

Evaluation of international youth exchange programmes – presenting a new tool in “Easy English”

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Introduction

Youth work and research: Can they go together? Is it possible to do empirical research in the practical field of youth-work – without interrupting the youth-work-setting too much? Is it possible to have a permanent way of evaluation, which fits into the principles of youth-work?

I want to present to you a method which bridges the gap between both worlds: research and youth-work. I start with some words about the background of the evaluation system. Second I will present key results from a recent study in the context of German-French-Polish youth exchange. My third point takes you into a more detailed account of empirical research. At the end I will present to you a new tool of evaluation in “Easy English” and discuss possible future developments in the field of evaluation.

In order to clarify our field of research: When I talk of youth exchange I refer to short-term group encounters between youth groups from different countries, either bi-, tri- or multilateral. The background of my presentation is an evaluation project, that I am responsible for together with my colleague Judith Dubiski as researchers for the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO) and the German-Polish Youth Office (GPYO). Our latest development, the “Easy English” tool was supported by IJAB (International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany) and funded by the German Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. We are very thankful to all these institutions for their support and the good cooperation throughout the last years.

The background

As most of you know, there is not much research in the field of non-formal learning. Some rare studies take insight into very selected working fields. But a typical youth exchange does not have any science-

based method of evaluation. As the leaders of the exchange programmes are interested in the participants' view, they often develop questionnaires or feedback-games on their own.

The aim of the project presented here is to move on from evaluation methods developed ad hoc to a standard practice for generating data and providing an easy-to-use evaluation tool. Since 2001, several evaluation procedures have been developed in the course of this project. They make it possible for the organisers of camps and international youth encounters to self-evaluate their activities by means of a locally conducted quantitative procedure. Through several scientific studies questionnaires were created, and later an optimised abridged version was made available for self-evaluation. The standard self-evaluation procedure does not generate any costs and can be used without additional staff.

In the scientific studies participants were not only questioned during the camp but surveyed once again three months later in order to ensure reliability and validity. In addition, extensive data on the camp were collected, for example on the structure of the programme. In contrary to this bigger empirical setting, the materials for self-evaluation remain restricted to three elements: the workers' questionnaires at the beginning asking for aims, the participants' questionnaires in the end and a short questionnaire for basic data for the leaders. The procedure aims, above all, at providing tools for simple and reliable self-evaluation to those in charge locally. Apart from that, the organisers are asked to send the locally collected data to a central office in order to be able to analyse all of the data at supra-regional level. But it is not possible to exert pressure of any kind on the local organisers to make them send the data.

From our point of view a good evaluation in the field of youth work...

- takes the participants view serious
- has a short questionnaire
- is easy-to-use, yet based on scientific development
- is free of charge
- takes the different profiles of exchange programmes into account (by asking the leaders for their aims)

The evaluation procedure presented here is called a system of "joint self-evaluation". It attempts to combine the benefits of external evaluation and those of self-evaluation: just like during an external evaluation, the research tools stem from a scientifically proven development. The quantitative evaluation of the questionnaires is conducted by means of a computer programme and thus delivers results that do not depend on the person responsible for the local evaluation. Still, the evaluation procedure can – which is otherwise only the case with a self-evaluation – be conducted and statistically evaluated independently and locally by the group leaders.

The collected data show the success of the idea of joint self-evaluation: during the years 2005 through 2012 more than 35 000 questionnaires were sent in to the central office: 31 345 participants'

questionnaires and 4 199 workers' questionnaires from 1131 groups (data from February 2013 – the real dates will be slightly higher after having finalized the data from 2012).

If you compare this to other empirical studies, you will see the advantage of this system: While even the biggest youth studies (like for example the German Shell study) collect no more than about 2000 questionnaires, our system generates a huge data output for a very low budget.

As evaluation in the field of youth work often produces fears, our evaluation tool has defined guidelines for the use of the tool:

General principles

- The goal is to make the self-evaluation for every institution/organizer as easy and convenient as possible.
- The evaluation instrument is used exclusively for quality development and not as a “surveillance instrument.”
- Whoever works with the data, commits him- or herself to dealing with it confidentially. Anonymity is guaranteed at all levels.
- The data of the individual institutions should be continually collected and combined.
- Taking the information on board and evaluating the data is open and self-critical.
- Evaluation and interpretation takes place in cooperation with all participants.
- Further development of the instrument is desirable, however only on the basis of firm scientific standards.
- Whoever uses the evaluation instrument ensures transparent implementation and observance of these principles within his/her area of responsibility.

Selected results

Basic data

For the international youth encounters in the context of Franco-German and Polish-German youth office, the collected data for the years 2005 to 2010 were analysed and published in a book, which is available in German, French and Polish (Ilg and Dubiski 2011). Some selected results from this subsample (N=5 206 participants and 719 leaders) give an impression of the kind of data which is gained with the help of this evaluation tool.

The mean age of the participants is 16.7 years. The groups are typically led by a team of young adults (most of them between 20 and 30 years), of whom the majority works on a voluntary basis.

20% are employed, fully paid workers, i.e. professionals in social work. 22% are part-time workers, for example artists who help in a cultural exchange programme for a small fee. The majority of workers are volunteers (58%).

Mobility

46% of the participants have never before been in the respective country. It becomes clear, that international exchanges play a key role in enhancing European mobility.

And indeed: One of the major learning fields refers to aspects of intercultural experiences, especially language: 74% say that they improved their foreign-language skills. And slightly more (77%) agreed with the statement “I have become interested in learning the other language(s)”.

A similar pattern can be found concerning the motivation for future mobility: Between 61% and 76% of the adolescents think about a longer stay in one of the hosting countries after they have got to know it during the one or two weeks of the encounter.

Motivation for future volunteerism

The results of the participants' questionnaires show how important the youth group leaders are for them. Most of the participants feel that at least one of the leaders is a person they have confidence in – even if it is a leader who comes from another country. The high regard for the leaders can also be seen by another result in the participants' questionnaire: more than half of the participants agreed to the item “I would like to work myself as a youth leader at one of these encounters”. Thus, international youth encounters can be seen as a promising way of strengthening young people's interest in volunteering for international projects themselves. The fact that three out of four volunteers actually had taken part in encounters during their adolescence shows that many of the earlier participants do, in fact, make their way to leading encounters themselves.

As the time is short in our workshop I have restricted myself to only a very few results. If you are interested in more results, you can read them in the book “Begegnung schafft Perspektiven”. This can be ordered and downloaded for free – in German, French and Polish – but not in English!

Multi-level-analysis

I want to move on to a topic more from a researcher's perspective. An important advantage of a very large sample is that such a sample allows for statistical calculations that would not make sense with less than 1 000 interviewees. The procedure of multi-level analysis, which is used in this process, has been established over the past years within the framework of the large school achievement studies, in particular the PISA, as an important analysis tool. Nevertheless, it has almost never been used so far due to lack of data with respect to youth work activities.

The main concept of multi-level analysis is based on its ability to analyse effects at the individual and the group level at the same time. The background of this method is constituted by complex regression analysis.

Table: Results of the multi-level analysis

<i>learning experiences:</i>	personalit y	political reflection	intercultural experiences
<i>individual variables</i>			
age		++	+
difference for girls		--	
difference for adolescents with prior experience			
difference for French adolescents	++		
difference for Polish adolescents	++	--	
difference for adolescents of other nationalities	++	--	++
<i>general group variables</i>			
difference for international encounters v. camps		+	++
<i>group size</i>			
<i>aims of workers (group level)</i>			
aim personality	++		
aim political reflection		++	
aim intercultural experiences			++

N=5 136 participants and 973 youth group leaders from a selected sample of youth encounters and youth camps.

NB: The data ranked according to ethnicity are represented as the difference from the data of the German adolescents for reasons of simplification.

+ positive interrelation

++ highly positive interrelation

- negative interrelation

-- highly negative interrelation

The table represents crucial insights of multi-level analysis in a compact form. In the three columns on the right, three key learning experiences which potentially are to be gained during camps or encounters are listed as criteria variables: personality, political reflection and intercultural experiences. The table explains interrelations with the predictors listed in the first column.

First of all, the individual predictors are represented (yellow background). An interrelation between age and experiences of political reflection as well as intercultural experiences can be seen. Regarding gender, only one effect is statistically significant, namely that boys report a reflection on political topics more often than girls. Prior experience, that is, whether the adolescents have already attended a youth travel group or not, does not have any measurable effect on the criteria variables. The significance of the country of origin of the adolescents differs depending on the respective criteria. Regarding personality, German adolescents benefit least, while political reflection is rather typical for adolescents from Germany and France. When it comes to intercultural experiences, only the values for adolescents from the "other" countries (e.g. in trilateral encounters) are significantly higher.

Two predictors were included at group level (orange background). The group size proves to have little relevance as a predictor. But there are significant differences depending on the respective type of travel groups: for international youth encounters, the values regarding political reflection and intercultural experiences in particular are significantly higher than for youth camps. This result may be considered as a confirmation of the programmatic claim that international youth encounters make a much bigger contribution to understanding strangers because of a direct contact with different

countries and cultures than group travel with adolescents from the same country, even if the camp in question takes place in a foreign country, which is usually the case.

One of the most interesting results can be seen in the part of the table with the blue background. The aims, which were asked for at the beginning of the measure, were aggregated for each measure (i.e. the mean value of all workers was calculated). If it is true that the workers' aims influence the events during a camp or encounter, this must lead to specific interrelations between the workers' aims and the corresponding experiences of the participants. The data show exactly this pattern – even if other predictors were controlled for within the framework of multi-level analysis as potential confounding variables. All the three aims of the workers lead to a respectively higher level of feedback concerning experiences from the participants.

For practitioners in the field of pedagogy, such findings might be especially interesting with respect to staff training: The “personal value system” of the workers obviously shapes the learning experiences of the young group members. At the same time, the provable influence of a conceptual focus on the experiences of the adolescents becomes apparent – an insight that is of crucial importance regarding evidence of the effect of youth work which has rarely been shown in empirical studies to date.

Evaluation in “Easy English”



For organisations from Germany, France and Poland our evaluation tool is available for free and can be downloaded. We know that also other organisations would like to use the tool – but we couldn't help them.

We have sometimes received “do-it-yourself”-questionnaires from other international backgrounds: Organisations have for example translated our questionnaires into Turkish and Serbian. But certainly, a scientific version would look a lot different from these hand-made versions.

In order to make our system available to other nations as well, we have developed a new tool, which actually has its first presentation in this conference: Our questionnaire in “Easy English”, provided with the help of IJAB (Germany).

The questionnaire in “Easy English” is kept

GrafStat - Antworten bearbeiten

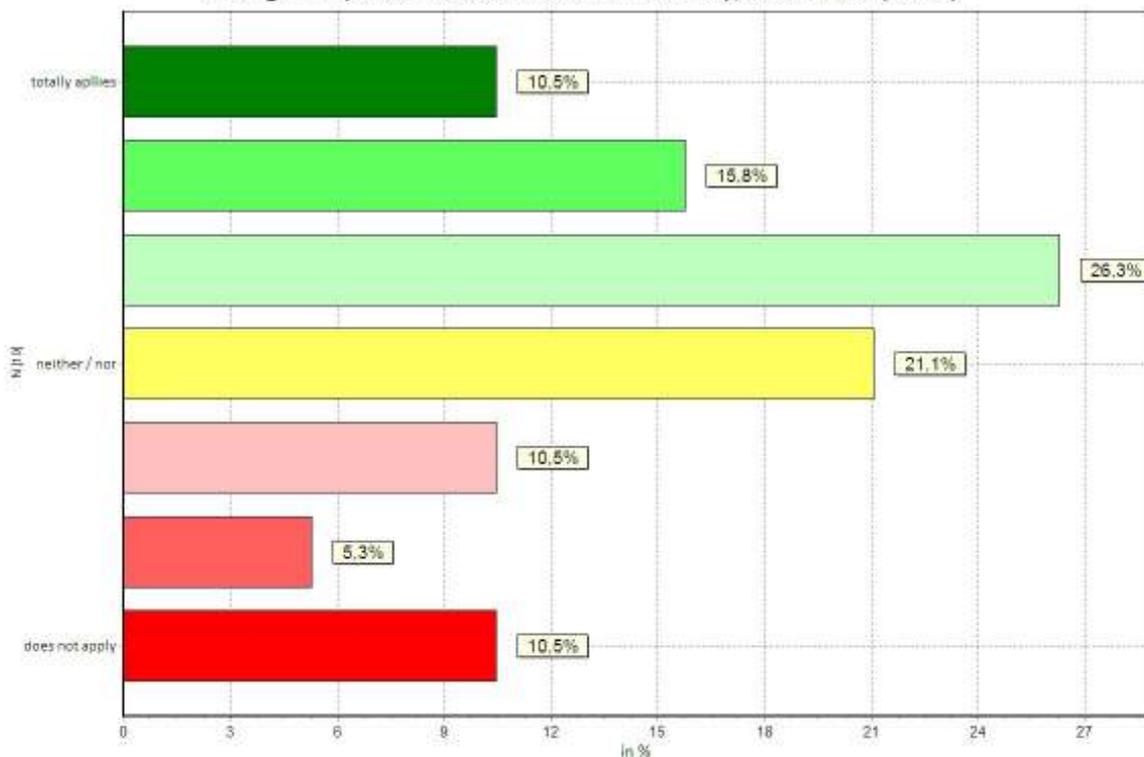
Antwort(en)	Frage
8	Travel
5	Housing
3	Meals
2	Weather
7	Programme
8	Group activities
6	Free time
8	Organisation
9	Rules
10	Fun
8	Atmosphere
10	Staff
9	Group
9	Overall opinion
7	01: I have made new friends in this exchange
6	02: I have improved my foreign language knowledge
5	03: We participants had the chance to design the programme for the exchange together
7	04: I discovered new sides and talents in myself.
7	05: I discovered new interests and hobbies during this exchange
4	06: During this time I learned something about other religions
5	07: The staff took me seriously
4	08: Now I would like to learn the other language(s).
6	09: The rules were the same for participants from all countries
7	10: I want to learn more about the other country/countries.
7	11: After this experience, I see some of what we do at home differently
2	12: I only spoke with other people in my own language.
5	13: There was a lot of conflict among the participants during the exchange
6	14: The exchange programme changed my ideas about the partner country/countries.
1	15: Auch ohne Fremdsprachenkenntnisse konnten wir uns verständigen. (T272)

Frage 20

1	Does not at apply
2	
3	
4	neither / nor
5	
6	
7	totally applies

Speichern 1 ohne Nummern

14: The exchange programme changed my ideas about the other country/countries. (T284)



Ideas for future research

From its beginning, the research project has been open to new developments. Currently we think into different directions – and basically it is a question of funding, which of the directions we can take:

- questionnaires for children: In Germany, a study by Heike Peters has proven, that it is possible for children in the age of 8-12 to fill in questionnaires with an easy language. As the field of international youth exchange also moves more and more towards children as participants, it would be a good idea to have childrens' questionnaires.
- Some think, that it is somewhat outdated to still use paper and pencil. One could think about setting up our tool in a digital way for smartphones. I am still a bit sceptical about this, but it is worth a try.
- panel study: For a panel study we would have to obtain a clearly defined sub-sample which remains largely unchanged every year. In contrast to the currently “accidentally” submitted data, a fixed database from the same youth organisations would be a reliable database for ongoing changes over time – following the research principle “if you want to measure change, don't change the measure”. Even with a number of only about 30 to 40 encounters (approximately 1 000 participants) in such a panel study, reliable monitoring data might be collected for the field of international youth encounters over the years – this would also offer the opportunity to make multi-level analysis calculations regularly and provide new comparative data for self-evaluation every year.

If the scientific community in non-formal learning wants to take a major step in advancing knowledge on youth travel, a panel study based on joint evaluation might be one of the most realistic ways to get there.

As you see: Our tool has quite some perspectives for future work. We would be very interested to develop these potentials further on a European level in cooperation with other countries and researchers.