11 LEARNING, REFLECTING AND DOCUMENTING YOUR COMPETENCES

By Paul Kloosterman

1. REFLECTION AND LEARNING

Some forms of learning are easier to reflect on than others. Learning how to bake your own bread will probably take some time, some water and a number of ingredients, but it can be done in concrete steps. In between these steps, one reflects on the different parts of the process and discovers that it is important to knead the dough for a long time, that the dough needs to rise before it is put in the oven, and that turning up the temperature of the oven to bake the bread faster is not a good idea. These are fairly simple reflections that happen all the time in regard to the things we learn in life. It is human nature that we reflect so we can do better the next time; neither is it the kind of reflection that takes a lot of time. In fact, it happens almost automatically.
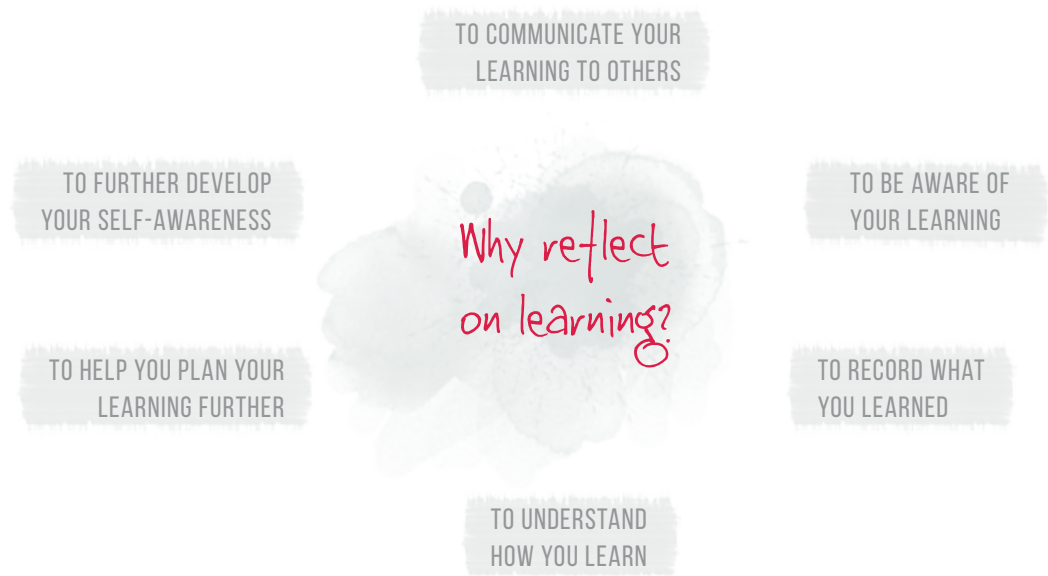
The kind of learning process that young people undergo in European youth programmes is different and more complex. Participants in youth exchanges, volunteering projects, training courses and other kinds of activities experience a form of learning that is often more about personal development, social skills, personal awareness, self-assurance, etc. These are all skills that are not learned by completing a few simple steps. We can't just tick off these things as if they were on a list; we cannot say "Now I'm totally self-aware!" or "Self-assurance: done!"

Learning about our own behaviour, our attitudes, our relationships with others and our personal goals in life is a process that never ends; one in which we take steps forward, sometimes steps back, and in which we develop new questions and new goals. It is also more difficult to identify the exact moment we undergo a learning process that relates to personal development, for this happens in situations that are frequently unplanned. It is not as if there is one session about assertiveness during the programme, and after that session participants know how to be assertive. Rather, they might find themselves in a variety of situations during the programme – on a coffee break, or maybe chilling out with other participants in the evening – where they act more assertively. Maybe they really did plan it, but sometimes it may just have happened and they only realised it at that very moment or a day later.

All this makes reflection more complex, but at the same time, reflection is essential for learning. It does not just help us to be aware of what we have learnt, it also teaches us about

how that learning took place. In other words, reflection helps on the one hand to record the learning experience; on the other hand, it helps us to prepare for continuing that process.

Finally, putting what we learn into words enables us to communicate it to others. This last point is why reflection plays such an important part in this publication: it tells us how to communicate our learning achievements to others, and how we can approach reflection as an essential part of the learning process.

TO COMMUNICATE YOUR
LEARNING TO OTHERS

TO FURTHER DEVELOP
YOUR SELF-AWARENESS

TO BE AWARE OF
YOUR LEARNING

Why reflect
on learning?

TO HELP YOU PLAN YOUR
LEARNING FURTHER

TO RECORD WHAT
YOU LEARNED

TO UNDERSTAND
HOW YOU LEARN

REFLECTION AND WRITING

Writing down experiences at the end of the day or the week helps learners remember what they did and to look back at those experiences from a certain distance.

Writing in itself can be a great way to reflect. When learners sit down alone and write, they go back through their experiences and put them into words. While this allows them to take the time to look back, it often adds something new to the experience. A young participant in a youth exchange who has enjoyed an exercise with many different activities, a lot of discussions, and intense teamwork with their peers will already have had all kinds of impressions at the very moment they undergo the experience. However, sitting down later on and looking at them again from a distance may deliver new insights. Writing down their own impressions, ideas, conclusions and questions helps them to reflect and learn.

The good news is that participants do this for themselves, meaning there is no need to write beautiful prose, that spelling mistakes are not a problem, and that it works as long as they can read their own handwriting. Of course, there are many people who love to write perfect sentences and work hard to find the most appropriate words, and that is wonderful too! However, "writers" are not the only people who can reflect and write about that reflection. Some are entirely content to scribble down some words, to draw things, to note down words all over the page in different colours, to write a poem, or to use pictures. All this is fine as long as it helps them to think about what happened, to look at and within themselves and to see how the experience changed them – in other words, to reflect. It is worth adding that this works provided notes are taken in such a way that they are still understandable when looking at them a few months later. At that moment, it may well be that they see things from another perspective and arrive at new insights and learning outcomes.

A more traditional way to take notes and reflect on one's experiences is to use a simple diary. A little book with empty pages and a pencil is all that is needed. But one can also use a bigger book and crayons as well as a pencil, maybe also glue to stick in pictures, and other materials. It may no longer be the fashion, but many young people love to have their own diary and take it with them everywhere to fill it with words, stories, thoughts, drawings, poems, etc., sitting down every now and then in a quiet place to write just for themselves.

A somewhat less traditional practice – but in many ways the same – is to sit at a computer, using Word create an electronic diary. There is also a large number of (mostly free) websites, web-based tools and apps for keeping an online diary. All kind of formats and features exist. Just type in "online diary" in the search box. Many tools allow users to add pictures and even video clips. It is almost as if they have their personal diary with them at all times. Most of these diary tools can be kept strictly private or shared with some people or even with the entire world. The latter effect can also be achieved if one uses a blog as a diary. While the entries are then no longer private, which can limit what and how one writes, it is a great format for people who like to share their thoughts and experiences. Blogs also allow writers to invite feedback from readers, which can be helpful.

In this publication, we talk a lot about how to identify and communicate concrete learning outcomes to others. Reflection is the phase that comes before communication. This is not to say that a diary should be a long list of learning outcomes along the lines of "now I know this", "now I am able to do that", etc. The diary format allows questions to arise and ideas to develop. In that sense, reflection is much more a description of this very process. When working on describing learning outcomes, all the words, stories, sentences, drawings and pictures in the diary will be very helpful to the writer in realising what they have learned.

Getting started

Young people may require some assistance writing and structuring their diary. Below are a few examples and tools that can help.

Typical Questions

A set of questions in the "I" format can be helpful in starting off the reflection and writing process:

• What did I enjoy most today?
• What made the biggest impression on me?
• What interesting contacts did I make?
• What satisfies me most today when I look at myself?
• What puzzled me today?
• Did I have a Eureka! moment?
• What did I find difficult?
• How did I deal with challenging situations?
• What did I discover?
• What new ideas got in my head?
• Is there anything I want to do differently the next time?
• What new questions do I have?
• What new plans did I develop today?
• Whom do I want to talk to again?
• What would be a metaphor for today?
• What grade would I assign this day?
• If this day were an animal/vehicle/musical instrument, what would it be?

(By the way, not all these questions should be used! Just pick a few.)

structuring one's thoughts using three questions

This method helps to analyse an experience in such a way that facts can be separated from feelings. Often when looking back at a situation, one tends to mix up the things that happened with one's emotional response, which can affect one's perception.

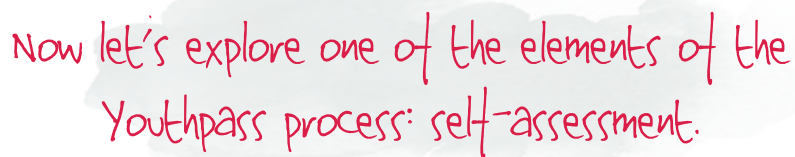## These three questions should be answered:

- What happened?
- How did I feel?
- What do I want to do differently in the future?

In this exercise, it is crucial to deal with the questions one by one, ensuring that as question one is answered, learners only write down the things that happened. This sounds easy, but it is often quite difficult to restrict oneself just to the facts. For instance, the sentence "It was a beautiful sunny day and many people joined our activity" would not be a good answer to the first question. "During the activity the sun was shining, it was 24 degrees and 46 people took part in the activity" would be the right way to describe what really happened. Moving on to the second question, one possible response would be, "I really enjoyed the warm weather and was surprised that so many people joined the activity." The third question is more evaluative and helps the participant to think about alternative behaviours and responses. The process is not easy, but it is an interesting way to reflect.

THE YOUTHPASS PROCESS

"It's more than a certificate!" That is what many people will say when asked about Youthpass. In a way, the certificate is the end — the result. To get there, participants undergo a learning process during their youth exchange, training course or volunteering placement. The so-called "Youthpass process" was born from the idea of turning that learning process into a conscious experience — one in which young people become aware that they are learning, choose what they want to learn, explore different ways of learning, feel responsible for their own learning process, and evaluate and assess that process. The Youthpass process is a perfect fit for the concepts of lifelong learning and learning to learn. It is important to develop an ability to take responsibility for and decide about one's own learning, because then that process becomes lifelong learning. *Youthpass Unfolded*[18] offers many examples and an extensive exploration of the Youthpass process.
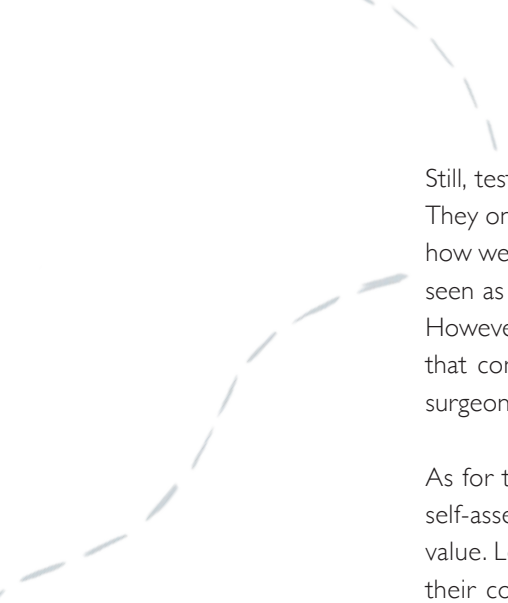
[18] Youthpass Unfolded — Practical tips and hands-on methods for making the most of the Youthpass process (2012 — updated in 2016). Accessible here: https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3553/Publication_YP-unfolded_online.pdf

Now let's explore one of the elements of the Youthpass process: self-assessment.

WHY IS SELF-ASSESSMENT IMPORTANT?

"Are you really the best person to assess your own learning?" is a good way to start a discussion about self-assessment. The next question could be, "Who can decide better than you what you have learned?" Many people are used to a system in which other people decide to what extent an intended learning outcome took place, or whether it happened at all. These other people administer tests, do interviews, prepare exams, and assess someone's learning outcomes. Indeed, there are quite a few professions where it is good idea to test candidates before they start working. No one wants to be operated on in a hospital by someone who declared themselves a surgeon.

Still, tests and exams as instruments for assessing somebody's competences have their limits. They only assess one's skills at that particular moment and often, the outcome depends a lot on how well the candidate handled the test situation. Assessments in the form of a test or exam are seen as a kind of "final" assessment, meaning that if you passed the exam, you are "good at it". However, this does not really correspond to the concept of lifelong learning, which recognises that competences can become outdated very quickly. No one wants to be operated on by surgeons who passed their exams 18 years ago and have had no refresher training since then.

As for the learning that takes place in the activities under the European youth programmes, self-assessment seems a far more appropriate way to identify learning outcomes and their value. Learners know best what personal development they underwent, how they improved their communication skills, why they feel more self-assured, how they have become better organisers, etc. In assessing their own learning, the young participants become much more aware of it, which subsequently enables them to better plan their further learning.

However, this is not to say that learners do not need other people to assess their learning. Self-assessment is not something people do on their own. Here, "self" refers to the fact that learners themselves are ultimately responsible for the assessment. That is not the same as doing it without help from others. Although the young participants probably know themselves best, they (as we all!) still have an incomplete or different perception of their behaviour and their skills. Other people see us from a different perspective and therefore can see things that we do not and/or attach a different value to our behaviour and skills. Similarly, peers, colleagues, trainers, mentors and youth workers will have experienced and observed the young participants interacting and working during the project and hence certainly have impressions of their own to share. Their impressions can enrich the self-assessment process.

Young learners can share their self-assessment with others and invite comments, suggestions and points they may have missed. But frankly, self-assessment is not an easy task. It is difficult for people to decide what value to attach to their own competences. Moreover, it is not something they are used to doing; it may feel uncomfortable to take notes on themselves, especially in a Youthpass context because Youthpass is a certificate. Rather, individuals are used to others doing an assessment or an evaluation of them and are happy when they receive a positive assessment. Writing something positive about oneself in order to present that to others may feel a little embarrassing, but that can be overcome. People in one's environment can play a strong role in this.

SO HOW IS IT DONE THEN?

A self-assessment is nothing more and nothing less than a snapshot taken at some point during the learning process when learners take a moment to see where they are. This moment can be supported with questions in the first-person format such as, Where am I going? Where am I now, compared to my initial ideas about what I wanted to learn? What progress have I made? What can I do better? What am I capable of? What kind of unexpected learning happened? Are my initial ideas still the right ones? Also: Am I on the right path? What new questions do I have? What are my next steps? What should I adjust?

During a self-assessment, people take stock of the reflections they had before. While this is very similar to a reflection, in a self-assessment individuals look back on a certain period or activity, and with the help of the reflections they did previously, evaluate the outcomes and the value of what they have learned and put that into words.

As stated earlier, defining what one has really learned is not an easy task. It is not something one "just does". Admittedly, some points are easier to identify: for instance, when the group has made a movie during a youth exchange and used a certain software to edit it, they can note down that they are now able to use that software. The same probably goes for volunteers describing how they improved their language skills during a nine-month placement in a foreign country. However, during a youth exchange or training course - and certainly during a long volunteering placement - young people have many intense experiences. What exactly is the learning in that? How can they pinpoint and describe it? It requires looking back at those experiences with the help of a diary and/or peers, youth workers, trainers and mentors and by asking other questions.

Questions about the learning process

Self-assessment is not only about WHAT one has learnt but also about HOW. It is an opportunity to think about what learning methods are best for the individual in question, what the challenges have to be overcome, what the role of other people is, and at what point you really feel like you are actually learning. These kinds of questions help to increase awareness of one's own learning and may help to adjust one's way of learning in the future.

Being able to express one's own style of learning in words is not only important personally and for further learning, it is also an important skill that is valued highly by employers, for example. Finally, it is one of the Key Competences identified by the European Commission: learning to learn. Knowing oneself as a learner is a crucial component of that competence.

Questions about new roles and tasks

When young people take part in an activity under a European youth programme, they often find themselves doing things they have never done before. These probably involve a lot of learning, which should be written down in one's self-assessment. For instance, during a volunteering project a young volunteer joined other volunteers to work with a group of teenagers every Wednesday afternoon - a new experience that went quite well. What did the young volunteer learn from that? To answer that question requires identifying what tasks were involved, such as coming up with ideas for activities, preparing the activities, setting a budget for the activities, preparing the space, explaining the activities to the group, getting the group's attention, encouraging unmotivated kids to join in, dealing with disagreements in the group, talking to individual kids, working together with the other volunteers as a team, resolving disagreements with one's colleagues, writing a report for the organisation, etc. Having noted down all these different elements, the volunteer can visually recall carrying out these tasks. What was new about them? What felt good to the volunteer? What did they get better at as the months went by? What made them be good at what they did?

The reflection that comes from those questions allows young people to articulate what they learned during that activity. Moreover, talking to other volunteers or a mentor, using the same questions, will undoubtedly deliver even more insights than just taking notes on one's own.

Questions about positive experiences

Often, what people like to do and what makes them feel good are the things they are skilled at, which is wonderful! To be very good at something that one doesn't like to do at all is probably not desirable. This can help during a self-assessment. Thinking back to situations

and activities that made a participant totally satisfied and happy can help them to define the competences they acquired. First, it is important to find out what exactly made them feel good; in other words, to analyse what elements made up that activity. Somebody who loves to play in a band will definitely like to play music. But what other components are there? Playing in a band requires the ability to work in a team. So maybe working closely with others is something that they love doing and that they are good at. Someone else who feels happy when organising the disco during a youth exchange may like to dance, but there may be many other elements that contribute to that joyful feeling and reveal that that individual has certain skills: being a good organiser, taking care of people, creating a good atmosphere, working in a team, etc. Analysing an activity in such a way can generate new insights about one's passions and competences. Maybe it is not so much the disco itself but working in a team that someone really loves to do and is good at.

Questions about the future

A self-assessment involves looking back at the outcomes of a certain situation or period. It is also a moment for the learner to look at the future, form new plans and develop intentions for the period ahead. Again, it is necessary to look at both the "how" and the "what" involved in learning. What kind of learning does one want to engage in from now on? What new ways of learning does one yet have to discover – methods that could still be useful? What kind of people does one want to connect with during that future learning process?

Focussing on the "what" involves asking a whole range of new questions. During a learning process, one may find answers to certain questions but then, many new questions arise. Exploring certain subjects more deeply will most probably generate new and more interesting questions. However, these questions may also arise from insights about oneself, leading one to ask, e.g.: How can I use that insight? How can I change certain behaviours? Where can I act out my newly discovered strengths? Undergoing such a self-assessment allows participants to look ahead, make plans and articulate.

Which ways of learning do I want to continue?

Which new ways of learning do I want to try out?

Which new questions came up?

How can I follow up on my new insights?

What kind of learning suits me?

What are my challenges?

What role do other people play in my learning?

What were my real learning moments?

THE FUTURE

THE WAY OF LEARNING

Questions for
self-assessment

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

NEW ROLES AND TASKS

What made me really feel good?

What made me like it?

What does that say about my competences?

Which new roles and tasks did I take on?

Which different elements were in that task/role?

Which new things did I learn there?

What was I good at?

SELF-ASSESSMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN YOUTH PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES

The diversity of activities within European youth programmes also means a variety of self-assessments, although the principles remain the same: the learner is the one who defines the learning outcomes.

When a mentor completes a three-day training seminar about mentoring techniques, their self-assessment will probably be shorter than that of a young volunteer completing a six-month placement. You simply learn more in six months than in three days. Moreover, a six-month learning process in another country and in a "new life" will be more complex than for a three-day session on a specific topic.

The mentor may only need a few notes taken during the course and their reflection period, and will only have to look at the programme to recall the different aspects of the training course to identify learning outcomes. Although unexpected learning may have taken place because of certain encounters or activities, the focus remains on the topic of the training course, namely mentoring techniques.

In a six-month placement the focus will not be that clear, the volunteer having had an enormous range of experiences all offering learning potential. These experiences cannot just be linked to tasks performed on the job, they also happen on a very personal level, influencing the volunteer's confidence and self-awareness. To identify all of these learning outcomes it is crucial to keep track by taking notes, in all kinds of ways and on a regular basis. A self-assessment based on such a long period will require much more time and effort to ensure all the different outcomes are identified.

While the mentor will need just a few hours to complete their self-assessment, the volunteer will likely need much more time to identify the different learning outcomes by talking to various people in the organisation running the project, going through all their notes, and checking outcomes with peers and mentor, etc. Keeping track is essential!

2. THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

We refer to youth workers, mentors, coaches and trainers as facilitators (of learning). "Youthpass Unfolded" has a chapter entitled "Role of the Facilitator", which describes several facilitator roles in the Youthpass process. In this Handbook, we focus on four of those roles as they relate more to reflection and self-assessment:

• Putting learning on the agenda
• Seeing the potential of learners
• Asking supportive questions
• Giving feedback

PUTTING LEARNING ON THE AGENDA

The link between youth work projects and learning is not always obvious. For many young people, learning happens only in school – and for some it may even have a negative connotation. Therefore, it makes a lot of sense to see learning from another perspective and to rethink the meaning of the word together with the young participants.

One of the first things a facilitator should do is to gain clarity about the objectives of the activity. What is the reason for this project? What does this activity offer? What learning do facilitators think is involved in this? How do we as facilitators understand our role? What is our approach to learning? By making their objectives and approach explicit, facilitators help young people to recognise learning opportunities. That is the moment when learning is put on the agenda.

When it comes to reflection, it is particularly important to allow sufficient time and space for it in the schedule. If there is no specific time set aside for reflection during the youth exchange and the participants are left do it at some point during their free time, it may not happen at all. Besides setting aside a specific time, it is also important to offer tools, methods and questions to help participants reflect. By providing time, space and resources, facilitators underline the importance of reflection as part of the learning process. Moreover, besides providing time for

reflection, it makes sense to ask young people to share their reflection experiences; to reflect on reflection, if you like. That may sound a bit over the top, but considering that for many young people, reflecting regularly is something completely new, it helps to create space for exchanging opinions about it, to overcome challenges, and to get tips and ideas from others. This way, learning will always be on the agenda.

SEEING THE POTENTIAL OF LEARNERS

It is important to recognise that for many young people, reflection and self-assessment is especially difficult because they require introspection. Reflecting on oneself and seeing one's strengths and weaknesses requires the ability to look at oneself from a distance, not to mention how hard it is to say about oneself, "I'm good (or not so good) at that!"

As a facilitator, commenting on what you observe in terms of behaviours and attitudes can help young people recognise things that they are not aware of or not sure about. It requires good observation skills, and the feedback provided should be descriptive rather than judgmental. For instance, "I think you took quite a leading role there", "To me, it looked like you really enjoyed organising that activity", "I have the feeling you enjoy doing much more than talking", etc. are all ways to start a conversation about competences – and particularly attitudes – and that can help young people reflect on themselves and gain more self-awareness.

Recognising the potential of learners also involves recognising the different ways in which people learn, and realising that there is more than one way to learn successfully, each path providing different opportunities. This is true for reflection, too. For some people, sitting on their own and writing does not work at all. They may benefit much more from talking to others, maybe while out on a walk or even when listening to music together. As a facilitator of learning, you should allow for different ways of doing things and not get annoyed if, when the time comes for individual writing, some participants start doing something completely different.

ASKING SUPPORTIVE QUESTIONS

It's important to have a set of questions ready for the reflection session. Coming up with suitable questions is not always easy, especially if you have to do it on your own. This Handbook contains many examples of questions and questioning techniques. As a learning facilitator, you play a crucial role in helping young people reflect by asking appropriate and supportive questions. You look at things from another angle, so you can offer new angles from which participants can look at their action(s) and behaviour(s). When you, through your questioning technique, get people to talk about themselves, you help them articulate what they have experienced, performed and learned.

GIVING FEEDBACK

Feedback is similar to the process of articulating one's observations as described above. However, "feedback" in this context refers to organised and planned feedback in a specific session that the facilitator and participant have agreed to do together. Here, it is important that the person receiving the feedback receiving the feedback decides on what to have feedback. Feedback is not just given universally on all aspects of the receiver's activities: rather, it requires the giver to focus on aspects that the receiver has chosen.

As the feedback provider, you have to consider what you are able to give feedback on. When a volunteer asks for feedback on how they worked with a group of children and you as their mentor have never really seen the volunteer in action, perhaps you are not the right person to do so.

The most important principle here is that the feedback should be helpful to the receiver. It is not an occasion for the feedback giver to finally share their personal opinions about the receiver. Be aware that if you want feedback to be a form of support for the receiver, it should always be given with a positive intention.

3. COMMUNICATING COMPETENCES

Putting learning outcomes into words is helpful when people want to communicate their competences to others. It can also be a very meaningful thing to do for oneself. The process of writing about one's own capacities and competences helps to develop a genuine awareness of what one is able to do, and do well. In turn, it helps to increase self-awareness and confidence.

For many young people, looking at the future and deciding about a direction in life is quite challenging. What kind of work do they want to do? What may they want to study? Awareness of what they are good at and of where their passions lie can be enormously helpful to that thinking process.

For a young entrepreneur, it is crucial to know what personal strengths they need to set up a business. Besides, awareness of competences they don't have is essential when deciding about who to cooperate with.

Being able to describe competences is important in many situations that involve working with others because it contributes to good teamwork. That goes for teams in professional contexts, but also in volunteering projects and one's personal life. Being able to communicate what you bring to the table is an essential life-skill.