

PROMOTING & RECOGNIZING LEARNING IN YOUTH WORK



**“HOW TO CATCH THE SEA FOAM
IN THE BREEZE AND SCATTER IT”**

Tomi Kiilakoski, Finnish Youth Research Network

FOREWORD

Dear reader,

Accompanying young people's learning processes and raising awareness of the importance of learning is a crucial competence that youth workers need these days. It is essential when it comes to giving young people access to international mobility schemes – which of course involves informing target groups about them in the first place.

Between October 2015 and June 2017, the Dutch, Hungarian and German National Agencies and Salto Training & Cooperation Resource Centre worked together on a project called **Time To Show Off!** The main objectives were to collect evidence and knowledge on how youth workers accompany young people's learning processes, to identify the competences they need as practitioners, and explore how these competences can be stimulated by education and training. Based on this foundation, the experts discussed the required competences and proposed ways to achieve a systemic impact on youth worker education and training.

Through their work, the **Time To Show Off!** partners want to support youth workers in accompanying young people as they learn about life and work, navigate their journey to adulthood, and become fully-fledged members of societies.

The Finnish youth researcher Tomi Kiilakoski <https://www.youthresearch.fi/research/researchers/tomi-kiilakoski>, one of the participants of the **Time To Show Off!** expert seminar in April 2017, was invited to share his insights and thoughts specifically on learning in youth work.

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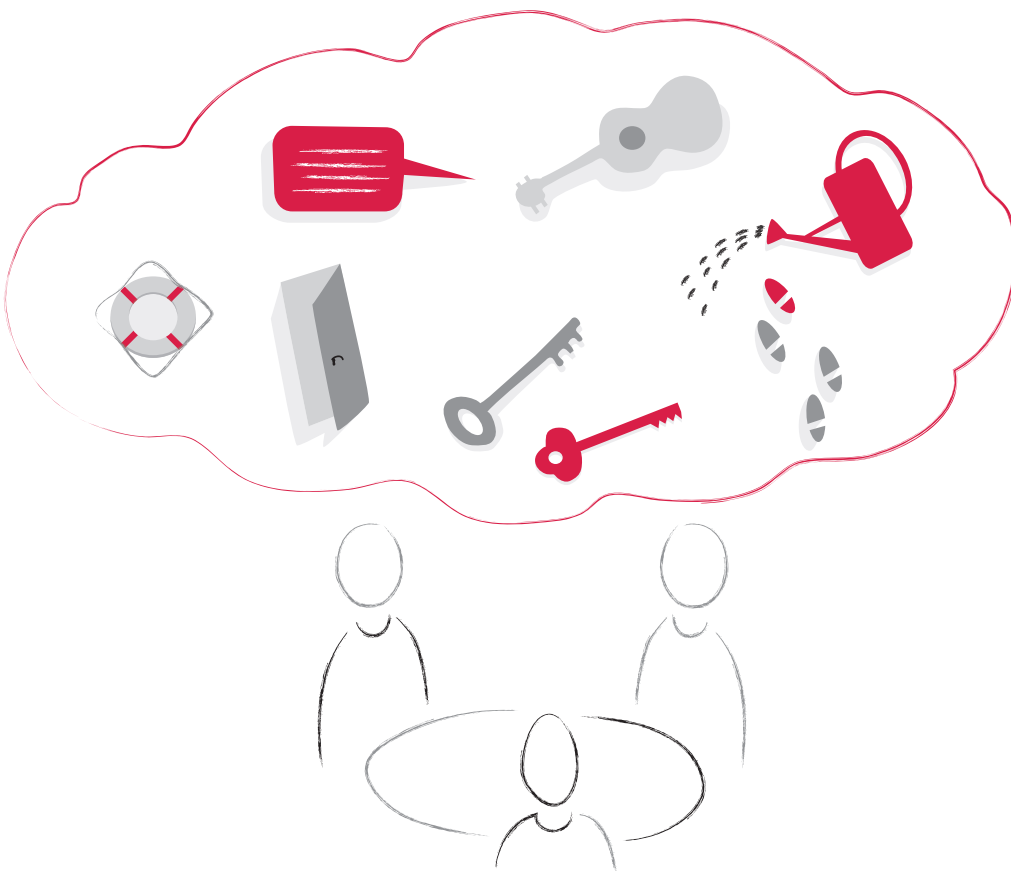
In his Masked Philosopher interview with Le Monde a few years before his death, French philosopher Michel Foucault said: "I'm saying that people must be constantly able to plug into culture and in as many ways as possible". He thought that teaching should be liberated from any institutional setting and that it should be "a possibility that is always being offered". He saw this as a democratic way of helping people to learn, to be able to see things differently, to find new ways of relating to society, to bring new ideas to life. If learning happens only inside educational institutions, we will restrict our abilities too much. We need different ways of learning and plugging into different fascinating areas of life. This would help people to really use their imagination and as a consequence of this "it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it". Using both scientific and poetical language, Foucault was saying that if we open up the barriers of learning, we can contribute to individual and social development. And this would not only pertain to cognitive development, it could also be about getting excited, inspired or even empowered or liberated.



TWO

Michel Foucault's vision of the manifold opportunities of learning outside educational institutions has been taken seriously in recent youth policy developments – a philosopher's dream has been turned into a policy ideal. Today, there is more and more talk about life-long and life-wide learning, about learning that takes place over the course of a whole life and in a multitude of contexts that entail dimensions of learning. Therefore, it is not surprising that youth work has gotten more attention recently. Though there is a debate among scholars whether youth work should be seen as non-formal learning, one thing is certain: young people learn a lot when engaging in youth work activities. They learn both as individuals and as members of communities of practice, where they work together with others towards a shared goal. Learning definitely happens in the sphere of youth work. The question is only: How should youth work negotiate its relationship with learning?

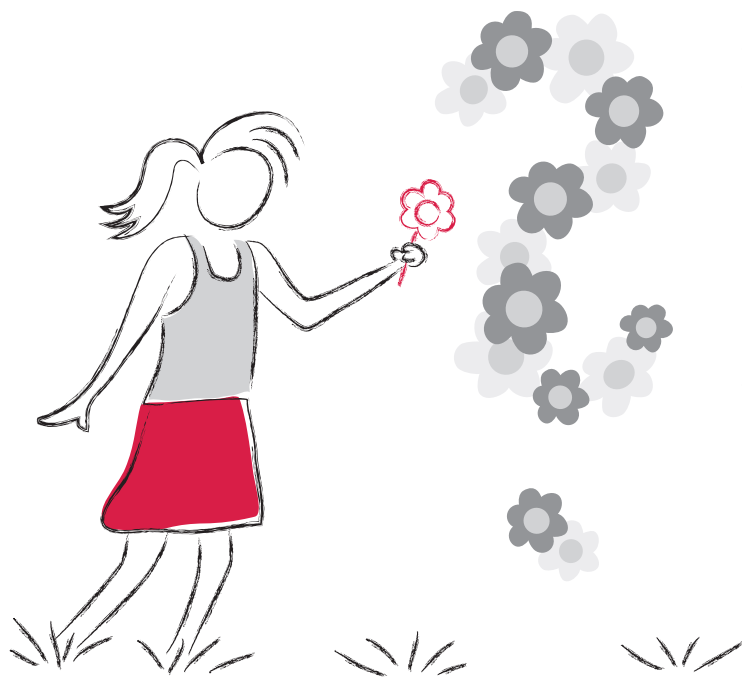




THREE

I had the pleasure of attending an expert seminar called Time To Show Off in Hilversum, Netherlands, from 23rd to 26th April, 2017. The golden triangle of youth policy – youth workers, government, and youth research – was well-represented at the seminar. There were 22 participants from 12 different countries, plus facilitators and other people involved in a wider project. The participants worked in NGOs, as local youth workers, university teachers, researchers and cultural activists. The backgrounds differed considerably, but a common theme clearly stood out: What to think about the relationship between youth work and learning? What different dimensions are there? What methods and procedures could we follow? How can we combine the evaluation of learning with the ethos of youth work?

FOUR



Any worthwhile seminar on youth work is likely to also focus on answers to these fundamental questions. But, having studied philosophy, I tend to value questions more than answers. A good question will remain a good question also in the future, while answers quickly become outdated and unsatisfactory, as the needs of the young, youth cultures, and societies in general change. Our societies today are changing at an ever faster pace and feelings of uncertainty are increasingly becoming a basic emotion. I always keep the wise words of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger in my mind: "Questioning is the piety of thought." So, it is essential that we ask the right questions – the right questions for youth work, the right questions for the young – not necessary the readily available questions of neo-liberal thought.

I think we were asking the right questions at the seminar. One of the questions on the Wall of Questions was: "What do I stand for? What do we stand for?" This question indicates that any serious reflection about evaluating, recognizing or perhaps validating learning (if one wants to go that far) is likely to contain a question about the very nature of youth work. This question has at least two sides. One is of course the basic question regarding what is learned in youth work: How do we better understand the learning processes and outcomes of youth work?

The other side of question is about the politics of evaluating learning: What are we doing when we evaluate and recognize learning – who are we serving? The young, the various individuals, or the institutions?

I believe that there is a tendency in the youth work community to emphasise the open-endedness of youth work, the fluidity, the ability to respond to different needs of the young. There is also often an emphasis on creativity in youth work, on doing things differently, in new and fresh ways. For these reasons, youth workers are sometimes hesitant to talk about learning. To them it can sound too formal and rigid. However, as a scholar of youth work, Jon Ord firmly placed educational responsibility within youth work. By this, Jon highlights the fact that youth work has principles, values and ethics and that we should be able to articulate youth work practices with confidence – as it is unique and valuable.

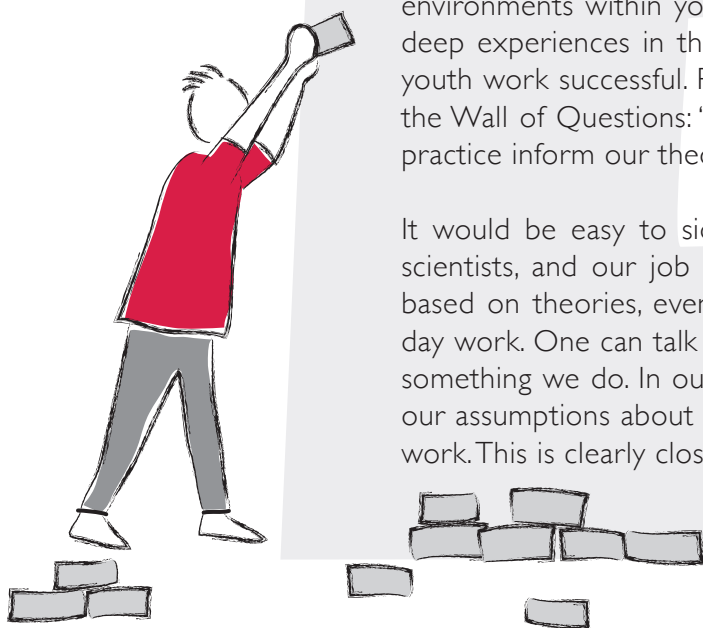
Many thinkers are claiming that we should get rid of a certain picture of learning we have. This picture may be referred to as learning as acquisition or the learning process as transmission – or as Paulo Freire does, as banking concept of education where the learner knows nothing and the teacher knows everything. The learning concept of youth work should pay attention to the fact that youth work is a process, the learning outcomes cannot be spelt out before the process, the context and the people are really important and there is always some element of participation involved. So, one needs to explicate the nature of youth work in order to be able to assess learning. Or, as **Rita Bergstein** pointed out in the seminar, youth work identity needs to be clear before it makes sense to start thinking about facilitation of learning. The way I see this, is that one has to have a clear understanding of youth work before tackling questions about learning. There are already other professions involved in the business of learning, so there is no need for youth work to do what others are already doing. The key is integrating learning dimension in youth work culture.



FIVE

The nature of learning, of course, is far from clear. There were voices in the seminar suggesting that youth work would benefit from more closely studying the different theories of learning. As **Juha Nieminen** emphasized, one cannot pick up only one theory of learning. There is a lesson to be learned (pun intended) in many (or all?) of the different concepts of learning. The way I understood Juha's point is that different theories may help us shed light on those wonderfully diverse ways in which human beings learn, both individually and as a group. Others called for a more detailed understanding of learning – not only evaluating competences or skills learned, but a deeper understanding about the nature of learning itself. To do this, we would need to talk about different learning environments within youth work, the motivation of the young, meaningful and deep experiences in the work – different elements that make the process of youth work successful. Pertaining to this, there were two spot-on questions on the Wall of Questions: "How does theory inform our practice? How does our practice inform our theories?"

It would be easy to sideline these questions by saying that theories are for scientists, and our job is to do youth work. However, our practice is always based on theories, even if we are only vaguely aware of them in our day-to-day work. One can talk about theory-in-use, which refers to the theory behind something we do. In our discussions we talked about the need to be aware of our assumptions about learning, about clarifying the theory-in-use within youth work. This is clearly closely connected to the training of youth workers.

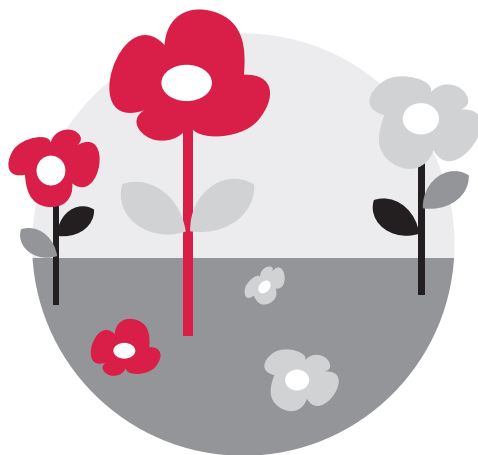


As part of the process, Paul Kloosterman had prepared a research report. In the report he describes youth workers explaining that young people learn when they are “looking back”, “sitting together and talking about the day”, in the situations “where they had to think together about how things went”. This reminds me of the basic point of the theories of experiential and transformative learning (boy, aren’t there many different labels to describe learning?): the experience alone does not give us anything, we need to think about the experience, to reflect on it. Paul is saying that youth workers should be better equipped to facilitate the reflection on learning. To put this another way, we need fun and interesting and captivating activities in youth work but we also need to be able to talk about what we did, experienced, and felt. We need doing, but we need talking as well.

Educational psychologists remind us that there is no linear or systematic way of facilitating learning, of making connections between my experiences and the ideas of others. Sometimes coincidence, luck, differences in opportunities or one’s background play a huge role in the process. Fortunately, this is nothing new to youth workers, who already know that it is important to listen to the stories of young people instead of using pre-defined categories, and who know that different young people are likely to need different ways of interacting with them. Salvi Greco talked about his experiences in youth work, and what he has realized for himself, with one of the questions he wanted all of us to ask in youth work, being: “Who am I to challenge you?”. How do we know what others need and what is challenging to them? Instead of deciding this before the process, we need to be open to different possibilities. This is probably as great a guideline as any in helping the facilitation of learning in youth work.



SEVEN

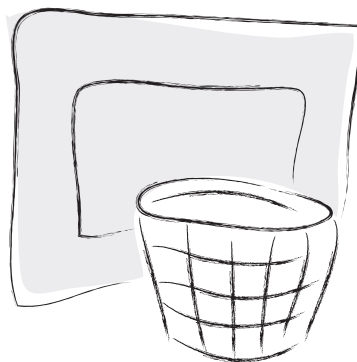


The atmosphere in the seminar was highly favourable towards recognizing and analysing learning in youth work. But the concept was challenged as well. **Elina Nivala** warned us that evaluating learning may only integrate young people into the existing structures of society instead of helping

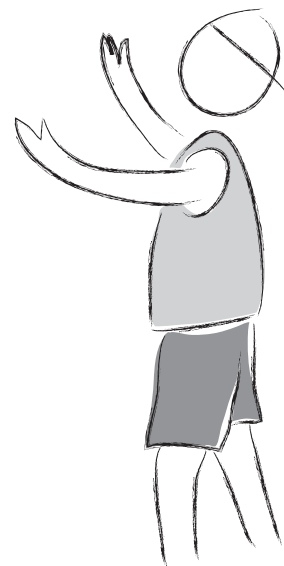
them make the world better. She pointed out that the goal of learning could also be to learn how to criticize our environment, negotiate our relationship with the various demands of society, and potentially work together to build a better future. Elina urged us to think about emancipation; though the concept may be a bit dated, the general idea remains relevant. **Maria Pisani** and **Hilary Tierney** talked about the need to take into account different social struggles, processes of marginalization, and power structures. To them, learning should not only be about employability or being able to cope in society. Here, I added some of my own thoughts and lamented “diploma disease” – horribly contagious and taking over every walk of life in Western societies. I also noted the need to analyse whether youth work really promotes learning among those young people who need it most. In the worst case, we will end up handing over diplomas to exactly those young people who already have a lot of diplomas. In social sciences this is called the Matthew effect: those who already have a lot, tend to get even more.

I think these concerns voiced are crucial for us – and they shouldn’t paralyse us or make us afraid to walk. Instead, they show that while integrating young people into society remains important, we also need to make sure that young people learn how to articulate their worries, hopes and dreams, and learn the skills necessary to make their dreams come true, even if their dreams don’t align completely with the demands of adult society.

One of the core questions in the seminar focused on how to actually evaluate learning in youth work, how to facilitate it, and how to recognise the learning dimensions in youth work. This is something that in the future will need to be worked on further. Here, we couldn't find common ground – there were many questions, some answers, but no clear consensus. There is, however, an interesting example of how to promote learning in youth work. An Austrian model presented by **Klaus Schreiner** describes the competency framework for youth work and work with children (see www.kompetenzrahmen.at). One of the key competences of youth work is to initiate learning, to create a space where learning is possible, and to guide the processes of learning. An Austrian example shows that if we want to put the recognition of learning on the agenda, we cannot leave this up to the respective youth workers, who generally already have more than enough on their plate. Instead, the question has to be answered together by youth workers and the management of youth work, using both bottom-up and top-down ways of working.



EIGHT



NINE



In reflecting on my Hilversum experience, the question remains: What did I learn, what did the experience teach me? First, that there is a lot to be learned when different members of the field of youth come together: a myriad of ideas, experiences and thoughts expressed both in a language of hope and criticism. Second, that question about learning in youth work is tied to a bunch of other questions. Perhaps talking about learning in youth work has proven to be so difficult because we first need to ask other challenging questions, e.g. how exactly youth work relates to formal learning, and how we could renew our practices to be able to evaluate learning. Third, that we still don't know how to successfully integrate the practice of youth work with learning theories. Fourth – that we are clearly already on the right path.



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