



Recognition of non-formal learning: solutions at the grassroots level

by Jo Peeters



For more than 10 years, recognition of non-formal learning has been in the spotlight. Many policy papers have been written, many conferences and seminars have taken place, and many people and organisations have shown interest. However, not every youth organisation knows how to develop and implement a recognition policy or strategy in its daily work. With this article I hope to inspire organisations to start working on it.

Once upon a time there was a youth worker. His job was to train and support volunteers in youth work. After doing this for a while, he found that these volunteers learned a lot from their volunteering, although this was not their reason, or at least not their main reason, for being a volunteer.

How did he find out? Well, mainly because the volunteers told him. Not directly, by saying: "Hey, look what I've learned!", but indirectly, by asking: "I am applying for a job, can you provide me with a testimonial?" or: "I am at a school for vocational education where I have to learn in the classroom all kinds of things that I already learned by volunteering."

So, the youth worker thought, well, I think that **my volunteers deserve some kind of support in this area.** He managed to get some project funding, and after two years proudly presented a "recognition toolkit", developed with and tested by volunteers. It was mainly based – to be honest – on things that others had developed here and there in Europe. It was titled "Erkenning voor de competenties van scoutingleid(st)ers"(Recognition of scout leaders' competences).

One of the things he was really proud of was a CD with a portfolio for volunteers, based on a model that had been developed in Switzerland. Unfortunately, a study among volunteers, done two years after the presentation of the toolkit, showed that no one used it and that it was assessed as the most useless part of the toolkit.

The "competence profile for the youth leader" however appeared to be the best part of it, since **this helped the volunteer to explain his competences to other people.**

And now, almost 10 years after producing this first toolkit, here is the youth worker again. It's me, I am that youth worker. And after 10 years of experimenting, searching, developing, travelling through Europe, attending conferences and seminars, I ask myself: **why do we still not have a well-established, well-known, well-accepted system to make the competences of volunteers visible?**

My main concern is still that the "volunteer around the corner" can benefit from volunteer work by getting his or her competences recognised. And maybe this is also a way to make volunteering more attractive, and attract new volunteers.

Nowadays I am not only working with and for volunteers in scouting, but for volunteers in youth work in general. I am working with a model that starts at the point where the volunteer is. It is a 10-step model, but not all the steps are relevant for every volunteer:

STEP 1

Commitment

Do I want to invest time and effort to get recognition?

I have to be aware:

- ☛ that my bottle is half-full;
- ☛ of my own responsibility;
- ☛ of my support options.

STEP 2

Starting up and setting targets

What is my motivation to get recognition, and what are my goals?

Name starting position:

- ☛ my motivation;
 - ☛ personal goals;
 - ☛ personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threads.
- Set personal goals (alone or with others).

STEP 3

Preparing personal profile

How do I show my half-full bottle?

Choice of format portfolio.

Personalising my validation approach.

STEP 4

Retrospective, developing personal profile

What have I done and learned until now?

Fill in your portfolio.

Gather proof of evidence.

Insight into personal learning and work experiences.

Insight into possible perspectives.

STEP 5

Choosing the standard

For example, the qualifications framework that is used in vocational education.

STEP 6

Valuation

Comparing my competences with the standard I have chosen.

Assessment of my portfolio, internal and external, explicit and implicit, depending on my goals.

STEP 7

Finalising validation

Getting formal recognition from an external institute.

Accreditation.

Personal advice; current and development potential.

STEP 8

Prospective: advice/personal development:

Making a plan for further personal growth/development/education.

Create my personal development plan.

Now I can discuss with others (private, company, volunteers, school) how I can reach my goals.

STEP 9

Working on personal development

Executing personal development plan.

Evaluating personal development plan.

STEP 10

Empowerment

I keep working on my personal development.

I choose a form/content in which my personal development stays central in my career development.



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So, this is an individual process that can be different for every volunteer, even for volunteers who are doing the same kind of work in the same organisation. Because, on one hand every volunteer has a different level of awareness of his or her competences, on the other hand the value of and need for (external) recognition is not the same for every volunteer.

In this context it is important to be aware of the differences between recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning, although the abbreviations RPL, VPL, and APL are very often used as if we were talking about the same thing.

Does this individual approach mean that there is no “common process”, something that the organisation can contribute? No, the contrary is true. There is a lot that the organisation can offer to support the volunteer in having his or her competences recognised, validated and accredited. Some suggestions:



Training certificate

A good training certificate mentions the contents of the training programme, how long it lasted, the level (for example, related to the European Qualifications Framework), and a reference to the (website of) the training institute.

Testimonials

A good testimonial gives a description of the work the volunteer has done, his or her responsibilities, and the level of autonomy: did he or she work with support, independently, or in an executive position. It's also important to mention the duration (one year? two years?), the number of hours spent per day/week/month, and a contact person.

Suggestions on how to describe your voluntary work on your CV

Things to consider: do you put your voluntary work under “hobby/free time” or under “work experience”. Can you describe the importance of your voluntary work to the job you are applying for?



Competence profiles for the various positions of volunteers

A competence profile is a list of competences that you can acquire by doing a certain voluntary job. It helps the volunteer to reflect on his or her own development. It also helps to “translate” the voluntary work to the labour market or to vocational education.

Tools for self-assessment

Self assessment is done by the volunteer to get an impression of the competences he or she has acquired. It also helps him or her to explore how useful these competences are outside the voluntary work. Self-assessment can be done in two ways. One way is to define on which level he or she has acquired the competence, the other way is to compare the competence with an external standard.

Assessment by others

Assessment by others can support and strengthen, but also nuance and relativise, the outcomes of the self-assessment. It can be done by other volunteers/team members, the manager of the volunteer, or the clients/members he or she has worked for.

Documenting products/results of the work of the volunteer

One of the most important steps in the recognition process is that you are able to show examples of the work you have done as a volunteer. Here you can think of reports of activities, minutes of meetings, pictures/movies of things you have made or of activities you have performed. Also signed declarations from your manager, thank you letters from participants, and your own written reflections on the job you have done can be useful. Be sure that it's clear what your role was: a general programme of a summer camp or a training course that you were responsible for is not enough.

Gathering evidence

Criteria for evidence are authenticity (is it really about you), relevance (does it really say something about the work process and your level of control), topicality (how recent is it), quantity (how often have you done it, how many things have you made), and variety (have you done the voluntary work with different target groups and/or in different situations).

Offering a portfolio for volunteers

A portfolio is an organised collection of everything you have learned and all the (voluntary) work you have done. It can also contain personal information. The idea comes from the world of art, where artists use a portfolio to show examples of their work. It can be digital, but also in the form of a case with everything on paper in it.

Making an agreement with institutes for formal recognition

Institutes for formal recognition are different in each country. Some countries have award systems, in some countries you have to get in touch with schools for vocational education and/or employers' institutes.

