



The European Experience with Youth Programs Lessons for Out-of-School Time

In March 2000, major players working to shape the European Union (EU) met in Lisbon and set the ambitious 10-year goal of making the EU the most dynamic, competitive, sustainable knowledge-based economy in the world. These heads of government discussed not only economic and financial aspects of society, they also identified innovation and knowledge, as well as education and training for living and working in this environment, as key present and future challenges.

This brief highlights some of the interesting lessons and perspectives encountered on a recent visit to European universities offering degrees in youth and community work, as well as participation in a seminar held at the Council of Europe and focused on ways to strengthen the youth field through training, quality assurance and systems of field support.

Background

Following the 2000 gathering, the responsibility for the creation of the knowledge-based society was given in large part to the formal education system, while responsibility for three other theme areas—civil society, social inclusion, and personal development—was assigned to the “Third Sector,” also known as the *nonformal education sector*. It is roughly comparable to our nonprofit out-of-school time sector of youth organizations, community programs, and national organizations working with and on behalf of young people.

Two leading organizations, the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, FR) and the European Commission (Brussels, BE), have formed a Partnership for Training Youth. Both organizations have youth divisions (the Directorate of Youth and Sport, and the Youth Unit in the Directorate General for Education & Culture, respectively) that provide leadership for multinational nonformal education efforts. They involve youth work leaders, researchers, policy makers, and young adult leaders in conferences, seminars, and work groups aimed at moving forward the nonformal

education agenda on behalf of the entire EU.

Observations

After attending a seminar of 50 youthwork leaders, researchers, and policy makers in May 2004, Center for 4-H Youth Development staff submitted the following observations to inform the deliberations of the Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School Time.

On Language

The language of nonformal education or nonformal learning is preferred in Europe over the language of out-of-school time. On the plus side, the terminology reinforces the sector commitment to education and learning. It emphasizes community-based learning methods rather than non-school time, and is descriptive of the wide range of intentional community-based programs and activities. On the minus side, while the terminology has meaning in the academic literature, the general public does not commonly understand the distinction.

The terms nonformal education and learning refer to intentional learning experiences provided

to people of all ages who voluntarily select to take part in clubs, organizations, and programs in areas of interest to them. These learning opportunities may be sponsored by government agencies, private organizations or for-profit businesses.

On Intentional Outcomes

Important expectations of the nonformal learning sector have been made explicit. Programs are asked to foster development within the three overarching theme areas: civil society, social inclusion, and personal development. This means the nonformal sector is encouraged to build and encourage understanding of and participation in a democratic society. It is to teach ways to combat racism, intolerance, homophobia, and other “isms” that threaten an inclusive society. And finally, it is to promote engagement in individuals’ personal development and learning so that they can follow their dreams and be active, lifelong learners responsive to change, innovation, and new knowledge.

On Age Distinctions

The youth agenda is definitely different than the child agenda. This agenda of civic society, social inclusion, and personal development is targeted at older youth and young adults. The ages most often cited are between 14 and 26 years depending on the tradition in individual countries. In Belgium, youth clubs target youth 16 years and older. In the United Kingdom, government supported youth centers are open for young people roughly ages 13 years and older. This targeting of older youth carries explicit expectations for high levels of youth participation and decision-making. The child agenda is focused on learning through play, social skills, and personal interests.

On Supports for Nonformal Learning

The Partnership Programme on European Youth Worker Training has been established to promote active European citizenship and civil society through the training of youth leaders and youth workers. The Partnership provides support through training, publications, and net-

work tools.

- **Training efforts** support staff in youth organizations and nonformal learning programs in order to advance the agenda of civic participation, tolerance, and individual development. There is a standard course on European Citizenship, and an advanced Training for Trainers. The former focuses on helping youth workers address the topic with young people. The latter is designed to help youth workers deal with major issues related to citizenship education for young people. Built into the course are components of mentoring, peer support groups, personal development plans, open learning communities, and practice projects.
- **Paper and electronic publications** include training kits (known as *t-kits*) and the *Coyote* magazine. Some t-kits are curriculum packages that help youth workers build into their programs topics such as human rights, gender equity, and intercultural learning. Others focus on project management, financial management, and evaluation. *Coyote*, which according to its editors is named after “a resourceful animal whose blunders or successes explain the condition of life in an uncertain universe,” offers trainer, researcher, and practitioner perspectives on topics like empowerment training with minority youth leaders.
- **Networking and knowledge exchange** are fostered through Trainers’ Forums organized throughout the year. These forums give youth workers opportunities to exchange viewpoints, experiences, and best practices. The dynamic website www.training-youth.net includes a wealth of resources for nonformal education programs while www.salto-youth.net provides information to support advanced learning and training opportunities for youth workers.

Ideas from European Youth Workers

Capture, document, and confirm nonformal learning. It is a priority to capture the opportunities and the competencies gained by young

people as they participate in youth programs. Each Finnish youth has, for example, a “blue book” in which to record participation, comments by significant adults, and personal assessments of learning. Europasses or digital portfolios are under consideration as ways to document the important lessons learned through participation in voluntary youth and community activities. The goal is not to formalize the learning (force validation) but to acknowledge and confirm it.

Develop basic youth worker training modules for all. While it is recognized that a single, unified training is not feasible (given the vastly different contexts for youth organizations in the different nations), there is wide support for training modules that can be used to build youth worker competencies in the areas of civic engagement, social inclusion, and personal development. These training sessions focus on understanding the core topics and knowing how to build them into youth programs. For example, what does a youth worker need to know to lead experiences and lessons about social inclusion? What does a youth worker need to know and do to engage youth in civic participation?

Focus nonformal learning on the future and on change. Trends in the workforce, family life, and community identity influence the skills, values, and knowledge young people will need to succeed. For example, the workforce increasingly depends on innovative, knowledgeable employees. Life skills include dealing with change and ambiguity, embracing new education at all stages of life, living in a socially inclusive community, practicing new ways of solving problems, and finding satisfaction through contribution to a democratic society.

Build on the diversity of existing systems. Avoid trying to standardize or over-formalize nonformal learning. Out-of-school time opportunities (nonformal learning) for young people must maintain their unconventional, innovative, and attractive character.

Introduce quality criteria on two levels: the quality of the specific learning opportunities, and the relevance of the content and skills gained. This relates directly to the explicit vi-

sion a community has for nonformal learning organizations. At the organizational level, this means quality criteria for organizations, staff, sites chosen, learning methods, cost efficiency, coherence, evaluation, and linkages to other learning experiences children have with regard to family life, personal development, social inclusion, public, and the workforce. At the level of relevance, quality must be judged by the degree to which programs promote skills, knowledge, and understanding of issues like respecting difference, discovering universal values, participating in community governance, communicating effectively across cultures, and solving important problems.

Be clear about the value to the larger community of the nonformal learning field, and its programs and organizations. A working paper entitled *Pathways Towards Validation and Recognition of Education, Training & Learning in the Youth Field* (Schild & Peter Lauritzen 2004) cited three reasons the field is important:

1. It is a significant sector for employment and volunteer opportunities for all ages.
2. It contributes significantly to the relevant skills and social competencies young people need for success in the labor market and in personal and community life.
3. It provides preparation for civic engagement by promoting experiences in participation, active citizenship, and political responsibility.
4. It enlarges the arena of intentional education by contributing a wide range of learning opportunities outside mainstream educational systems.

Actively prepare and involve young people in leadership roles in organizations and communities. The EU supports two European Youth Centres (in Strasbourg, France, and Budapest, Hungary) where young people come together from different communities and countries to work, learn, and contribute to the agenda for change within Europe. As in the United States, youth become engaged through opportunities to explore sports, the arts, theater, voluntary service, technology, intergenerational sharing, environmental issues, and many other interests, but they end up working on common issues facing their communities and nations.

Implications for Minnesota

One short experience in the United Kingdom and France has sparked new interest and enthusiasm for our work with out-of-school time programs and organizations. It is clear that those of us working on these issues in Minnesota have much in common with our European colleagues. We share concerns about sustaining, strengthening, and expanding the wonderful diversity of community learning opportunities that contribute so powerfully to the growth and development of young people. We want to find new ways to connect children, youth, and adults in meaningful, stimulating relationships. We want to feel confident that we are preparing our young people in the best way we know how for their roles as contributing adults in our society. We all have a lot to learn.

Internet and email have opened the doors of communication around the world. The resources

of the Council of Europe and the European Commission are abundant and available to all through the Worldwide Web. We're not working on these program, policy, and practical issues alone, and we are challenged to stay in dialogue with others who share our interests and commitment.

The material presented in this brief draws on a series of draft papers prepared for the Council of Europe & European Commission Youth Research Partnership meeting in Strasbourg, April 28-30, 2004. Of particular interest is the working paper entitled "Pathways Towards Validation and Recognition of Education, Training & Learning in the Youth Field" prepared under the leadership of Hans-Joachim Schild, European Commission and Peter Lauritzen, Council of Europe in February 2004. Author: Joyce Walker

The Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School Time (MnCOST) is an action project of the University of Minnesota Presidential Initiative on Children, Youth and Families. The Commission convenes in January 2004 and will meet five times over the next year.

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