**A2**   **Getting interested in non-formal education and learning**
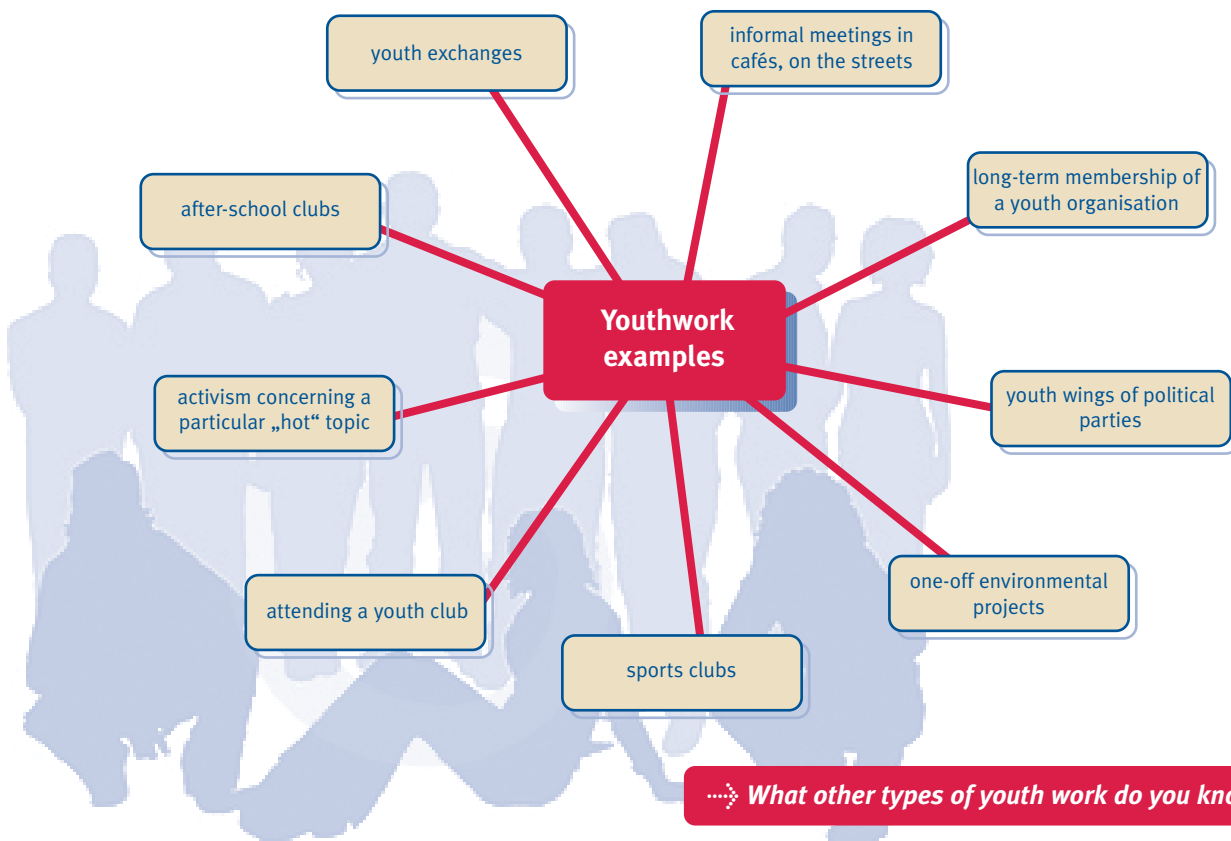
➥ *Mark Taylor*

In this publication and in lots of other places associated with the Youth in Action Programme, you will find references to learning and, especially, to non-formal education and learning. Why is this? What is the point? This chapter tries to go into some of the reasons and to show why we should even bother to start getting interested in all this stuff. See what you think!

**What place does youth work have in education and learning?**

Those who are involved in youth work have known for a long time that young people gain a lot from it (and not all of that is concerned with grand educational aims!). But it is also true that people outside the youth work field often give it a low priority, do not always know what young people gain, nor do they have an understanding of what youth work can contribute more generally to society. Youth work itself is difficult to put into one "box": if you look at the situation in different countries, youth work may be supported by education ministries, youth work ministries or even leisure/tourism ministries. Practitioners may be paid or voluntary and they may have learnt mainly through experience or through a formal educational qualification programme. For some, youth work is mainly about encouraging the active involvement of young people in society; for others it is an open space for learning; and some see it as a form of social control. This is not very surprising because youth work can be found in a wide variety of contexts. Here are some examples:

youth exchanges

informal meetings in cafés, on the streets

after-school clubs

long-term membership of a youth organisation

**Youthwork examples**

activism concerning a particular „hot" topic

youth wings of political parties

attending a youth club

one-off environmental projects

sports clubs

····⟩ *What other types of youth work do you know?*

## A2. Getting interested in non-formal education and learning

Disputes about the concepts of education and learning are as old as Socrates and it would take far more space than we have available to go into all the definitions, links and views about this. The publications and websites listed at the end of this chapter can help you go deeper into the subjects. (And when this chapter is translated into other languages, we will find more exciting challenges, for example, in trying to see where the German concepts of "Erziehung" and "Bildung" fit into the arguments!).

Along with others – like the European Youth Forum – we have found it useful for the sake of clarity to differentiate between:

**Education as a system**
and
**Learning as a process**

So, non-formal education can be seen as a system outside formal education which brings together resources, people, objectives, tools and methods to produce a structured learning process.

These thoughts naturally throw up a lot of questions about how the different types of learning are linked together *and* how to distinguish between formal, non-formal and informal elements. Without wanting to be too simplistic, the current consensus (see the "Pathways to Validation" reference at the end of the chapter) seems to be that:

> *informal learning happens nearly all the time in daily life (at home, on the street, in cafés, etc) but it is not a planned activity;*
> *non-formal learning is voluntary, is assisted by others and is planned;*
> *formal learning is structured, regulated from the outside and involves some form of certification*

Nowadays, we refer to informal and non-formal learning as providing the framework for the educational approaches seen in youth work. Everything depends on the context within which we use such terms. Many now like to see the different forms of learning in a kind of spectrum.

Researcher Helen Colley and her colleagues (see the references at the end of this chapter) put forward the idea that it is virtually impossible to find any educational activity which is only formal or only informal – most contain a mixture of elements from both. If we try to imagine where to place youth work here, it is possible to see it on the spectrum as a mixture of non-formal and informal elements:

**formal ............... (non-formal) ...............  informal**

> ⟶ *Where would you place your youth work experience?*

If we follow the principles of Lifelong Learning, then youth work provides complementary learning opportunities to formal education and has a contribution to make that should be recognised – both for the individuals concerned and for the field itself.

For more details about recognition of non-formal learning and European developments, have a look at the two following chapters:
A3: "Hitchhiker's guide to recognition in the youth field
A4: "You hold the keys to Lifelong Learning"

### So what do we get out of non-formal learning?

Before we go any further, we need to be clear that youth work does not equal non-formal learning, or vice versa! So, maybe it's more interesting to see both as overlapping circles:
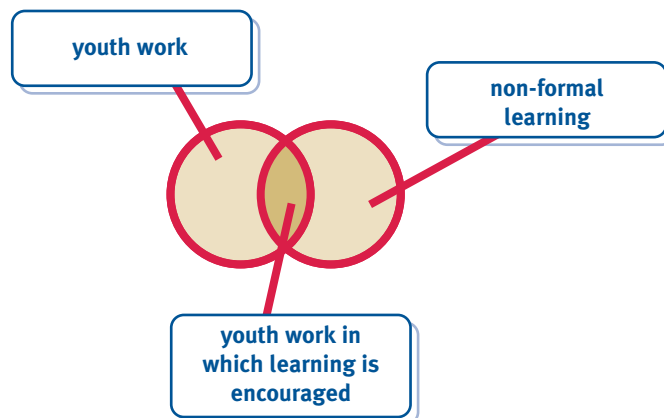
## A2. Getting interested in non-formal education and learning

Non-formal learning takes place in many contexts, such as training on the job in a factory. But youth work is not only about learning, it can also be about getting involved or the pure joy of being together having fun! Within youth work we can plan our learning, AND we are also lucky enough to be able to take advantage of things which happen unexpectedly – use our flexibility and direct contact with the "here and now".

> ⋯⋯▸ *What do you think young people learn through participating in youth work?*

One of the great challenges we face at the moment is to make the learning that undoubtedly occurs in youth work more explicit. The learning that takes place within youth work is often invisible, both to those within and outside the field. And if we call it "non-formal" or even "informal" learning, then there is a danger that people will think it is inferior to anything produced within the formal education system as it doesn't usually result in formal qualifications based on exams. Yet in the context of an individual's life, what he or she has learnt by taking part in youth activities may have just as big an impact (or bigger) on the quality of their lives. Have a look at the chapter B1 "How to support learning" for tips and ideas on planning and making learning more visible within the Youth in Action Programme.

Over the past few years, we have seen a growing realisation that non-formal learning makes a major contribution to young peoples' lives within three main interlinked areas:
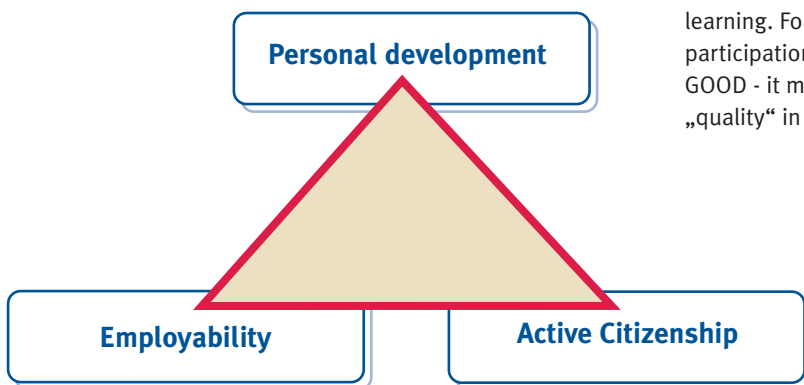
At each point of the triangle we can think of many learning themes which can be made more visible than they have been in the past. Some inter-linked examples are provided here:

For personal development: looking at how I am growing up; what do I want to be and do? how do I live and cooperate with others? how do I learn? gaining insight into my strengths and weaknesses...

For active citizenship: how does my youth work participation link with the wider society? what initiatives do I take to include others in what we do? to what extent do I put into practice that slogan about "thinking globally, acting locally"? how do we act democratically? where do human rights need to be protected? how can I make a difference?...

For employability: what "soft skills" do I need to be effective in teamwork? how do I take the initiative? what are my "hard skills" in relation to project management (budgeting, planning, risk assessment, etc)? how can I describe what and who I am to others?...

What else would you put under the triangle headings if you were looking at activities within the Youth in Action Programme?

### How do we know if our non-formal learning is any good?

Of course, the mere fact that you have participated in a Youth in Action Programme activity is in itself no proof of learning. For learning to happen, the activity (and your participation) must be CONDUCIVE to learning. It must be GOOD - it must be of high QUALITY. But what exactly is „quality" in non-formal learning? Peter Lauritzen – head of

**Personal development**

**Employability**          **Active Citizenship**

### A2. Getting interested in non-formal education and learning

the youth section in the Council of Europe's Directorate of Youth and Sport – gave a powerful answer in an interview with the Serbian NGO Hajde da [which we summarise here in bullet points] outlining what to consider when assessing whether a given non-formal learning project is of high quality:

> *clarity of aims and objectives*

> *appropriate material learning conditions*

> *trained staff (voluntary or professional)*

> *learner-centredness*

> *solution-focused*

> *variety of methods used*

> *good balance between individual and group learning*

> *appropriate amount of time allocated to learning, relaxation and private time*

> *room for intercultural relations and reflection of their influence on the learning process*

> *good knowledge of previous learning histories and good information on intended use of the learning*

> *reasonable balance between cognitive and skills training attraction of and in the learning process*

> *self-reflection*

> *assessment of progress and difficulties*

> *self assessment*

> *group evaluation.*

> ⋯⟩ *What would you add to or change from this list when you look at your own practice?*

And Peter goes on to say that "quality standards [for non-formal learning] should grow out of a process of development and gradual agreement between public authorities and learning providers in co-operation with the research community. This should lead to an agreed assessment system, the training of assessors and the implementation of an efficient and transparent system".

One of the most recent examples of such a process happening has been the development of the *European Portfolio for Youth Workers and Youth Leaders* (see the reference at the end of this chapter). A whole range of stakeholders were brought together to devise a framework for practitioners to look at themselves and their youth work within a context of non-formal learning. It is important to note that the Portfolio is only one step towards defining quality standards in youth work in Europe – we shall have to see over the next few years how the youth work community makes use of it.

We have quite a long way to go before quality standards in non-formal learning are fully agreed – and the whole Youthpass process will serve as a useful map for us to follow and to learn from as we go!
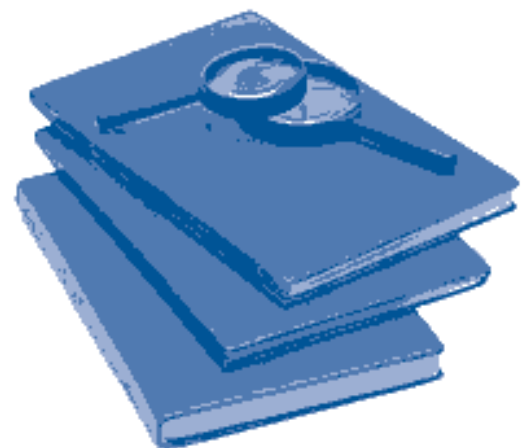
**A2. Getting interested in non-formal education and learning**

links

## References and further information

There are an increasing number of publications, papers and reports on these vital issues – the website which also hosts the Youthpass will contain many of them. Here are some starting points:

### Non-formal education and learning - background

The theme of the June 2006 issue *of Coyote* magazine (published by the Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission) is non-formal learning and education from the perspectives of the relevant European institutions, youth organisations and practitioners.
   *http://www.youth-partnership.net/youth-partnership/publications/Coyote/11/Index*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

Explore the history of and current developments in informal and non-formal education on the informal education homepage:
   *http://www.infed.org/*
Two good examples of the thinking available here are Alan Rodger's article on a new paradigm for non-formal and informal education:
   *http://www.infed.org/biblio/non_formal_paradigm.htm*
and the piece by Helen Colley, Phil Hodkinson & Janice Malcolm on the relationships between informal, non-formal and formal learning:
   *http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/colley_informal_learning.htm*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

The UNESCO Task Force on Education for the 21st Century, including the Delors report:
   *http://www.unesco.org/delors/*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

A very useful internet forum on the Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning for practitioners and academics is provided by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop):
   *http://communities.trainingvillage.gr/nfl*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

### European Union

A broad introduction to the contribution of education and training to the Lisbon strategy:
   *http://ec.europa.eu/education/index_en.html*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

Resolution on the Recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field decided by the EU Council of Ministers:
   *http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11096.htm*
or
   *http://tinyurl.com/m7ske*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

**A2. Getting interested in non-formal education and learning**

links

The Bridges for Recognition conference report is full of examples from around Europe of initiatives on giving recognition to different forms of youth work.
   *http://www.salto-youth.net/bridgesforrecognition/*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

### Council of Europe

Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe:
   *www.coe.int/youth*
This is also where you will find the European Portfolio for Youth Workers and Youth Leaders freely available for download:
   *www.coe.int/youthportfolio*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on the promotion and recognition of non-formal education/learning of young people
   *http://tinyurl.com/z52r7*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]

### European Youth Forum

Position papers of the European Youth Forum on the role of youth organisations as providers of non-formal education/learning can be found here:
   *http://www.youthforum.org/en/policy_papers.htm*
[Accessed 15 September 2008]