

”Interdisciplinary Education in Teacher Training Programmes via Leapfrog Principles”
Anqing 17-18 October 2008
Anqing Teachers College, The World Future Society and the University of Minnesota

TOWARDS A BROADER CONCEPT OF LEARNING

- Can non-formal learning challenge the formal education paradigm?

Dr Lasse Siurala,
Director, Youth Department, City of Helsinki
Docent, Helsinki School of Economics
lasse.siurala@hel.fi

Formal education under attack

Most young people in Europe enjoy the school and learn moderately well through the curriculum. However, too many and an increasing amount of them do not feel well, become isolated, experience stress, get bad remarks or simply drop out. There has been growing criticism towards the school system in that it is too much teacher centred, narrowly focused on cognitive development and individual competitiveness and is isolated from the surrounding society. One way forward is that formal education changes its paradigm into a non-formal learning approach – or establishes better links to it. The paper will start with three dilemmas which highlight the issue and point to possible solutions.

(1) OECD runs PISA studies which assess the learning outcome of students at the age of 15 years. The studies have been carried out in 2001, 2003 and 2006 assessing competencies in mathematics, physics, natural sciences, problem solving in 57 countries (in 2006). Finland has been very much topping these rankings in all three studies made. At the same time other international studies (The Civics study: Suutarinen, Brunell & Törmäkangas 2002) on the political awareness and social responsibility of school children gave embarrassing results: Finnish young people were at the bottom of the scales measuring interest in politics, participation in politics and the sense of social responsibility. Evidently excellent cognitive performance does not go hand in hand with the development of social and moral competences. It could even be that strong focus on individual educational competitiveness leads to disregard of other people and consequently to lacking interest to feel responsibility for others and lack of motivation to act through collective organisations (like NGOs, political parties, trade unions, social movements etc.) or structures (like elections). In sum, what the formal education misses is learning to be a morally and politically responsible active citizen.

(2) A European-wide study (Pohl & Walther 2005) on labour market integration of young people concludes that even if the labour administration across European countries have invested in labour market guidance and counselling with a variety of sophisticated instruments of testing, interviewing and dissemination of information, still, a significant number of young people keep having problems to integrate into post-compulsory education. According to the researchers the missing element of current

vocational guidance and counselling is the inability to create motivation, an internal incentive to make the right choices concerning one's educational and occupational careers.

(3) November 7th 2007 a school boy gunned down 8 people including his school mates and the headmaster in a small Finnish municipality. Finally he killed himself. Following things were soon found out about the gunman: (1) He had no previous criminal record and was not known to the social workers, (2) He was known to be an isolated person who read Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Adolf Hitler, (3) In his web-pages he had informed weeks before that he would do something terrible at his school and he showed video clips of his shooting exercises and (4) He was known to participate in extremist neo-nazi internet communities which actually had encouraged him to go on with his plans. All this was a considerable shock in Finland: How could this happen in a highly developed welfare society? Why didn't the health or the school care systems recognise his problems? Why wasn't he involved in any social network, which could have stopped him? Why was a net-based extremist community for him the only context for exchanging ideas? Why are there no social or youth workers in the net to look after young people? The youth researchers explained that "this event is a sign of the development of the Finnish society into an individualised competition society... The performance oriented school lacks social communities (social trust) and is void of arenas for the exchange of ideas" (Hoikkala 2007). The net, in particular, lacks safe environments for debate and social encounter.¹

All these three dilemmas refer to weaknesses in the current formal education system: There are not enough learning opportunities to become a morally and politically responsible active citizen, formal education fails to support identity development and the motivation of young people to make the right occupational choices and the school has not been able to recognize learning that takes place outside the classroom. Furthermore, educationalists have lost track of young people's new arenas of learning and growing: the virtual world.

There is a lot of terminological confusion in the use of the terms 'formal', 'informal' and 'non-formal learning'. A very short definition is following (Siurala 2006):

formal education: institution based, structured, hierarchically and chronologically graded, teacher/trainer centred education which emphasises objectivity of knowledge, memorizing and aims at certification.

informal learning: learning in everyday life (home, working life, media etc) which does not aim at certification but where a diversity of actors each with their own intentions impose meanings on the learner.

non-formal learning: learner centred and practice based learning process which emphasises intrinsic motivation, the social context of learning, the usefulness of knowledge and aims at identity growth, social change and integration into society. Learning is voluntary, involves conscious educational aims and may be credited.

¹ Finalising this paper 23 September 2008 Finland was again shocked by a school shooting with 11 students killed by a fellow student. Many things were very similar to the 2007 event: the weapon (a hand gun), the profile of the killer (a socially isolated young man with extremist ideals), the shooting (random killing of school mates and teachers) and the process of events (meeting similar minded extremist groups in the net, using the YouTube to show videos of shooting practices and announcing a warning about the actual shooting some hours in beforehand, also in the net). The 2007 shooting could not any longer be dismissed as a singular event.

This definition of non-formal learning has its roots in pragmatist philosophy (like John Dewey) and 'alternative educationalists' (like Paolo Freire). The paper will take up selected concrete examples to describe the potentiality of non-formal learning to meet some of the above mentioned challenges of formal education.

Learning active citizenship skills

Recent youth legislation in Finland (Youth Act 2006) has taken the international recommendations on children's rights to participation (UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and similar agreements of European Union and the Council of Europe) one step further. The Finnish law says very strictly that "Young people must be given opportunities to take part in the handling of matters concerning local and regional youth work and youth policy. Further, young people shall be heard in matters concerning them." This strongly obliges the municipalities to take young people aboard in planning, running and evaluating services for them. According to a recent study on municipal budgets, about 50% of the total budget is used for services to children and young people. This means that there are plenty of opportunities to involve young people in service production. This is to serve at least two purposes; to improve the quality of services and to provide young people the opportunity to learn citizenship skills.

Mayor's Forum is based on a budget head that the school normally has for annual maintenance and repair costs of the school and its environment. In the case of the Helsinki, the Capital of Finland, the education departments has a budget of nearly 1 million euros (per all schools) for this purpose. This money was given to the students to decide themselves how to best use it. A democratic decision making process covering all classes and all schools of the primary and secondary education, most vocational education and gymnasiums (students between 9-18 years of age) was organised together with youth workers and specifically trained teachers. This annual process starts with future workshops at all classes to propose, discuss, argue and vote on proposals to improve the school environment or the social cohesion ('social capital' or 'social trust') at the school. The proposal of each class then goes together with two elected representatives of the class to the school council to be similarly decided. As the final step the proposals of schools (which can range from improving the school library, establishing a relaxed sofa corner, building basket ball court in the school yard or all students going together to a movie and have a joint discussion about it afterwards) are decided at the City Council meeting hall at the City Hall chaired by the Mayor. In these three day meetings the representatives of the schools present their ideas, defend them in a public discussion with other school representatives and finally there follows a voting (using the City Council voting protocol and equipments). As a result what the schools get with the public money allocated to that use is exactly what the young people themselves want. As the civil servant from the education department who previously decided on the budget head later said: "The money is now better used". Most importantly, all children and young people participate in a process where they decide on real money, where they learn active citizenship skills (argumentation, listening to others, making compromises, voting) and become acquainted with – not only the Mayor of the City – but the general decision making context of the City. In addition the Mayor's Forum gets good media coverage which further adds to the empowering experience of the participating young people that they did something important.

'The Best Skating Park in Europe' is the name given by about 30-40 young people in a suburban district of the City of Helsinki to a project through which they wanted to transform an empty field into

a skating park. The young skate board enthusiasts asked the local youth workers whether the city would build them a skate park. The youth workers replied that it is possible to build a skate park on that empty field, but that the young people should do it themselves. The youth workers promised to provide them assistance when needed. After a short moment of embarrassment the young people started to work on it. They started by searching how and where to get the necessary permissions, prepared the applications and negotiated with the City Planning Department, Construction Department and Department of Environment. They designed and run an information campaign to the local inhabitants, which were not all happy with the park. They also made a number of fund application, including a very bureaucratic one to the European Union youth fund. In about a year they got all the permissions, the City Construction department covered the area with concrete and they received the funds from the European Union. As the final step the young people designed and build themselves the necessary skating equipments. In the opening ceremony of the park they did feel that it was the best skating park in Europe. They also 'learned by doing' incredibly much about how the city administration and international funding works and got a very positive experience about the possibility of young people to affect things that concern them, and about being an active citizen.

Creating motivation and supporting recognition of individual career options

Formal education is very much focused on development of cognitive skills and knowledge of facts. It has been argued that the difficulties of many young people at the school and their lacking capacity to make the right educational or occupational choices, is partly due to too little knowledge about the actual working life and too little possibilities to ponder questions like Who am I? What do I want from life? This issue has become very pertinent as young people experience that they face increasingly many options and as there is an increasing interest in 'individual life policy', an expectation to find that particular career which meets one's specific individual wishes. As a result many young people finishing general education take time to search themselves and gather experience from working life instead of going directly to vocational or university education. The drop-out figures are high and many (most) university students prolong their studies beyond the normative length of the studies. The labour and education policy makers see this as waste of public and human resources and have reacted through policies to induce measures to guarantee 'quicker flow' from comprehensive education via further education to working life. However, another or a parallel approach might be to provide better possibilities for young people to explore their identity and get more possibilities to work out their career options through interplay between education and practice in working life.

Youth Workshops are today an increasingly recognised measure for those young people who have not found their place in vocational or university education. These young people can join a workshop on craft, theatre, media, metal or wood work, car repairing, running a café etc for 6-9 months under the guidance of youth workers and professionals on the type of activities mentioned above. The workshop may focus on improving occupational skills, learning working life behaviour, provision of vocational guidance, strengthening life management competences, exploring one's individual talents, developing social skills, sorting out young people's personal problems etc. There are also special workshops for youth at risk, often linked to the social department of the municipality. Workshops are typically run by the youth service or the education service of the municipality or a specialised non-profit organisation. The essence of workshops is that doing is combined with experimenting, developing and reflecting one's identity. Empirical studies indicate that the workshops, today available in most municipalities in

Finland, have been one of the most successful measures in career development and labour market integration of young people.

Own Career is (in Finland) a joint project between youth work and special education of the school. Youth workers and teachers work together as a team with young people with difficulties to attend the normal school education. Own Career is consisted of a 'lighter' version of school curriculum combined with projects in real life which come together as an individual portfolio of formal and non-formal learning outcomes. Own Career also focuses on the personal and social questions of the students. For a certain profile of at-risk students the opportunity to learn through real life practice of the student's own interest improves his or her life management skills and recreates the motivation for further education. The City of Helsinki has over the years increased its offer of Own Career classes.

Supporting young people's own activities and arenas as learning experiences

Even if young people lack interest in participating in representative democracy, there are many who are active in other areas of meaning-making and social interaction, that is, active participation in youth projects, youth organisations, action groups and the various net communities. The youth fields of European organisations like European Union (27 member countries, based in Brussels, Belgium) and Council of Europe (47 member countries, based in Strasbourg, France) have stipulated as one of their main objectives to promote non-formal learning; making it transparent, recognising its learning outcomes and linking it to formal education. The key argument is that through activities outside the school young people learn important skills and competences not only to function as an active citizen, but also to improve their social inclusion and integration into the labour market. These skills and competencies should be credited and linked to, for example, formal education curricula and to labour market recruitment.

Another recent area of non-formal learning is the net in which particularly young people spend large amounts of time. According to educationalists it is *The* arena of today's meaning-making, identity growth, forming of social communities, getting and meeting friends, learning and finding information, participation and action. It is also an arena of risks and harms like economic lost, harassment, bullying, racism, ethically questionable sites (child porno, drug selling, etc), extreme political movements, net-dependency, false information etc. The criticism has been that education and youth work, among others, have not been able to bring their service to where the young people today are, nor to safeguard youth from the risks which life in the internet involves. The virtual world is a non-formal learning context which particularly the formal education institutions have had problems to deal with.

The Blue Book is a civic activities study book. It is created by a Finnish non-governmental youth organisation called Youth Academy. The Blue Book provides a possibility of young people active in organisations or in campaigns, projects or other organised activities of young people to register these activities in the study book confirmed by someone responsible for the said activity. The Youth Academy has made an agreement with a number of vocational education institutes and companies that the Blue Book is credited when the holder is entering the vocational institute in question or applying for jobs at the said companies. The Blue Book is a form of crediting non-formal education. European Union has expanded the good experiences of the Blue Book to European level through launching a similar instrument called **Youthpass**. It is intended to be linked to **Europass**, which is a study book to

promote Life Long Learning (LLL) and Life Wide Learning (LWL) to gather the differently acquired skills and competences through the life course. These competences include (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning, 18 December 2006):

- 1 Communication in the mother tongue
- 2 Communication in foreign languages
- 3 Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- 4 Digital competence
- 5 Learning to learn
- 6 Social and civic competences
- 7 Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- 8 Cultural awareness and expression

The Blue Book, Youthpass and Europass are measures towards better identification, description and validation non-formal learning. Despite these efforts very much is still on a development stage and additional measures are needed at least on two other areas: to support forms of non-formal learning and to reach the stage where formal education institutes and employers fully recognise non-formal learning outcomes. The final example of the paper looks at the first area: new ways of supporting non-formal learning.

Virtual Youth Work is a totally new way of entering into dialogue with today's youth and promote their learning competences. The question is: how to reach young people in the net and how to support their non-formal learning activities through the net?

Experience has shown that it is very difficult for an organisation or for a public sector agency to create a website which draws the attention of young people. They predominantly go to commercial sites, which happen to be on the mode. Thus, for example the strategy of the City of Helsinki has been to establish a partnership between the City's youth service and those privately owned websites which are the most popular among young people and to create a youth activity or a communication forum inside those sites. At the moment there is a **virtual youth centre** with non-formal youth activities and with the possibility for the young people to discuss with youth workers (both using their own avatar figures). There are even **virtual street workers** (identified as the city's youth workers) roaming along the digital routes. The real life youth centres of the City have their own pages in the most popular chat sites trying to create a link between the real and the virtual world. Activities in these sites can be versatile: for example at the occasion of the Finnish municipal elections, October 2008, the youth workers helped to organise a 'youth voting machine' and a series of chaired electoral debates at the those sites to sensitise young people to political issues and to urge them to cast their vote.

Activity oriented net arena is an interactive service for young people presently under construction. It has three key aims. The first is to utilise the (said) strength of web 2.0: taking the users of the net (young people) on board to produce the contents. The second aim is to create a better link between individual expectations and existing services of the youth department and others providing services for young people. The third main aim is to promote learning and action through and in the net. The user joins the net arena and creates his/her own profile with a picture, personal information and information about hobbies, competences, training and experience. These descriptions form a "tag cloud" which then links the person to real-life things like forthcoming activities, concerts, courses, friends with similar profiles, information in the public library (which has an online database), wikipedia, information on

how to organise an activity or a project and how to apply for funds (which exist), available equipment, bus routes and time tables etc. As an example, if your profile says that you are interested in, say, photography, the net arena informs you about where to lend a camera, about courses on photography, about related organisations and books available at the library, about photography exhibitions, contests and friends with similar interests. If you are more experienced in photography, you may be offered possibilities to run courses on photography in the local youth centre, or an invitation to take photos for the local newspaper or to join a team to organise a photo exhibition etc. The user can also make use of his/her personal net pages as a digital curriculum vitae or a portfolio, where you can present your contributions, like in the case of the photographer, your best shots and video clips. The user pages also give the youth workers an updated idea of what kind of activities and services the young people need. All this requires a critical mass of users, a flexible technical structure, a large variety of services and updated pages on the availability of and the access to them. Such an arena has the potentiality (1) to link virtual and real life (as many of today's most popular websites only operate in the net), (2) to run virtual world activities under the 'guidance' of youth workers (as there are too few educationalist in the net), (3) to create social communities in/through the net and (4) to offer a non-formal learning context in the net.

These services are clearly only the first steps in the effort to provide educational support and activities in the net. It is not only to protect young people from the harms and risks in the virtual world, but also to help young people use the net in a positive way in their identity growth and active participation, not to mention the effort to make transparent the competencies that they clearly develop in this new social media.

To conclude

It was the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey who said: "It is essential to maintain the continuity of knowing with an activity which purposely modifies the environment" (Dewey 1916, 344). The emphasis of the formal education 'to teach facts' misses the potentiality of linking the student as an active real life agent in the learning process. This paper has looked at learning contexts where young people themselves are the actors. Being an actor implies that there is something to act on; the social reality and its concerns and potentialities. Young people can 'modify the environment' at the school (Mayor's Forum), along their educational career (Workshops, Own Career), in the leisure time ('The Best Skate Park in Europe') and in the virtual world ('Virtual youth centre', 'Action oriented net arena'). As young people are actively changing their environment, they are learning. Learning outcomes may be social skills, moral competencies, better life management or a strong intrinsic motivation to study and work. At its best good education is about good life. As Dewey (1916, 359-360) also said: "Education is not a mere means to moral life. Education is such a life."

References:

Dewey, John (1916): Democracy and Education, Columbia University

Europass; see <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu>

Hoikkala, Tommi (ed) (2007): The Jokela Phenomena (in Finnish only), Finnish Youth Research Network

PISA studies, see <http://www.pisa.oecd.org>

Pohl, Alex & Walther, Andreas (eds.) Tackling disadvantage in youth transitions, A thematic study on policy measures concerning disadvantaged youth. August 2005

Siurala, Lasse: Non-formal learning as an educational approach, in Dorin Festeu and Barbara Humberstone (eds.) Non-formal Education through Outdoor Activities Guide, Buckinghamshire 2006

Suutarinen, Sakari & Viking Brunell & Kari Törmäkangas (2002): Young Finnish Citizens - National Defence, Perceived Threats and Ethnic Attitudes, A preview on findings from a national sub-study related to the IEA/Civic Education Study in Finland, Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä (see <http://ktl.jyu.fi/arkisto/civics/civics.htm>)

Youthpass; see <http://www.youthpass.eu>