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Maynooth University, Ireland
in collaboration with
Tallinn University, Estonia

Unit 3

Communicating Youth Work

Getting the Word Out

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Introduction

Communicating Youth Work – Getting the Word Out

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 3.

This unit highlights the importance of youth workers engaging in careful, systematic reflection on, and documentation of, their practice, as a prerequisite for better communicating to each other and to external stakeholders the nature, value and outcomes of what they do. The uses of different types of youth work research and enhanced public relations are considered.

Please watch the Unit 3 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).

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.

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.



This unit - 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 difference that deliberate, purposeful reflection can make to good youth work practice and to the communication of such practice to external stakeholders.
- The interface between youth work practice and youth work research, and the value to both of these of a narrative or storytelling approach.
- The relevance of a range of types of research method to youth work research and the benefits of combining different methods.
- The need to recognise the fact that 'youth work takes time' and to provide for longitudinal and retrospective research designs.

Unit 3 Contents



1. Introduction

Poses the question, how we (youth workers) might approach the task of getting the word out?

2. Reflection and analysis

Emphasises the role of considered reflection and analysis (individual and peer) in promoting and sustaining purposeful action and effective communication in, and about, youth work.

3. Stories and storytelling

Positions stories and narrative as a process of constructing meaning about experience. Such sense-making stories are both 'excellent data' in research terms and exemplify good youth work practice.

4. Practitioner research

Suggests that research is not something separate to youth work, that youth workers and young people investigate, question and explore as a matter of course. These processes are at the heart of 'practitioner research'.

5. Qualitative and quantitative

Outlines the multiplicity of approaches and methods in research that can be of value in youth work contexts, approaches and methods that 'best fit' with youth work processes.

6. Mixing methods and being creative

Reminds us that youth work is 'teeming with multiple types of data', urging youth workers to be as creative as possible in designing, implementing and disseminating research that is in keeping with youth work project.

7. Youth work takes time

Acknowledges that the benefits of youth work may not be visible for some time and proposes that youth work, funders and policy makers look to longer term research options.

8. Conclusion

Proposes that youth work's long term interests will benefit from youth workers positioning themselves as practitioner researchers who enable young people's active involvement in research that is meaningful to them in order to 'get the word out'.

Questions

Can you identify three benefits that youth workers gain from engaging in systematic reflection on their practice?

What is the difference between reflecting alone and reflecting with a peer(s)?

Why are stories relevant to both youth work practice and youth work research?
How can they be both at the same time?

Why should youth work research not rely on one method alone?

What would taking a 'long term view' of youth work policy and youth work research involve?

Engaging with the Interactive Video Content

Introduction

Unit 2 of this module shows how a lack of public understanding and recognition can have a very detrimental impact on the youth work profession. It is damaging to the situation of youth workers (in terms of working conditions and career prospects for example) but most importantly it negatively affects young people themselves, because resources, premises and infrastructure are not of the standard and quality that young people need and deserve. Expressed in more positive terms, we might say that greater support and recognition for youth work are likely to follow from increased efforts to raise awareness of its nature and value. But even leaving those points aside we can say that the inherent value of youth work – all the energy and effort, creativity and imagination that youth workers and young people bring to it – and all its enormously beneficial outcomes for individuals, communities and society, simply deserve to be better known. As the National Youth Council of Ireland's very effective campaign and events make abundantly clear, *youth work changes lives!* The better youth workers are, therefore, at 'getting the word out', the better for youth work and for young people.

How might we approach that task? Based on insights of contributors to other units, and other modules, perhaps one answer is that youth workers should start by 'getting the word in'! In other words, they should begin to focus on communicating more deliberately and explicitly to themselves and to other youth workers, in partnership with young people, *what* they are doing and *why* they are doing it. This is precisely the kind of reflection referred to by Dana Fusco in the video for Unit 2. It requires time and

space but it will 'pay off' in terms of more effective practice and more fulfilling experiences for young people and adults.

Reflection and analysis

Consider the analogous situation of dealing with a personal difficulty or problem, or confronting a personal dilemma or challenge of some sort. If we are lucky, a solution may pop into our heads, or a change in circumstances - expected or unexpected - may result in a satisfactory outcome, and all will be well. That will provide short-term relief, but it will do nothing to strengthen our capacity to deal with a similar situation that arises in the future. In contrast, consider an approach where we have carefully thought through the nature of the challenge and its context, the options available to us and the likely consequences of different courses of action; and on that basis arrived at an informed decision. That way, we will be much more likely to have an understanding of why things developed the way they did, even if the outcome is not ideal, and we will have a basis for comparing approaches to such challenges in future. If some of these reflections are in writing, in the form of a personal journal or diary (not necessarily a hard copy one), all the better because we will not only be relying on memory if we have to consider similar matters again. If someone else is involved in the reflections or discussions, better again because the benefits of a different perspective will be felt, both in dealing with the challenge and in reflecting on the efficacy of the response. All of this applies to youth work practice too, except that in this case the benefits are multiple. At the same time as becoming more effective at what we are doing, with a

greater sense of fulfilment and direction, we are putting ourselves in a much stronger position to be able to communicate the nature, value and outcomes of the work to external parties, including funders and policy makers. We are also contributing actively to the development of 'communities of practice' at a range of levels (Wenger 1999, 2000; Gardner 2014; Smith 2003, 2006).

Stories and storying

Reflecting on practice in the way just described has a strong *narrative* dimension. When we do it, we are tracing the links between a series of episodes or events; but more than that, we are trying to explain the nature of the links, the *relationship* between the episodes or events. We are constructing a meaningful *story* about them. In the video, Sue Cooper stresses the value of stories in youth work research. Her research involves 'getting young people to actually talk about what's changed for them from their perspective and not just in the youth project but beyond the youth project and how youth work has helped them make those changes...What is it about their engagement that has helped them do that?'

This approach to youth work research is particularly apt, because it is so close to the nature of youth work practice. As Sue Cooper has written elsewhere when describing a youth work evaluation study, 'the evaluation methodology must be commensurate with youth work itself...only then will we genuinely be able to articulate the value of youth work to policy makers and funders' (Cooper 2018: 100). From a researcher's point of view, as Sue says in the video, stories make 'excellent data' that can be analysed systematically and the findings communicated to a range of stakeholders. But they don't just represent

or communicate good youth work; they *are* good youth work, a point that will be clear from the other units in this module, which highlight among other things the importance in youth work of conversation and dialogue.

This idea is at the heart of an important book by Julie Tilsen called *Narrative Approaches to Youth Work: Conversational Skills for a Critical Practice*. In a narrative approach, 'your job is that of a *conversationalist*: someone who partners in the cocreation of meaningful stories and experiences through collaborative conversations with young people' (Tilsen 2018: 52). A similar view has been expressed by other youth workers and writers referred to elsewhere in *Youth Work and You* (Spence, Devanney & Noonan 2006; Spence 2007).

Practitioner research

Seen in this way youth work practice and youth work research are not two entirely separate things, and no one who is competent and confident as a practitioner should feel intimidated at the prospect of 'doing research'. Lisa Downes addresses this point in the video: '... when we hear research we think academic, highly intelligent, you know I won't be able to do it, and as a youth worker to a youth worker I'd be saying actually just look at it [this]way... we're encouraging young people to investigate, question, explore...'. Investigating, questioning and exploring are what research is all about, but it is hard to imagine any example of good youth work practice that does not also have these things at its core. When getting involved in research therefore, youth workers are being invited to deploy key skills and aptitudes that they already have to different, but complementary, ends. It may be helpful for



them to see their professional identity in terms of being not just youth work practitioners but practitioner-researchers (Cullen, Bradford & Green 2012).

Qualitative and quantitative

The video shows that it is not just youth workers who can do youth work research. Young people themselves can be, and indeed should be, actively involved rather than simply being passive ‘respondents’ or subjects of investigation. Carly Weafer describes how she built on earlier experiences as a participant and then group leader in the Talk About Youth Project (note the link with narrative and storying!) to become centrally involved as one of the researchers in the *Impact +* study. In this international and multi-partner study funded by Erasmus +, a team of professional researchers trained a group of young people and youth workers and then all collaborated in implementing the research design.

Impact + used a combination of semi-structured interviews and an arts-based method, a mix agreed by the research team because it ‘fit best with the character of the research’ (van den Heuvel et al. 2019: 19). This is an example of a qualitative approach to research. But as Tim Corney suggests in the video, both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used to connect the individual and collective stories of young people involved in youth work with the ‘larger story’ (such as a major social issue or problem) that may be of most interest to policy makers or funders. Very often a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will be required, all the more so because, as Tania de St Croix says in the video, the question of what outcomes youth work leads to is a complex one, and cannot be expected to have a simple answer (or one


with only one dimension). For an example of a research study into the ‘purpose and outcomes of youth work’ that combines qualitative and quantitative methods (interviews, focus groups and survey questionnaire) see Devlin and Gunning 2009.

Mixing methods and being creative

It should also be noted that qualitative and quantitative research methods are not necessarily discrete or mutually exclusive. Sometimes data that is *collected* qualitatively (for example through conversational methods or open-ended questions in a survey) can be coded and categorised in such a way that it can be *analysed* quantitatively. The ‘purpose and outcomes’ study just referred to includes examples of this approach, as does the research report on the impact of youth work in Europe to which Sue Cooper contributed, cited above (Ord et al. 2018).

In addition to choosing qualitative and quantitative methods, or a mix of both, youth workers should aim to be as creative as possible in designing and implementing research projects, again in keeping with the nature of youth work practice. We have seen that the *Impact +* study had an arts-based component as well as semi-structured interviews. Arts methodologies can throw valuable new light, both analytical and imaginative, on what young people gain from youth work and on how youth workers practice it. Stuart, Maynard and Rouncefield (2015) provide a detailed account of creative and participatory methods in youth work evaluation.

Youth workers should also remember that a lot of the information they routinely collect for administrative and reporting purposes can also be seen as data for research, where necessary and appropriate



with additional support from research specialists. Any youth work project or setting is absolutely teeming with multiple types of data! Of course it is important to observe good ethical practice, whether the research project is specifically designed to gather new information (this is called 'primary' research) or draws on pre-existing or 'secondary' data (see various chapters in Bradford and Cullen 2012).

A further point emerging from the video is that 'getting the word' out about the value and outcomes of youth work need not by any means be limited to conducting research projects or preparing formal reports. Carmel O'Connor encourages youth workers to have social media accounts and make a focused effort to spread 'good news' stories and raise the profile of youth work, not just at the level of the local project 'but for youth work in general'.

Youth work takes time

Pauline Grace also stresses the need for youth workers to focus on the profile of youth work ('we need to write and publish and video and blog'), but both she and Tania de St Croix raise an additional point: the need for youth work research, and youth work policy, to take a long term view. Youth work takes time! This was among the main conclusions of the empirical study by Devlin and Gunning (2009) into youth work in Ireland and it is forcefully stated here by Pauline: 'It's not a magic wand, don't give me funding for twelve weeks and expect miracles. Yeah for sure something might happen in that twelve weeks but it might be twelve years before we see [the full benefits] so let's also put in place some longitudinal studies along the way.' Tania also says 'we also need to talk to young people who have been involved in youth work when they were younger, reflecting back what did it bring,

what did it contribute to them' while Pauline asks: 'What are [young people involved in youth work today] doing in ten years time? What was the impact and influence of youth work on their lives?' However, longitudinal studies, if they are to be done well, are among the most complex types of research design, and the most demanding in terms of planning, resources and logistics. A commitment from funders, policy makers and/or private sources to support such research would be a great service to youth work and to young people. Perhaps that too is something about which youth workers need to 'get the word out'.

Conclusion

Youth work practice and youth work research are not two entirely separate things. A careful and systematic approach to reflecting on practice, and documenting practice, can provide the basis for communicating youth work processes and outcomes to a range of external stakeholders, including policy makers and funders, and in a range of ways, including through research. Both youth work practice and youth work research essentially rely on exploring, investigating and questioning, so youth workers might be encouraged to see themselves not just as practitioners but as practitioner-researchers. Young people should be actively involved in youth work research, just as they are in youth work practice. In both cases, stories and storying are a particularly relevant and valuable method. Youth workers are surrounded by 'data' all the time and (while adhering to good ethical practice) should be both creative and pragmatic in finding ways of reflecting on and analysing what they do and why they do it, raising the profile of youth work and 'getting the word' out as widely as possible.



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Links to further Information and Reading

Overleaf you will find a range of resources to deepen your knowledge of and engagement with the unit's focus on 'Getting the Word Out'.

Articles and Books

Books

Cooper, S. (2017) *Participatory Evaluation in Youth and Community Work: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge

Heath et al. (2009), *Researching Young People's Lives*. London: Sage

Matthews, B. and Ross, L., (2010) *Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social Sciences*. Essex: Pearson.

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Articles/Book Chapter/Reports

Bamber, J. and Rowley, C. (2012) Speaking Evidence to Youth Work – and Vice Versa, *A Journal of Youth Work* No 10 pp37-56
https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/42027/1/JYW_10_2012_Mackie_McGinley.pdf

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Sonpal, K., Walker, E., Swallow, V., Brady, L-M. , Stones,S.(2019) *Report on Involving Children and Young People in Research*. Southampton: INVOLVC
<https://www.invo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/77620-YPv3-Booklet-WEB.pdf>

Story-telling in Youth Work: A resource for workers, managers, tutors and students. In defence of Youth Work.
<https://story-tellinginyouthwork.com/>

Van den Heuvel, S., Braun, M., Bulthuis, M., Szalma, B. and Ketelaar, N. (2019) *The Importance of International Youth Work*. Impact + Project Report.
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Youth & Policy Special Issue: Youth Work and Research No 107, 2011
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Websites and Website Resources

CLES (2011) *Research Methods Handbook. Introductory Guide to Social Research Methods.*

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National Centre for Research Methods, UK.

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YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/user/NCRMUK/featured>

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University of Southern California, *Social Science Research Paper Guide*

<http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide?hs=a>

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<https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/07-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf>

Youth & Policy Journal - offers a critical space for the discussion of youth policy and youth work theory and practice. Archive.

<https://www.youthandpolicy.org/y-and-p-archive/>

Summary

This unit has highlighted the importance of youth workers engaging in careful, systematic reflection on, and documentation of, their practice, as a prerequisite for better communicating to each other and to external stakeholders the nature, value and outcomes of what they do.

There are multiple sources of data, and methodological possibilities, such as narrative and participatory approaches, available in a youth work context that can be utilised systematically to successfully 'get the word out.'

Conclusion

In order to 'get the word out' about youth work, youth workers should begin with a focus on communicating more deliberately and explicitly to themselves and to other youth workers, in partnership with young people, what they are doing and why they are doing it. As well as enhancing practice, this will put them in a much stronger position to be able to communicate the nature, value and outcomes of the work to external parties, including funders and policy makers, while also contributing actively to the development of 'communities of practice' at a range of levels.

In youth work research and evaluation, the methods chosen should be commensurate with the nature of youth work itself.

Stories can have a particular relevance and value. They are good youth work practice in themselves but they can also yield 'excellent data' from a research perspective. But youth workers should be alert to the multiple sources of data, and methodological possibilities, that are available in a youth work context.

Young people can and should be actively involved in youth work research rather than simply being passive 'respondents' or subjects of investigation. Creative and participatory methods can have a particular value in youth work. Often a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will provide the best way of approaching the research questions or objectives.

Youth work takes time. Both youth work policy and youth work research need to take a long term view. Longitudinal research would provide valuable insights into youth work processes and outcomes but would need to be actively and adequately supported and resourced.

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- National Youth Council of Ireland
- Talk about Youth Project, Dublin
- Youth Work Ireland Tipperary

YouTube videos used:

NYCI - Transforming Shadows - the process
<https://youtu.be/DB8KDeTMdog>

YWTipp - Youth Work Ireland Tipp
https://youtu.be/iBS1uU4r_ul

YW Ireland Youth Work Ireland Tipperary -who we are!
<https://youtu.be/ZeNe6wYnlw>

YW Ireland - Learning & Sharing Event
<https://youtu.be/Sf2PXTonlpk>

Talk About Youth St. Andrews Resource Centre Dublin
'Dear Me' Campaign_ Merrion Square.mp4 (not available)

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

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Contact:

Dr. Hilary Tierney

Centre for Youth Research and
Development Department of
Applied Social Studies
Maynooth University

e. ywelp@mu.ie

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