

### ***What is excellent Youth Work?***

This is not an attempt to define the essence of all excellent Youth Work but a discussion of some of the characteristics which contribute towards young people having an enjoyable, challenging experience from which they can learn through the process of working with a reflective, effective practitioner.

Thanks should go to those involved in the discussion which brought about the idea for this paper. The group included teaching staff and students of the BA Youth and Community Work Programme at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. The group took part in a Socratic dialogue on the topic 'what is excellent Youth Work', deciding to explore a residential project which has taken place a number of years before. The students were initially unclear as to whether they had ever witnessed excellent Youth Work. The dialogue then explored the experiences of a leader of the residential project which was regarded as being creative and a significant event in the lives of the young people involved, in that sense being an excellent example of the Youth Work process. The group explored questions about the project for two hours. The following is an interpretation of notes taken at the time of the discussion.

One of the key aspects of excellent Youth Work is that it invariably begins through conversation, the role of the Youth Worker is fundamentally important in either creating the conversation or in harnessing the potential in the conversation for some learning to occur.

Excellent Youth Work though begins with a discussion which may result in the development of a germ of an idea, how can those involved in the process of developing the idea have fun, learn something, develop in some way. The Youth Worker must consciously consider these questions in the pursuit of excellence!

Running in parallel the worker must work with young people to consider what is needed to make this experience happen. This group task can be facilitated by the Youth Worker adopting a liberal approach of welcoming all to the group and understanding that if the piece of work is a long term one that individuals within the group may well come and go. Again this has to be planned and allowed for. When considering the fact that individuals will come and go it is necessary to consider the outcomes that the group may realistically expect to achieve from working together – these outcomes should encourage enjoyment, thinking and raising the awareness of young people. It is important that practitioners (and managers, and policy makers) understand and become comfortable with the realisation that some results of the process of Youth Work cannot be readily measured by the questionnaire or the tick box evaluation but may be results nonetheless.

This brings us on to a consideration of cause and effect, as a Youth Work practitioner how can one readily assign the changes in young people to our work. This is something that often workers are unsure of, insecure about and lacking in a suitable vocabulary to describe. In the case of excellent Youth Work, the practitioner must be comfortable with having an idea of the outcomes they expect young people to achieve (developing a new view of the world, learning a new skill, increasing knowledge or understanding of something). In excellent Youth Work the practitioner and the young people are involved as partners in the process, in that way the worker must build an understanding of what the work means to the young person involved, what is their purpose for being involved. Following on from

this the practitioner must have the ability to discuss with young people whether learning is occurring and if it is, precisely what is being learned. Excellent Youth Work provides young people with experiences which, under the correct conditions can become a catalyst for powerful learning. Throughout though, the practitioner understands that the journey, the process of growth and development is what is important. In this sense the practitioner has a professional obligation to be comfortable with supporting young people to develop skills of reflection in order to understand and appreciate the outcomes of the work.

In excellent Youth Work the practitioner works hard to equal out power differentials, while respecting that someone is ultimately responsible for the work, the health and safety implications, the safeguarding aspects of the work and the ethical aspects of the work. It is important that in excellent Youth Work the role of *friendship* and boundaries are explored and clarified between Workers and young people.

It is important in excellent Youth Work, that all those involved explore their strengths and weaknesses and discuss who will pick up the necessary tasks for the work to take place. In some cases the practitioner may have a vision for the piece of work and will delegate to others to complete the necessary tasks. At all stages clarity is necessary in this process, who will own which tasks and how will they be completed. Some people may be really interested in looking after the paperwork associated with excellent Youth Work and this may prove invaluable for them in their chosen career. How impressed would a potential employer be if a young person could present themselves at an interview and discuss in depth how they had planned and organised a budget, cooking, cleaning and washing up rota for a group of 15 young people and staff, split into five groups on a two week residential project.

There is an increasing reluctance on the part of some workers to engage with a form of Youth Work which is led by the needs and interests of the group. Excellent Youth Work goes beyond feelings that the vision for the work will be impossible or implausible due to constraints on resources. However, all those involved should think creatively about how to gather resources whether through pen and paper methods of grant applications or through tried and tested methods of fundraising in the community such as bag packing or car washing at the local supermarket. The sort of thinking which is constrained by funding restrictions or Health and Safety implications has no place in excellent Youth Work and must be regarded simply as another hurdle in the process of encouraging young people to develop strategies for resilience in manoeuvring the obstacles of modern life.

As a practitioner capable of excellent Youth Work one must prepare for and expect pressures to arise – it is important to develop sound planning and management skills and to enable realistic planning to take place, for example expecting tasks to realistically take 10% or more longer than initially anticipated. It is important that as a group involved in excellent Youth Work that resilience is fostered and nurtured. Resilience is a key resource in modern life.

When establishing a group, the rules are created by consensus by the group and worked through. This process, if it is to be entirely inclusive must be created and worked through carefully and diligently. This

process will help in the establishment of sound team dynamics, the development of a shared vision for the group and an early opportunity to set down norms for the group and individuals within it.

The practitioner should understand the importance of knowing the young people and their communities, when bringing groups together then the worker can plan to accommodate any personal difficulties.

Through this process of complementary education it is necessary for the Youth Worker to have the ability to adopt different Youth Work roles, to be teacher, leader, manager, confidante, among others. The skill on the part of the worker is to know and understand when to utilise these different approaches with equity. In this regard it is necessary that the practitioner adopt an approach based upon reflective practice, particularly reflection for action and reflection in action and to prepare for, to think ahead to what *may* happen, and if it does happen, how best to respond.

The process of excellent Youth Work is based upon an approach of well managedness and open dialogue with young people. The group should be brought together to evaluate and to respond to positives, the worker knowing and understanding (and encouraging others) to identify and respond to the passions of individual group members.

In excellent Youth Work the importance of networking cannot be overestimated, again, this aspect should be shared equally among the group – there should be lots of discussion about acquiring useful contacts and whether there is one person or a small group who will take control of this networking and making links with other organisations in the area and further afield.

In undertaking large scale off site activities which may involve travel abroad young people would gain so much from it and this aspect of Youth Work has diminished considerably in recent years while the world is becoming increasingly globalised. Policy makers and planners of excellent Youth Work should develop a long term plan to help and encourage the young people of Wales to better understand their own culture and heritage through excellent Youth Work activities that are non-threatening but which are progressive and developmental. Through this process young people can learn invaluable skills, knowledge and personal attributes which will be important in their transition to adulthood.