

## MOOC – ESSENTIALS OF YOUTH WORK

### Podcast on the history of youth work

#### TRANSCRIPT

**Dariusz** [00:00:02] Welcome to our podcast. Today, we are going to talk about the history of youth work, and we have invited today two guests. We have Howard Williamson here, who is a youth worker and also a professor of European youth policy at University of South Wales. And we also have Jan Vanhee who works on European and international youth policy in the Division Knowledge and Policy at the Department of Culture, Youth and Media in the Flemish community of Belgium. Welcome - both of you. We are going to talk about history of youth work, which is quite a very big topic, and we don't have a lot of time to talk about it. So, I would like to start with asking you about your reflection, your impressions about your involvement in the project on the history of youth work in Europe. Because you both contributed vastly to the project, which in the end, what we also mention in our course, resulted with seven-volume series on the history of youth work in Europe. I would like to ask you, why did you both embark on this journey? What was your motivation? Maybe Howard you can start?

**Howard** [00:01:18] Well, it already started with Filip Cousse, who's been the co-editor of all the volumes all the way through with other people. Filip did his PhD on the history of youth work in Flanders. And he happened to go to a UK conference in the north of England, which had been doing the history of youth work in the UK, in England, primarily for many, many years, and published quite a number of volumes, about five volumes. And he came back rather inspired by that. He defended his thesis at the University of Ghent and Jan attended that. So, Jan and Filip were connected through that. I knew Filip through the young researcher seminars in Budapest, and I knew Hanjo very well, so engaged the partnership. It was the idea, I think was probably and Jan can confirm this as something to do with a conversation between Jan and Filip and Jan and Hanjo. I certainly sat in a bar with Filip in Strasbourg and Filip was telling me about this and I said, if you want some help, I'd love to be part of it. And so, we had a couple of seminars in Blankenberge, and a third in Ghent connected to the European Youth Work Convention, the first one in 2010. And every time we had a small seminar, we realised that there were many other issues, other different countries stories or other kinds of themes that needed further exploration and attention if we were going to understand contemporary youth work. So, it just grew from there.

**Dariusz** [00:02:51] Jan?

**Jan** [00:02:55] My entrance... I'm also in a youth worker, especially in a long-standing period as as a volunteer and the greatest youth movement in my country also. And I became later then the secretary general. But what... youth work is very well developed in Flanders Belgium, but also in the other two communities. And what I have seen in recent years that several, especially youth movements and youth organisations, celebrated their 50th, 75th, 80th anniversary. We have a

variety of activities and alongside efforts also to safeguard their heritage, especially on the local level. I saw they were organising exhibitions and they explored their archives to present the origin and history of their own organisation. And that fascinated me. Myself, I made a book of my own local youth organisation on the celebration of 35 years. And that was in 1981. So in 1981, that was a huge celebration and huge work also to document that book. And it had a huge recognition and a huge response, even from the minister of culture and the office of the Prime Minister in that time of Belgium also. I was always interested in history even I'm educated as a social worker. And because Filip Cousse belongs to the same youth movement as myself, I was triggered also by the fact he was defending his PhD at the University of Ghent. And the one strong part was the history of youth work in Europe with amazing links and parallels with similar developments in countries like UK, like Germany and others. And that was for me media entrance because in that time. I was already active, what was ninety-nine for my country in the EU and in multilateral representation, so that we just needed to do something with that, especially in the upcoming presidency that we organised. And I coordinated the second time in 2013, 2010. And also, just to end, there are a lot of students making their master thesis linked with the youth activity, youth organisation and all those things. And some professors at the University of Leuven and Ghent and even Brussels were interested in that also. I was not seeing that at the European level. And I was worried why the EU and the Council of Europe were not directly interested in those histories because it's all about having a better knowledge and understanding about young people, also active in the youth movements and organisations. It's in line with what Howard also is telling and it's all by coincidence that we are, or not, that we put forward that amazing, huge work of seven volumes.

**Dariusz** [00:07:29] It's really amazing, really impressive - also to go through it, to read it. Sometimes it's quite difficult as well. And it really needs time and attention to really dwell into what is there in this in this book? It's actually repeated several times in the volumes. And also, when you look at the existing definitions or descriptions, I would say, of youth work, which is highlighting its diversity, the diversity in form, diversity of people that it reaches, diversity of the methods and so on. So, taking into account this diversity in its different aspects, when researching the history of youth work, when reflecting on the history of youth work in Europe, because this was what the project was about. But also, we can think about the global aspect - what kind of questions are we actually looking for? What do we actually mean by the history of youth work? What is it?

**Jan** [00:08:33] I think as a responsible today for giving form and content to youth work and policy and also how to support youth work, you cannot avoid the following questions like what is your work, what is a policy, and supporting youth work at all levels. What do we know today and what are we using for today's developments? And I think the spirit was also that we were doing that with practitioners, researchers, volunteers, paid youth workers, representatives of youth NGOs and all those things. You are right, and so there are many histories we discovered of youth work in Europe. There was a kind of recent history of European youth work, and that is characterised, like you said, by diversity, but also by tension and development. So, it's just in the beginning, even the work is huge. They are all small pieces of a puzzle. And the seven volumes are an invitation, in my view, to go further with it at the local level, at the national level, at the European level. Sometimes during the whole setting of the scene and the whole period, we met people who are afraid to invest in history of youth work, and I think it's always good to know the origin and the sources from where we are coming. Which mistakes we made. What can we learn from it? But the questions in my understanding are very basic. What is your youth work? And when you are looking to the third volume and in the introduction you will read, and perhaps you have to quote that, the conclusions of the third conference, because in my understanding, that gives a very good summary of what we

have in the core of of the whole approach and development of of the project on history of youth work in Europe.

**Dariusz** [00:11:04] Thank you. We provided a lot of references to different volumes because I think in different moments of our course, a lot of things from these seven volumes are relevant. Howard, what answers, what questions are we looking for when we research youth work history?

**Howard** [00:11:19] Well, Jan has given a very detailed and profound set of observations. But I think, you know, when we had the first two seminars in Blankenberge, we were primarily focused on, you know, what's the story from a particular European country. And we had people coming on giving country stories. And what became very clear very quickly was that those countries stories were so different. They were different in terms of, you know, was youth work about spaces for young people, was it about, you know, taking young people forward in their lives, was it about regulation, was it about emancipation, was it about social work, was it about education. And it became very clear, certainly by the third and fourth seminars that you had this phenomenal diversity, of course, which was celebrated at the first European Youth Work Convention. And I think it's very important for people thinking about the evolution of the youth sector in Europe to make the links between the history project and the conventions, because, you know, some of the same people were at the heart of that. And the third history conference was actually held in the first part of the week, and the second part of that week was the first European Youth Work Convention. So, they were very closely linked. And even in the first volume, Filip particularly was writing about the tensions and paradoxes in youth work, that it was very contradictory in many ways, it wasn't clear cut like supposedly social work might be or education or youth justice work. So what on earth was youth work and people looking at the first volume will see, we had this triangle, we had the transit zone and we had the forum and we had and actually that stayed with us all the way through to the very end to the end of volume seven, where we were still talking about youth work being about creating and defending spaces for young people, for their own development, their own autonomy, but also helping young people to move forward in their lives, the kind of bridges that came out of the second European Youth Work Convention. And that's very important. But it is, of course, a tension because youth work isn't about solving crime or getting kids educational qualifications, but it contributes to those sorts of things, as well as participation and voice and other things. And if we assume that youth work is almost anything that is work with young people, then we lose the kind of specialness and specificity of what youth work is rather than it being social work or education. And the final point here is, which is why right at the end we come up with this concept of trilemmas because youth work invariably has to navigate within tension triangles, tensions between - is it about learning or is it about therapy? Is it about regulation or is it about emancipation or something else? Is it about responding to the policies, agendas for young people, or is it about what young people want? Or is it indeed about what youth workers want to do with, for young people in different kinds of context, buildings, up the hills, on the street or whatever. So, there's a whole host of questions that need to be asked about what is it, who should do it, what kind of training and skills do they need? What kind of connection should they be making with other agencies that are working with young people like the police or like schools? It can go on and on and on. But you have to draw boundaries at some point. And really the question for youth work is what kind of boundaries do you want to draw, where and how will that promote recognition and credibility of youth work within the context of a wider professional practice with young people?

**Dariusz** [00:15:20] Thank you for mentioning twelve trilemmas. I think it's a very important reflection and summary of lessons learnt actually from the project. And we also referenced that in our course and suggested for participants to read, because I think this can be very much eye

opening for a lot of people, especially what you said, Howard about that, yes, sometimes we tend to think that youth work is about everything or I would maybe put too many expectations, sometimes these expectations may be very institutionalised, and I'm wondering if it's possible to identify certain milestones in the history of youth work in Europe, something that really influenced youth work that we know nowadays.

**Howard** [00:16:00] Well, I'm sure Jan can answer that. I'll just say very briefly that 20 years ago, you know, the concept of youth work was hardly mentioned in Europe. And if it was mentioned, it tended to be either the European programmes that is called now the Erasmus plus programme, the Youth for Europe programme at the time, or they were the kind of, you know, human rights kind of courses and peace and conflict resolution stuff that was being promoted and supported by the Council of Europe. But it wasn't really called youth work. Nobody was really talking about youth work as a concept, because in most countries it's a concept that doesn't exist. So, yes, there's not even the words for it in the native languages. So, you ask about stepping stones or milestones. It's a new phenomenon in Europe. And Jan very rightly talked about the need to think about youth work at European levels and at national levels, because it's often very different. You know, just one anecdote was that I was once somewhere in Europe where a colleague said they don't do any youth work here because that colleague felt that youth was about human rights, education and peace and conflict resolution. And I said, no, they do loads of youth work here because they had a lot of club-based youth work, which I recognised as following in a particular kind of British tradition. So, we've got lots of different kinds of youth work. And one of the things the history project did by bringing different people together was it made us aware of that massive diversity of things that people put under the banner of youth work. And one of our challenges was first to understand those different interpretations of youth work. And the second thing was to work out whether we could harness it, bring it together and have a more common kind of trajectory or momentum to advocate for youth work at a European level.

**Dariusz** [00:18:06] Well. Jan, would you like to answer?

**Jan** [00:18:09] No, I agree with the analysis of Howard, and so I think it's, and that's an invitation to all the participants on the MOOC to document very well and carefully their work they are doing in youth work and not to neglect it or underestimate the value of it. And especially to document, what you are doing over the years in your youth movement or youth organisation or youth work activities at a local level and then also your responsibilities at the regional and national level to do the same, to document, to work and to invite students, master students or PhD students to work on it, because it's part of the reality in your country. You can do that from different corners. And I think people who are studying history can help us even now with the seven volumes that we have, a kind of diamond, a massive, huge, massive volume of knowledge, and it will be also good that we find some PhD students to work on it because the work is not done. It's just starting and, it's what Howard said also, that was not a case 20 years before. And so we need to continue doing those efforts and everyone can contribute to that. And I'm quite sure.

**Dariusz** [00:20:21] Yeah, for sure. I think that that's important. We asked participants as well to actually provide they own stories as well.

**Jan** [00:20:28] It's about stories and it's about histories. So, it's the two words.

**Dariusz** [00:20:37] Yes, that's what we ask participants to do, so we may end up also with providing more contribution as well to the project. Although the project is finished, maybe it's finished in a

sense that there are books published, but it's not finished in the sense that history continues and there's a lot of still fields to be researched. Another thing is, I think a more kind of practical level and the relevance of what was already done on what's already researched, the relevance to the let's say to people who are youth workers, who are youth work practitioners, professionals now. We live in the times when we talk a lot now about history being rewritten because it has to serve some kind of political agenda. And we talk more and more about that history can teach us nothing because we keep on repeating the same mistakes all the time. So, what does the history of youth work can teach us?

**Howard** [00:21:34] Well, I mean, I you said earlier about the trilemmas, the 12 trilemmas. And, you know, I wrote that really because I think it is a summary, it's an attempt to summarise the issues that have come out of the history project. People may not be terribly interested that, you know, youth work in Greece came out of social work. That's just the top of my head sort of illustration. They may not be terribly interested, but it is important for contemporary youth workers to work out where they sit within many of these triangles, or you could call them pyramids and youth workers... The first triangle I ever wrote was probably 30 years ago when I talked about the demands of public policy, the principles of youth work and the voice of young people. And we talk very blandly about youth workers, about responding to the voice of young people. Well, yes, it significantly is, but not exclusively. Youth work is about certain kinds of principles of participation and empowerment and inclusivity. Yes, it is, but not exclusively. Youth work is about, you know, responding to what governments want youth workers to do with young people. If we ignore that, we ignore that at our peril. And I said, if we get sucked into any of those three corners, then we are paralysed from being good youth workers. We've got to navigate. We've got to negotiate. And the 12 trilemmas give us some sense of how we navigate and negotiate. Do we do stuff in buildings? We know in COVID-19 now, you know, that you don't have to do youth work in buildings. You don't necessarily have to have physical space. You could have virtual space, but youth work would be lost if it was exclusively virtual, any more than it would be lost if it was exclusively physical. It needs to be out there in young people's own space on the street. So, history has given us this huge knowledge base, as Jan put it earlier, which has enabled us to produce the triangles. I think it would have been difficult to produce those triangles abstractly. We probably could have done, but it wouldn't have had the same credibility. And I think it's almost now the launch pad, the trampoline, the starting point for current youth workers across Europe to think about, well, where do they sit within each of those triangles? And they will sit in different places for different reasons. But they've got to have a good reason for wherever they choose to sit.

**Dariusz** [00:24:11] OK. Thank you, Howard. Jan, anything to add? What can history teach us?

**Jan** [00:24:15] I agree. The 12 triangles Howard discovered in the seventh volume, it helps for our navigation. It's a kind of reference especially, and that is an invitation for all youth workers at all levels, in my understanding, volunteers or paid youth workers to reflect on the work we are doing today and the developments we see. And especially when we are exchanging our personal findings and experiences. It's good to confront them and to compare them not only with each other, but also with our references that are... And that is new. Those are a kind of common references in Europe, in whole Europe and the 50 countries that are covered by the Cultural Convention. And still, we know it's not covering all the countries because we have still missing pieces. It's good that every country is looking and document very well the origins of their youth work and the roots or their youth work in their country and to confront them also with those twelve trilemmas. That is helpful also to upgrade the quality of our work and it triggers also our personal learning process to become a better youth worker also, I think.

**Dariusz** [00:26:01] Thank you. These elements that you mentioned, which is that the reflection on what we are doing, how we are doing youth work and also maybe even seeing where it comes from and improving it. This kind of reflection is important. And therefore, the history of youth work can be very, very helpful in that. I think that's it I what I wanted to ask you. I don't know if there is anything else you would like to add from your side that you think it would be important...

**Howard** [00:26:35] A very small point, Dariusz. And it really is that I mean, Filip and I once wrote an article which I think was called something like "Youth work, probably the most difficult job in the world". And part of that is to make people fall about laughing because people think youth work is about sort of knocking a pool ball around or, you know, of sitting in circles and having sort of cozy and cuddly debates. Youth work is, when it's done properly, it's phenomenally complicated. You cannot just rock up and work with a group of young people. You've got to be ready for all kinds of unexpected eventualities. You know, the reflective practitioner, which I know is a book by Donald Schon, but, you know, everyone talks about youth work as being reflective practitioners. You've constantly got to have a range of options at your fingertips. You've got to be ready for the unexpected. You've got to be able to engage in lots of different ways, sometimes quite proactively, sometimes quite reactively. So, youth work... and it doesn't really have any walls and boundaries like social work or education might have. So, it leaves the youth worker very exposed to mistakes or to rather bland practice. And so being a youth worker, when it's done well is an incredibly complex form of practice. And that's why Filip and I wrote that article, because you're constantly navigating between these various different positions.

**Dariusz** [00:28:12] Thank you for this. Thank you, Jan. And thank you, Howard, for your contribution to this podcast. And we are finishing. And we invite you, of course, to read the articles, different parts of the volumes, of the seven volumes of the history of youth work that we provide you in the MOOV. You will find the links in this unit and other units as well. Thanks a lot.