



YouthWorkAndYou.org

Maynooth University, Ireland
in collaboration with
Tallinn University, Estonia

Unit 2

Communicating Youth Work

Beyond Activities: What Youth Workers Do

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Introduction

Communicating Youth Work – Beyond Activities: What Youth Workers Do

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.

Welcome to Unit 2.

**Please watch the Unit 2 video
before proceeding further.**

Setting the Scene

The Communicating Youth Work module considers the distinctiveness of youth work as compared with other professions, particularly those that have a focus specifically or primarily on young people. It 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).

The second unit within the module 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 1 - 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.

This unit - 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 emphasis that youth workers place on how activities are organised and run (the 'process') as well as on the activities themselves (the 'task' or 'product'); and the importance of integrating both of these.
- The centrality of conversation in youth work practice, meaning that youth workers must be skilled in dialogical listening and in the careful and constructive use of questioning.
- The role the youth worker plays as a facilitator, both of one-to-one interaction and of group discussion and group work, and therefore the need to be able to position themselves appropriately.
- The importance of youth workers being enabled and supported to develop their knowledge, skills and feelings through processes and programmes of education and training, so as to be able to facilitate learning and development among young people, enhance youth work practice and contribute to the development of the youth work profession

Unit 2 Contents



1. Introduction

Poses the question, 'what do young people do when they are in youth work settings?'

2. The what and the how

Addresses the interplay of activity and purposes in youth work contexts.

3. Integrating task and process

Outlines the youth worker's role in facilitating young people's experiential learning.

4. Relationship and conversation

Introduces the idea that youth workers need, in addition to being good conversationalists, to have a capacity for dialogical listening.

5. Facilitation and positioning

Explores the idea of youth workers as facilitators of 'associative life' in youth work contexts and identifies 'positioning' as a skill that youth workers need to develop.

6. Education and training

Discusses the need for education and training to enable youth workers, individually and collectively, to consciously acquire, develop and hone their youth work identity and ability.

7. The profession in context

Places youth work in a wider social and policy context. one that youth workers need to understand and with which they need to be able to engage.

8. Conclusion

Suggests that youth workers require not just their own shared professional language and vocabulary but they may also need to develop a way of communicating to a range of audiences in the broader social and policy context.

Questions

What is the difference between engaging in an activity such as, for example, football or drama in a youth work setting and engaging in the same activity in a football club or theatre group?

Can you listen and speak at the same time?

Consider two groups that you are involved in where you typically position yourself in two different ways. How and why?

Think of a common youth work activity, situation or setting, one that you are familiar with or encounter regularly. In what ways does theory help you to make sense of it or understand it better? How does such theory relate to practice (through praxis)?

Engaging with the Interactive Video Content

Introduction

What do youth workers do? Another way of approaching this question (but arriving at only a partial answer) is to ask: what do *young people* do when they are in youth work settings? An even brief glance at the videos for this module makes it very clear that youth work is full of *action*; people are rarely seen to be 'doing nothing'. Even discussion and conversation in youth work (of which there is a lot, a point returned to below) tends to have an active, or even proactive, character. Activity itself is therefore important, and it may be an interest in a particular activity, or hobby, or 'leisure pursuit' (note the sense of purpose and intention in the latter word) that attracts young people to youth work in the first place. Sometimes activities in youth work are given added focus and structure in the form of 'programmes'. The following list (based on Devlin 2017: 85) gives examples of some of the most common youth work activities and programmes, but it is not by any means exhaustive.

- Recreational and sporting activities and indoor/outdoor pursuits, uniformed and non-uniformed.
- Creative, artistic and cultural or language-based programmes and activities.
- Spiritual development programmes and activities.
- Programmes designed with specific groups of young people in mind, including young women or men, young people with disabilities, young Travellers or young people in other ethnic groups, young asylum seekers, young LGBTI+ people.
- Issue-based activities (e.g. justice and social awareness, the environment, development education).

- Activities and programmes concerned with welfare and well-being (health promotion, relationships and sexuality, stress management).
- Intercultural and international awareness activities and exchanges.
- Programmes and activities focusing on new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digital youth work.
- Informal learning through association, interaction and conversation with youth workers and other young people.

The what and the how

Because they are very obvious and plain to see, many people equate the activities in youth work with youth work itself. In fact, as Tim Corney says in the video, 'there are stereotypes...that youth workers just play games with young people...they play pool in a drop-in centre and [people think] somehow that's not really work'. Trudi Cooper makes a similar comment: 'Most people look at the activities that youth workers do with young people and assume that the activity is what's important'. And while all the activities do of course have their own inherent value and purpose (and, as indicated above, attractiveness for young people), in a youth work context the *ethos and approach* that youth workers, and young people, bring to them is at least as important as the activities themselves. In other words the *how* is as important as the *what*. A pop song that only some readers will be old enough to remember had the title 'It ain't what you do it's the way that you do it (that's what gets results)', which could be a youth work motto! You'll note that Tim and Trudi immediately follow up the comments quoted above in very similar ways. Through activities, says

Tim, 'you're building a relationship of trust with the young person [so as to] facilitate access and assist young people in finding their voice'. For Trudi, 'the activity is just the means of building a relationship with young people that will enable conversations to happen, [increasing] the young person's understanding of their situation and of the world around them'.

Integrating task and process


This aspect of youth work is sometimes discussed in terms of 'process' and 'product' (or 'process' and 'task'). In fact it is not helpful (despite what some earlier writing in youth work would have suggested) to see these in terms of a polarity, whereby an emphasis on one must inevitably be at the expense of the other. It is better to see them as different dimensions of the youth worker's role, one enriching the other (Devlin and Gunning 2009) and both part of a cycle that moves through stages of experience, reflection and conceptualisation and then onto further, enriched experience and experimentation, which begins the cycle again (see Kolb 1984; for a critique see Smith 2001). This means that the approach to, for example, sports or arts in a youth work context is very different from one where sports or arts are themselves the primary – or perhaps only – concern of the worker/practitioner, and the outcomes for young people are therefore also different.

Relationship and conversation

Because of the range of activities involved, youth workers tend to have a great deal of practical or technical 'know-how', and are in fact often themselves specialists in arts, sports or other areas. But in addition to this, in order to be able to integrate task and process in the way just described, they bring to their practice a set of other skills and aptitudes that are essential for – indeed defining of – youth work. One of these has been emphasised already in the first unit of this module: relationships. Youth workers

need to be highly adept in building, nurturing and sustaining relationships. As we have just seen, in Trudi Cooper's words activities provide 'the means of building a relationship', one which will 'enable conversations to happen...'. Pauline Grace makes a very similar point: youth work is 'about relationship building, it's about travelling with people, it's about critical dialogue and conversation'.

Youth workers therefore need to be very good conversationalists, and this means being more than good talkers! Listening is a vital part of good conversation, and listening well is a highly complex skill. Julie Tilsen makes the point that good listening in youth work is not just *active* ('active listening' is now quite a common term). Youth work requires *dialogical listening* (note the link with Pauline Grace's point about dialogue). In Tilsen's account, even the way youth workers *speak* can have a listening quality; they can 'speak to listen'. They need to be able to 'listen to things besides words' (Tilsen 2018: 71-72). Related to this, good youth work involves careful and constructive questioning. Questions, says Tilsen, are 'the main course of a narrative conversation', and she gives detailed examples of different types of questioning in youth work (Tilsen 2018: 89-103). Listening and questioning effectively requires a keen sensitivity to non-verbal communication, and the many ways in which young people (and adults) express their thoughts and – crucially – their feelings. Another insight from Pauline Grace is relevant here: 'When young people feel valued, heard and listened to, something magic happens'. Furthermore, this 'magic' doesn't just work for individuals. That is why it is in the interest of the state and the public at large to support youth work. 'Are we getting paid to do that? Yes because we have a better civic society if we do that.'



Facilitation and positioning

To create the space for, and engage in, good conversations youth workers are essentially acting as *facilitators*. This applies at the level of on-to-one interaction (and the quality of such interaction is vital for individual young people) but in youth work it most commonly takes place in groups. Note that the activities portrayed in the videos for this module overwhelmingly involve people working together, collectively and collaboratively. Youth workers facilitate what was referred to in the first unit as ‘associative life’. This skill, and role, is described in some European languages as ‘animation’, a lovely idea that captures the ‘life-giving’ contribution of good youth work (and related work like community work).

Acting in a facilitative way, both in work with individuals and in group work, itself requires another skill, which Julie Tilsen (drawing on Harré & Van Langenhove 1999) refers to as ‘positioning’.

For example, you can choose to position yourself in a way that creates space for the young person to make decisions and exercise agency in their life. This doesn’t mean that you are inconsequential to the interaction; it means that you decentre (but not dismiss) yourself within the conversation and position yourself in collaboration with the young person. At other times, you may choose to position yourself in ways that centre the authority you carry. Positioning has to do with how you define yourself *in this particular relationship, at this particular time, for the purpose at hand* (Tilsen 2018: 24).

Among the things that youth workers facilitate is the creation and emergence of young people’s ‘stories’, and of new and different ‘narratives’ for and about young people (the concepts of story and narrative are developed further in Unit 3). As Pauline Grace comments in the video, youth work


narratives can be very powerful, and very different to ‘dominant’ or conventional narratives of youth, such that an external observer can ‘see, feel, taste and smell’ the difference when they encounter it.

Education and training

None of the above skills and qualities can be taken for granted; they need to be consciously acquired, and carefully developed and honed. Just as youth work is concerned with the development of young people’s ‘knowledge, skills and feelings’, those who hope to become youth workers must be given the opportunity to acquire and develop the necessary knowledge, skills and feelings *themselves* so as to be able to make this happen. That is why there is an increasing emphasis on the provision of initial education and training programmes for professional youth workers, and a growing recognition of the need for ongoing or ‘continuing’ professional development, as well as appropriate complementary education and training for youth work volunteers.

Such education and training programmes obviously include extensive practice or ‘fieldwork’ experience in youth work settings; but they also place an emphasis on the *integration* of practice with relevant theory, through what is sometimes termed *praxis* (Smith 1999, 2011). This needs to be done consciously and deliberately through a process of reflection, and it takes time and ‘space’. As Dana Fusco says in the video: ‘when you have space to reflect on practice you’re starting to articulate your concepts and your ideas’. The concept of articulation is an interesting one. To ‘articulate’ means to ‘utter explicitly and distinctly’ but it also means to ‘connect the parts to each other’.

Expressing and describing how the ‘parts’ of youth work practice are connected is a



process of analysis and theorisation, enabling practitioners to explain to themselves and to each other what is happening in their work and *why*. In Dana's example, it involves exploring why 'this really worked with this group', and using appropriate language and 'labels' in communicating these things to each other. It means, in Sue Cooper's terms, youth workers 'recognising, understanding and saying' what it is that they do. The need for what Dana calls a 'language to describe what's going on' means there has to be what external observers might pejoratively describe as a youth work 'jargon'. All professions, including youth work, require a common theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins the exercise of appropriate practice skills and that is expressed through a shared vocabulary.

The profession in context

Such a shared framework, and shared vocabulary, are obviously vital in enabling youth workers to communicate among themselves. But again like all other professions, youth work exists in a wider social and policy context, one that youth workers need to understand and with which they need to be able to engage. It is a basic insight of the sociology of the professions that no profession will survive, never mind flourish, if it does not have recognition and trust from the public (Healy 2017). Despite the many ways in which youth work is distinctive (as outlined in the first unit), this insight is no less relevant here. There are a wide range of stakeholders with whom youth workers need to be able to communicate in order to build this recognition and trust, including (as Sue Cooper says) 'the communities in which you're working, your managers who are managing you, the politicians in your local area' and possibly other national or international actors. And as Pauline Grace suggests, perhaps youth workers could have done a better job than they have to date in

telling these outside interests 'what we do, who we do it with and why', meaning that 'other people have set the agenda', requiring youth workers to demonstrate their impact on 'teenage pregnancy or joblessness or whatever'. However it is also the case that, as Sinead McMahon says, 'communication is a two way street', and there may be problems with policy makers and funders 'hearing the message' just as much as there are problems of youth workers not adequately 'explaining or communicating what they do'.

Conclusion

The consequences of a failure to communicate the nature and value of 'what youth workers do' are unmistakeable, and may include material hardship and cutbacks. As Dana Fusco makes clear: 'If the public doesn't recognise what youth work is then how do you get support for the work itself?...When the sector keeps getting cut and cut, we're disappearing underneath the public eye because the public doesn't know what [youth work] is'.

This may mean that youth workers require not just their own professional language and vocabulary but they may, separately, need to develop a way of communicating – a different language almost – that will help to 'get the message across' to other stakeholders. This can create difficulties and tensions, putting youth workers in a position that Jeffs and Smith (1999) once referred to as being 'Janus-faced'. But handling tensions, or 'negotiating ambivalence', is nothing new for youth workers, and might indeed be among the basic skills they require to do their jobs (Lorenz 2009; Devlin and Tierney 2010; Devlin 2012; Williamson 2017). How to get the message across, or 'get the word out' is the focus of Unit 3.



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Links to further Information and Reading

Overleaf you will find a range of resources to deepen your engagement with and knowledge of the unit's focus on what youth workers do.

THINK
ABOUT
THINGS
DIFFERENTLY

Articles and Books

Books

- Corney, T. (ed) (2014) *Professional youth work: an Australian perspective*.
Centre for Social Research; Hobart, Tasmania: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.
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- De St Croix, T. (2016) *Grassroots youth work: Policy, passion and resistance in practice*. Bristol, UK;
Chicago, IL, USA: Bristol University Press.
- Sapin, K. (2013) *Essential Skills for Youth Work Practice*. (2nd edition) London: Sage.
Chapter One available to preview at https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/66923_Sapin_Essential_Skills_for_Youth_Work_Practice.pdf

Articles/Book Chapter/Reports

- European Commission (2014) *Working with Young People: The Value of Youth Work in the European Union*.
http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf
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https://www.youthworkireland.ie/images/uploads/general/YOUTH_STUDIES_IRELAND_Volume_4_No_2_Research_Digest.pdf
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<http://www.youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/tania-de-st-croix-i-just-love-youth-work.pdf>
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https://www.youthworkireland.ie/images/uploads/general/What_Do_Youth_Workers_Do.pdf
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https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262613/04_SCRIB.pdf/7fb04f92-7226-2f3c-ed00-a9b46f43406e

Websites and Website Resources

The 5th Space – making the other 4 count

<http://5thspace.in/explore/what/>

CDYSB (2008) *Toolkit for quality youth work*. Ireland

<http://www.cdysb.ie/Library/Toolkit-of-Essential-Guidelines-for-Good-Youth-Wor.aspx>

CDYSB (2012) *Youth Works: True Stories from Youth Work Practice and Provision* (Ireland)

<http://www.cdysb.ie/Files/Youth-Works.aspx>

Centre for Effective Services (2014) *Ideas in Action in Youth Work – in practice*

https://www.effectiveservices.org/assets/CES_practice-final_v5_28.05.14.pdf

Code of Ethical Practice - Youth Affairs Council, Victoria, Australia

<https://www.yacvic.org.au/resources/code-of-ethical-practice/>

Commonwealth Alliance of Youth Workers Associations [CAYWA]

<https://www.caywa.global/>

Commonwealth Secretariat (2014) *Co-Creating Youth Spaces: A Practice Based Guide for Youth Facilitators*

http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Co-Creating_Youth_Spaces_web.pdf

ComMutiny – The Youth Collective.

<https://commutiny.in/>

EU-CoE Youth Partnership (2017) T-KIT on Social Inclusion

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262484/T-Kit+8+Social+inclusion+WEB.pdf/ab8390b6-2d9e-f831-bbcf-85972152e6e0>

EU-CoE Youth Partnership. Expert group on researching education and career paths of youth workers

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/expert-group-researching-education-career-paths-youth-workers>

EU-CoE Youth Partnership (2019) *Youth Policy Essentials*. (2017 revised 2019). Brussels

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EU-CoE Youth Partnership (2019) Open Online Course Essentials of Youth Policy

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/online-course-on-youth-policy>

Estonian Youth Work Centre (2015) *Occupational Standards for Youth Work*. Tallinn

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360° Participation Model

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<http://infed.org/mobi/reflection-learning-and-education/>

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<https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/NSETS-Professional-Endorsement-Criteria.pdf>

National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) Resources for Intercultural or Inclusive Youth Work

<https://www.youth.ie/articles/resources-for-intercultural-or-inclusive-youth-work/>

SALTO YOUTH (2018), *A Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally*

https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3460/CompetencemodelForYouthworker_Online-web.pdf.pdf?

Stanton, Naomi ed. (2015) *Innovation in Youth Work: Thinking in Practice*. London: YMCA George Williams College.

https://indefenceofyouthwork.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/c12_innovation_in_youth_work-proof-v3-1.pdf

T-KITS: easy-to-use handbooks for use in training and study sessions (some in French and German) EU-Coe Youth Partnership.

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/t-kits>

Youth Action Northern Ireland and University of Ulster (nd) *Gender Conscious Work with Young People* (Occasional Youth Work Practice Paper 2). Belfast: YANI/UU

http://www.youthmetro.org/uploads/4/7/6/5/47654969/northireland_gender_conscious_work_with_young_people.pdf

Summary

Youth workers facilitate ‘associative life’ – people working together, collectively and collaboratively.

To do this they need to know how to position themselves, in different groups and relationships, in different contexts and at different times.

Conclusion

Youth work involves a wide range of activities, and youth workers are often highly skilled in a range of hobbies and leisure pursuits, including arts, sports, digital media and other areas. But how youth workers go about the implementation of activities is at least as important as the activities themselves; and it is the integration of the 'how' and the 'what' that means youth work is taking place.

As part of their work in building, nurturing and sustaining relationships, youth workers need to be very good conversationalists. They need highly developed skills of listening, questioning and communication in general, verbal and non-verbal.

Youth work skills and aptitudes cannot be taken for granted; they need to be consciously acquired, and carefully developed and honed. Programmes of initial and continuing education and training enable youth workers to integrate theory and practice (praxis) and develop a shared vocabulary that enables them to reflect on what they do and why, thereby contributing to the development of youth work as a profession.

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- EU-CoE Youth Partnership
- London Borough of Newham Youth Services
- National Youth Council of Ireland
- Youth Work Ireland Tipperary

YouTube videos used:

EU-CoE Youth Partnership VoxPop 20 years
https://youtu.be/kYN_msJC1bw

National Youth Council of Ireland [NYCI]
NYCI - EU Youth Conference 2013
<https://youtu.be/QgNQJXlzvJE>

NYCI - Youth Work Changes Lives Showcase
<https://youtu.be/T7im-6yBHfg>

Youth Coalition of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)
<https://youtu.be/LSmB9PKYR38>

Youth Work Works - Youth Work in the London Borough of Newham.
https://youtu.be/Oqs-2zRnu_4

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We really couldn't have done it without any of you.



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Unit 2

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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