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Maynooth University, Ireland
in collaboration with
Tallinn University, Estonia

Communicating Youth Work

Uniqueness, Benefits and Outcomes

Maynooth University
National University
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Introduction

Communicating Youth Work

The Communicating Youth Work module is designed to enhance your understanding of the wide range of dimensions of youth work as a profession and as a practice.

It consists of three units:

- Uniqueness, Benefits and Outcomes

- Beyond Activities: What youth workers do.

- Getting the word out.

Please watch the Unit 1 video before proceeding further.

Setting the Scene

The Communicating Youth Work module identifies the benefits of youth work, both for young people themselves and at the wider levels of community and society. It looks at the question of what youth workers do, not just in the sense of what activities they facilitate or engage in but what the context of those activities is and how the workers' ethos and approach is what gives them their distinctive value. It asks how youth workers might better record, document and communicate the nature and value of what they do, to each other and to relevant external stakeholders and interests, and how young people themselves might be more actively involved in such processes.

As a preliminary observation, one that may seem obvious, we note here that 'youth work' is a compound noun: it is made up of two parts, and in order to understand it properly we need to understand both of its parts, and their relationship to each other.

The 'youth' in youth work means that it is a type of work that takes place with, and/or by, and/or for young people.

The 'work' in 'youth work' means that when it is happening, somebody is purposefully, intentionally, doing something. This is not always the case with other concepts, even closely related ones (like youth welfare, youth development and so on).

Unit 1 (this unit) focuses on the nature of youth work – what makes it distinctive and even perhaps unique – and on its benefits and outcomes in terms of personal, community and societal development.

Unit 2 'Beyond Activities: What youth workers do' addresses the question 'What do youth workers do?' and considers a range of aspects of youth's workers' methods and approaches, placing youth work activities in the context of their underlying purpose and their distinctive process, as well as the nature of youth work as a profession.

Unit 3 'Getting the word out' asks how youth workers might better record, document and communicate the nature and value of what they do, to each other and to relevant external stakeholders and interests, and how young people themselves might be more actively involved in such processes.

What you will learn

In this unit you will learn about:

- The vital importance in youth work of relationship, association and the voluntary participation of young people.

- The nature of youth work as a profession and the ethical commitment of youth workers to young people.

- The integration in youth work of a concern with knowledge, skills and feelings as dimensions of personal and social learning and development.

- The contribution of youth work to communities and society as well as to young people, individually and collectively.

Unit 1 Contents

1. **Introduction**.
   This section identifies the key characteristic of youth work as 'youth-centred'.

2. **Relationship and Association**.
   This section explores the idea of the youth work relationship.

3. **Professional Ethics and Empowerment.**
   Considers the primacy of youth workers' commitment to young people.

4. **Knowledge, Skills and Feelings.**
   Explores the importance of the interplay of knowledge, skills and feelings in youth work processes and outcomes.

5. **Benefits at a range of levels.**
   Emphasises that personal and social benefits are synergistically combined in a youth work context.

6. **Social Impact, Social Change.**
   Discusses the idea that the benefits of youth work go beyond the individual young person.

7. **Empirical Evidence.**
   Summarises youth work's key benefits and outcomes identified in research.

8. **Conclusion.**
   Reminds us that the benefits and outcomes of youth work are for young people, their communities and wider society.
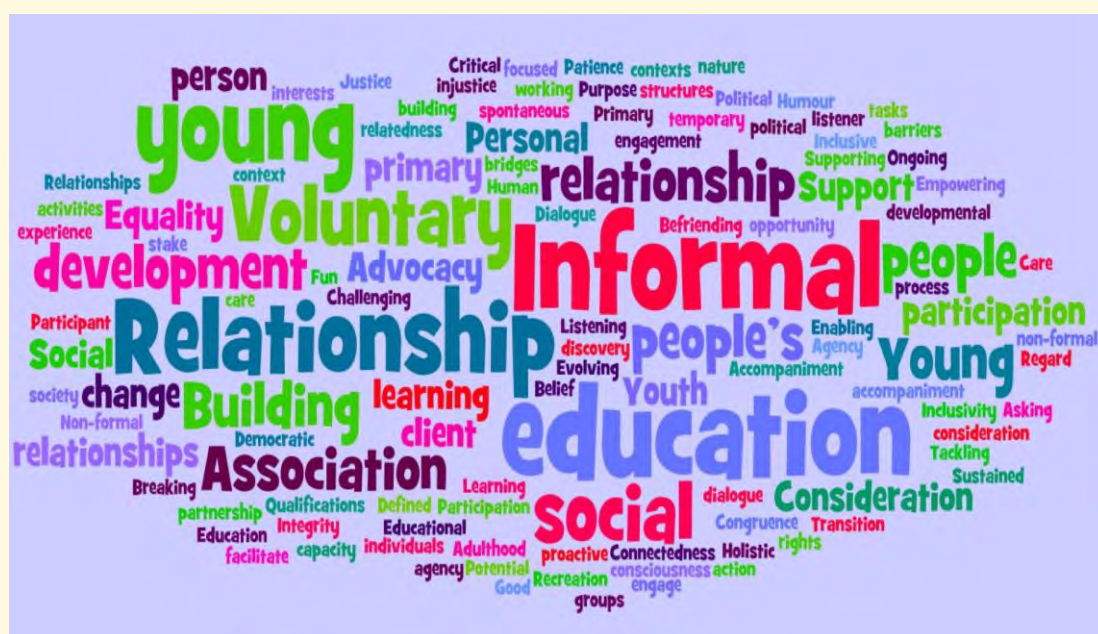
Questions

What difference does it make that young people participate and associate voluntarily in youth work?

If you are a youth work professional, or hope to become one, what is the most important thing that you *profess*?

How do young people's feelings and emotions relate to the way they develop in the areas of knowledge and skills?

What do you think your neighbourhood or community would be like if youth work did not exist? What about society as a whole?

Engaging with the Interactive Video Content

1. Introduction

What is youth work? Based on the remarks in the introduction, we can see that youth work is something that takes place with, by or for young people (or more likely some combination of these). It is therefore unequivocally 'youth-centred'.

There are debates as to the technical or chronological definition of 'youth'. Research shows that its interpretation varies widely not just internationally and cross-culturally (Cooper 2018), but even administratively within individual countries or jurisdictions, where it can be defined differently for different policy or legislative purposes (Chisholm et al. 2011). The detail of these distinctions need not concern us here. Despite the variety of precise definitions, it is also clear that the overwhelming focus of youth work internationally is on the years of transition from childhood into adulthood, and this can include the years of what might be regarded (or defined in law) as 'late childhood' as well as those of 'young adulthood'. A look at the youth work settings represented in the videos for this module confirms that this is the case.

Youth work is not the only profession or practice (or 'service', or 'intervention') that concerns itself with this age group. So what makes it distinctive? A number of elements will be outlined below, although as Jeffs and Smith (2010) have suggested, it is the coming together of several important elements that creates the distinctiveness of youth work.

2. Relationship and association

For youth work, it is vital not just that young people are present when it happens (which is obviously the case!), but that there is a particular type of relationship, both between the young people themselves and between the young people and the adults involved. Sue Cooper suggests in the video that the nature of youth work 'can be crystallised down' to this relationship, and that everything else – listening to each other, working together, having positive feelings and experiences, mutual respect and trust – flow from that. This relationship reflects, and draws sustenance from, the voluntary nature of young people's participation in youth work; they can 'take it or leave it' in a way that does not apply to their engagement with adults in other practices or services. This is in turn reflected in the language used, at least in English. Youth workers generally refer to the young people they work with as 'participants' or 'members' or just as 'young people', rather than as 'students' or 'pupils' or 'service users' or 'clients' (Devlin 2017: 81).
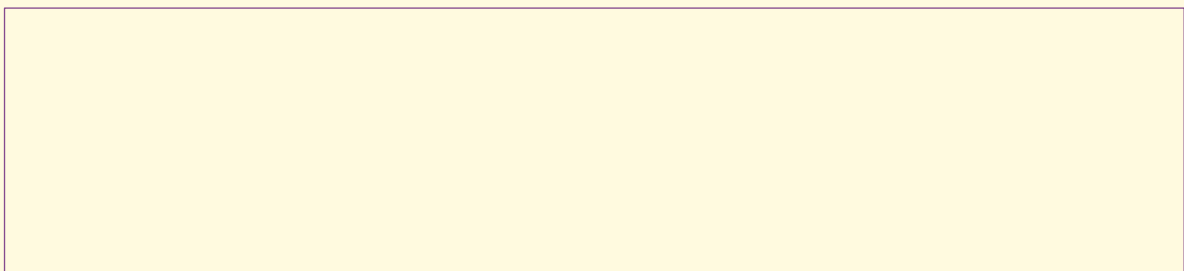
All of the above features of youth work remind us that youth work has a history as a social movement as well as a social profession. It almost always exists in a community context and is an important part of civil society, or what in some European countries is called 'associative life', through which people come together to work collaboratively to achieve shared objectives. This is why the role in youth work of voluntary (non-governmental) organisations, and of individual volunteers, is so important. It is also why it makes sense in the video for Dana Fusco to refer to young people allying with adults in the youth work space, and why Sasha Noonan points out that young people do not experience youth work as 'adult-oriented, adult heavy, top down', but can 'be themselves' and engage on their own terms.

3. Professional ethics and empowerment

For the above reasons, youth workers must have a particular type of motivation and commitment, to youth work but more importantly to young people. Youth work is a profession as well as a practice; it is one of the 'social professions' (Banks 2004). All professions have a defining ethical commitment (that is what makes them a profession rather than simply an occupation) and for youth workers the commitment is to young people. As explored in the Human Rights and Ethics module, young people are the 'primary consideration' of youth workers (Corney 2014). Howard Sercombe (2010) uses the term 'primary client', for reasons he

explains in detail, but as suggested above 'client' is not a term that most youth workers tend to use or feel comfortable with. The primacy of young people among youth workers' concerns is reflected in what Pauline Grace says in the video: as a youth worker she is 'directly accountable to the young people'. She compares youth work with other professions that have a much stronger legislative and structural basis and much more 'power behind them', saying that in youth work we are trying to 'equalise that power imbalance and co-create our journey'. (See also the Youth Participation and Non-formal Education module for further discussion of these issues.) On a related note Tania de St Croix suggest that there is a different quality to the 'power relations' in youth work than in a school or in a setting that a young person has been referred to. Given these differences between youth work and other professions that work with young people, it has even been suggested that youth work is 'institution free' (Fusco 2014; Siurala 2017). However, at least in some countries, the policy, legislative and administrative infrastructure of youth work is becoming more 'established' and complex.

4. Knowledge, skills and feelings

The distinctive features of youth work give a distinctive character to its potential benefits and outcomes. Pauline Grace makes the link explicit when she says that through youth work young people can come to feel 'part of civic society, included not excluded'. In

addition to the reference to the social context, the word 'feel' is significant here. The fact that how young people feel matters, and that youth work can enable them to have more positive feelings (as well as to develop in the areas of knowledge and skill) has been recognised throughout the history of youth work. Acknowledging feelings was explicitly a part of the framework for youth work practice set out by Mark Smith in his highly influential *Creators Not Consumers: Rediscovering Social Education* (1982). Youth work's emphasis on feelings might be related to, and may indeed have played a part in shaping, what has been called the 'emotional turn' in the humanities and social sciences in recent decades (Lemmings & Brooks 2014). In the video, Trudi Cooper includes 'kindness, empathy and feeling for other people' among the things that young people can learn through youth work, as well, crucially, as a 'more nuanced understanding of their situation [and a] critical awareness of the forces beyond themselves'.

5. Benefit at a range of levels

Trudi Cooper's remarks draw our attention to how personal and social development are not just equally valuable components of learning but are *integral* to each other and are synergistically *combined* in a youth work context. (Which is why models that present them as separate, while valuable for expository and analytical purposes, should not be taken as guides for practice; see Cooper 2018).

There is therefore a lot of comment in the video on youth work's value in terms of enabling young people to develop and progress as individuals ('navigating their own life journeys, taking decisions about their own selves' and also, importantly, becoming 'learners for life' as Ashraf Patel says). There is also reference by Dana Fusco to youth work's role in developing young people's 'sense of agency'. Wyn and White (1998: 318) define agency as involving 'consciousness of the potential to take action...willingness to engage in action, and...the knowledge and willingness to challenge existing structures'. A learner for life with a sense of agency sounds like a good description of someone well placed to seize whatever opportunities contemporary society might throw their way, and to deal with the inevitable challenges arising from a rapidly changing and unpredictable world, as well as to make a positive impact on that world themselves.

6. Social impact, social change

This reminds us that youth work has benefits beyond the individual. These may be for the community in which young people live (everything from, as Dana says, 'beautification' – a more attractive neighbourhood, perhaps with better amenities and services – to 'less violence', with better local relationships and interactions, including inter-generationally). But the positive outcomes may also be for other young people, and for the wider world. Two contributors to the video explicitly stress

the collective nature of youth work and its concern with social change (something that is implicit in the features outlined above and distinguishes it from other 'youth professions').

Orietta Simons comments on youth work's value in 'ensuring that injustices that occur for young people are addressed' while Ashraf Patel notes that if, through youth work, young people can 'shape the world in a positive way then it's creating a better space for other young people'. It is also ultimately contributing to the 'wellbeing of the universe', an outcome that sounds increasingly apt in an era of global ecological challenge and awareness (see Patel et al. 2013).

7. Empirical evidence

These wide ranging aspects of the benefits and outcomes of youth work, drawing on international perspectives, were confirmed in a national empirical study involving young people and adults in youth work in Ireland (Devlin & Gunning 2009). Summarising the findings the authors wrote:

...the most obvious benefits of youth work are for individual young people (including 'concrete' benefits such as information, practical skills, enhanced educational or employment opportunities; and less tangible ones such as confidence, self-esteem, tolerance and sociability). But there are also benefits for the adults involved, both paid staff and volunteers – much the same range of benefits as for young people. There are benefits at the level of neighbourhoods and communities as well – more positive

relationships between old and young, reduced tension, better amenities or an enhanced physical environment, more coordinated and effective service provision. Furthermore, because youth work clubs and projects at local level are very often affiliated to regional or national and even international networks, and because the young people and adults who participate in a youth group carry the benefits of their involvement with them into many other areas of social action and interaction, there are broader societal benefits as well (Devlin & Gunning 2009: 51).

The latter study also included among its findings the fact that youth workers often do not have tightly prescribed outcomes in mind when they work with young people, and that far from undermining their work this is a vital part of it. In the video Tania de St Croix distinguishes between work that has 'no particular outcomes' and work that *appears* not to have any; and comments that the improvisational dimension of youth work adds to its distinctiveness and its effectiveness (see Unit 2).

Also in the video, Pauline Grace suggests that working with young people to develop a feeling of being included in in civic society is a 'long term commitment', raising another point that was also confirmed in the study referred to above: the importance of allowing adequate *time* for effective youth work to take place. This point is taken up again in Unit 3 of this module.

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Siurala, L. (2017) 'What are the Meanings and the Underlying Concepts and Theories of Youth Work?', pp. 227-233 in H. Schild, N. Connolly, F. Labadie, J. Vanhee and H. Williamson (eds) *Thinking Seriously About Youth Work, and How to Prepare People to Do It*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

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Links to further Information and Reading

Overleaf you will find a range of resources to deepen your engagement with the unit's focus on the distinctive features of youth work, its processes, benefits and outcomes.

Books

Batsleer, J.R. 2008. *Informal Learning in Youth Work*. London: Sage

Davies, B. and Batsleer, J. (2010) *What is Youth Work* . UK: Learning Matters

Fusco, D. (ed). (2012). *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Questions*. London/New York: Routledge

Young, K. (2006). *The Art of Youth Work* (2nd edition). Dorset: Russell House.

Articles/Chapters/Reports

Connolly, N. (2017). Key Challenges of Youth Work Today: An Introduction. Thinking Seriously About Youth Work. In Schild et al (eds) (2017) *Thinking Seriously About Youth Work, and How to Prepare People to Do It*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing. https://www.academia.edu/35585874/Key_Challenges_of_Youth_Work_Today_An_Introduction

Centre for Effective Services (2014) *Ideas in Action in Youth Work – in theory* https://www.effectiveservices.org/downloads/CES-theory-final_v3_28.05.14.pdf

Coburn, A. and Gormally, S. (2019) Youth Work Education: Is the Voluntary Principle no Longer Reliable in Defining Youth Work?, *Concept*, 10:1, p.12. Available at: http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/2998

Cooper, T. (2018) Defining Youth Work: Exploring the Boundaries, Continuity and Diversity of Youth Work Practice. pp. 3-17 in P. Alldred, F. Cullen, K. Edwards and D. Fusco (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Youth Work Practice*. London/New York: Sage. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327061610_Defining_youth_work_exploring_the_boundaries_continuity_and_diversity_of_youth_work_practice

Cooper, T. and White, R. (1994) Models of Youth Work Intervention. *Youth Studies Australia*. 3:4 pp30-35. http://resourceboxes.flexiblelearning.net.au/demosites/series3/301/content/papers/sixmodels.pdf

Hlagala B.R, and Delaport, C.S. (2014) Ideologies and Theories for youth practice work *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 12:1 pp.59-74 https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/43497/Hlagala_Ideologies_2014.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Ord, J. (2008) A curriculum for youth work: the experience of the English Youth Service. *Youth Studies Australia*. 27:4 pp49-57 https://www.academia.edu/30346115/A_Curriculum_for_Youth_Work_The_experience_of_the_English_Youth_Service.pdf

Seebach, M (2008) Youth Participation and Youth Work *Youth Studies Ireland.* 3:2 pp37-53
https://www.youthworkireland.ie/images/uploads/general/YWI_Journal_Vol3No2_03_Youth_Participation.pdf

Sercombe, H. (2010). *Youth Work Ethics*. London: Sage.
A preview of Chapter 2 Ethics and the Idea of a profession is available at
https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/32436_02_Sercombe_CH_02.pdf

Smith, M. (1982). *Creators Not Consumers: Rediscovering Social Education*. Leicester: National Youth Agency.
http://infed.org/mobi/mark-smith-creators-not-consumers-rediscovering-social-education/

Verschelden, G. & Coussée, F. & Van De Walle, T. & Williamson, H. (2010). *The History of Youth Work in Europe and its Relevance for today's Youth Work Policy*.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265678272_The_history_of_youth_work_in_Europe_and_its_relevance_for_today's_youth_work_policy/stats

West, A et al (2017) *Youth Work – A Scan of Comparative Practice* (Australia, Finland, Ireland, Denmark, Scotland). Washington: American Institutes for Research.
https://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/youthaffairs/20181108Final_ReportAIRYouthWork08Oct2018.pdf

Websites and Web Resources

The 5th Space – making the other 4 count
http://5thspace.in/explore/what/

Commonwealth Alliance of Youth Worker Associations – Global definitions of Youth Work.
https://www.caywa.global/resources

Commonwealth Secretariat (2017) Youth Work in the Commonwealth - A Growth Profession
http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/events/documents/YouthWorkintheCW_9781849291736.pdf

EU-CoE youth partnership - co-operation programme between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth
https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/about-us

Devlin, M. and Gunning, A. (2009) *The Purpose and Outcomes of Youth Work: Report to the Interagency Group*. Dublin: Irish Youth Work Press.
https://www.youthworkireland.ie/images/uploads/general/YWI_Interagency_Report_size.pdf

EU-CoE Youth Partnership 100% - Giving 100% of young people 100% of the information on their opportunities and potential.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXTIKCWsbBo

Estonian Youth Work Centre
https://entk.ee/en/

European Commission – Supporting Youth Actions in Europe
https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/implementation/work_en

European Youth Strategy (2019-2027) – What's it all about?
https://www.leargas.ie/blog/the-new-european-youth-strategy-whats-it-all-about/

H. Schild, N. Connolly, F. Labadie, J. Vanhee and H. Williamson (eds) (2017) *Thinking Seriously About Youth Work, and How to Prepare People to Do It*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/thinking-seriously-about-youth-work

National Youth Council of Ireland – Building Solidarity in the Youth Work Sector
https://www.youth.ie/

Transformative Youth Work International Conference Recordings and Publications. Marjon University Plymouth, England. 4-6 Sept 2018
https://www.marjon.ac.uk/courses/our-faculties/faculty-of-education--social-sciences/department-of-social-sciences/transformative-youth-work-2018--developing-and-communicating-impact-/

Youth Wiki - Online Information Platform on European Countries' Youth Policies.
https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/youthwiki

Youth Work on YouTube – original source footage used in Video 1

NYCI – Gaming as Youth Work
https://youtu.be/3vj6SwWkOh8

NYCI - Let's Act on Inclusion
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFLxLOjqYao

Youth Work Works, a documentary about youth work in the London Borough of Newham.
https://youtu.be/Oqs-2zRnu_4

NYCI - I Used to Be Quiet - Youth Work Changes Lives
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoAqrDFDa-8

NYCI - Youth Arts Residency Scheme Liberties
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGPkdyXWlro

NYCI - Youth Arts Residency Scheme
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sNbjk1oVRQ

NYCI - Including minority ethnic young people in youth work opportunities
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdh2Tf4sPhA

YWTipp - Changing Young People's Lives _ Youth Work Ireland Tipperary _ Coca-Cola Thank You Fund
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lA8qFOm5Kmg

Summary

This unit has outlined a number of features of youth work that, when combined with one another, make it distinctive and perhaps unique. This distinctiveness is reflected in the very wide range of benefits and outcomes that can flow from youth work for young people, communities and society. When combined and integrated, the features of youth work make it a powerful vehicle for individual and collective expression, development and change.

Conclusion

The nature of the relationships among young people and between young people and adults is a defining feature of youth work practice. The voluntary nature of young people's participation in youth work gives a special character to youth work relationships.

Youth work is a profession (one of the 'social professions') as well as a practice. Like all professions it rests on an ethical commitment. In ethical terms, young people are the primary consideration of youth workers.

In common with other forms of education, youth work is concerned with enabling young people to acquire and develop new knowledge and skills, but unlike most education youth work also places an explicit emphasis on feelings and emotions, and on the integration of all aspects of learning.

Youth work has positive benefits and outcomes not just for individual young people but for young people in general and for communities, society and the wider world. Through youth work, young people can exercise agency and contribute to positive social change.

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Session 1

Tierney, Hilary, Devlin, Maurice and Reynolds, Saoirse (2019). *Communicating Youth Work Units 1, 2 and 3.* Youth Work eLearning Partnership (YWeLP).

Available at https://www.youthworkandyou.org/ywelp-module-one/

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