The boomerang effect: impact of recogniton work on quality development

By Darko Markovic

"Magic Mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?"
- Queen, Snow-white and 7 dwarfs
For the last ten years, I have been involved in various recognition processes at national level (in Serbia) and at European level. From this experience I know that working for better recognition of youth work and non-formal learning is never a dry and a purely administrative thing, it is often a very emotional process that touches deep values of the stakeholders involved (Markovic, 2006).

Boomerang effect: questions of quality
The other thing I have discovered during the quest for better recognition that as soon as you seek for more recognition, inevitable you have to deal with the issue of quality as well. Indeed, like a boomerang effect - the more recognition you ask for, the more quality questions come back to you.
And that's a tricky moment when you start asking yourself if the all actions towards ensuring quality would actually lead towards over-formalization of youth work? Is that a price you are willing to pay for getting more recognition? The questions of quality makes you think deeper about what kind of recognition are you *really* looking for? What is your "recognition adventure" (Markovic, 2012)? And recognition by whom? And who should ensure the quality and by which mechanisms? Youth workers themselves or some other institutions?
Even if it is about self-recognition only, there is a still question how do you *demonstrate the value* of what you are doing. In other words "Can we say what we do and can we do what we say" (R.Gomes, CoE DYS)?

Learning outcomes: the common language?
In case we would wish to get out of our own "youth worker bubble" and get better recognition of learning happening in the youth field, it implies engaging in communication with "others": education, employment, policy makers, wider group of stakeholders, etc. and for that engagement we need to establish a common language. This need for a common language is not a solely youth worker issue; the similar challenges you may find in the education sector who is also striving for better validation of non-formal and informal learning as well. Some years a *shift to learning outcomes* (CEDEFOP, 2008) was promoted as means of creating a common language between different education providers and different learning settings. Somehow it was a less of importance *where* something was learnt, but rather *what* was learnt.
Indeed, one way to demonstrate the value of the youth field in relation to learning to the other sectors is to start talking in terms of "learning outcomes": competencies gained by young people engaged in mobility experiences.

The power of HOW

However, no matter how appealing is the idea of the common language using the "learning outcomes" as the key vocabulary, one of the key assets of the youth work is not so much about its outcomes, but rather its *processes* – the ways the educational activities are carried out. Thus the point to consider is - "Can we have GOOD learning outcomes without a GOOD learning process?".

The pedagogical processes in youth work are deeply rooted in its core values and principles and therefore not to be neglected in the recognition activities and efforts. Moreover, the quality assurance measures should be designed in order to enhance the values and principles of youth work, rather than tackling the issue of quality in a more "technical" and management way.

Recognition that supports quality

Having said all these, since the recognition and quality are so intertwined, the question is whether there are recognition mechanisms that actually can support quality development? Can we envision such recognition tools and procedures that would avoid static and bureaucratic approaches to recognition and offer and more dynamic and quality-focused instruments?

In some European countries the recognition topic is not new and we can even notice an inflation of recognition/validation instruments which does not serve its original purpose anymore and turn out to be just a set of administrative procedures, often not very gladly used by youth workers and young people themselves. In some other countries (like Serbia) this is still an unchartered territory with more space for experimentation and learning from other's good/bad practice.

Youthpass – the way to go?

Without a need to praise Youthpass as a tool for recognition of learning, I find its initial results quite interesting for reflection. The impact survey is being undertaken and it will be published in June 2013, but from the practice point of view some quality benefits are already very visible in the field. Firstly, it seems that involving such an instruments that fosters self-reflection, increases an overall *greater awareness of learning in youth mobility activities both by the youth workers and young people* themselves. Second quality development, particularly visible is also a slight change in the youth worker role – from "activity providers" and "project organizers" to "learning facilitators". Generally, an inspiring thing about Youthpass is that it is *not promoting just a certificate as such but also the whole pedagogical process behind*. Perhaps, this could be one of the ways in thinking about how to design recognition tools that would actually serve quality development and not just recognition *per se*.

Beware of what you are asking…

Finally, when thinking of setting up new recognition systems and mechanisms, be prepared that it is a long-term process that might require commitment and flexibility. Take your steps wisely, keeping in mind the key principles and values of what you are doing, cooperate with others but try avoiding being hijacked for somebody else's

agendas. Recognition is possible, but - beware of what you are asking for… you might actually get it.

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