

A3

Hitchhiker's guide to recognition of non-formal learning in the youth field

⇒ Darko Markovic

*"What do I get?
Oh, what do I get?"
Buzzcocks*

At the moment many formal, non-formal and informal discussions are taking place on how to get better recognition for learning in the youth field. Some people think there are already enough opportunities to gain recognition, others have strong concerns about "formalising the non-formal", others still argue it is a waste of resources, while some believe it is just the right moment to work on the development of new recognition strategies. Obviously, for many different reasons, the issue of recognition touches the very heart of youth work and non-formal education, leaving barely anyone participating in those discussions totally indifferent¹.

Following these "hot discussions", it seems that some of the main questions related to recognition are: How can we bring the institutional policy objectives and the realities of youth work in Europe closer? What are the main challenges and the "stretch zones" for us, youth workers/leaders, mentors and trainers, in this process? What are the potential dangers and pitfalls for youth work and non-formal education? And what might be the potential benefits for the young people we work with?

Already knowing that the definitive answer is "42"², this chapter still dares to address the above questions, while offering a brief guide for reflection and answers to some major dilemmas related to recognition for learning in the youth field. So, fasten your seat belts...

Current policy situation at European level

In May 2006 the Council of the European Union adopted a *Resolution on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field*. In this resolution the Council states that "the work and achievements of young people and those active in youth

work and youth organisations deserve greater recognition in order to enhance their value and visibility, and should be given due consideration by employers, formal education and civil society in general".³ The Council also invites Member States and the European Commission to get involved in the development of youth-specific recognition tools "for identifying and recognising the skills and competences acquired by young people through non-formal and informal learning"⁴. Although you might find this official call from the "high level" surprising, this is just a part of the same "wave" in re-thinking learning and education in Europe, which started in Lisbon in 2000⁵.

Following this direction, over the past 6-7 years, various "milestones"⁶ have been set and different "pathways"⁷ explored on the way towards better recognition of the learning that takes place in the youth sector. Still the question remains: how can we create more of a link between the policy and practice of recognition?

The confusing word "recognition"

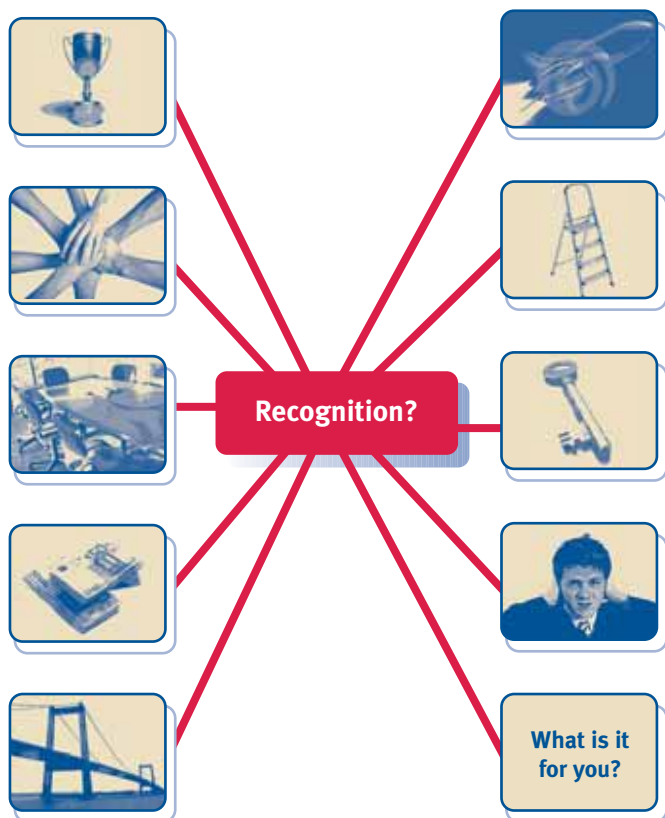
From my own personal experience of working with recognition⁸, I can tell you that the use of the word itself can cause quite some confusion. First of all, there are some difficulties in translating the English term into other languages, without losing the original meaning.

⇒ How do you say "recognition" in your language?

Secondly, the word "recognition" conjures up a whole range of different associations: some people think of accreditation, others of certificates or even diplomas, while the rest might think of giving more value to something. And they are all right, but they just think about *different recognition mechanisms and procedures*⁹. And if we approach it from a more metaphoric way of thinking, what would your image of "recognition in the youth field" be?

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Do any of these images represent recognition in the youth field for you? Which one(s) and why?



The third problem with understanding recognition is related to the potential *objects of recognition*. In the youth field context, one can think of better recognition of the youth sector as a whole, the youth worker profession, youth trainer competences, educational programmes, providers, participation, qualifications and - last but not the least - the object of recognition can be the *young people's learning, both process and outcomes, in youth activities*. When thinking about recognition, the last is probably the least controversial and it is the main focus of the Youthpass and this publication.

Finally, what creates major confusion about recognition is usually the mixing up of two interrelated, but still distinct, processes – *formal recognition* and *social recognition*¹⁰. Formal recognition (sometimes also called “codified”) of learning is about giving a formal value and formal status to new competences acquired by participation in an

educational youth activity (e.g. youth exchange, EVS, training etc.), involving mechanisms like certification. On the other hand, social recognition is more about giving and recognising a social value in learning *per se*, as well as a positive attitude from and appreciation of the community towards activities in the youth sector.

The same type of logic can be applied when thinking about the status of the youth sector and non-formal education in your country and other countries in Europe. Due to different social, educational or political factors, there are large national differences related to recognition of youth work and non-formal education. For example, in some countries you can find a formally recognised profession of youth worker/trainer, while at the same time there is relatively low social recognition for this kind of work. In other countries there might be significant financial support for and social appreciation of youth work activities, but no formal recognition at all.

If you take these two dimensions of recognition, where would you place the status of youth work and non-formal education in your country?

High formal recognition		
Low formal recognition	Low social recognition	High social recognition

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Understanding your own youth work

Another challenge related to putting recognition of learning in youth activities into practice concerns the very understanding of youth work, its core purposes and practices.

...→ *When thinking about the reasons and the nature of activities that you carry out with young people, would you consider them primarily as leisure time activities, or education and learning or social activism or a combination of those three?*

<input type="radio"/>	Leisure time and fun	10
<input type="radio"/>	Learning and education	10
<input type="radio"/>	Social activism	10

The way you see the main purpose and the way you approach youth work might significantly affect your perception of and attitude towards calls for more and better recognition of learning in the youth sector.

“Attractive youth work”

Two years ago, I had an opportunity to work as a trainer for the International Young Nature Friends (IYNF), an organisation which took the very courageous step of reconsidering its core purpose, after many decades of existence. Driven by the significant decrease in interest by young people in their activities, they started to “dig” deeply into the very nature of the youth work they were doing (as well as the very nature of the function of their organisation). And they came out with a very interesting concept of “attractive youth work”¹¹. It might look to some people like a simple marketing trick, but essentially it was a very well thought-out concept which gave their outdoor youth activities a clearer and intentional (non-formal) educational dimension and ensured this was clearly communicated to the young people who were interested in taking part. The good old hikes in the forest or mountain climbing activities were not to be seen merely as an opportunity to get along with other young people and be in contact with nature, but also as consciously planned, value-based, non-formal education opportunities to learn about team work, diversity,

sustainable development, environmental protection etc.¹². People from IYNF were convinced that these kinds of activities would be more attractive to today's young people! What do you think?

Recognition of learning - a way to make youth activities even more attractive?

When I look back and think about my own learning in youth work and non-formal education, I realise that's precisely the place where I learnt some of the most important things in my life, for example: what taking initiative *really* means, how to communicate effectively, how to understand cultural differences and how they affect communication, how to work in a team, how to lead a project, how to stand up for my rights in a constructive manner and many more¹³.

...→ *What were the main things you learnt in youthwork in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes?*

As youth leaders, mentors or trainers in youth activities, we should be proud and not too modest about the importance of learning for the young people we work with. There is, indeed, so much precious learning taking place in youth activities all over Europe. Still the question remains: can we offer more to the young people we work with? Can we offer more than personal satisfaction and self-confidence and an experience which is usually very difficult to explain to those outside the youth field?

To be clear, the things we learn or teach in youth work are so vitally important and universally needed, but still we sometimes lack a “translation system” to communicate these learning outcomes to other sectors and “stakeholders” (families, schools, potential employers, etc.). And if there were a recognition system that could provide a common language (a translation tool) for learning, understandable both within and outside the youth (and civil society) field, would it then be an important added value to our youth exchanges, training, EVS? This is the moment where the need for the development of a youth-friendly recognition tool is clearly identified!

...→ *To what extent do you think that the existence of such a tool would make our youth work even more attractive for young people and more understandable to people outside the youth field?*

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Why do we need recognition - is employability the main driving force?

Apart from the political ideal of making “Europe a knowledge-based society through the perspective of valuing both lifelong and lifewide learning”¹⁴ in a practical sense, the calls for more recognition of non-formal learning are very often seen by youth workers as merely labour market-driven initiatives. Here I would like to argue that there are also some other reasons for better recognition of young people's learning in youth activities: it is about helping young people gain more self-confidence and develop self-awareness; for some young people the opportunity to participate in youth activities is their only chance of getting any kind of education; it could be a tool to fight discrimination and work on social inclusion, but also a way of raising the profile of youth work in general. At the same time, we should not be afraid of the employability issue as such. In spite of the fact that most youth work initiatives have nothing to do with the employment prospects of their participants, but are more concerned with the personal development and social activism (active citizenship) of young people, I guess no youth worker would disagree that there is a legitimate and increasingly important need amongst young people for better employability (see also the “non-formal learning triangle” in chapter A2). In particular, when you take into account the current unemployment rates all over Europe, isn't it our responsibility as youth workers to do all we possibly can to respond to that need?

About “power-phobia” and responsibility

Another large concern amongst youth workers and trainers related to recognition is the question: “Recognition by WHOM?” This question becomes increasingly important if the main power for facilitating the recognition of participants' learning is given to us - youth workers and trainers. Wow!

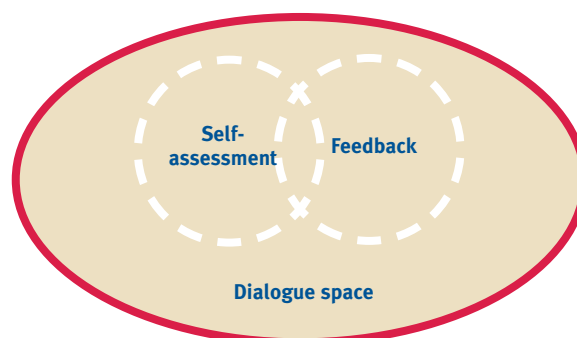
→ How do you deal with power associated with your role as a youth worker, trainer or mentor?

Although we tend to create participant-centred, democratic learning settings in our activities, one should not underestimate the natural power imbalance inherent in this type of relationship - the power associated with the youth worker/mentor/trainer role¹⁵. For me, this power is not

necessarily a negative concept, if it is reflected on and constructively used. In fact, there is a strong link between the power and (educational) responsibility youth workers/mentors/trainers have and their participants' learning. And we should not be afraid of it! To be clear, I don't want to suggest that we should become autocratic educational workers and examiners, not at all. I would just like to argue that we should be aware of the power we have and take our educational responsibilities seriously for the future benefit of our participants!

Assessment or self-assessment – is that a question?

Related to the power issue, when thinking about recognition of learning in the youth field, many youth workers/mentors/trainers take the position that ONLY self-assessment carried out by participants is an acceptable form of validation of learning in non-formal education. Assessment carried out by youth workers/trainers is seen more as a “step back” to the traditional grading system in schools and totally against the values of non-formal education. But thinking in dichotomies, in an “either – or” way is too easy. So, with the approach inherent in Youthpass, we would say it is neither self-assessment, nor assessment, only. It is rather, *self-assessment enriched by feedback in a dialogue space*.



The key word here is *dialogue* which could include feedback or group conversation¹⁶ as a mutual process of exchange in a safe environment where two (or more) perspectives meet each other and search for a common “truth”. Why is that so? Although self-assessment is closer to the desired democratic and participant-centred nature of non-formal education, there are some points to take into consideration. One of the key prerequisites for adequate self-assessment is the level of a participant's development of their self-awareness competence¹⁷.

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Self-awareness is the ability to be in contact with one's own strengths and weaknesses, and to neither overestimate nor underestimate one's own performance, behaviour or learning. This is an essential life skill which is best developed in relation to other people and through their feedback¹⁸.

That's why the *dialogue space* is important, not just for the sake of the result of the process (i.e. to have an accurate description of the learning outcomes), but also to support the development of a participant's self-awareness competence! In fact, the latter could be even more valuable for the participant than the outcome itself. What do you think?

How do you see the relationship between assessment and self-assessment in your youth work? How do you support the development in self-awareness in your participants/volunteers?

young people" in youth activities, one might wonder whether it is really possible to maintain an appropriate balance between preserving autonomy and creativity in youth work, on the one hand, and providing young people with the opportunity to gain (formal) recognition for their competences, on the other? Well, it seems to me that the people who worked on the development of Youthpass have seriously taken this dilemma into consideration and have offered some practical and creative solutions¹⁹.

Of course, it might seem like "more work and burden" for us, youth workers/mentors/trainers, to implement recognition tools, such as Youthpass, in our projects and, of course, we have the right to ask: "What do we get/lose with this?". But the main questions to ask ourselves still remain: "What do young people need to live in Europe nowadays? And what can we do about it?".

Oh, by the way... do I get a Youthpass for writing this text?

Recognition in practice

Coming to the end of our journey, and recalling the Minster's call for "recognising the skills and competences acquired by

¹ See how it feels to work with the recognition issue in: Markovic, D. (2006) : A step towards the recognition of non-formal education in Serbia and Montenegro, Coyote, issue 11, Partnership of the Council of Europe and European Commission, <http://www.youth-partnership.net/youth-partnership/publications/Coyote/11/Index>

² Adams, D. (1984): The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Macmillan. According to this great work of fiction, some time ago a group of hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings decided to finally answer the great question of Life, The Universe and Everything. To this end, they built an incredibly powerful computer, Deep Thought. After the great computer programme had run (a very quick seven and a half million years) the answer was announced. The Ultimate answer to Life, the Universe and Everything is... (you're not going to like it...) is... 42. Unfortunately, in the process, the original question was forgotten!

³ Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field, published in the Official Journal of the European Union, 20.7.2006.

⁴ ibid

⁵ For more information about the Lisbon process and how it relates to the youth field, see the chapter A4 "You hold the keys to Lifelong Learning" in this publication

⁶ Schild, H.J., Von Hebel, M. (2006) : Milestones for formal and social recognition of non-formal and informal learning in youth work, Coyote, issue 11, Partnership of the Council of Europe and European Commission, <http://www.youth-partnership.net/youth-partnership/publications/Coyote/11/Index>

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⁷ Partnership of the Council of Europe and European Commission (2004): Pathways towards validation and recognition of education, training and learning in the youth field, working paper

⁸ Markovic, D. (2006) : A step towards the recognition of non-formal education in Serbia and Montenegro, Coyote, issue 11, Partnership of the Council of Europe and European Commission, <http://www.youth-partnership.net/youth-partnership/publications/Coyote/11/Index>

⁹ For more information see Chisholm, Lynne (2005): Cheat Sheet on Recognition Terminology in "Bridges for Recognition report", <http://www.salto-youth.net/bridgesforrecognition/>

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ IYNF (2005): GOTCHA Handbook Attractive Youth Work – a Guide to Making Things Happen, IYNF, Prague, http://www.iynf.org/obsah/materials/documents.php?id_document=31

¹² For more information on concrete activities and examples of "attractive youth work" see IYNF's Variety magazine, <http://iynf.org/obsah/materials/variety.php>

¹³ For more information about learning potentials in the youth field, see chapters A4 "You hold the keys to Lifelong Learning" and B1 "How to support learning" in this publication

¹⁴ See Presidency Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council, 23-24.3.2000. http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?lang=en&id=1296&mode=g&name=or Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/comp_en.html#2 or the chapter A4 "You hold the keys to Lifelong Learning" in this publication

¹⁵ Titley, G., editor (2002): T-kit Training Essentials, Partnership of the Council of Europe and European Commission, Strasbourg, http://www.youth-partnership.net/youth-partnership/publications/T-kits/T_kits

¹⁶ In the practical application of the Youthpass, there are certain differences when using it in different types of Actions. For more practical suggestions on how to use it in various youth activities, see Part B of this publication

¹⁷ Goleman, D. (1998): Working with emotional intelligence, Bantam books, New York

¹⁸ For more on the role of feedback in the educational setting see Luft, J. and Ingham, H. (1955): The Johari Window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness or read Mark Taylor's Marker Column in Coyote, issue 12. p.46, <http://www.youth-partnership.net/youth-partnership/publications/Coyote/12/Index>

¹⁹ For more information and practical suggestions on how to learn and recognise it in various youth activities, see chapter A5 "Youthpass – more than a certificate" and Part B in this publication