participation?

How to encourage participation within trainings, seminars, events, youth exchanges, etc.

My dear reader,

I know you are in one way or another connected to the youth participation topic, because Coyote doesn't fall into every pair of hands! So I need to explain briefly my way of thinking in front of my computer, whilst writing this article.

When I was contacted by Coyote to write this article I didn't know what to answer (as I'm not used at all to writing articles in such publications). But then I decided to give it a try and write this article as a tool to help me question my own practice...

My aim is not to gain consensus, or on the other hand to fall into the negative and not-constructive criticism: Most of the questions tackled in this article are first of all for me... But I would be more than happy if you take them for you also!

Here it is - clarification is made, let's start!!! But where to start? Let's decide subjectively on an entrance and write the main questions rising in my mind while thinking and typing...

Before approaching and trying to understand how to encourage youth participation through projects and activities in the youth field, it can be good to ask why?

▶ Participating why, where, in what?

Participation, youth participation, active youth participation; such topics have become a priority nowadays in the European Youth Field... Everybody agrees on it; we have to promote it, encourage it... But there are other questions that should come first and which we may forget...

Why work on it? I don't want to open a philosophical debate, because we are all able to give nice and standard reasons for it. To give a voice to youth...But why?

To make young people recognised as social actor... Nice again but why?

To make a better world? Well....

Another way to try to answer this question could be to consider this other question: "Participating where and in what?"

In our organisation... In our activities... In our local community... In Europe?

Following activities we designed for that, in the decision-making process, in taking initiatives, in following our initiatives?

It's impossible to promote youth participation if we are not able to answer concretely to those questions...to know where (concretely) we want to go...

Because our approach, tools, process and activities we'll design will be completely different according to our answers...

For me, for example, now I'm working to support young people to take an active role in the decision-making bodies of their local reality...(either institutional like city councils, associative like in NGO's or in creating their own initiatives...).

▶ A need of coherence between values and practices in the youth field...

As actors in the youth field, we can say that we promote active participation, and in the end we USE the young people for our own interests / purposes.

After several years of practice, particularly in the training field about youth participation, I realised that most of the participants in the trainings (representing NGO's, local authorities and youth structures) are quite equipped in terms of a theoretical approach to participation, and each of us is able to argue quite deeply on the topic. All of us are also persuaded that we

are actively promoting youth participation and have a good impact of it...

But if it is working so well, why give more and more importance to such a topic at the European level? Why design more and more trainings, tools, materials and projects on such issues?

Even if the political will is to promote and develop Non-Formal Education and youth active participation in countries where recognition is missing, it can not be the only reason... Maybe it is also because the concrete impacts of youth work in Europe are not as great as we could expect...

And here we tackle the concept of participation as such and the levels of participation...You can find plenty of different theories, some similar, some complementing each other, some in contradiction...

Personally, I try to discover new thoughts, models, theories, but till now, I always come back to the «ladder of participation» of Roger Hart.

When speaking about active youth participation, Roger Hart tells us that we speak about having young people directly involved in the decision-making process.

But how many NGO's working with and for young people have members / representatives of their "target group" in the decision-making bodies of their own organisation.

It could be a quiet interesting research to do, no?

We did it at the local level in our local reality of 13 villages... Around 20 NGO's were involved in a local diagnosis... All of them saying that they have young people as members...There is only one which has a few young people (under 30 years old) in their administration council and bureau, and none in the organisations working for young people!!! And most of them said that young people don't want to take responsibilities.

So one of the first conclusions to take from this is a lack of coherence between values we are able to promote in a very professional way, and our real actions.

Isn't it too easy to say that young people don't want to take responsibilities??? Do we really give them the space to take it? Do we think about giving them the competences to be active and take responsibilities? Or isn't it easier to keep this situation as it is, to go on doing as we have been for decades!!!! Because involving young people in the decision-making process can also be dangerous for us... They could question our practice, our way of thinking...

► Should we be more ambitious as youth workers/trainers in the youth field?

Which kind of participation do we want to promote?

Don't we miss some ambition?

Taking part in activities designed for young people is only the

basic level of participation... But isn't it too often the one that we are looking for?

Don't we always look for more young people to be members of NGO's, to take part in the activities of a youth centre?

But how many of us give a real place for young people in the decision-making bodies of our organisation??? And then, in order to justify ourselves, we can often hear that they are not able to understand the context in order to take decisions, they don't have enough experience, they don't have enough keys to understand what we want to do...

Maybe yes, but then it should be our role to equip them for this.

Promoting youth participation for me means concretely supporting young people to take initiative, to initiate social change around them.

Of course here we need also to go deeper and see young people not as one single target group...

The youth field is also full of contradictions. On the one hand, looking at teenagers, we often want them to have a real adult role, having values, taking position about the world around them, projecting themselves in the long term and we forget that they have still one foot in childhood.

But on the other hand, when we have real young adults in front of us, who already take their life in their hands, who are able to take a position and defend and promote a certain vision of society, it may disturb us if their vision is different to ours...And in this case, representatives of the local community may create a gap, be paternalistic, and believe that the young people are still too young to understand exactly what they want, and the consequences.

We want them to be active if it goes in our direction, but not if it can go against us!!!

Isn't it more manipulation than participation?

► Creating new spaces for young adults to take an active role in the society

Why do so many youth structures have most of their young people not older than 15-16 years old like in France for example?

Because youth structures are not perceived as resources for older young people, for young adults who are in fact active citizens (having the responsibilities of their own life), but in the mind of local communities, still future adults...

As youth actors, our role should not be to be actors of social change, but agents of social change... The real actors of social change should be the young people...

And I do believe that youth work in the non-formal education field should be more based on this approach...particularly for young adults (when they reach the majority regarding the law)... Because the existing actors and structures are not relevant to the majority of those young adults.



I don't want to believe that having young adults almost not represented in the different decision bodies of a local community means that they reject society and want to be out...It means more that we have to rethink our social intervention toward them and our educational practices, but also the way we look at them.

► **Multiplying settings of interaction between young people and other actors of the local community...**

We should consider young people as part of a global system with a lot of different actors: the community where they live, parents, friends, NGO's, clubs, schools, local authorities...

If we want to promote active youth participation, it means that we want them to take action in this global system... So we shouldn't work only for and with young people, because it is not considering them as social actors...

The first way for it should be to promote the interaction between young people and other social actors of the community. If we work only with young people, then existing mutual prejudices which the adult community have toward young people (and vice-versa) will never change. Even more, the initiatives of young people that they make unilaterally could be perceived as an "attack" against the "order" organised by the adult community.

Putting young people together with youth workers, local authorities, and other inhabitants can take some time to get over mutual prejudices, but is the only way (for me) to bring about social changes in which young people can have the same voice as other local actors...

I strongly have the feeling that sometimes we direct young people too much even when they take their own initiative... And it has a vicious effect : it doesn't contribute to giving a place for young people as social actors, just as youth leaders...

My main work in my local reality nowadays is toward young adults (18 to 30 years old)...When we really decided to work on active youth participation, our first action was to contact as many social actors as possible that were sharing the same interest to try to understand better the situation of youth participation in our area...

We had representatives of local authorities, youth workers and NGO's but also independent young people that were interested; and we have met regularly, at least every month together, for more than 2 years.

We started with a participative diagnosis, designing together what we wanted to know and how we could collect the information... And all actions developed afterwards were based on this analysis.

It took almost 2 years to get over the mutual prejudices and to have all the members of this local platform feeling equal, stopping fighting (softly) against each other, and starting to understand that they could have some common will to take action together... But now the base starts to be here and ideas for local actions are suggested by the different "categories"; and, what is more important, implemented collectively!

One of the results is that we have three young adults of this local platform who have been elected in the councils of different villages, for the first time!!! We were hoping for such results but we didn't design specific actions for it... It came out of the fact that some local authorities' representatives started after one or two years to work together with some young people and discovered that they were appreciating this collaboration and found the will to continue it.

But then, how to promote youth participation through our activities... I would say first by being able to continuously question our practice and the coherence between our values and practice...

- 1/ *Being clear why we want to promote youth participation, which kind of participation, and participation in what.*
- 2/ *Being able to analyse our values and practices, and look for elements of coherence and non coherence, to improve the first and decrease the incoherence.*
- 3/ *Considering the young people we work with as key actors, but not exclusively, meaning creating the setting and conditions of regular interaction between young people and other key actors of our local reality.*
- 4/ *If needed, supporting them to identify common aims, will, vision.*
- 5/ *Facilitate the cooperation until each actor feels equal in this cooperation.*
- 6/ *Let them fly.*

► **Then finally, how ?**

Good question!

As we speak about educational process here, our training activities should take all of this into account.

For example, we should work more with heterogeneous groups representing the different actors of a local community (young people organised and not organised, youth workers, local authorities...), meaning we should work more also with local realities and not only participants.

And this work shouldn't be just one show event but on a regular and long-term basis in which training should be considered as only one step of this global approach, in order to really look for impacts....

It means also at all levels, from local to international, to maybe make a break in the explosion of trainings, and look a bit more to quality in a long-term perspective...

Let me try to illustrate my words with a concrete example: Still in this long-term project we do on active youth participation, we had several residential training events bringing



together local authorities, youth workers and young people from the same territory together. Six local territories were represented during those training events. But we should consider those residential sessions only as “steps”, meaning as part of a larger and bigger training process. Regarding our reality, this is one “three-years training process”, in which the core element is this permanent platform (meeting every month) with young people, NGO’s, youth workers and local authorities and international and local trainings and workshops etc are just a few of the training tools we use.

This is more what we call an “action training process”; meaning an ongoing process built on the local reality, in which international moments are just a tool, a support for growing motivation and will to act.

The possible results and impacts of such an approach have a big chance to have deeper and stronger roots.

In our local reality, some of the most visible impacts after two and a half years are:

- some local actions designed and implemented collectively between different actors of the youth field including young people (like innovative forms of debates to bring the issue of the role of young people in local social life into the public space),
- some will for young people to bring the European dimension to the local level, and promote it as another territory of action for young people (we support now two groups of young people in hosting a youth exchange on discrimination and a partnership building activity on the environment),
- to reconnect young adults and decision-making bodies as we have three young adults participants of this long-term project who were elected recently onto the council of two different villages...

Of course it is not possible to do a copy/paste of such an approach in every local reality. But we believe it is time to look at youth participation as a permanent and fundamental challenge, which will never stop...

Permanently, we need to:

- understand that there are other ways of looking at youth participation and adapt our pedagogical processes toward young people, in countries where non-formal education is recognised, but also where we take it for granted and we don’t question it any more...
- create new ways of social intervention; taking advantage of the analysis of existing practice without copying it, into countries where non-formal education is not recognised at all...

Often, it is more difficult to change what exists than to create... But if we want to develop opportunities for young people to confront their visions and perceptions of others in a constructive way, we cannot always put responsibilities on the shoulders of others (of the young people, of the local authorities, of the others NGO’s!!!), we need to admit that we all have in this field a part of responsibility to improve and to make things better.

References :



- Roger Hart (1997) *Children’s Participation: The Theory And Practice Of Involving Young Citizens In Community Development And Environmental Care*, UNICEF

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