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International Youth Exchange and Non-formal Education. Synergetic effect

Analysis of organizing international youth exchanges with using non-formal citizenship education approach practice is presented in the article. Short observation of roots and different understandings of both phenomena – international youth exchange and non-formal education – as well as their authors' definitions are given. Advantages of using the concepts, as they defined, mechanisms of their interaction and synergetic effect of using them interactively in pedagogics and youth work are described in the article.

Key words: *international youth exchange, non-formal education, youth work, diversity consciousness, competence to live together, raising awareness of current social challenges, personal development.*

Introduction

This article is based on the reflection of seven years cooperation between Academy for Citizenship Education "Haus am Maiberg" (Hesse, Germany) and NGO

"Youth Agency "Interactive" (Yaroslavl, Russia) in the international youth exchange sphere and their separate experience. Since 2009 the institutions have been realized over 30 international exchanges for youth and multipliers. A wide field of youth exchanges exists in Europe. It includes sport, music, cultural and other types of projects. A special concept for *youth exchanges* has been developed in the projects organized by "Interactive" and "Haus am Maiberg". It is based on the principles of non-formal education and citizenship education. In the projects the educational focus is on promoting interaction and reflection. The concept is to involve youngsters from Russia and Germany and from other countries and to raise their awareness of the relations between the countries as well as for recent social challenges which exist in the countries. Having in mind the conflicts in the past between the nations as well as present stereotypes and tensions the exchange projects aim to promote better understanding and trust on a personal level.

The reflection of the experience has been done in frames of number of workshops, seminars and trainings, organized by us in Germany and Russia, and, of course, by evaluation and working out programs of every youth exchange, we have had.

Now we would like to present you an attempt to formulate basic principles of our practical work: international youth exchanges, its roots, EU context and how we do it, and non-formal education, as we understand it, as well as interconnections between them.

Roots and context of *youth exchange*

International Youth Exchanges have different roots. In Germany on a national level first steps to establish structures for youth exchanges became part of foreign policy in the 1950th after the 2nd World war. In the western part of Europe, international youth work was linked with the idea of reconciliation. In the east part, youth exchanges were mostly organized as workcamps with the idea to promote solidarity between socialist societies. One important step for the development of youth exchanges in Germany and France was the foundation of the *German French Youth Agency* in 1963. Schools, youth centers and organizations from civic society were

allowed to apply for funds. Later on, international youth work became a key aspect of youth work by definition of basic youth laws (in Germany KJHG §11).¹ Youth exchanges were lacking an educational concept besides the aspect of reconciliation. Since the 1970th and 1980th new concepts have developed mostly in the frame of intercultural learning. Interaction between participants concerning life-environment and social challenges became more and more a principle of youth exchanges.²

On the European level the first discussion about youth aspects started in the frames of the Council of European. The background was the idea that the different member states faced similar issues of youth policy. In order to promote mobility and participation the youth center in Strasbourg was founded and reports were published. In 1988 *Youth for Europe*, the first program to fund activities of youth exchanges in the EU was established. Since that time the EU commission and the national agencies became active units to develop youth policies in European framework. In the last decade the aspect of employability became a key aspect of EU youth policy which is influencing the practical level.³

What do we mean saying *youth exchange*⁴?

One of the general aims we have doing international youth exchange is to create a space for effective learning process due to the personal encounter with people with other cultural, social or personal background. The learning process, we mean, has the following dimensions:

- discovering and deconstructing stereotypes,
- reflecting participants' own behavior and attitudes, the frames and mechanisms around person influencing their doing,
- exploring perceptions by others and their own ability to be open for differences,

¹ <http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/kjhg/>

² A comprehensive description of International Youth Work in Germany and its history gives Thimmel [6]

³ H.-G. Wicke gives an overview of the development of European youth policies and the program of Youth for Europe [8].

⁴ Hereinafter we use *youth exchange*, *project* and *meeting* as synonyms, but *youth exchange* is the term explained the essence of the phenomenon preeminently.

— sensibilization seeing diversity inside one culture (e.g. national culture) and reflecting participants' own relations with “own” culture.

The aim defines our project basic frames.

Usually we work with the group up to 24 young people from all (two or more) countries all together during one week in one of the country (it's also possible we have re-meeting in another country some months later). The limitation of participants enables more personal encounter among young people, leads to a fruitful group process as an important resource of the learning process and gives possibilities to share personal reflection. All these aspects are important to realize a meaningful non-formal learning experience. The significant conditions are: participants have common language (the level or correctness is not important, the main point the participants can communicate whenever they want and understand each other) and they stay together whole week, having common experience and trial living together.

The group size and its constancy, the project duration as well as the conditions for unlimited and intensive interaction between participants set opportunities for learning process, as it was described above, that occurs not only through organized activities but also in free time, basically non-stop.

Furthermore, our projects have topics those are connected with current social challenges. Meanwhile we try not only to discuss the topic on abstract level, exploring its social and political aspects, but also to make connections with personal dimension – which aspects of the challenges participants experience in their everyday life or/and what mechanisms, similar to those occurred the social challenge, they can see in their schools, universities, families, sport teams, communities, surroundings etc⁵.

Doing that we hope to achieve following pedagogical aims:

— to sensibilize and raise participants' awareness about the topic, its different aspects and points of view on it,

— on this basis to develop the participants' competence of critical thinking in general,

⁵ In recent years we have had topics such: "It was just a joke. Does freedom of expression have borders?", "His Story. Her Story. My History. Historical memory in life of young people", "Motherland", "Borders in our life" etc.

— and – on the example of one topic – to go deeper in interaction between participants with different cultural and social backgrounds.

The last point means not to limit ourselves by intercultural learning in terms of getting to know (national) traditions, food, habits, games etc. Saying "go deeper" we talk about looking at "bottom part" of *iceberg of culture*⁶, where we can face attitudes and values, based on cultural, social and personal background and picture of the world/life different people have. The idea also is to see this kind of "cultural" differences not only between the groups of one nation but more inside them or even irrespective of belonging to them, emphasizing diversity of individual cultures (as complex of knowledge, values and behavior) and deconstructing concepts of unified nation mentalities.

Thus, we define *youth exchange* as young people encounter, where they share their ideas, opinions, views and ways of life and it becomes opportunities not only for opening participants' minds wider, but also and especially for critical comprehension and reflection their own values, attitudes and everyday behaviour as well as social and political phenomena, consciousness diversity and development of competence to live together being different.

Mentioned processes can occur rather spontaneously, and in this case we can talk about *informal learning*, but also they can be organized and moderated by youth workers or/and educators, for instance, according to *non-formal education* principles⁷, as we do it in our projects.

What does *non-formal education* mean for us?

Often *non-formal* education is defined through *NO*, and its principles are described as alternative ones to formal (simplifying – traditional school, academic) education principles. Hereinafter we use the same way to explain what non-formal education does mean for us.

⁶ The concept of Culture as iceberg was suggested by Edward Hall [3].

⁷ Different ways of formal and non-formal education and informal learning definitions are presented in number of publications [1, 2, 4, 5]

But non-formal education is not opposite to formal one. They both (indeed together with informal learning) are complementary to each other in the lifelong learning process, making it more various and effective.

The first definition of non-formal learning was given in European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning in 2000 as "Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalised certificates. Non-formal learning may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations and groups (such as in youth organisations, trades unions and political parties). It can also be provided through organisations or services that have been set up to complement formal systems (such as arts, music and sports classes or private tutoring to prepare for examinations)." [1]. As we can see this definition can cover rather wide range of practices. That has caused variety of understandings of the term. For instance in handbook on non-formal learning "Here2Stay" by A.Krezios and M.Ambrozy [4] we can meet how some international institutions describe non-formal education.

The definition closest to our understanding of non-formal education is done, for instance, by G. Mazza in the article "The interaction between formal and non-formal education – The objective of raising the employability of young people" [5] and – earlier – in Manual for human rights education with young people of Council of Europe "Compass" [2]. There "non-formal education refers to planned, structured programmes and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competences, outside the formal educational curriculum" and its core characteristics are specified. Now we would like to clarify non-formal education basic principle, which has significance for our practice.

Speaking about non-formal education, first of all, we mean there is no right answer or the only answer to the questions we have in the programme of our projects. The point at issue is participants and a group in whole are exploring different aspects of the topic and viewpoints on it. Participants coming to their own personal answers which are new ones (for them) but just temporary points on the continuum of understanding and awareness of the topic. Further, these new points can bring even more

questions. Ideally, participants understand this – the answers they come to are not the final points, but ones of possible answers they chose for the moment in certain life circumstance. That also includes participant's feeling controversy of the topic but conscious choosing his/her own position and having ability to explain and defend it.⁸

Consequently we obtain two following principles concerning planning results and their evaluation.

Actually we could say non-formal education doesn't have planned results as curriculum in school or academic tradition. There are no planned levels (of knowledge or skills), which should be achieved by participants. The task of pedagogues (youth workers, trainers) is to create environment in which every participant can advance by the way of awareness and sensibility, developing their own competences of critical thinking and complex understanding social processes, their political dimension and their own attitudes and strategies concerning the issues.

Evidently, if we don't have planned levels of learning, we cannot measure the results as achievements. Non-formal education results can be seen by evaluation personal development (by participants) and group and each participant's process (by trainers/pedagogues).

How do such educational and learning processes look like? Rather oversimplifying, we can say the process consist from to big parts – experience and its reflection.

In non-formal education we firstly speak about organizing experience (like real meetings and visits to special places, simulation games), working with participants' background – actualizing previous experience they and their family have had, but also using natural experience – discussions and conflicts in the group, situation of being together).

The second part of the learning process which is debriefing/reflection of the experience on personal and social and political level is – in our opinion – even more

⁸ As it was said above such vision of non-formal education is typical for Council of Europe [2, 4], but also it's rather developed (with variations) in Germany. It probably is effect of important and actively reflecting ad discussing agreement in citizenship education field, called *Beutelsbacher Konsens* [7], and basically consisted of three principles: Prohibition against overwhelming (indoctrination) the pupil, Treating controversial subjects as controversial and Giving weight to the personal interests of pupils. English description of the principles is given here: <http://www.lpb-bw.de/beutelsbacher-konsens.html>

important. This is the main source for learning in non-formal education.

Sitting in a circle in time of discussions and reflection is a sign for equality not only between participants, but also between participants and pedagogues. It as well as absence of time restrictions (for working with certain question) can help to strengthen the desire to share thoughts and feelings and to enhance expression of opinions and impressions.

Further we would like to specify more detailed but still important point for organizing non-formal education process.

Group dynamic (including free time, including conflicts) is a significant part of the educational process. Pedagogues should monitor group dynamic, influence it entering special activities and correcting planned programme, use it for educational aims through reflection and connection to the main project topic.

Developing the thesis, we have to note that non-formal educational process is also oriented on the group needs and interests, that means the planned programme and focuses (main points of discussions) can be changed if some other aspects (mostly connected with the aims of the project) become more important and discussible in the group. Thereby we can reach better personal results, going deeper in the issue and touching questions topical for participants, than we discuss all aspects but more superficially.

We have already used the words *trainer* and *participant*. We believe non-formal education as it explained above needs change of perspective to the roles: not students (pupils) – but participants, not teachers – but trainers or facilitators.

Explaining shortly what it means we have to say that one of the most important trainers function is to create environment answered two dialectical connected conditions:

— On the one hand participants, having experience, should found themselves in discomfort zones where they face situations, opinions, phenomena, contradicted their usual picture of the world, attitudes, narratives, stereotypes, behavior patterns. That become strong imputes for learning.

— On the other hand group atmosphere in general should be safety enough for open discussions, group reflection and just living together although you noted you are different and think and behave differently (from others) concerning some issues.

Naming young people *participants* we mean not only their more equal status in the process and its orientation to their needs, but also the fact that voluntary participation in the project is necessary for success in educational/learning process, organized as it said above. Otherwise it would be difficult to make them discuss openly and actively and reflect things personally and deep.

The last short note is diversity in the group is also resource for participants' motivation to be involved in intensive opinion sharing.

Thus, we understand *non-formal education* as an approach in youth work

— having learning aims connected with

- raising awareness of participants of chosen topic, its different dimensions and perspectives both on personal and social and political levels,
- developing critical thinking, sensibility and conscious attitudes of social challenges and their own behaviour in situations connected with the challenges,

— based on

- organized and planned experience – current or actualized from participants background, as well as
- working with group dynamic and
- following discussion and reflection both of them,

— planned by youth workers/pedagogues/trainers,

— organized as group process but

— had open and personal result and its evaluation,

— where group is the key recourse of learning, other information sources (such experts, media, museums, books etc.) play role of inputs for participants' debriefings and trainers' task is moderating/facilitating those processes.

Looking at both definitions given above we can see common points in our un-

derstanding of *youth exchange* and *non-formal education*. But, we believe, we can have synergetic effect increasing results of both of them if we implement youth exchanges using non-formal education approach.

Why do we use non-formal education in international youth exchanges?

As it was showed above, the main idea of youth exchange is better understanding (or learning how to understand better) others and to learn to be different but live together. In this case participants need:

— Not learning (national) traditions from books, guided tours or asking their peers to demonstrate some traditional (folk) things, but to see the real life of peers – differences and similarities they have in real live.

— Not only spend time together, do something together (e.g. ecological or restoration work), have fun or play sport games, but also try to go deeper in interaction between people with different background:

- to talk and try to understand points of view for the past, the present and the future, young people in different countries (and in your country) have,
- recognize diversity of ways of life and
- think how it's possible to live all together.

For that we need to organize environment for special experience and – even more important – for reflecting it, as it was described above, when we were explaining what do we mean as *non-formal education*.

Why is international youth exchange useful for non-formal education?

Situation of international youth exchange can bring:

— More motivations for participants to take part and to do it actively;

— New experience, which is important input for learning in non-formal education, such: to stay one week with people from other countries, to be in other country, to see your own country sometimes from "guests" perspectives and to develop individual perspectives, realize personal interests and needs in new (intercultural) situation, to express them, to experience new attitudes and behavior of your peers.

— More perspectives in discussions, simulations, reflection, that makes these

core processes of non-formal education richer.

— And, eventually, if the aim of education we provide is to learn to be different but live together (as it is in our case), youth exchange can enrich learning process with real (let it be small) experience of this – like first personal try.

Conclusion

The article presents the authors' understanding of essence, aims and principles of international youth exchange and non-formal education as well as possible synergetic effect increasing results of both of them if youth exchanges are implemented as non-formal education process. Non-formal education as well as International Youth Exchanges contribute to the fulfillment of basic aims of youth work: self-determination of young people, awareness for personal interests and empowerment to active participation in a civic society. In times of globalization young people are expected there to develop an independent personality as well as social competences and professional skills. Today many European countries are facing migration and multiethnic societies as well as xenophobia and fears concerning others. Youth Exchanges as well as non-formal education offer multiple learning opportunities by experiencing social diversity. By its combination such projects can promote critical thinking, awareness of stereotypes and other frames influencing personal attitudes and social and political phenomena as well as empowerment for anti-discrimination and active participation. Youth exchanges are special occasions for self-awareness and the reflection of the construction of personal and national identity. Non-formal education offers tools to facilitate reflection and interaction as resources for integral learning.

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