

Overcoming the geographic divide through distance learning methodologies: Youth development training by CYP

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Abstract

The development of leadership skills and competencies among youth leaders and professionals involved in youth development work is a critical component of a sustainable youth development strategy.

CYP recognizes that the provision of adequate opportunities for youth and community leaders to acquire these skills and knowledge has a profound impact on human resource capital of any society and consequentially must add value to the development process.

This paper will therefore briefly explore the historical context of CYP youth development training programmes. It will examine rationale and issues related to the transition from resident based to distance learning.

It will of necessity -

identify the challenges, achievements and lessons learnt

analyze and examine the current challenges and strategies being employed and considered to enhance relevance and upgrade integrity of CYP Training Programmes and

provide an insight on possible strategies for the way forward, including global collaboration with institutions within and without the Commonwealth, facilitating greater access to training material, the transition to VLE based training and the incorporation of a research based component.

The Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) has been training youth workers since 1973, and has done so by supported distance education since 1998. In this short article we show how the task has been one of collaboration for meaningful learning.

1. Mission and values

The CYP works "as a trusted partner to empower, engage and create value so that young women and men can contribute to the economic, social and cultural advancement of their families, communities and countries."

As a Commonwealth agency, it is driven by certain fundamental values:

- respect for diversity and human dignity and opposition to all forms of discrimination whether rooted in race, ethnicity, creed or gender;
- adherence to democracy, the rule of law, good governance, freedom of expression and the protection of human rights;
- supporting the elimination of poverty and the promotion of people-centred development and progressive removal of wide disparities in living standards among members; and
- upholding international peace and security, the rule of international law and opposition to terrorism.

Since collaboration can be defined as “a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem” (Alluri/Balasubramanian, 2006), we can therefore say on the broad level that the Commonwealth is itself a collaboration, whereby sovereign states maintain a developmental and democratic approach to national and international questions. The Commonwealth is just one of many diplomatic and political networks. Nevertheless the modus operandi of the Commonwealth at Head of Government level – consensus building among equals – is observed in each of its activities and constitutes a significant contribution to international society.

2. What is a youth worker?

As we have said, one dimension of Commonwealth collaboration has been to fund and run a youth development programme, one of whose activities has been the training of youth workers. But thus baldly stated, does such an intervention have a determinate character? Is there even any guarantee that it is a developmental or democratic intervention? The point is that now, as in the 1970s, there is a *lack* of consensus as to the nature of youth work. There is confusion as to whether or not a youth worker is little more than someone who keeps youth off the streets.

Why is this? Firstly, the wish to keep young people “off the streets” is over-determined, and there are tensions between the different motivations: do we respond to young people primarily as victims of social problems, or as (potential) perpetrators? Today the tension between these perspectives is perhaps in sharpest focus in connection with crime and violence, terrorism, ethnic and religious conflicts and the HIV and Aids pandemic.

Secondly, if youth work contexts are defined as non-formal and voluntary, they carry with them a practical requirement of egalitarian social relations, at least to some extent. Those who have not practised such relationships may find them hard to even imagine. But more importantly, such relationships may, directly or indirectly, pose problems for the wider societies and inequalities within which they function.

Thirdly, the knowledge community in which non-formal, voluntary and to some extent egalitarian relationships play a part, as a matter of necessity and in response to poverty, has unsurprisingly germinated and grown at the margins rather than at the centre of society. For example, we look to “ragged schools” as one of the starting points of modern youth work. Yet (and this is to restate the second point) the transformatory power of informal and voluntary action can stand in stark contrast to its social origins.

There are implications for the visibility, status and funding of youth work initiatives. In many countries the occupational category does not even exist, or where it does, is not yet clearly defined or conceptualized by the majority of stakeholders, including policy makers. Therefore, youth work is not widely recognized as a formal career as yet, those who practice the profession are limited, and this limitation is further exacerbated by the lack of funding and other resources. The major weakness of youth work in many countries is the limited appreciation of the nexus between youth development and national development goals. Consequently there is usually the absence of a strategic approach and insufficient provision of funds for the documentation and highlighting of effective youth work programmes or good youth work practice. This means that the services of youth organisations are limited and they cannot provide adequately for the needs of young people.

On the other hand there are agencies such as the CYP which see young people's capacities as central to national development and which are pressing for a “paradigm shift” away from corrective, problem-based approaches toward an evidence-, asset- and rights-based approach.

3. Youth work and development goals

From what starting points then, can we find a consensus on the role of the youth worker?

The struggle against poverty is now a mainstream concern. According to the most widely ratified treaty in history, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, under-eighteens have: *"the right to express...views freely in all matters affecting [them], the views...being given due weight in accordance with [their] age and maturity..."* (CRC 1989 Article 12). Here then, is a human-rights justification for the "to some extent egalitarian" character of youth work.

Meanwhile, with over half the world's population aged under 24 (closer to three-quarters in many developing countries) youth issues in development are more urgent than ever. Between 2000 and 2010 some 700 million young women and men will enter the labour force. And currently there are not 700 million new jobs available. Policy-makers in the Commonwealth are therefore beginning to ask themselves:

- Is there a clear relationship between development planning and demography in policy and practice?
- Are positive interventions planned to reflect these demographic trends, in education, training, employment and education activities?
- What should be the positive measurable outcomes of successfully engaging even a fraction of these young people in economic activity?
- What is the worst possible scenario if the labour market entrants – the 700 million – remain marginalised, powerless and excluded?

Turning to the Millennium Development Goals, there is a notable absence of targets specifically on youth. But if we take the goals in turn, there is a youth affairs aspect to each:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Today's livelihoods programmes must take account of adolescent-headed households, out-of-school youth, economic migrants, internally displaced persons and refugees. In this more fluid social landscape youth workers are needed to help resolve resource conflict issues, build consensus between the generations and promote skills transfer where traditional pathways have broken down. They are also needed to ensure cross-sector collaboration on youth livelihoods interventions.

2. Achieve universal primary education

Although youth workers educate in the non-formal setting, they play a role in encouraging out-of-school youth to go back to education, and also in making sure the parent community understands the value of education.

3. Promote gender equality and empower women

A "youth-worked" community is one in which young women have a voice. Raising young women's expectations and building their self-esteem is at the heart of informal education.

4. Reduce child mortality; 5. Improve maternal health

"Youth-worked" health services are ones which are approachable and non-judgemental toward young mothers, with information campaigns that connect with youth cultures.

5. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

As agencies look to peer-education as part of combating HIV/AIDS and encouraging healthy lifestyles, the ability to communicate with young people becomes a life-saving issue. Self-esteem issues are central to young people's negotiating and sustaining behaviour change. HIV/AIDS is overwhelmingly a disease of young adults.

6. Ensure environmental sustainability

Youth workers have a role to play in mitigating unsustainable urbanisation: by helping young people toward a more realistic understanding of life in today's cities, and by

building recreation and livelihoods in rural areas. Youth workers are also vital to conservation and public health efforts, the sustainability of which depends on new generations.

7. Develop a global partnership for development

"Young people are part of the effort or the effort fails," Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon has said. By extension those who are able to engage young people, the youth workers, are also essential: "Many adults are used to exercising authority and keeping authority through authoritarian practices. People who have tried to promote participation with good intentions have become frustrated, demoralised or cynical when it hasn't worked well, and are left wondering what might have been done better."
(CYP/UNICEF2005: 21)

4. From Targets to Competencies

A role for young people in development is therefore both a right and an imperative. What does the youth work profession have to say about realising that right and that imperative? These are more than theoretical issues. They go to the heart of articulating the niche of youth work and realising the value of investments in it.

· Too often, [the youth work education] debate has been dominated by those who are already qualified and well-established in their chosen field, rather than the new generation of workers who have the right to influence future developments...

*· Clearly, there is a debate to be had about how best to equip people with the skills, knowledge, recognition and status to acquire the necessary professional expertise and continue to be rooted in their own communities. However, it is also very important to consider how these people can be given transferable skills and knowledge, recognition and accreditation so that they have the freedom and ability to practice in other areas or countries.
(Martin Notley for CYP: 1997)*

*· Reflective practice is more than an examination of personal experience; it is located in the political and social structures which are increasingly hemming professionals in. ... (Professional practitioners) are being reduced to technicians, their skills to mere technical competencies ... In order to retain political and social awareness and activity, professional development work needs to be rooted in the public and the political as well as the private and the personal.
(Bolton : 2001:3 1)*

The above quotes establish that in defining the profession of youth work, intellectually and in practice, it is antithetical to exclude the policy sphere and the recruitment of youth workers into that policy sphere. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the youth worker emerges as an agent of change able to continually ask themselves certain questions – whether that is in the field or on a policy level:

The underpinning themes of youth work training are kept "alive and kicking" by the youth and development worker constantly asking themselves four questions:

- i) What do I mean by personal and social education?
- ii) What is the social, economic and political context in which I live and work?
- iii) What do I do which encourages or prevents change?
- iv) How does the work setting and/or other structures affect what I do?

The roles played by someone adept in asking these questions are those of enabling and empowering.

To return to Alluri and Balasubramanian's definition of collaboration, it has been no small part of CYP's work since 1998 to construct and maintain this shared conception of youth work training.

This is because the Commonwealth Diploma in Youth and Development has been delivered by a rapidly expanding network of no fewer than 27 partner institutions, in 50 Commonwealth countries embracing the full spectrum of socio-economic, religious and cultural contexts.

Yet because the above conception of training is critical and open-ended, CYP has been able to avoid the pitfalls of an over-centralised, top-down approach. Far from marginalising local knowledge and context, the questioning approach brings them to the fore.

5. Meaningful Learning

What is equally important, this basis for training is a recipe for meaningful learning.

The constructivist view of learning is one in which "there is a process of developing understanding through problem-solving and critical reflection"; it is an active process where learners are engaged in "learning by doing." (Som Naidu, 2006).

The Commonwealth Diploma in Youth and Development is designed to be studied over a period of roughly eighteen months by professionals already engaged in youth work. There is therefore ample scope for "learning by doing," as students relate the course material to their practical assignments.

The instructional design embodies the constructivist perspective on learning by use of "scenarios, problems, incidents, stories and cases" (Som Naidu, 2006). Learners are indeed "active partners in the process" since they agree a learning contract with their tutor and maintain a learning journal to record their experience of integrating the course with their working lives.

Evaluations of the programme further bear out the constructivist perspective: it is students who are learning alone rather than in a group, and students who are not engaged in youth work, who find the course most difficult to complete successfully.

6. Challenges and Achievements

Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting in Trinidad and Tobago , 1995, mandated the feasibility study for developing the Diploma by supported distance education, with the aims of:

- Allowing larger numbers of students to participate than had participated in residential courses
- Allowing students to study nearer to home
- Allowing in-service students to study whilst continuing in professional roles

These aims have been achieved. Over 1,500 youth workers have completed the Diploma since 1998, a similar number are currently studying and over 200 have completed the shorter Certificate course. They have done so at an average cost of £165 per student, with over £5 being invested by partners in universities and government for every £1 invested by the CYP.

In the Caribbean CYP has partnered with HEART Trust/NCTVET to develop Regional Competency Standards for Youth Work. This will provide guidance for the development of training programmes and articulation from Levels 1 to 5 of the CARICOM qualifications framework, clearly show youth development work requirements and provide a basis for

objective assessment of youth workers performance. This is all part of CYP positioning itself as an agency specialising in the professionalisation and institutionalisation of youth work.

The Diploma programme has also seen the launch of a refereed journal, hosted by the University of South Africa, "Commonwealth Youth and Development." As argued by Rawwida Baksh, Head of Gender Affairs at the Commonwealth, building the body of knowledge for youth work and the youth movement is comparable with the critical knowledge base for the gender movement. Baksh identifies four kinds of knowledge building which journals such as "Commonwealth Youth and Development" can play a role in:

1. Validating Young People's Contribution:

- Quantifying and Making youth work visible
- Critical
- By examining young people's place and relationships in the world
- Recognising that their experiences are valid subjects for public enquiry and discourse
- Recognising their contributions as citizens, labourers, family members

2. Theorising by and about young people

3. Building a Youth Studies Discipline

4. Recognising the importance of Critical Evaluation

Finally, a rigorous Pan-Commonwealth Quality Assurance mechanism has been developed, and the Diploma has been recognised as being equivalent to one year's study in higher education.

The challenges have included several of those identified by Creed, Allsop, Mills and Morpeth in "The art of the possible: issues of learner support in open and distance learning in low income countries" (IRFOL/Commonwealth of Learning 2005): Low levels of face-to-face tuition; delays in delivery of study materials (in some countries) and low rates of student retention (most countries).

7. The Way Forward

Building on the many positive aspects of the pilot phase and looking to the future, several areas require planning and action. These include,

- Dissemination of modules in new media;
- The inclusion of a clear role for practical fieldwork;
- The development of further routes into the Diploma and academic routes beyond the Diploma;
- The promotion of youth in development work as a profession across the Commonwealth and the recognition of the Diploma as a professional qualification;
- Realisation of a Rights-Based Approach across the programme
- Attention to the spiritual dimension of youth work and youth development

As CYP's partnerships evolve it will remain important to use consultative methods to ensure mutual understanding: "Particularly in an emerging profession such as Youth in Development Work, it is easy for language to obscure the nature of the tasks to be performed. There is a danger of *assuming* there is consensus..." (Martin Notley for CYP, 1997, emphasis added)

The specifically "Commonwealth" character of the Diploma programme is precisely that it operates by consensus and is therefore developmental at every level. This will continue

to imply a culturally sensitive, thematic approach to Youth Work Training (rather than a narrow topic based approach), alongside a deep-seated commitments to human rights and democracy.

Four thematic areas for Youth Work Education (adapted from Christian: 2003)

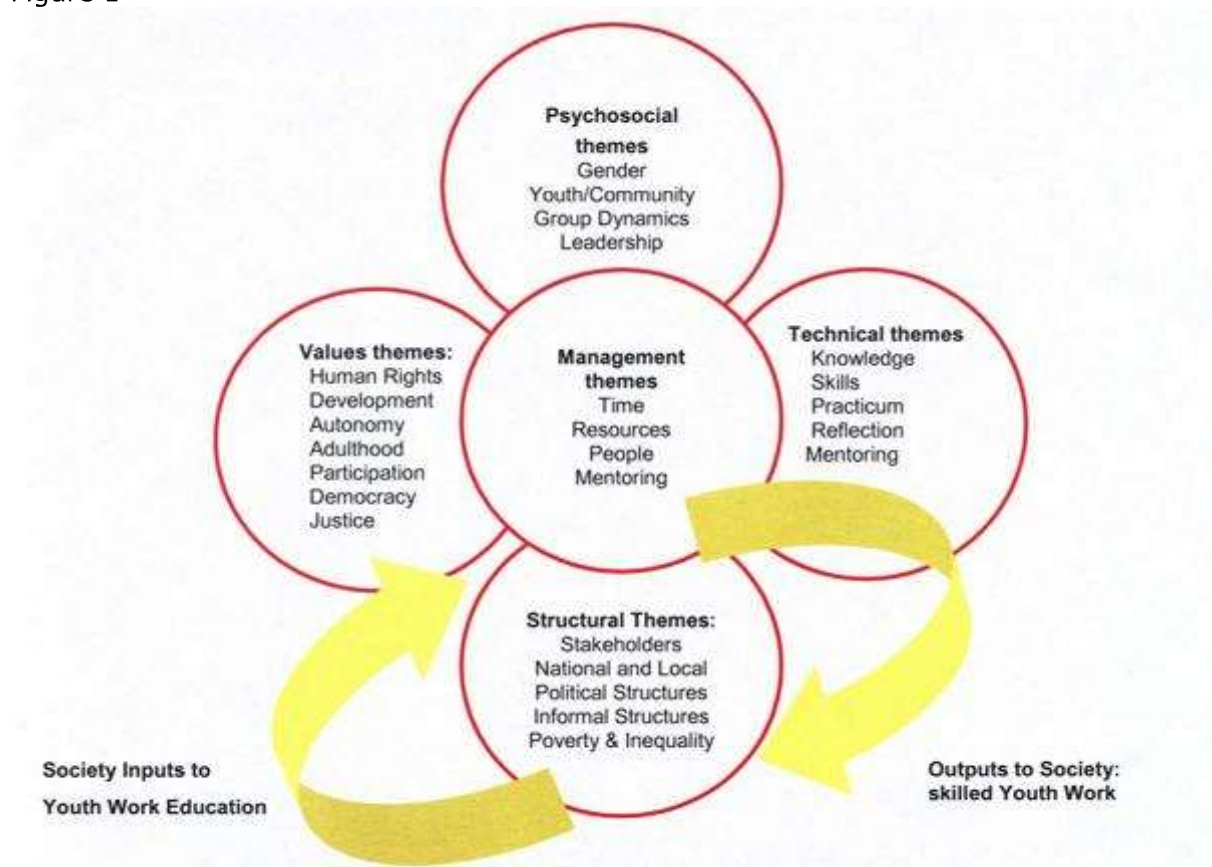
8. Conclusion

We have argued that an adequate definition of youth work encompasses the policy sphere and addresses global priorities such as the Millennium Development Goals. Youth work that is human rights-respecting acknowledges this and situates young people as actors in society rather than as problematic, second-class citizens beyond it. To gain the critical and practical competencies for such youth work is an exercise in "meaningful learning." By building a partnership for distance education, CYP has exposed many hundreds of youth work professionals to meaningful learning since 1998.

1. Quoted in "Youth Work Education and Training: From Training to Professional Education," Chandu Christian for Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting 2003

Figures

Figure 1



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