

# What Do Youth Workers Do?

## Communicating Youth Work

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### Abstract

Youth workers are generally highly skilled communicators across a range of circumstances and contexts. Yet despite this, their perception is that the nature and potential of their work is not fully understood beyond the boundaries of their own profession. This manifests itself in central policy decisions which only partly account for the realities of youth work practice conditions. Drawing upon evidence from empirical research, this article argues that textually based, theoretical discussion relating to the processes of intervention with young people remains underdeveloped, particularly in relation to the necessities of informality and the informal educational perspectives of the work. Only if the discourses of theory and policy are coherently informed and challenged by the practice perspective will it be possible to build a discursive field which might more comprehensively and holistically communicate what youth workers do.

### Keywords

Informal education; youth work practice; youth work theory.

### Introduction

Youth workers have always been keen to communicate the distinctive benefits of their professional interventions for young people. They have done so in formal and informal settings and beyond their professional boundaries. Yet they seem generally unconvinced that their work is fully understood by policy makers, fellow professionals or the public at large (Crimmens et al, 2003; Spence and Devanney, 2007). Whether or not their perceptions are accurate, the anxiety of workers is evident in their need to constantly explain and justify their practice. This betrays a defensiveness which implies that despite their verbal dexterity, the problem of communication in the public sphere is real enough for them.

Partly the difficulty might be attributed to preferred forms of communication. Youth workers tend to rely upon verbal forms of communication in face-to-face situations. In a profession where conversation is the key to successful practice, where everyday realities are unpredictable, the dominance of talk is to be expected, but this is not without consequence. Talk tends to be present-orientated, anecdotal and relates primarily to the immediacy of experience. Within talk, reflection and retrospection derive largely from the practical problems and issues of everyday encounters. In

contrast, written or visual texts are produced within youth work mainly for functional rather than analytical purposes; minutes of meetings, reports and information-sharing are documents designed to service the organisation, whilst photographic exhibitions, newspapers and the like are part of the productivity of work with user groups. Such texts communicate the principles of practice only incidentally. Meanwhile, critical, analytical and theoretically informed texts about practice occupy only a minor role in the communication of youth work both within and beyond the profession.

This translates into a tension between theory and practice which is unhelpful in circumstances where youth workers in different national locations are striving to establish their professional credentials under different policy imperatives and with different emphases. Ultimately, the successful development of youth work in an increasingly interconnected world depends not only upon the parameters of national legislation and policy, or upon the ability of workers to establish international practice networks, but also upon the identification of those universally distinctive features which delineate it from other welfare and educational professions, and which therefore enable it to be transferable across particular policy environments.

The pre-eminence given to conversational communication in which experiential knowledge is largely transmitted through anecdote, is at odds with the dominance of textually based theoretical and research knowledge which informs policy making and decision making (Catan, 2002). The possibility of youth work perspectives being fully incorporated within political and institutional processes is therefore weakened. When research is aligned with policy rather than practice, the difficulty is exacerbated (Issitt and Spence, 2005; Hoggarth and Payne, 2006). This is seriously problematic insofar as governments look towards youth work as one possible means of engaging young people who are resistant to, or excluded by other more formal institutional interventions. For the emphasis in this context is inevitably informed by 'evidence' derived from a problem-orientated approach to young people, which is seldom attuned to the potentiality model of youth from which youth work takes its bearings (Davies, 2005). Unless the meaning and principles of practice are communicated to sponsors and politicians in terms relevant to practice, then the values which lie at the heart of successful youth work interventions will be continuously compromised in the process of submitting to the vagaries of political expediency and bureaucratic rigidity.

This article argues that the forms of communication need to be brought into a finer balance by increased attention to theoretically informed meaning-making analysing what youth work is. Only when such meaning-making reaches a 'critical mass' influential outside the immediacy of youth work practice, informing other approaches to young people, and transcending national policy concerns will youth workers be able to communicate effectively what is it that they do and thereby maximise their effectiveness. The creation of research-based, theoretically developed and practice-informed texts is necessary to the process of creating a discursive field in which the meanings, values and potential of youth work as professional activity might be effectively communicated.

To inform the discussion, this article draws mainly upon the evidence derived from research undertaken in the UK between 2004 and 2006 entitled 'An Everyday Journey: discovering the meaning and value of youth work' (Spence and Devanney, 2007).<sup>1</sup> The research process involved preliminary discussions with five groups of youth workers and

five of young people in order to identify the principal concerns of participants in youth provision. These concerns informed the questions which guided participant observation in 15 youth projects chosen to represent different geographical regions and a range of youth work approaches. During the participant observation, in addition to research diaries, researchers engaged in 51 'directed' discussions with youth workers, and undertook interviews with 105 young people involved in the projects. The insights derived correspond clearly with the evidence gleaned in other recent research projects which focus upon the question of youth work practice and the perspectives of youth workers (eg. Crimmens et al, 2004; Harland and Morgan, 2006; Yates and Payne, 2007).

### Understanding Youth Work

Reflecting the structural powerlessness of the young people who are the main object of its attention (Lalor et al, 2007), youth work has been amongst the least well resourced, the most poorly represented, and its workers amongst the lowest paid of professional practitioners within the educational/health/social work field. Even when youth work has statutory support as it now does in Ireland, its weak position in the panoply of statutory services, retaining significant dependence upon the voluntary sector, is characteristic of powerlessness. And even when it attracts additional funding in response to specific social concerns and questions, as it has done in Northern Ireland where the 'peace dividend' in particular has offered specific opportunities for growth and development, the conditions for such funding are time limited and instrumental in relation to goals set outside youth work itself (Harland et al, 2005). Mainly youth work is perceived as supplementary to other educational and welfare services and its priorities are located in the margins of related provision.

As a consequence of its structural marginality, negative issues often dominate youth work agendas – exclusion, disaffection, young people's problems, conflict, social problems of youth. Positive youth work has been rendered inarticulate in this environment; its discourses are colonised by terms of reference derived from other professions. This is further reflected in negative expressions of what youth work is. Time and again, in the 'Everyday Journey' research, workers (and young people) described youth work mainly as *not* teaching. Harland and Morgan (2006:9) have made the same point about the perspectives of workers in Northern Ireland where 'there seemed to be more consensus on what youth work was not'. Even when workers describe positively what they do, they often use comparisons with other professions in order to give meaning to their own practice:

*We don't have an agenda for them, like social workers would have, or teachers ... It's open. It's open and it gives them free space as well, that they don't get anywhere else* (youth worker quoted in Spence and Devanney, 2007:72).

Ironically, it may be because youth workers are so verbally skilled that they experience difficulties in reaching any lasting consensus about what youth work *is*. Driven by the need to exploit funding opportunities wherever they can, youth workers adapt their language to conditions not of their own making. They perform for audiences who come with pre-determined agendas for their work in relation to pre-determined aspirations for young people. Thus for example, the concept of 'youth' which underlies the very existence of youth work is a universal category which is consistently

contradicted by the widespread adoption of the fashionable policy language of targeting and exclusion to communicate the worth of contemporary practice. Inevitably in such conditions, the public and private images of youth work often relate in tension.

Tensions can be managed if youth workers retain control over at least some of their practice conditions, but the effect of targeting and outcome-led processes of accountability which accompany increased involvement by the state, systematically colonise the space available for worker autonomy. As one worker in Scotland commented to Spence and Devanney (2007: 119):

*There have been lots of changes in youth work in Scotland ... This shaped the way forward for youth work as part of Community Learning Development, and put them at the forefront of community planning and showed youth work as the front line partner to work with schools etc. This was nice as up until then youth work had been the poor cousin, but it was also scary as now everyone is looking at what youth work is doing. This has led to new tighter systems to justify the work.*

If youth work is to thrive, it is essential that the public language of practice and the terms of reference informing policy at least complement the intrinsic nature of the processes of practice. This does not mean that there will be one way and one way only. Nor does it mean that priorities and concepts will be static. But it does suggest that discussion should revolve around a set of central reference points and that the boundaries of the youth work constituency should be recognisable. Mainly this implies developing a theoretical and policy language which is grounded in, emanates from and connects back to the realities of practice conditions.

It is tempting to think that such a language might be derived from clear and commonly agreed definitions of youth work methods, purposes and values. However, given the fluidity of the conditions under which youth work functions, it is difficult, as Harland and Morgan's (2006) research demonstrates, to achieve consensus around any standard definition. Definitions are apt to depend upon the particular historical and organizational context in which they are created and in themselves, they can never fully represent the richness and openness of practice which calls for constant re-working and re-framing of meaning. Fixed formulations of what youth work is or is expected to be are inevitably inscribed within formal frameworks for practice. For example, in the definition offered in the Irish Youth Work Act (2001, s. 3) youth work is identified as:

A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary involvement ... which is:

- a) complementary to their formal, academic and vocational training; and
- b) provided primarily by voluntary organisations.

This particular definition is determinedly structured and firmly situates youth work as a 'complementary' approach both in the framework of institutions and in the type of institution, thus confirming the relative, and secondary, status of the profession. Nevertheless, in its recognition that young people need to be voluntarily involved, it does leave a gap for the negotiated relationship between youth workers and young

people, which suggests that youth workers might maintain some control over the conditions of practice. However, the boundaries for this negotiation are restrictive, drawn in terms of curriculum planning and ‘training’. Whilst the definition might be particularly reflective of, and will certainly influence the bias of development in Irish youth work, the concepts which it mobilises are all contestable. It is only if such concepts are opened to scrutiny and critical analysis with reference to other – and perhaps competing – definitions operating elsewhere that the discursive field will begin to develop as an active process of communicating universal youth work principles. Definitions in themselves are inadequate for the task.

In attempting to move beyond the negative or relative representations of youth work it is particularly important to engage continuously with theoretical principles associated with the main themes of youth work. For example, education is clearly a central theme and the terminology of social education, non-formal education and informal education has been used at different times and in different places to identify the distinctiveness of the work in English-speaking countries.<sup>2</sup> An important task of building the discursive field of youth work and to communicate its meanings is to engage with the different theoretical dimensions of these related educational approaches.

Conceptualising youth work as ‘the social education of the adolescent’ (Davies and Gibson, 1967) came to pre-eminence after the second world war as means of helping young people ‘to develop socially during their leisure time’ (ibid:1). The ‘prime concern’ of social education ‘is with any young person’s meetings with others, with his capacity in these meetings to accept others and be accepted by them, and about the common interests around which these meetings may revolve’ (ibid:2). According to Davies and Gibson, the dynamic of social education is in relationships, and the primary objective of youth work is to enable young people to ‘discover how to contribute as well as take from his association with others’ (ibid:2).

Non-formal education refers to ‘... learning and development that takes place outside the formal educational field, but which is structured and based on learning objectives’ (Youth Service Liaison Forum, 2005:13, quoted in Lalor et al, 2007: 269), and it relies upon curriculum-based approaches and training. While the definition just quoted comes from Northern Ireland, this perspective seems to be shared by the Youth Work Act in the Republic. The dynamic of non-formal education lies in the ways in which young people participate in structures and programmes rather than in relationships and its objectives relate to organisational purpose as much as to the self-defined interests of young people. When the power to define the priorities of youth work is located outside the setting of everyday practice, non-formal education is promoted because it provides a framework to facilitate processes of accountability evidenced through targets, strategies and outcomes. However, non-formal education relies upon the informality of youth work relationship-building for its success, especially with those young people who are targeted because of exclusion or disaffection.

The language of informal education, ‘which is not structured and takes place in daily life activities within peer/family groups, etc.’ (ibid) is a more holistic designation of youth work. Within the ‘Everyday Journey’ research the terminology of informal education was most frequently used by workers to explain the dynamics of their relationships with young people. Informal education in the English context in

particular appears to have become the vehicle by which youth workers seek to positively differentiate their educational approaches from those of schools. Its emphasis upon the centrality of conversation emphasises the relational principles characteristic of social education whilst accommodating but transcending the structural limitations of non-formal education. Efforts towards delineating a conceptual framework for informal education have been pursued, notably by Jeffs and Smith (eg Jeffs and Smith, 1996; Smith, 1994), as a means of asserting the central values of youth work as a humanistic practice. Its principles have been succinctly expressed by Kerry Young who considers youth work processes to be primarily 'moral philosophy':

Education is the business of youth work. Enabling and supporting young people, at a critical moment in their lives, to learn and develop the capacities to reflect, to reason and to act as social beings in the social world. Not in any way they choose, but in accordance with the state of 'good faith' to which all human beings aspire. That state of living a life true to oneself (Young, 1999:1).

Young's definition is interesting for its acknowledgement that young people are social agents, not just individuals inhabiting a particular moment of the lifespan, and that the educational perspective of youth work involves invoking a set of ideals which transcend personal 'needs'.

Nowhere is *informal* education the language of policy. That English youth workers manage to maintain any commitment to informal education is partly due to unresolved tensions between policy objectives and practice realities and the inability of bureaucratic processes to deal with the dynamism and fluidity of the voluntary relationship between youth workers and young people. Within policy statements, there are gaps and contradictions. These reflect the necessity of pursuing instrumentally desired outcomes, but within conditions in the youth work field which are not in the control of policy-makers. The gap between 'planned programmes of education' and the 'voluntary involvement' of young people in the Irish Youth Work Act definition, is unacknowledged; but it is a gap which must be filled in youth work practice. Many of the young people who are the main subjects of youth work intervention would not engage voluntarily in their initial contact with youth projects if they thought they were to engage in 'a planned programme of education designed to aid their personal and social development'. Anyone attempting to uncritically follow the definition into practice, without reference to real relationships, would encounter serious difficulties.

To some extent, the tension around structure and informality is recognised in a recent pronouncement of the UK government:

The evidence ... showed that unstructured provision attracted the more disadvantaged young people. The real challenge therefore in working with disadvantaged young people is to introduce structure and greater organisation and supervision into the unstructured provision to which they are more likely to be drawn. Other evidence shows that youth work has a crucial role to play in supporting and challenging young people to try different things (Dept. for Children, Schools and Families, 2007: 22).

In this document, for the first time in decades, the UK government acknowledges that young people tend to access generic youth projects because they are seeking leisure opportunities, fun and recreational facilities and that it is in such an environment that youth workers can best contribute to 'positive outcomes'. Yet still, it remains unclear how the space between young people's desire for unstructured approaches can be squared with the government's desire for structure and curriculum except with regard to the 'support and challenge' that might be offered by youth workers. The source of the problem can be located partly in the underdevelopment of the discourse of practice processes and the difficulties experienced by youth workers in communicating their practice realities.

### Developing a Discourse

Despite gaps and contradictions, the political acknowledgement of some key concerns of youth workers, including voluntary participation and the tension between structure and informality, is important. Possibly it indicates that the increased efforts of practitioners, educators and researchers in recent years to spell out and communicate what youth work actually *is* has been heard at policy level. Opportunities for developing the textual field of knowledge relating to youth work practice have been growing, facilitated by the increased attention to youth policy in the global context and by the growing international contact between youth workers, young people and academics (eg. Williamson, 2007). In addition, professionalisation has resulted in an expansion of youth work education which has brought into the field increased numbers of academics, some from related fields, and a widening of connections between youth work and related professions.

Development of *critical* understanding has been achieved mainly through the determined efforts of independent commentators to bridge the gap between theory and practice, to use independent media to pursue ideas and debates which challenge received wisdom amongst practitioners and policy-makers, and to pursue understanding which presents a wider vision for youth work than that normally inscribed within national policies. The declared intention of Youth Work Ireland of 'promoting the interests of young people and youth services by critiquing and commenting on relevant literature and social policy developments and engaging in advocacy and campaigning' should not be underestimated in this regard ([www.youthworkireland.ie/strategic.asp](http://www.youthworkireland.ie/strategic.asp)). Analytical work which refuses to be intimidated by more powerful voices is crucial to the development of the discourse of professional practice, because it continues to question the philosophical and ideological basis of policy, to explore the limits and possibilities of practice, to engage in debate and present new and imaginative thought which draws from knowledge gained from an understanding of a dynamic and distinctive practice tradition.

In the pursuit of a theoretical discourse relevant to practice realities, the establishment of academically rigorous journals sympathetic to youth work is crucial. The recent establishment of *Youth Studies Ireland* is part of the trend, as too is the long-term survival (against the odds) of *Youth and Policy* and the recent revival of *Scottish Youth Issues*. These journals offer space for practitioners, researchers and policy makers to engage in analysis and debate which relates directly to youth work, which does not categorise it as but an offshoot of another profession, and which does not understand

youth work merely as a technique for delivering government policy. There is still some distance to travel before youth work journals and related texts achieve equal status to other academic publications, but the movement is in a positive direction. What is particularly important is that such journals offer the opportunity for the distinctive youth work voice to be heard, linking professional practice with policy issues through intellectual debate and discussion.

Youth and community work has been in the forefront in exploring and making use of the potential of new communications systems. These are particularly sympathetic to the informal conversational bent of youth work and to its responsiveness to young people's interests. The Informal Education Website ([www.infed.org.uk](http://www.infed.org.uk)) is making a major contribution to the reclamation of youth work history as well as to the communication of youth work theory and practice. The more recently created 'Critically Chatting' website devised in response to the interest in a series of seminars is in turn challenging conventional wisdom and pursuing a collective and critical analytical approach to policy and practice (<http://critically-chatting.0catch.com>). Meanwhile the websites of national and local agencies and organisations similar to Youth Work Ireland ([www.youthworkireland.ie](http://www.youthworkireland.ie)), such as the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies ([www.acys.info/](http://www.acys.info/)), and the related sites of trades unions (eg. the British Community and Youth Workers Union, [www.cywu.org.uk](http://www.cywu.org.uk)), and voluntary or specialist organisations (eg. Northern Ireland Deaf Youth Association [www.nidya.org.uk](http://www.nidya.org.uk)), are communicating a wealth of up to date information about activities, policies, practices, training and publications, contributing to an expanding arena for conversations about youth work and its meaning.

This emerging textual field, reflected and affirmed in the oral tradition by increased conference and workshop activity, speaks across the theory-practice divide. It pays attention to the realities of practice as much as to the intellectual challenges of theory; it points to the insights of history as well as to contemporary issues; it considers the meaning and criticises policy in addition to revealing issues raised in policy implementation. It is out of this range of work that textual authority for the narrative claims of practitioners might emerge. Such developments need to be nurtured in order to facilitate the growth of an assertive practice-based language in which the oral and the textual have at least equal weight.

### Communicating Practice

It is no accident that *Youth and Policy* had the privilege of publishing a short article which might lay claim to being one of the best pieces of writing about youth work practice ever produced and which seems expressive of the development of a self-created professional discourse. It was written in 2004 by Jeremy Brent<sup>3</sup> in response to the debate about the role of accreditation and curriculum in English youth work. Entitled 'Communicating what youth work achieves: the smile and the arch', the piece is drawn from Brent's long experience of employment in a youth club in Bristol. It is worth quoting extensively from the part about 'The arch':

Over the years, there have been a number of deaths of young people who have attended the youth centre: car and motorbike accidents, drug-related deaths, suicides, a collapsed trench on a building site, cystic fibrosis. Young

death is particularly hard to deal with, and deaths that occurred 20 or 30 years ago still bear a great burden of grief. So the idea grew of converting a scrap of land outside the building into a garden of remembrance with, in its centre, some kind of monument ...

The project employed a sculptor who engaged the young people in the design work. A design was chosen of a young man whose brother had died on Christmas day from a drugs cocktail. Brent describes the construction of the arch:

The project was very physical. One young man, whom I had seen self-anaesthetised with drink and drugs at the funeral of his brother (killed in a motorbike accident) was dripping with sweat as he sawed through chunks of steel to give the arch the fruit of his effort. This was doing something, creating something, not just talking about it. It was the first time that I think he had properly grieved.

The description of the creation of the arch is followed by a commentary on policy:

This has been a powerful piece of youth work ... The product did not get in the way of the process, and the project can partly be judged by its product. The value of the arch far outweighs the value of any accreditation that could have been given to young people for having taken part. In fact, accreditation in this context would have been demeaning. Certificates would have detracted from the importance of the arch as something worth doing for itself, and devalued the emotional depth of its content.

We could surmise the learning outcomes of the young people involved, but that feels almost sacrilegious. They were personal to them. I would not dream of asking them, let alone giving them a questionnaire to fill in. The project had, as so often in youth work, unrecordable outcomes, outcomes that cannot be encompassed by an evaluation form (Brent, 2004:71–72).

This piece finely illustrates both what youth workers do and the problem of formally communicating what they do. Using a practice-based story to make his point, Brent refers to deep emotion, to the personal, and to his own sensitivity towards the value of the project to the young people involved. So often these are the terms within which youth workers verbalise the meaning of their practice and so often these are the terms excluded from textual communication. It is instructive that Brent does not tell this story in a vacuum but with critical regard to a particular dimension of policy which he believed was impacting negatively upon practice.

There is a long tradition of youth workers using stories from practice to communicate the meaning of their work. A story told by a youth worker-coordinator of a young people's motor project lay behind the development of the 'Everyday Journey' research project. Based in a factory unit on a small industrial estate this project worked mainly with groups of young people defined as problematic and referred by schools. The arrangement between project and schools was formal, but the young people's participation was by agreement. Using old cars donated by local garages, the young people were taught basic safety techniques, the use, organisation and care of tools and how to strip down and repair car engines. In the process they

produced a portfolio of their work and received a certificate of achievement at its completion. This non-formal educational programme was supplemented by informal activities and outings. The co-ordinator was very proud of the formal outcomes and placed great emphasis upon the young people's portfolios. However, within informal conversation, his emphasis was completely different. He told a story of a girl working in a group which was otherwise all male, who was unable to relate to anyone and who constantly suffered verbal abuse from a stepfather. The girl attended regularly, but seldom communicated or even raised her eyes. Then the group was taken go-karting. The track was wet and slippery, and she skidded into a ditch. The workers ran to her to make sure that she was not hurt and found her sitting in the ditch, covered in mud, but looking up and laughing with her hands outstretched and cupped together. In her hands there sat a frog. The story ended there. No further explanation was deemed necessary. The narrator, communicating with an 'insider' knew that the fundamental meanings conveyed would be implicitly understood.

This story and its telling highlighted the gaps between the public presentation of the work which referred to its material and structured elements of learning, and the central meanings which were apparently located in the secondary and supplementary aspects of the project, in its accidental moments and in its emotional outcomes.

Inspired by this story, the 'Everyday Journey' research was designed partly with the intention of collecting stories from youth workers and young people in order to find a way of adding their voices authentically to the developing discourse of youth work. It was anticipated that in a collection of stories it would be possible to find commonalities and differences, to critically analyse them as 'texts' and in so doing articulate some of the key meanings and priorities which emerge in the real conditions of youth work practice.

Not as many stories were collected as anticipated. This seemed to be related to the semi-formality of the research situation and the expectations which youth workers have of the role of research vis-à-vis policy. Nevertheless, the stories told had a clear function. They were mobilised largely to legitimise claims that youth work interventions could be critical in changing the lives of young people. There seemed no other means of communicating the full meaning of critical moments of change because these would seem either mundane or inappropriate if translated into more formal language. Making eye contact, smiling, or grieving can find no comfortable place within a set of directives which stress 'life and social skills' or 'sex education'. Yet youth workers want to communicate that when a young person cannot usually smile, the mundane act of smiling becomes hugely significant. The critical interventions of youth workers can make a mundane nothingness into something extraordinary.

What usually appears ordinary, must be always open to question for youth workers. For example, the following extract is from a young mother who talked to the researcher about the effect of the young women's project on her life:

Researcher: *And what sort of changes were you starting to see?*

Laura: *Well just being able to go out the house. I mean I couldn't get on buses. I couldn't even go to the corner shop whereas I was starting to take little steps to go to different places like that. And now I can go on a bus, I can go on the train, I mean I can't do it by myself, well I probably could do it by myself because I would challenge myself to do it.*

Young people articulated their understanding of what youth workers do and their gains from youth work according to their particular circumstances. Always this was relevant to their personal needs and interests, and always it added to the stock of happiness in their lives as *they were at that moment*. Undoubtedly this would have consequences for the future, but young people are interested in their own here and now as much as in their transition to adulthood (Anderson et al, 2005). A young man from Northern Ireland expressed this very clearly:

Craig: *It's really different, cos it's really laid back and relaxed, it's more about what we would want to do and things we enjoy doing. Like I absolutely adore skating and since we came here it's all been centred about that, and it's been what we want to do in the skating. It's just been thoroughly enjoyable from the start, like two and a half years and I haven't been annoyed once; I've never come out of this place angry. It's always been a cheerful mood and I can't wait until next week.*

What Craig does not reveal in this extract is how, from the participation in skating, the young men involved were enabled to meet young people across the community divide, were kept safe, discussed the need for public provision for skaters, worked alongside local councillors to achieve that, and in so doing began to learn the arts of democratic engagement. All these things were relevant to the skaters and of long term importance for their democratic participation, but far and away the most important to them in the immediacy of their everyday lives is 'I've never come out of this place angry'. It was necessary to establish this before anything else could be pursued; creating and maintaining the conditions for its achievement were the first and principal concerns of the youth workers, underpinning all other development.

The oft-repeated youth work mantra of 'starting where young people are at' is a phrase which rather clumsily covers a complex, sensitive and highly skilled process of intervention. Starting there creates the conditions in which some young people will voluntarily and actively engage with a youth project, eventually communicate positively with youth workers, and through them learn to actively participate in wider social issues. This process of intervention involves understanding the socio-economic, institutional and cultural context of young people's lives in a general sense whilst simultaneously having the capacity to respond sensitively to the differences between individuals and groups on an inter-personal level. The primary skill which is used to 'start where young people are at' is that of listening. Because youth workers listen in an informed but open way not only to words, but to silences and absences, conversation and dialogue can emerge. The following exchange is between the researchers and a group of young women involved in a youth project sited within a school:

Researcher: *Can you say a bit more about what you think youth workers do?*

Mary: *They keep people off the streets.*

Chrissy: *They're like teachers, they teach us but in a more fun and exciting way and they respect us.*

Rosie: *And they listen to you when you want to talk to them.*

Leanne: *Teachers are boring.*

Mary: *And they shout at you.*

Researcher: *And you think youth workers are different to that then?*

Rosie: *Yeah.*

Chrissy: *Maureen [the youth worker] listens to us and helps us.*

The following is from a young women's project:

Researcher: *What about the role of the workers, what do you think the workers do and what do they help you with when you come to the project?*

Jane: *Dead friendly, always friendly every time you come in. Always smiling.*

Katie: *Always smiling.*

Kelly: *Dead supportive and encouraging really I think.*

Helen: *And if you need somebody to listen to you they're always there to listen to you.*

Katie: *If you need help with anything you can always just phone them. Like you know they're not going to be funny with you, they're 'I can help you do this and do that'.*

Jane: *They just seem interested.*

Researcher: *So like having time for you and that sort of thing? I mean is that different to your other experiences or ...*

Katie: *And they treat everybody equal.*

The process of making young people happy, of being friendly, involves youth workers in a whole person experience in which the personal cannot be entirely separated from the professional. Their professionalism of necessity involves communicating something personal. In order to commit their trust, the young people need to believe that the youth worker cares about their welfare not just as a professional matter, but at a personal level. And just as significantly, most of the youth workers involved in the research believed this too; just as they believed that 'relationships' were at the core of their practice. Yet youth workers also know that personal and relational language is a deeply problematic area of public communication. So for instance, in response to declarations of friendship from young people, workers needed to explain that they could not be a personal friend, that they were just 'like' a friend. One worker talked apologetically about the importance of 'love' in her work:

Claire: *It's giving them that sort of, love's probably the wrong word to use these days, because it's taken far too much out of context but they do get that to an extent. One of the main things folk need and it isn't just young folk it's everybody, they need that certain extent of love and somebody that's really caring for them. I know so many people like, 'I'm going to kill myself, nobody likes me', and some of them are just making it up; but other ones maybe there isn't actually anybody there. They've maybe got friends but maybe they can't interact that well with their friends and they need that.*

Susan: *It's acceptance isn't it? And it's also about, you're accepting that person. And sometimes you'll pull them up because you'll see aspects of their behaviour are unacceptable but it's not about saying you're not acceptable.*

Ultimately, it is in this difficult area of relationships, love and friendship that the language of youth work is most underdeveloped. In the professional discourses which flow from statutory support, the language of emotion is ruled out of court. It is too messy for bureaucracies and policy makers, too unruly for power brokers, and too disruptive for the rationalities of academics. Yet it is in this untamed area that the heart of what youth workers do in their work with young people is to be found. For youth work to be fully recognised as a professional activity, it is essential to create a language to express this. This implies a critical challenge to the dominant meanings of professionalism and of the definitions of youth work associated with policy.

### **Conclusion: What can be done?**

In order to communicate effectively what youth workers do, a number of significant issues need to be addressed. These are not exhaustive, but they are crucial to the future of the profession as informal educational practice.

Firstly, although information about the dimensions of what youth workers do is already in the public domain, some key elements of meaning are silenced in that domain. Structured and formal elements of intervention are easily understood in the public sphere and are prioritised in the formal discourses of professionalism. It is necessary to address silences, to adopt a critical approach to policy language and to develop more fully the language of informality. Here, real relations of power are at stake, for the language is representative of such relations. It is therefore necessary to consider the way in which youth work is constituted in systems of power between fellow professionals and policy makers.

Secondly, youth workers need to reclaim and develop their own intellectual and practical history. No activity can claim professional status and public trust if it does not have a body of historical knowledge to give authority to its current actions and to inform current debates and discussions. There are important classic texts, research reports, recordings, films and archives which speak of a coherent and international body of knowledge which is underused as youth workers attempt to deal with the pressing realities of the present and perform for the latest policy priority. Historical texts often use a language of practice which is not only relevant to former times but has universal validity. The reinstatement of the textual history of youth work is crucial to establishing the claim to a distinctive professionalism and to the communication of a dynamic professional identity. The gap between theory and practice in youth work must be bridged and it behoves the academics associated with youth work education in particular to pursue the intellectual task and to enthuse their students to consider practice, theory and the pursuit of knowledge to be indistinguishable in furthering the interests of the profession. Reflection in itself is insufficient.

Thirdly, those connected with youth work have a responsibility to engage critically with policy to encourage a dialogue in which politicians are consistently reminded of the realities of the practice situation. Without a direct debate with politicians, the work

will be shaped according to a version of reality which does not take into consideration the views and perceptions of those young people who are most excluded from the benefits of citizenship, participation and positive social relationships. Youth workers do not need researchers to communicate the values and meanings of their practice. They can do this themselves but a first stage in affirming the value of what is meaningful in practice involves youth workers communicating with each other and acting collectively. Time must be made for such activities outside the pressures of the everyday isolated situation.

Fourthly, reading and writing for the youth work journals can help build a critical mass of intellectual dialogue. It is necessary to consider too the value of related texts from other professions and within other media in communicating the values and processes of youth work. Youth work is not self-contained. There are disciplinary fields which overlap with it and with which it is necessary to communicate in language which can be commonly understood. Only by recognising the possibilities and priorities of related professions will it ultimately be possible to be clearer about the professional boundaries and challenges of youth work. Only by communicating with fellow professionals on an equal intellectual level will it be possible to situate youth work equally in the panoply of educational and welfare professionals.

Finally, it is imperative that the emerging professional discourse should not be distorted or imbalanced by ignoring the affective, emotional and interpersonal aspects of the work. Addressing these requires energy, time and great skill. There is a language of practice, at present implied in the anecdotes of workers and hidden in the pages of historical texts which is crucial to the health of the profession. In contemporary discourses such language is to be found mainly in faith-based approaches: it is allowed in that context. If youth work is to flourish, such language must also be embraced and asserted in the secular field. Otherwise, what is central to the youth worker's identity is displaced. And ultimately without such language, communicating why youth work is useful and beneficial for young people will become simply a matter of accident dependent upon the personality, charisma and bravery of individual workers. Without the affective aspects of practice which such language expresses, youth work does not and cannot work.

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## Notes

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- 1 Funded by the UK's 'Big Lottery' and undertaken between 2004 and 2006 in partnership between Durham University and the voluntary youth organisation, Weston Spirit.
- 2 In the European context, the language of social animation and social pedagogy are also important. See [www.infed.org.uk](http://www.infed.org.uk) for further discussion.
- 3 Jeremy Brent died in 2006. See obituary in the Guardian and Rapport.

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