

**Voluntary Activities and Civil Learning –
Findings of a Preparatory Survey for a European Case Study**

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Introduction

On the basis of biographical data of young people in seven European countries (UK, Denmark, Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Spain) we examined civil learning processes in the wake of voluntary activities. The following remarks are of a general kind, though, because the current stage of our research does not yet allow to elaborate on country-specific particularities.

With reference to the actual state of the respective academic debate, it is safe to say that the effects which are generated by the voluntary engagement of young people are not well understood. Only few studies concentrate on the question of how learning in this special sphere is structured and whether or not learning processes of a civil kind do take place at all. The question of *what* it is exactly, that might be learned in the wake of voluntary activities, is disputed as well.

On the one side it is stated that voluntary activities bring about processes of *social learning*, meaning the advancement of informal social competences. The other side points to the civic aspects of voluntary activities, aiming at the promotion of abilities to engage oneself for the

cohesion and integration of the community or society at large. This form of learning can be called *civic learning*. While social learning in the sense of social competences refers to the private sphere, civic learning alludes to the public or societal dimension –in a wider sense to the constitution of social capital.

The announcings of the EU often immingle these meanings. In that case, the individual profit for the personal development and the public advantages of an active citizenry are not clearly separated. The prominence of voluntary activities is furthermore regularly diminished by its understanding as a labormarket or sociopolitical resource only.

In the following comments, I will focus exclusively on the civic dimension of learning processes in the context of voluntary activities of young people.

On the basis of our preliminary empirical surveys we can demonstrate that voluntary activities generate learning processes conducive to social solidarity, social affiliation and to the strengthening of social capital. In this sense we can affirm that the voluntary engagement of young people does engender civic learning processes.

Three different dimensions, which can vary regionally or on the national level, are of importance in this respect.

- Learning processes within the framework of voluntary activities differ from learning processes in other spheres. There are specific characteristics of civic learning (1)

- If we take voluntary activities as a particular framework for learning processes, we can distinguish wholesome and constraining conditions for civic learning (2)

- It is of eminent relevance how the proximal social environment reacts to the voluntary activities of the young people and how the societal forms of appreciation and recognition look like (3)

1 The specific characteristics of civic learning

Learning processes in the context of voluntary activities follow a genuine 'logic', discerning them from other social contexts and featuring a couple of particularities.

- a) Learning in the scope of voluntary activities is not formalised. This implies that the barriers to these learning processes are relatively low – which boosts the willingness of young people to engage in this field.
- b) We are confronted with a type of learning that is centered on *practical activities and everyday life experiences*. This marks a great difference to learning processes in the education and schooling context, where learning is (in general) more theoretical and less practical in its orientation and conveyance. Young people do not expect a specific learning potential in their voluntary activities. For them, voluntary activities are more about ‘learning-for-life’ in the sense of a general attitudes towards life and normative orientations.
- c) Learning within the limits of voluntary activities is *self-initiated* and *on one’s own responsibility*.
- d) Of special interest is the finding that – from the perspective of the young people – the learning processes are not of an individual kind. In the wake of voluntary engagements activities are realised conjointly and collective experiences take place, resulting in respective learning processes. This means that the young people do not ascribe these experiences to personal efforts or their individual learning capacities but rather to common activities. We find a clear case of collective learning within a group of young people.

2 Learning conditions in the context of voluntary activities

Independent of the individual faculties of the young people the general conditions of the voluntary activities are pivotal in determining whether or not these experiences lead to civic learning. The following dimensions have to be kept in mind.

- a) Our empirical findings point out that the duration and the intensity of the engagement are decisive. The longer and more intense the engagement, the more sustainable the civic learning processes. These aspects are substitutable: we were able to observe fields of voluntary activities in our study where people would only be engaged until a certain goal was reached – the accompanying experiences were so intensive, though, that sustainable learning processes were ignited. This is the case with citizen’s initiatives or action committees, for example.

On the other side, long lasting and constant engagement can enable civic learning as well, even if the field of action does not offer a great depth of experience. This is the case with forms of engagement orientated more towards sociability or companionability, such as in some sectors of voluntary activities associated with sports.

Civic learning remains almost ineffective, however, when the engagement provides deep but overwhelming experiences, which can not be properly reflected.

b) It is fundamental, whether the civic activities allow for an *active participation* and the *chance of a self-determined intervention* by the young people.

c) The field of voluntary action also has to provide the opportunities to bring out the experience *of responsibility* to the young people. This placing and assuming of responsibility seems to represent the vital variable for the question whether a truly civic learning is initiated and whether a continuative voluntary engagement follows.

3 The social environment

The voluntary engagement of young people requires *social flexibility*. It is often a big step to enter the world of voluntary activities and to tolerate learning processes under unfamiliar conditions. It takes courage for young people to discover this world and to expose themselves to these experiences of foreignness. But young people do not get involved in these matters with the overriding goal in mind to create social capital. What happens is that voluntary activities entail *implicit knowledge*, which can not be acquired consciously and which can not simply be transferred into other spheres of living. Instead, the successful application of the newly acquired knowledge depends heavily on the social environment, just as other forms of knowledge. Civic experiences have to be transferrable to other spheres of living in order to support social capital building processes, though. Therefore, a *transformation mechanism* between the voluntary activities and other spheres of living has to be established.

It is because of these interrelations that the reaction of the proximate social environment – family, friends, peer group – to the voluntary activities of the young people is of such great importance. It is absolutely

crucial, whether the respective voluntary activities are regarded as socially acceptable forms of engagement in this social context.

In order that the experiences of voluntary activities can be transformed and that civil society can benefit from them, further attendant supporting is necessary. Only with the help of professional assistance civic learning processes can be sustainable. The intense experiences of voluntary activities alone, especially when they touch the young people emotionally and when they constitute unforgotten adventures, is not sufficient.

Experiences in a foreign world, which are not deliberated can even act in the opposite direction as they can not be worked up. On their own, experiences deriving from voluntary activities can not deploy a civic impact.

Personal as well as societal recognition and acknowledgement is a key variable for the effectiveness of voluntary activities.