



The internal/external dynamic of young people's lives in contemporary europe

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In a previous article "From tools to non-formal learning tools" I considered a possible definition of what a non-formal learning tool might be, of how we could view and characterise it theoretically and how we might use it in practice.

However, such considerations give rise to others. Having attempted a working definition of a non-formal learning tool and how it might be used, the question might be posed as to the context and outcome of employing such learning tools. Of course, the context can be what I described in my last article as the non-formal learning environment and the outcome a specific non-formal learning outcome. In the example I gave, the learning tool was employed creatively to initiate and support a learning process that would help youth workers to try and measure the quality of learning outcomes. The question I pose now is a broader one in terms of both context and outcomes. What is the broader socio-economic context in which youth workers and youth leaders are now working and employing

non-formal learning tools? What are the challenges, concerns and issues facing the young people they work with in contemporary Europe? What are youth workers' and youth leaders' aims and objectives in seeking to support young people in meeting these challenges and in addressing the concerns and issues that currently impact on their lives?

The present socio-economic environment across Europe is more than challenging, it is positively daunting. The impact of the economic downturn on young people presents many challenges, particularly in such areas as youth unemployment, the increasing risk of exclusion and the potential for the well-being of young people to be adversely affected. The unemployment rate for young people in the EU aged 15 to 24 rose sharply from 15 % in February 2008 to over 23.6 % in January 2013. The NEET cohort (young people not in education, employment or training) comprised 7.5m young people aged 15 to 25 in January 2012. In some of the Member States bordering the Mediterranean, the youth employment rate is alarmingly high.

In such a challenging environment, what are the non-formal learning outcomes for young people that will help them to meet these challenges and face the future with confidence and hope? How best can youth workers and youth leaders help young people achieve these outcomes? How can the prevailing socio-economic environment and challenges that young people face on a daily basis be factored into and underpin the use of non-formal learning tools?

One way of approaching these questions is to consider what might be described as the internal/external dynamic of young people's lives today. The internal factors can be conceived of as needs and aspirations: the external factors can be characterised as influences and impacts.

Young people's needs are basic (safety, shelter, food, clothing) and social/environmental (family and peer relationships, role models, education, culture and community). However, it is in their personal and developmental lives (the need to be valued and respected, to be informed and consulted, to participate meaningfully, to be involved in decisions that impact on their lives, to define themselves and forge their own futures) that young people can most readily achieve their aspirations through self realisation.

The external influences and impacts on young people's lives not only reflect and interplay with their needs and aspirations but also present both opportunities and challenges. Family relationships and those with friends and peers crucially impact on and influence the lives of young people. The pervasive impact and influence of the social and economic conditions in which young people live, learn, play and work, is well documented. Standards of education in the family (that of the mother in particular), the level of family income and family health issues can also impact positively or negatively on the lives of young people. However, no less important is the living experience of young people: where they live; the school, the neighbourhood and community in which they grow up; their ethnic background and cultural heritage; their gender and sexual identity. Influences and impacts can be both direct and indirect, seemingly obvious or nuanced (such as work and learning opportunities, the safety and security of the neighbourhood they live in and the level of community support available to them).

Internal - Needs and Aspirations

Basic needs:

- safety and security • shelter
- food, clothing

Social and environmental needs:

- Family and friends
- Peer relationships
- Mentors
- Education
- Culture
- Community

Personal and developmental needs:

- Valued and respected
- Informed and consulted
- Participate meaningfully
- Involved in decisions that impact on their lives
- Define themselves and forge their own futures
- Achieve their aspirations through self realisation.

External - Influences and Impacts

Relationships:

- Family
- Parents
- Siblings
- Friends
- Peers

Social and economic conditions:

- Education
- Income
- Health and well being

Environment:

- The school
- The neighbourhood • the community
- Ethnic background • cultural background • cultural heritage
- Gender
- Sexual identity

But what do the dynamics of these internal and external factors, the interplay of needs, aspirations, influences and impacts mean and what is their significance and implication for the non-formal learning environment? What is their value when devising specific learning tools to achieve particular learning outcomes?

At one level, this internal-external dynamic could be seen as a framework that encompasses the non-formal learning environment and the use of non-formal learning tools. In devising specific learning tools aimed at particular learning outcomes, youth workers and leaders need to take into account the basic living conditions in which the young people they are working with live; their home and community environment; their level of educational attainment; their ethnic background, in addition to meeting their need for respect, participation and recognition.

At another level, the internal-external dynamic can be seen as a profile of the young people - at either individual or group level - with whom youth workers and youth leaders engage. Effective individual or group profiling could prove to be an invaluable aid in determining a non-formal learning environment and in utilising appropriate learning tools.

Lastly, the internal-external dynamic could act as a barometer in gauging the impact of change and transition in young people's lives. The internal-external dynamic is particularly prone to the adverse impact of current socio- economic conditions in Europe. A parent's unemployment, a sibling's health problems, ethnic tensions in the neighbourhood, early school leaving in the community can all act disproportionately on everything else.

This internal-external dynamic also points to other aspects of the non-formal learning environment and their importance for both determining learning tools and achieving learning outcomes. Insuring safety, security and well-being; recognising ethnic background and cultural heritage; valuing and respecting; including and consulting are all vital in helping young people to discover themselves, gain confidence, build quality relationships with both adults and peers, discuss conflicting values and form their own, as well as expanding their knowledge of and capacity to enjoy life and to succeed: to relate,

to be respected and to be recognised.

Did you know?

Case Studies are 2500 years old... Something very similar to the learning tool that we now call case study was already used in the 5th-century BC, by the philosopher Lao-Tse. A member of the study group would present a paradox, which would be in the form of a parable. They would then discuss it and explore possible resolutions.

<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/history/chinese.html> [2]

Tags:

[Non-formal Education](#) [3]

[Tools for learning](#) [4]

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Links

[1] <https://educationaltoolsportal.eu/educationaltoolsportal/en/tools-for-learning/miriam-teuma>

[2] <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/history/chinese.html>

[3] <https://educationaltoolsportal.eu/educationaltoolsportal/en/tools-for-learning/tags/non-formal-education>

[4] <https://educationaltoolsportal.eu/educationaltoolsportal/en/tools-for-learning/tags/tools-learning>