Alice in a Wonderland: Creating an Institutional Pathway for Students' Community Engagement Recognition at The University of Rijeka
(personal and institutional self-ethnography)

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Abstract

This is a personal and institutional self-ethnography that describes how a certain change on recognising youth engagement in the community as well as the non-formal and informal learning of students can be introduced into robust and rigid system, like higher education/ university is. Telling the story about the University of Rijeka, we'll be discussing various factors relevant for introducing such a change, being at the same time respectful towards the four pillars of recognition - formal, political, social and personal/self-recognition. This story is a personal narrative of an institutional change; of persistence and strategic alliances with various social partners inside and outside the university, that describes a journey on a way to synergise formal, non-formal and informal learning as well as forms of students' community engagement recognition and validation at The University of Rijeka.

Story/Personal Narrative

This is quite a personal story of bringing a change into university. This is why in particular I can portrait this next 10-15 minutes as a certain personal and institutional self-ethnography. It is a story of brining certain elements of youth work (non-formal and informal learning) and it's recognition more close to the students of education, and then of a snow-ball effect that spilled the particular case of a good example into institutional policy and then in practice, from one department to one Faculty, from one Faculty to the university level.

To start a change within such a robust and rigid institution, like university is, before anything, you need to be aware that you're about to enter a very looooong process that sometimes resembles battlefield, sometimes it resembles you talking to the walls, sometimes

it resembles you drowning in the fast running river of non-understanding and resistance…
but you persist, and you continue swimming…even it if means swimming the upstream…
To start a change within such a robust and rigid institution, like university is, what you need
for the start is/are (I) institutional leader(s), those at various governing positions that
understand the change you want to introduce, and can directly influence the chain of
decision making process, and (II) institutional enthusiasts, those who will 'fight' within the
system of its own pillar activities - in this particular case, it was about the education of our
students. You need to create an alliance of strategic partners, be persistent, committed to
your goal(s), and above everything - very, very, very patient and with a clear idea where you
want to go, and how to come there…unlike the Alice in Wonderland…however, you often
end up filling like Alice in Wonderland, anyway…

A little diagnose, just to place the story in a certain context. At the time, I had more then 10
years of experience in the youth sector, dominantly in Croatia, but with a certain
international connections, doing both research and lecturing in the field outside of Croatia.
And my focus has been the university civic mission - how to better connect university and
the local community; how to create an engaged university; how to better connect both
students and academics with the community and the real life that has been going on there…
And to get back to the story that brings me here - I wasn't very happy about the educational
opportunities my students of education/pedagogy had…or, better to say, did not have. It was
all too formal, non-connected with their/our (local) community/ies, there were no (serious)
examples of collaborating with civil society organisations, it was too much about theory and
less about their practical work, and even when that one was in place, it was all about the
institutional work, while the civil sector was unduly neglected. What this Alice had in mind
was how to create a learning environment that would bring into synergy formal, non-formal
and informal learning. Or, at least, that would build bridges between formal, non-formal and
informal learning. What I had in mind was a mutually responsible but still attractive learning
environment for students to match their profession and various interests with the learning
and working opportunities in their intermediate university environment.

So my journey on the way of University of Rijeka institutionalising platform and tools for
the recognition of our students' non-formal and informal learning began around 10 years ago
when I found the true university/institutional leader…at the time she was a vice-rector for
teaching affairs and students. Brilliant, open-minded, with shared principles and values
about the education and the role of non-formal and informal learning and students'
engagement in the community for their own learning and growing up process. Those so-
called "soft skills", that many in the academia do not find relevant for teaching and learning,
she found crucially important for the young people's education. We were on the common
ground, both believing that our university should play a more important role in improving
the inclusion and well-being of our students and empower them to be active citizens. We

'just' needed to figure out how :) We were sure that we wanted our university to communicate those values and principles more directly with our students, and our local community. We wanted them to know that we actually do care about the educational opportunities for our students…so we set up a certain strategical framework - what we're about to do…when…how…with whom on our side…but at the same time detecting those who might oppose…and thinking about how to overcome challenges on the way.

So let me guide you through the couple of steps of our joint journey…we knew we have to work on several platforms in parallel in order to really bring in the culture of valuing and recognising the importance of non-formal and informal learning of our students. We knew we had to and wanted to target all four dimensions of recognition - formal, political, social and personal/self-recognition. We knew we needed to intervene into university and its constituents' strategic documents; we knew we had to tackle the issue from the inside, including students into the process; we knew it was important for the process to be inclusive in respective to various social partners from the non-academic community; we knew we had to think about how to promote our ideas among academics working at the university; we knew we wanted to make it part of the formal study programmes so that our students can gain ECTS points for their engagement outside the academia, and for their own learning that happens outside the academia as well. Our motto at the time was - less is more; keep it short and simple; one step at the time but several steps ahead in thinking and re-thinking our strategy.

We started with the political dimension of the recognition as we needed to make it part of the relevant strategic documents. The first step was to put 'institutionalisation of students' community engagement, its recognition and validation' into UNIRi Strategic Plan 2007-2013 (and later on 2014-2020), as it gave us the "political base" for continuing the 'battle'. This was the first step checked - placing the importance of non-formal education and the informal learning and its recognition into relevant strategic documents. The second step was following soon as we established at The University of Rijeka two new Rector's Awards - The Rector's Award for the Best Student Volunteer and The Rector's Award for the Best Student Activist Project/Engagement. The first 'soft' message was sent out to all of our students - your university values and recognises the importance of your volunteering in the community, and we want you to know that!

At the same time, at the Department of Education/Pedagogy, we started with a certain educational experiment - that will later on become a success story, recognised even in the process of the university re-accreditation - we gave our students an opportunity to receive 1 ECTS point each semester for their engagement in various organisations and institutions in the community. It was more then recognising their (volunteering) engagement - what we wanted for our students is to get engaged in the learning process in various youth and for the

youth organisations, that is structured in terms of learning objectives, with learning time and learning support available, and that is intentional and connected to their chosen field of profession of pedagogue. As this proved to be very successful, and our students were coming back with their reports and reflective diaries witnessing and proving their own learning as well as professional and personal growing up (personal/self-recognition), we raised up the bar by giving them the opportunity to match their engagement with the 3 ECTS points every semester (as part of the regular study programme, not as an addition). Some five years later, my Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences went through the process of re-accreditation, and this particular practice at our department was praised in the international committee report as a success story, with the recommendation to create it as an institutional policy that will allow for all of our students to have such an opportunity. This was the second step checked - scaling up the change from one department to all 11 of them. Still, it was the story of 'just' one institution at the whole University.

By witnessing the success this practice had at this particular institution of mine, and now by having it being recognised at the level of formal international institutional accreditation process, still the vice-rector at the time, initiated the vote on The University Senate Charter on Formal Recognition of Competences Gained Through Community-Based Engagement. Reflecting the participatory nature of youth policy, we engaged students in creating the policy at the university level. We held focus groups with students from various disciplines and regular meetings with The Students' Senate and students' organisations. What this Charter allows our students is to receive 5-10% of ECTS points of the whole study program for their own community engagement (180 ECTS for undergraduate - 3 years, 9-18 ECTS for CE; 120 ECTS for graduate - 2 years, 6-12 ECTS for CE).

But in order to actually create such an opportunity for our students, we needed to get the academics on board, as we needed them to re-think the way they're doing their teaching; we needed academics on board as they are the creators of the syllabi that we wanted to serve as a platform for our students' engagement in the community; we needed academics on board as we wanted both elective and mandatory courses to become part of this institutional change. This is where bottom-up and top-down policies and ways of bringing in the 'reform' usually clash :) What we did was a mix-up of both…still, the university is an institution with its own 'rules of the game', and both ways of brining in the change proved to be successful. Putting it on agenda proved even easier then we thought, as the vice-rector from this story, became a rector in the meantime :)

Today, our students from various institutions at the university can get 5-10% of the ECTS points through various forms of own engagement and participation in the non-formal learning education/trainings. Procedures for recognition and validation vary from place to place as we wanted each institution to find it's own best strategy, respecting the disciplinary

differences, as well as different forms of governing. But still - our students have an amazing opportunity to match their own interests, their own professional and personal learning with organisations, institutions and projects in the community. With such a policy in place, we sent a message to all of our social partners and beyond - we know that learning is happening outside our university walls, we respect that, and we want to recognise that at the formal level.

Last year our university went one step ahead with the accredited life-long learning programme "Youth in the Contemporary Society" that started in collaboration with the Institute for Social research in Zagreb. One semester long programme with 30 ECTS points is another form of bringing together formal, non-formal and informal learning at our university. The programme targeted people from various sectors who work or want to work with young people. Our idea was to create a new kind of learning environment for them to get closure to the world of theory and practice in youth sector. The first year brought us 30 participants, not only from Croatia, but other countries in the region as well. They're still in…we'll evaluate soon this first year generation, and that will allow us to re-think and re-design the programme following their recommendations. In the meantime we went one step further in collaboration with The University of Ljubljana and The Institute for Social Research in Zagreb by applying for the joint study programme in youth studies.

The charter on Formal Recognition of Competences Gained Through Community-Based Engagement, accompanied with the university projects of re-designing of all of the study programmes at the university level, and newly-organised life-long learning programme on youth in contemporary society, brought in a certain revolution. And when you bring in such a 'revolution' into the system, bearing in midd the slowness and resilience of the university as an institution, you know you're gonna have people on all three sides - those pro, those contra and those who play a 'Switzerland' state of mind. Regardless of the coherent vision we had in mine, we encountered a lot of challenges. Let me mention just some of them…

- the challenge of making the concept of (non-formal) learning outside the academia as well as students' engagement relevant for academia - 'battle' on the relation academic vs. non-academic, formal vs. non-formal
- lack of confidence in the academic community regarding the effectiveness of non-formal learning and youth work activities
- differences between the institutions at the university in practising recognition and validation of students' engagement and non-formal learning
- risking formalisation of non-formal learning/education as well as of institutionalising students' volunteering
- trusting community/social partners regarding the assuring quality in in non-formal learning/education and students' engagement in their own organisations
- creating partnerships

- being dependent on other sectors

What I find important about this story is that - despite of various challenges that we have overcome, and some that are still out there to tackle - this is a story about a change. This is story about a positive change brought up by committed people - by being knowledgeable about the system they want to change, and by knowing how to work within such a system; by being aware of the importance of building strategic partnerships with social partners; by being respective to students by engaging them in the process; by not being afraid to commit ourselves to bring in strategic and practical novelties…