

The Art of Youth Work

Second Edition

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Please note: The perspectives offered and observations made are strictly the personal opinion of the individuals involved. As such, they do not necessarily represent the policy or position of any youth and community service or voluntary organisation by whom the individual may be employed.

Introduction

Things change. There was a time when talk about youth work was conducted by way of vague references to relationships and processes; a time when the work was shrouded in a kind of precious veil. That is no longer possible and actually, never should have been, not if we were ever serious about supporting young people to reach their full potential or other such time honoured youth work aspirations. But anyway, that time has passed. Now, youth work has to be 'curriculum based', and it must produce recorded and accredited outcomes.

In some ways that is OK if by 'curriculum' we mean youth workers and young people having a clear sense of what is to be achieved (in terms of the benefits and learning gains for young people), the processes to be used and the measures by which workers and young people will be able to judge progress and achievements; and if by outcomes we mean the sort of personal and social development that equips young people with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to make informed decisions and take charge of their lives.

It also seems fine to expect that young people should be enabled and supported to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being (DfES, 2003); and good news that services should:

- Be more responsive to what young people and their parents want.
- Balance greater opportunities and support with promoting young people's responsibilities.
- Be more integrated, efficient and effective.
- Improve outcomes for young people while narrowing the gap between those who do well and those who do not.
- Involve a wide range of organisations from the voluntary, community and private sectors in order to increase choice and secure the best outcomes.
- Build on the best of what is currently provided. (DfES, 2005)

All of this supports the 'Change for Children' agenda. But what is the youth work contribution to this and is it different from the contribution to be made by other forms of work with young people? In other words, does youth work have a particular contribution to make to young people's lives and is there a

clear set of 'defining characteristics' that mark it off from other forms of work with young people that may target such issues as crime and anti-social behaviour, drugs and alcohol, young pregnancy, formal education, employment or training, community cohesion, or neighbourhood regeneration?

It has been suggested that seven 'defining features' *when configured together* produce the distinctive practice of youth work. Specifically, an explicit commitment to:

- Young people's voluntary participation.
- Seeking to tip balances of power in their favour.
- Responding to their expectation that youth work will offer them relaxation and fun.
- Responding to their expectation that youth work will penetrate unstimulating environments and break cycles of boredom by offering new experiences and challenging activities.
- Seeing and responding to them simply as young people, as untouched as possible by pre-set labels.
- Working on and from their 'territory', at times defined literally but also as appropriate to include their interests, their current activities and styles and their emotional concerns.
- Respecting and working through their peer networks. (Davies, 2005: 22)

Elsewhere, the 'key dimensions' of youth work have been defined as:

- Focusing on young people in the sense of being an age specific activity.
- Emphasising voluntary participation and relationship in the sense that young people freely enter into relationships with workers and end those relationships when they choose; and where relationships are seen as a fundamental source of learning.
- Committing to association in the sense of joining together in companionship or to undertake some task, and the educative power of playing one's part in a group or association.
- Being friendly and informal, and acting with integrity in the sense that workers should be approachable and friendly; have faith in people; and be trying, themselves, to live good lives. That youth work is driven by conversation and an evolving idea of what might make for well-being and growth.
- Being concerned with the education and, more broadly, the welfare of young people. (Smith, 2002a)

This book argues that these 'defining features' and 'key dimensions' constitute the defining characteristics of youth work because they give expression to a sense of *purpose* for youth work based on supporting young people's:

- Personal development: not merely in terms of the development of the individual but in terms of the *development of the person* – their sense of self, identity and the values that underpin their actions in the world.
- Social development: not in terms of ‘life skills’ or learning about social issues, but rather as the development of young people as *social beings in a social world*.

In so doing, youth work supports young people to learn from their experience; and develop the motivation and capacity to:

- Examine their values.
- Deliberate on the principles of their own moral judgements.
- Develop the skills and dispositions to make informed decisions that can be sustained through committed action.

Integral to this process is the issue of identity in terms of:

- Self-image: a person’s description of self.
- Self-esteem: a person’s evaluation of self, a crucial dimension of which is a person’s adherence to moral and ethical standards. (Coleman and Hendry, 1999)

Philosophy

This makes youth work an exercise in moral philosophy insofar as it enables and supports young people to examine what they consider to be ‘good or bad’, ‘right or wrong’, ‘desirable or undesirable’ in relation to self and others – ‘What sort of person am I?’ ‘What kind of relationships do I want?’ ‘What kind of community/society do I want to live in?’ Fundamentally, youth work confronts Socrates’ question, ‘How should one live?’ which is both singular and plural in the sense that it asks, ‘How should I live?’ as well as, ‘How should anyone live?’ (Williams, 1993).

Such an activity demands young people’s voluntary participation since moral philosophising cannot be absent minded or mechanistic, and neither can it be hidden or coerced. Participation in moral philosophising requires that:

- Youth work’s *purpose* as well as its processes is made explicit to young people.
- Young people engage in discussions that help them to clarify their understanding of what is involved.
- Young people give their conscious and informed consent to engage – not in the rock climbing, arts workshop, health discussion group or camping trip – but in the process of self-examination through which they increasingly integrate their values, actions and identity. (Young, 1999)

Participation in youth work is therefore more than simply taking part or having a say. Participation involves a process of conscious, critical self-reflection that can only be entered into voluntarily.

This participation becomes empowering as the young person increases their capacity to function well 'as a person, not as an instrument' (Fromm, 1993: 117). That is, as a person capable of autonomous rational judgement; acting from free will, voluntarily as opposed to acting 'under compulsion or from ignorance' (Aristotle, 1987: 66); a person who demonstrates:

- A disposition towards increasingly questioning taken-for-granted attitudes, assumptions and beliefs.
- An increasing integration of the values and purposes that permeate their actions and relationships.
- A sense of their own value and identity through different circumstances and pressures. (Pring, 1984)

For empowerment lies not only in the establishment of power-sharing structures or processes but importantly in the reclaiming of oneself as fully intelligent, fully powerful and fully human.

Such deliberations cannot, of course, take place in isolation since learning to become a certain kind of person is a function of the relationships within which we move, and which provide the context for whatever moral reflection we engage in (Kleinig, 1982). For as Aristotle observed, 'the fundamental moral and intellectual activities that go to make up a flourishing life cannot be continuously engaged in with pleasure and interest unless they are engaged in as part of shared activities with others who are themselves morally good persons' (cited in Cooper, 1980: 331). Youth work as an activity in moral philosophising is, therefore, necessarily based on conversation, association and integrity.

Also, in focusing on that particular moment typically known as adolescence, youth work engages with young people as they begin to explore the 'boundaries of freedom', examine how they see themselves and are seen by others, and reflect on their sense of 'personal identity' (Leighton, 1972). Youth work is, therefore, an age specific activity that focuses on young people not because they are disaffected or disengaged; not because they cause problems or have problems; but because they are in the process of creating themselves and developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for lifelong reflection, learning and growth.

This is not to suggest that all young people are the same since they are, after-all, unique individuals who:

- Live in different circumstances e.g. in relation to housing, personal and familial relationships, urban/rural settings.

- Face different issues e.g. in terms of health, crime, employment.
- Have different interests e.g. sport, music, the environment.
- Aspire to different achievements e.g. in relation to educational achievement, career choices or life goals.

Young people are also different because some of them are women and others are men. Some are Black people, others white people. Some have a disability. Some identify as lesbian or gay. And they come from a range of class backgrounds and religious commitments.

However, in focusing on them as *young* people youth work respects and works with peer networks in ways that recognise:

- The similarities in young people's experiences because they are *young*; and
- The differences in young people's experiences as unique individuals who are also members of particular social groups.

Practice

All of this, however, brings us back to the beginning in the sense that, by its nature, youth work is based on a voluntary *relationship* with young people involving honesty, trust, respect and reciprocity; and a youth work *process* that enables and supports young people to learn from their experience and develop themselves as authentic human beings – i.e. people who know themselves and are true to themselves.

The youth work relationship is one in which the young person is accepted and valued; the youth worker has faith in the young person; shows concern and empathy; and takes account of their experiences, opinions and ideas. It is the kind of relationship described by the McNair Committee, as long ago as 1944 (HMSO, 1944: 103), as being 'a guide, philosopher and friend' to young people, which I previously elaborated as providing:

A steer for young people through the philosophical enquiry into the nature, significance and inter-relationship of their values and beliefs, based on a relationship of true friendship – [following Aristotle's definition of] – wanting for someone what one thinks good for his/her sake and not for one's own.

(Young, 1999: 82)

The youth work *process* is, therefore, a reflective exercise that enables and supports young people to:

- Learn from their experience.
- Develop their capacity to think critically.
- Engage in 'sense-making' as a process of continuous self-discovery and re-creation.

Art

The art of youth work is the ability to make and sustain such relationships with young people. In so doing, youth workers need to themselves develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to engage with young people in the process of moral philosophising. The training and development of youth workers therefore needs to provide them with opportunities for their own self-exploration, examination of their own values, development of their own critical skills and enlargement of their own capacity for moral philosophy.

For in the end, adapting Louden's observation about teachers (quoted in Cortazzi, 1993), youth workers do not merely deliver youth work, they define it, interpret it and develop it. It is what youth workers think, what youth workers believe and what youth workers do in practice that ultimately shapes the kind of experience and learning that young people get.

The future for youth work

But none of this happens in a vacuum. Social policies and priorities change. Organisational structures are created and transmuted. Provision and practice are transformed. The question is, where is the future balance to lie between the following?:

- A concern for the welfare of young people as *people*; and a concern for the welfare of young people as *workers and citizens*.
- The provision of things to do and places to go; and the provision of opportunities for young people's personal and social development.
- A focus on informal education; and a focus on prevention and effective early intervention.
- An approach that treats young people as 'customers' who help to shape the services they receive; and an approach that treats young people as 'partners' in the process of learning and development.
- A perception of young people as young people; and a perception of young people as alienated, anti-social, drug and alcohol abusing delinquents in need of social integration.
- A view of young people as achievers of outcomes; and a view of young people as creators of their own lives and the communities of which they are a part.

The hope is that this book will act as a reminder of what youth work was, is and ought to be, and in so doing will help to:

- Support the continuing contribution of youth work as a distinct practice in work with young people;

- Clarify the differences between youth work and other forms of work with young people so as to inform the appropriate contribution of youth work to the ever changing arrangements for services to young people;
- Illuminate the ways in which youth worker training and development could be built on in order to enable practitioners to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to successfully undertake youth work as an exercise in moral philosophy.

Finally, I make no apology for the quotations from youth workers and young people included here, for whilst social policies and organisational structures change, the philosophy of youth work does not. So as dated as these quotations are, they nonetheless continue to exemplify the core purpose and principles of youth work, and the practice that is in danger of being left behind.