

# Informal Education, Youth Work and Youth Development: Responding to the Brathay Trust Case Study

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YOUTH WORK as a distinctive process-led, young person-centred educational practice has been on the wane for at least two decades (Davies, 2008; Jeffs and Smith, 2008; IDYW, 2009). Its open, improvisatory and unpredictable character has not fitted well with an increasingly instrumental and behavioural neo-liberal agenda. As youth work has declined, other forms of work with young people have risen in prominence, particularly those favouring structured and targeted approaches based on prescribed outcomes. By and large these behavioural modification schemes have hesitated to give themselves an identity, preferring the pretence of still defining themselves as youth work. In the emergence of this array of interventions intent on regulating young people's lives (Taylor and Taylor, 2010), relatively few writers have drawn attention to the significance of the technocratic 'youth development' model.

Given this silence we welcomed the appearance earlier this year of an article, '*Non-formal youth development and its impact on young people's lives: Case study – Brathay Trust, UK*', written by Karen Stuart and Lucy Maynard (2015) and published in the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*. However, we found ourselves so perplexed by its argument that we have produced a trio of critical articles as a collective response. These are prompted by their account of 'how the [Brathay] Trust has developed a robust theoretical framework to underpin a non-formal youth development approach' (Stuart and Maynard, 2015: 231) which reignites what are, for us, important debates on three contested areas of practice with young people: informal education; youth work; and youth development.

Obviously, we would urge you to read Stuart and Maynard's piece in full, but our interpretations of its main assertions are as follows:

- Rooted in non-formal learning and education, youth development is a structured and planned intervention into young people's lives with identified and intended measurable outcomes. It can be shown to be robust and rigorous in both theory and practice.
- Rooted in informal learning and education, youth work is no more than unintentional learning, having little need for an educator or for preparation. Given a failure to evidence achievement, youth work is less than robust and less than rigorous.
- Against this backdrop, it is clear that in the present climate youth development richly deserves further research and development as the way forward for work with young people.

In the following articles we take up these assertions critically, but with a desire to open up dialogue

rather than shut it down. Firstly, Tony Taylor offers some overall context on the youth development versus youth work debate and questions Stuart and Maynard's claim that youth development is robust and rigorous, suggesting it is as much riddled with contradiction as the youth work it seeks to surpass. Secondly, from a theoretical perspective, Naomi Stanton explores Stuart and Maynard's misunderstanding of what constitutes informal learning, informal education and youth work. Finally, through a detailed interrogation of an example from practice, Bernard Davies offers evidence on the centrality and impact of the purposeful, reflective youth worker – in direct contrast to Stuart and Maynard's dismissal of the youth work role and process.

In line with Stuart and Maynard's openness about their commitment to Brathay and its programmes, we need to make clear that each of us brings to these articles an equally strong commitment to and long experience of youth work and specifically to the open access facilities and approaches advocated by *In Defence of Youth Work*. (IDYW, 2014; see also Davies, 2015). We also start from the premise that any analysis of the practices considered in Stuart and Maynard's paper need to be located in explicit theoretical, practice and political perspectives, including how those practices are defined, contextualised, analysed and evaluated.

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# Youth Development: Youth Work's Friend or Foe?

*Tony Taylor*

IN THIS RIPOSTE to Stuart and Maynard's article, I will concentrate on unravelling their explanation of what constitutes youth development. Given the promiscuous desire nowadays to use and abuse the term youth work if and when it suits, their attempted clarity is enormously valuable. Placing itself in the camp of non-formal learning, youth development is described as a structured and planned intervention into young people's lives with identified and intended outcomes, which, Stuart and Maynard claim, is robust and rigorous. I offer the following doubts in a critical rather than antagonistic spirit, arguing that, at the very least, youth development is as riven with contradiction as the youth work which, in these three articles, we seek to defend and nurture.

## The Political Context

Whilst Stuart and Maynard sketch an assault on both youth service provision and its philosophy over the last decade, document young people's dilemmas 'in these challenging times', and outline the pressures upon projects to respond, they tell only part of the story. The pressures to justify the survival of youth work are hardly new. Speaking personally, as a Chief Youth Officer in the mid-1990s, I almost crumbled under 66% cuts to a nationally regarded Youth Service in Wigan. The only way to procure further funding back then was to submit programmes based on specious outcomes. A few years later I was admonished by several of my peers for not believing that accredited outcomes would be the saviour of youth work.

Thinking more broadly, the last four decades have witnessed the triumph of neo-liberal economics and ideology. It is revealed as the common-sense of our age, 'the individualisation of everyone, the privatisation of public troubles and the requirement to make competitive choices at every turn' (Hall and O'Shea, 2014: 6). If we are to be rigorous the question of what has happened to youth work and to young people ought to be grounded in these political and social circumstances, in the hegemony of neo-liberalism. This is the ABC of any social or political analysis.

The fixation on outcomes-based approaches is born of the 1990s. Its *raison d'être* is to measure supposedly the effective and efficient use of funding in achieving targets. In terms of the impact on youth work this is best caught in the advice contained in the National Youth Agency/Local Government Association documents, *The Future for Outcomes* (2013) and *The Calculator in Practice* (2013). Before a young person is even 'a twinkle in the eye' of the youth worker, a project is instructed to define its audience, to agree the evidence needed and in accord to select from its portfolio of outcomes. In this scenario prioritising the collection of the right data is seen as crucial

to competing in a world of commissioning and increasingly payment-by-results. At a stroke the market is thrust into the very heart of our work, whilst young men and women are commodified, reduced to being no more than the bearers of 'data for exchange'.

Stuart and Maynard's account of the pressures on young people today is well made. Indeed commentators such as Henry Giroux (2013) talk of a 'war on youth'. However Giroux, along with others such as In Defence of Youth Work (2009), is at pains to stress, in contrast to Stuart and Maynard, that young people are not a homogeneous category. Rather than being seen as generally vulnerable or disadvantaged, young people are better understood as being particularly oppressed by and alienated in differing and similar ways according to the interplay of their class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and faith. They are caught up inexorably in this matrix of power relations.

Stuart and Maynard's silence on the character of the political regime we live under and the austerity it has consciously imposed, together with their embrace of a generalised category of young person, raises important questions about what sort of practice with young people might contribute to their vision of 'autonomous young people flourishing in a just and sustainable world' (2015: 234).

## Youth Development as Programme

Stuart and Maynard might well shake their heads at our doubts. For they argue confidently that youth development as an approach can deliver in four broad areas: improving learning, attainment and employability; reducing offending and anti-social behaviour; improved well-being (groups with discrete needs); and Social Action. However, these categories are not of their making. Across the last two decades they have been imposed by successive governments in an ideologically driven mission to instrumentalise work with young people, to bring order to an unruly practice. They constitute the reference points for funding. Of course they make the sort of common-sense that suggests anyone doubting their appropriateness is a trifle disturbed. And yet, for us, it raises some important critical questions:

- Is improving learning, attainment and employability such a straightforward objective when youth unemployment is high, when so many young people face being part of a precariat rather than a proletariat?
- Isn't reducing offending and particularly anti-social behaviour related intimately to how we define pro-social behaviour? This is not a question to be restricted to young people. It is a question to be asked across society, most obviously of the financial institutions, whose greed precipitated the post-2008 crisis. It is a question to be posed of a Tory government's profoundly anti-social policies.
- Isn't improving well-being fundamentally a collective project? Thus, alongside the important work with individuals or groups with discrete needs with its inevitable psychological focus, isn't it necessary to encourage the politicisation of what it means to be well or even happy? Isn't it the case that any young person has good reason to feel ill at

ease with the values and norms of contemporary neo-liberal society?

- Whilst welcoming Stuart and Maynard's emphasis on 'criticality', hasn't the radical meaning of Social Action been undermined via its appropriation by schemes such as 'Step Up to Serve' and the National Citizen Service? Whilst workers are under pressure to encourage volunteering, as if clearing an overgrown path is novel, they are disciplined for accompanying young people on political demonstrations.

Of course these questions might be missing the mark in terms of the form and content of Brathay's programmes, but how are we to know? The description of youth development in Stuart and Maynard's article is conspicuously lacking in detail. We are informed that the programmes last between two days and three years, that the funding is diverse and that the young people vary in demographics, assets and needs. At a minimum we need more information. A breakdown of the range of programmes, their differing lengths, the means of recruitment, especially as groups are said to be referred, the character of these varied groups of young people and an insight into the make-up of the providing organisations themselves is basic surely to gaining a better understanding of what is meant by youth development. So too an insight into the process, through which workers and young people decide upon the specific five or six outcomes pertinent to their particular programme, would be invaluable. In terms of the integrity of youth development, knowing more about the nuts and bolts is all the more important as its programmatic character dovetails with the neo-liberal policy of providing short-term funding linked to pre-determined outcomes.

## **Brathay's Model of Youth Development**

The youth development programme of the Brathay Trust is situated within a three part framework comprising Values, Practice and Outcomes. There is much within this structure that youth work and youth development share. There are also significant moments of difference. Both the common and uncommon ground need to be explored. Thus for now, we shall pose some areas for exploration in the hope that this collective journey might be undertaken.

### **Values**

The historical struggle for social justice is a shared endeavour. Hence both youth work and youth development are haunted by the question of to what extent they nurture young people's social selves and encourage the growth of autonomous young people's groups. At its best youth work has contributed to the fostering of young people's groups, organised around gender, race and sexuality, but less so as neo-liberalism has sought to depoliticise practice. Whilst youth development speaks of young people as successful social agents in the pursuit of fairness, it is unclear how the mutual struggle for human rights, the forging of independent youth groups, emerges out of its practice.

Stuart and Maynard pin their colours to the mast of critical pedagogy, arguing that adherents of

youth development work with young people in ways that are anti-oppressive and empowering. This is to be applauded and obviously chimes with youth work's efforts, particularly in the 1980s and 90s to nurture through training an anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice. However, in reality, given that youth work is always a contested ideological arena, youth work's radical pedagogy minority was always opposed by youth work's conservative social pedagogy majority. And the latter has strengthened its influence in recent decades, embracing an outcomes-led approach geared to social conformity. Against this background, at the very least, youth development's advocacy of critical pedagogy and thus the fostering of a critical consciousness underpinned by a relentless critique of capitalist education is surely no straightforward matter.

Both youth development and youth work share a commitment to experiential learning and to a positive rather than negative view of young people. In theory, both refuse to see young people as in deficit. However, again, youth work's perspective has been seriously undermined by a shift to targeted interventions premised precisely on a view of young people as deficient in one way or another. Again it is difficult to see how youth development's programmes directed at referred groups (referred on the basis of what need?) floats above this dominant discourse without some degree of turbulence. For example, below the surface talk of assets and strengths the very way in which the discourse of 'employability' is utilised, suggests that young people lack the skills needed to gain employment. In this way the victim is blamed, the system excused.

### ***Practice***

The youth development model emphasises self-awareness, empowerment and agency. Stuart and Maynard speak of dialogue, consciousness and politicisation. Within youth work from Davies (2009) to Young (1999) and Batsleer (2008) via Jeffs and Smith (2008) the same themes emerge, if sometimes differently named.

Neither youth development nor youth work, though, can escape a number of important concerns. Upon which psychological theories do they draw in seeking to understand the personality and practices of young people? To what extent do these theories or understandings make sense in the hurly-burly of practice? In my opinion youth work has been confused on such matters. To put it crudely it has leaned principally on humanistic psychology, which offers insights essential to the building of relationships, but which fails to ground its subject in social relations. In contrast youth development seems more confident about its psychological perspective, offering 'frames' and 'models' to aid the worker's intervention into young people's lives. Its sources are eclectic, drawing on a heady mix of humanistic and behavioural sources. There is though, a fly in the explanatory ointment offered. Stuart and Maynard's references point both workers and young people to seductive, yet speculative models and categories, which claim to explain in simplistic terms who we are and why we act in the ways we do.

Amongst the sources referenced by Stuart and Maynard, Honey and Mumford propose that we are but one of four sorts of learner – Activist, Theorist, Pragmatist or Reflector; Kahler suggests that human motivation can be reduced to five drivers – Be Perfect, Be Strong, Hurry Up, Please Others and Try Hard; and Harris, best selling author of the book, ‘I’m OK, You’re OK’ completes a trio of theorists wedded to the significance of Transactional Analysis (TA). All of which takes me back forty years to running a part-time youth worker training course with a colleague besotted with Berne (1964), the father of TA. It made for a fraught, even tetchy relationship, which certainly entertained the students. My prejudiced interpretation of those events is that my co-tutor captivated the workers in the early stages, but that as time passed they became less convinced that complex young people could be easily fitted into the functional roles on offer. In addition Stuart and Maynard invoke the controversial world of neurons and genes to explain further our behaviour, quoting favourably ‘the amygdala hijack’ which claims that a particular part of the brain controls emotions, and Glaser’s choice theory which argues that we are driven by our genes to satisfy five basic needs – survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun.

All I can humbly say is that Stuart and Maynard’s pot-pourri of explanations is extremely contentious. Given that youth work and youth development are concerned with the ‘character’ of young people and thus inexorably the ‘character’ of youth workers themselves, both have much to do in developing a coherent psychology which goes beyond fads and fancies.

In using the notion of empowerment as a signifier of individual development, Stuart and Maynard embrace the contemporary abuse and dilution of its meaning. In its original incarnation, empowerment is a collective undertaking, impelled from below on the basis of a common cause or identity. It is not an individual project. The collective cannot be empowered by those possessing power. The very idea of ‘empowering’ individuals masks the structural inequalities, which restrict the mass of humanity’s choices. Empowerment reduced to the gaining of self confidence feeds into a neo-liberal diet of possessive individualism.

### ***Outcomes***

The uncritical, even effusive welcome given by Stuart and Maynard to the deeply problematic Catalyst Outcomes Framework (2012) is disconcerting. Together with Marilyn Taylor (2014) I have offered a thorough critique of its shortcomings, but in this context we will confine ourselves to the following points:

- The Framework is neo-liberal to its core, expressed in the fact that it accepts without question austerity and argues therefore that the young person of its attention must become ‘emotionally resilient’, less of a drain on the State and prepared to work for whatever crumbs are on offer in the market place.
- The outcomes themselves are treated as if the process is linear, irresistible and easily measurable. Whereas, to take confidence as an obvious example, the capacity is fragile.

Confidence waxes and wanes, is often situation-specific and indeed sometimes deeply problematic, spilling over into arrogance.

- Remarkably, too, the research supporting the Framework's seven clusters of outcomes fails conspicuously to engage with the burgeoning sexual feelings and desires of young people.
- The use of Outcomes-based approaches across the public sector has distorted practice in deeply troubling ways, leading to the fabrication of data. Work with young people is not insulated from such dilemmas. We know of situations where management monitors workers' performance on the basis of them illustrating ever increasing improvements in prescribed outcomes for young people.

Stuart and Maynard claim that the Catalyst Framework affords a shared language. If this is the case and accepted across youth development it brings with it too an ideology utterly at odds with their claim to critical pedagogy.

### **From Evidence-based Practice to Practice-based Evidence**

The section of Stuart and Maynard's article on the process via which the Brathay Trust honed their youth development model is illuminating. There are several moments where Stuart and Maynard and ourselves share the same analysis. They recognise the range of problems besetting the Outcomes agenda, for example, noting that, 'young people are complex; with many different factors affecting their day-to-day living. Therefore, how can we truly claim that a programme has led to the outcomes they experience?'(2015: 245).

This said, though, they cannot resist a side-swipe, by way of a quote from Jean Spence (2004), at youth workers, who throw in the towel in the face of this tough question and 'reject the very notion of outcomes'. In fact Spence's point is that youth work is process-led: 'the dominant ethos in youth work is one of "process" rather than "outcome"'(2004: 262). She does not dismiss reflecting upon the consequences and effects of our engagement with young people.

But to return to points of agreement. In their scrutiny of evidence-based practice they come to a conclusion, with which we would concur, 'that simplistic pre-determined outcomes, pseudo-scientific and quantitative analysis would not show the real value of [their] work' (Stuart and Maynard, 2015: 247).

To their great credit Stuart and Maynard undertook a pilot one year project to test their conclusion across as many of their 5,000 participants as possible, utilising a classic pre-intervention, post-intervention model of self-assessment by young people. As a result they drew up an extensive range of descriptive statistics, supported by a number of observations from participants to give soul, as we would obviously argue, to the dry data. The outcomes were perplexing as there was a gulf between the apparent results of the pre and post intervention outcome wheels and the information

provided by young people through a feedback form at the end of the specific programme. The latter, completed by around 20% of young people involved, conveyed a real sense of progress and learning, whilst the former suggested that little had changed. In Stuart and Maynard's words, 'young people cannot have learnt and not changed in learning' (2015: 253).

Spurred on by this contradiction they pursued a further piece of work with 12 young people on a three year programme. To cut an interesting story short, Stuart and Maynard's explanation of the gap between the intervention self-assessments and the feedback forms is that the former are 'not methodologically fit for purpose. Young people are not "lab rats", the variables in their lives cannot be controlled, and there are psychologically more complex processes at play than in a medical trial' (2015: 257). Thus Brathay 'have implemented a post intervention measure of retrospective start scores and supported this by qualitative data to evidence the impact of our practice' (2015 :257). They argue that their approach is to be understood as a search for practice-based evidence.

Without being too sanguine about these conclusions none of them come as much of a surprise to those of us committed to informal education and youth work. As illustrated by the example analysed in Bernard Davies's piece below, across our diverse moments of action research into the significance of our practice a consistent theme haunts us – uncertainty. Our encounter with young people is thoughtful and purposeful. Its effects though can never be predicted or indeed settled with certainty, can never be guaranteed. None of which means that we don't do our utmost to reach our very best understanding of our impact on young people's lives. Indeed our own excursion into the potential of story-telling (In Defence of Youth Work, 2011) is a way of better recognising and sharing youth work's possibilities. Our heresy, deeply unfashionable in these instrumental times, is that youth work can never offer proof of its worth. It can provide evidence, but evidence that will always be open to interpretation, not least from an ideological point of view. If youth work is undoubtedly on the retreat, it is not because it lacks the manly virtues of robustness and rigour, although this might well be the case. Its present unpopularity is due to the fact that its open and improvisatory practice is explicitly at odds with the dominant neo-liberal agenda of individualised social conformity.

It is necessary to add that in practice youth work will witness moments when a structured approach comes to the fore, classically when the need for a themed residential emerges from the unfolding conversations and relationships with young people. I presume that in youth development there will be moments of informal learning as workers and young people mix outside of the structured setting. This said the two perspectives are clearly distinct. The question arises as to whether youth work and youth development are in opposition within a system that is obsessed with competition and rivalry?

## Concluding Concerns

In truth the conclusion to Stuart and Maynard's exposition of their youth development model is disingenuous. In essence, they argue they have illustrated that their model of youth development

is robust and deserving of further research and development. Whilst we are less than convinced by the former claim, we have no quarrel with the latter desire and applaud their scepticism about evidence-based practice. However, in the final paragraph they seem to want ‘both sides of their bread buttered’:

*[Pointing] to the need for the sector to be skilled and confident, developing its own artful ways of applying science to impact evaluation, and defending its position from its value base. We now support other UK organisations to navigate the ground that we have through a peer support group, the Youth Work Evidence Group. We highly recommend that youth workers and educators in other countries take the initiative in such a manner and tell their governments what good evidence of youth work looks like, rather than waiting to be told. And finally, above all, as critical pedagogues, we need to remain cognisant to the power structures that may shape our practice, and the oppression that may create for us as practitioners and for the young people we serve. (Stuart and Maynard, 2015: 258/259)*

Firstly, as is par for the course nowadays, Stuart and Maynard here slip into eliding notions of the youth sector, youth work and youth development. All of which is less than helpful, given that the substance of their argument clarifies the distinction between youth work and youth development, opening up the chance of a fruitful debate about differing forms of work with young people. For example, how far are youth social work, youth development and youth work complementary or antagonistic to each other? As things stand these questions are not being asked and the debate is not taking place. Secondly, having been at pains to dismiss youth work, Stuart and Maynard are now supporting a Youth Work Evidence Group to follow Brathay’s youth development journey.

We can be forgiven for feeling that youth development needs no special pleading. In a range of guises, some of which we’re sure Stuart and Maynard would be critical, youth development dominates the scene. With respect to their aim of influencing Government, the Cabinet Office supported Centre for Youth Impact might well be named the Centre for Youth Development. The website is awash with articles and blogs which take for granted the superiority and efficacy of structured programmes with specified and intended outcomes. Criticism is given but a token hearing.

As far as Stuart and Maynard’s claim to being critical pedagogues goes, being seriously so is tough in these ‘dark times’ (Giroux, 2013), whether within youth work or youth development. They are absolutely right in the final sentence to underline that practitioners do not float free from the power structures of oppression and exploitation. Brathay’s model of youth development though fails to remember sufficiently this stricture. In this they are not alone. Our own practice within youth work has often fallen short.

The reality is that almost four decades of neo-liberal violence have, from schools through to

universities, undermined deeply the holistic tradition of liberal education discussed below by Naomi Stanton. Teachers teach to test, lecturers answer to the market and youth workers are led by outcomes. Youth development does not stand outside of this authoritarian script. It is problematic that while youth work is in crisis, youth development prospers. Increasingly the remnants of youth work, often now youth development in all but name, propagate the values and norms of a possessive, individualistic society. Our contention is that both youth work and youth development need to be self-critical and grounded, recognising the enormous pressures to adopt what Marina Warner (2015) dubs 'a cruel optimism' via which we put the best gloss on our practice, even as it is distorted almost beyond recognition. Remaining true to a critical pedagogy or radical practice can only be a collective project. In its limited way the In Defence of Youth Work campaign tries to contribute to this endeavour. It would be good if the advocates of youth development joined with us. In this way we can be critical friends rather than hostile rivals.

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# Informal Learning is NOT the same as Informal Education – addressing Stuart and Maynard's problematic theoretical confusion

*Naomi Stanton*

THIS PIECE responds to Stuart and Maynard's (2015) dismissal of youth work as informal learning from a theoretical perspective. In particular, it seeks to highlight that their conflation of youth work with informal learning disregards the theoretical underpinnings of youth work. They define informal learning in detail on page 236 of their article with no reference to theory at all. Their definition suggests that informal learning can take place anywhere, requires no educator or facilitator to be present and leads to no evidence of achievement. On page 237, they use the term 'informal education' interchangeably with informal learning and include a brief reference to Janet Batsleer's (2008) discussion of such. They assume, quite erroneously, that informal education is the same as informal learning and they routinely ignore some of our profession's other key theorists on the former (for example: Brew, 1946; Jeffs and Smith, 2005). In doing this, they argue for a non-formal youth development approach to work with young people, within which they place the practice of the Brathay Trust, as superior to informal learning and youth work.

## Informal learning is NOT the same as informal education

The key problem in their utilising a definition of informal learning is that whilst it is the form of learning which often takes place in youth work, it is not the mode of practice that has been theorised and developed over decades to underpin youth work. Informal education is a mode of practice that has been carefully considered and articulated and that emphasises the importance of paying attention to, for example, the character of the educator, the environment or setting created for education to take place and the deliberate (as opposed to incidental) harnessing of informal learning within the youth work context.

### ***What is informal learning?***

Stuart and Maynard's definition of informal learning, though unreference, is not inaccurate. It fits with the distinctions made between formal, non-formal and informal learning by the Commission of the European Communities (CEC):

- ***Formal learning*** takes place in education and training institutions, leading to recognised diplomas and qualifications.
- ***Non-formal learning*** takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and

*training and does not typically lead to formalised certificates. Non-formal learning may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations and groups (such as in youth organisations, trades unions and political parties). It can also be provided through organisations or services that have been set up to complement formal systems (such as arts, music and sports classes or private tutoring to prepare for examinations).*

- *Informal learning is a natural accompaniment to everyday life. Unlike formal and non-formal learning, informal learning is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills (CEC, 2000: 8).*

As outlined by Stuart and Maynard, informal learning can happen anywhere without educational intervention and may not lead to evidence of achievement. McGivney (1999: 6) outlines that it can be ‘unplanned’, ‘incidental’, ‘unintentional’ and ‘surplus’ to any explicit aims. She also outlines that it occurs ‘through dialogue’ and explains how such learning might be utilised for work with communities.

Those discussing informal learning also acknowledge that it is often ignored and its importance disregarded by policy-makers and researchers, as it is by Stuart and Maynard. Frank Coffield states that ‘although informal learning is routinely ignored by government, employers and most researchers, it is often necessary, whereas formal training is often dispensable’ (2002: 1). Similarly, in discussing engaging people in lifelong learning, the CEC state that:

*[F]ormal learning has dominated policy thinking, shaping the ways in which education and training are provided and colouring people’s understandings of what counts as learning... Non-formal learning, by definition, stands outside schools, colleges, training centres and universities. It is not usually seen as ‘real’ learning, and nor do its outcomes have much currency value on the labour market... But informal learning is likely to be missed out of the picture altogether, although it is the oldest form of learning and remains the mainstay of early childhood learning... Informal contexts provide an enormous learning reservoir and could be an important source of innovation for teaching and learning methods (CEC, 2000: 8).*

The CEC document also emphasises that in contexts where people have the choice to engage in learning that individuals’ motivation is only likely to be sustained where they are:

*...able to follow open learning pathways of their own choice, rather than being obliged to follow predetermined routes to specific destinations. This means, quite simply, that education and training systems should adapt to individual needs and demands rather than the other way round (2000: 8).*

This emphasises, again, the importance of providing learning that is not the ‘outcome based’ form triumphed by Stuart and Maynard.

### ***What, then, is informal education?***

It would be arrogant to assume that learning only takes place in educational contexts. However, Jeffs and Smith (2005) explain that education is the process of bringing thinking and learning into the ‘conscious’. Informal learning occurs both, purposefully, in an informal education context and, incidentally, in everyday life. This distinction is grasped by anything more than a cursory glance at the informal education literature. In short, informal education is a mode of practice developed to allow an educator to create environments for informal learning:

*Informal learning involves unplanned, incidental, even accidental, learning in everyday experience. Informal education involves an educator creating an environment to facilitate informal learning rather than leaving it to chance* (Stanton, 2004: 75).

In creating this environment, the nature and role of the educator and the context in which they operate are key considerations. Jeffs and Smith (2005), in their much re-printed, seminal text on Informal Education, define informal education as follows.

*It is the process of fostering learning in life as it is lived. A concern with community and conversation; a focus on people as persons rather than objects, a readiness to educate in different settings* (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 8).

Whilst it is clear that informality is central here; within this ‘fostering of learning’, of making learning a conscious process, the role played by the educator is highly significant:

*Because informal educators aim to advance learning and open it up to as many people as possible they naturally seek to build upon such incidental learning. They use it as a starting point, and try to deepen learning through encouraging conversation, reflection and further experience. In other words, informal educators both consciously set out to create environments that foster incidental learning, and encourage people to explore what may have been learnt* (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 9).

As well as the role of the educator being significant in the theory of informal education, those organisations engaged in practice have also emphasised its importance. It featured, for example, in many of the curriculum documents of individual Youth Services developed in the early 2000s, such as that of City of York Council:

*Informal education is a delivery style which runs through all these methods used and areas*

*covered in youth work. It relies on workers engaging young people through conversations and skilfully using these as a way of raising issues and engaging with young people. Good quality youth work makes use of opportunities as they arise to support young people in exploring ideas and issues through conversation and action* (City of York Council, 2003: 2).

Whilst Stuart and Maynard suggest that no educator is required for informal learning to take place, we see here that in the more purposeful practice of informal education, an educator is indeed present and important. Brew also emphasises the role and character of the educator in what was the first substantial text on informal education. She explains, among other attributes, that ‘one should adopt the language of the people and be both clear and homely’ (Brew, 1946: 40). What all these examples emphasise – and what the story discussed in Bernard Davies’s piece below helps illuminate – is that the presence and role of the educator is crucial to the learning that takes place within informal education.

### **Different settings or any setting?**

Stuart and Maynard (2015) also suggest (in table 1, p.236) that informal learning can take place in any setting. Whilst this is true of definitions of the incidental nature of informal learning, in fostering environments for *informal education*, setting is a key consideration. Jeffs and Smith, in their definition of informal education quoted earlier, suggest the educator must have a ‘readiness to educate in different settings’. However, a flexibility to work in different settings is not the same as being able to work in *any setting*. Indeed, as the theorists of informal education (such as both Brew and Jeffs and Smith) emphasise, in the process of fostering or creating environments, the appropriateness of the setting itself is an essential consideration. First and foremost, the key consideration is that theorists of informal education and youth work emphasise the importance of starting ‘where the young people are’ (Brew, 1946; Davies, 2015; Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Whilst the informal educator needs, therefore, to be flexible to work in different settings, some may not be appropriate at all due to them not being anywhere near to the young people’s starting position or them having negative connotations for them. Davies (2015), in particular, explains the importance of levelling the power dynamics between young people and educator and to starting from spaces within which the young people have ownership or, at very least, a level of negotiation. Stuart and Maynard’s suggestion that youth work as informal learning can take place anywhere is a gross oversimplification of the importance of considering the environment within informal education practice.

Whilst there is not space to explore them all fully here, Stuart and Maynard’s simplistic comparison of the different forms of learning disregards some key features of informal education – with the importance of the facilitator and the environment being but two examples. Another is their suggestion that no ‘evidence of achievement’ occurs from informal learning. By contrast, impact is a much debated (though, admittedly, contested) concept in youth work and informal

education theory and practice. The fact that outcomes are achieved through youth work is not contested, how these outcomes should be measured and whether they can be pre-defined is more complex. Davies (2015), for example, emphasises that impact is significant in youth work but that this should be measured qualitatively (see, for example, In Defence of Youth Work, 2011) and not merely in reductionist and quantitative ways. Moreover, as demonstrated by the example of practice examined in Davies's piece below, the evidence may take (considerable) time to emerge – and even then may do so only by chance.

### **Acknowledging overlap**

Stuart and Maynard are keen to emphasise their non-formal 'youth development' approach as distinctive from informal youth work, which they appear to view as chaotic and uncontrolled. However, as Tony Taylor makes clear in his article above, many of the features of their work which they go on to discuss have long been discussed as features of youth work. Empowerment, critical pedagogy, experiential learning and social justice have long been discussed by informal education and youth work theorists as defining features. This is undeniable with a knowledge of the literature (see Jeffs and Smith 2005 as a starting point). Take, for example, Stuart and Maynard's focus on experiential learning as key to their youth development approach. The theories of Kolb, Dewey and other key thinkers on experiential learning have long informed – indeed, arguably, are the most crucial underpinning of – the theory of informal education.

Why therefore are Stuart and Maynard so keen to distinguish their approach from the developed theory and practice of youth work? As already suggested, clear overlaps exist which their oversimplistic distinction appears to disregard – overlaps between formal, non-formal and informal learning and education which commentators on informal learning and education recognise. McGivney explains:

*It is difficult to make a clear distinction between informal and non-formal learning as there is often some crossover between the two. The setting itself is not necessarily a defining element: some informal learning takes place in formal educational environments (such as schools) while some formal learning takes place in an informal local setting (such as church or village halls) (McGivney, 1999: 1).*

Similarly, Jeffs and Smith (2005) explicitly recognise and discuss this overlap between the formal, non-formal and informal modes of learning.

It is perhaps important to consider whether the approach triumphed by Stuart and Maynard, if not as distinctive as they suggest, is as superior to youth work as informal education as they appear to argue. If we consider the original definition of education (as emphasised by Dewey, 1956) as the 'drawing out' as opposed to the 'pouring in' of learning – then the process of informal education

arguably achieves this more easily than modes of non-formal learning which are manipulated to achieve certain pre-defined outcomes whilst maintaining the illusion of non-formality. Informal education arguably has the intrinsic capacity to remain guided by the theories of person-centred, reflective and experiential learning.

## Conclusion

Informal learning is the process that people engage in. Informal education is the practice that has been developed to facilitate that form of learning. Whilst informal learning is unplanned, incidental and often takes place without an educator, key theorists of informal education as a form of practice emphasise the role and character of the educator as highly significant. The use of informal learning as interchangeable with informal education in Stuart and Maynard's paper, as well as the oversight of these key theorists, is a major error in their analysis. Their definition of informal learning is correct in that it is incidental, even accidental, and without the intervention of an educator. Informal education, however, is the deliberate use of informal learning as a tool by educators in which they obviously do apply some limited structure, boundaries, even goals – in order to foster an environment in which they can facilitate learning. As such, the use of a definition of informal learning rather than informal education in their article is misleading as they are relating it to a situation in which a youth worker or educator is actively present rather than simply the incidental moments of learning encountered in everyday life.

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RESPONDING TO THE BRATHAY TRUST CASE STUDY:  
INFORMAL LEARNING IS NOT THE SAME AS INFORMAL EDUCATION

Stuart, K., and Maynard, L. (2015). Non-formal youth development and its impact on young people's lives: Case study – Brathay Trust, UK. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 7(1), 231-262. Retrieved from <http://journals.padovauniversitypress.it/ijse/content/non-formal-youth-development-and-its-impact-young-people%E2%80%99s-lives-case-study-%E2%80%93-brathay-trust>.

# Challenging Stuart and Maynard's Misrepresentations of Youth Work: Evidence from Practice

Bernard Davies

STUART AND MAYNARD's (2015) rejection of youth work as a conscious and disciplined form of practice is made most explicit in their assertion that 'much youth work is based on an informal learning approach'. Adopting positions which, as Naomi Stanton has shown above, do not withstand critical scrutiny or analysis, they then define this as:

*...learning that is not organised or structured in terms of goals, time or instruction. There is no teaching or facilitation. So informal learning refers to the skills acquired unintentionally through life and work experience, and the skills are not acquired in a planned or deliberate manner* (236).

This position is then explained further in a table which characterises 'informal learning' as:

- having 'no adult role';
- in relation to the 'role of the learner', being merely 'self-directed';
- having 'no plans';
- in relation to 'who has responsibility for planning', being simply 'learner directed';
- in relation to 'evidence of achievement' – providing 'none'.

(Stuart and Maynard, 2015: 236)

In the past and perhaps still, too much practice claiming to be 'youth work' has, it is true, displayed too many of these characteristics. However to define the practice in this way is to do so simply on the basis of what its least effective practitioners do. More positively, it needs to be challenged as a grossly inaccurate characterisation both of youth workers' intentions and of their actual direct practice with young people.

Moreover, for an article whose whole purpose is to argue the case for 'evidence-based practice', Stuart and Maynard provide little evidence to support these assertions. To counter their view, rather than setting out an alternative abstract definition of youth work, I offer as evidence a critical analysis of one of the 'stories' included in the In Defence of Youth Work book This is Youth Work: Stories from Practice. (IDYW, 2011: 20-21). As explained when it was published, the book itself sought 'to counter New Labour's resort to the simplistic number-crunching and "tick-boxing" which dominated its monitoring and evaluation of youth work' (p 2) – a need which under subsequent governments since 2010 has become even more pressing. As do others in the book, the specific story analysed here has been chosen as a fitting practical illustration of the key features of

the youth-work-as-informal-education approach outlined by Naomi Stanton in her article above. In particular, though the young person's learning was in many ways 'unplanned, incidental, even accidental', it can be shown to have occurred only because an educator, 'rather than leaving it to chance', deliberately intervened to create an environment and processes which made it possible.

## Some evidence from practice

In a slightly abbreviated form, this is the worker's 'story':

### *Pen and paper youth work*

*Anne was fifteen. On this particular evening she looked subdued and withdrawn, making little contact with the other young people. Something was clearly affecting her but her shrug suggested that she did not want to talk. It was a dismissal of both Grace (the youth worker) and the topic.*

*During the evening Grace created an opportunity for sitting next to Anne. Rather than talking, she passed her a note asking if she was ok. Anne responded by writing a note back saying she was feeling down, things were not all well at home – that she was really struggling. She signed the note with a sad face ☹. Through a series of small points of clarification in the notes that followed Anne, bit by bit, was able to reveal her struggles. Open questions were avoided or ignored by Anne who was too sussed for that: she saw them as disrespectful, an insult to her intelligence. For Anne the problems were too big to bring out in one go.*

*Though it wasn't emotionally and physically possible to do that, the small pieces of clarification that Grace asked for seemed to be respected and responded to. Grace used the clarifications to show she was interested, that she cared and – both as a youth worker but also as a parent herself – that maybe she even understood a little of what was happening to Anne. When it became clear that her relationship with her mother and father was strained, one of Grace's responses was that she was a mother as well and that as a parent she didn't always get it right.*

*As the exchanges of notes continued other worries came out – about the pressure to have a boyfriend and how she felt about herself. All this took place without a spoken word between the two of them. At the end of the evening Grace wrote another note asking Anne how she was feeling. Her response was to draw a ☺ – an improvement on the ☹ where she'd started.*

*No more was thought or said about this exchange. Though infrequently, Anne continued to visit the centre, then eventually stopped coming altogether and contact was lost. A couple*

*of years later Anne saw Grace in the town centre. She approached her smiling, asked how she was and about the youth centre. She was studying in College and enjoying the course. Anne asked whether Grace remembered their exchange of notes, to which Grace replied that of course she did. Anne thought for a moment and then, looking directly at Grace, said that on that evening she was feeling so low that she was thinking of self harming but that their 'conversation' had stopped her. She then said thank you, and 'seeya'.*

(Adapted from IDYW, 2011: 20-21)

## Messages from practice

How then does this example of practice fit Stuart and Maynard's definition of 'informal learning' and their criteria of this:

- 'not (being) organised or structured in terms of goals, time or instruction';
- involving 'no teaching or facilitation';
- with 'skills acquired unintentionally (by young people) through life and work experience'
  - 'not acquired in a planned or deliberate manner'?

## *Intentionality – generating goals and structure*

Underpinning this whole piece of practice is the intentionality of Grace, the worker's, behaviour throughout her contacts with Anne. When, during young people's 'private or social lives' – such as when they are 'hanging out in the park' (Stuart and Maynard, 2015: 236) – did a member of the public who just happened to be around approach a young woman she did not know that well, indicate she'd noticed she looked 'subdued and withdrawn', and ask how she was feeling?

Indeed, so against our society's norms of everyday social intercourse is such behaviour that we surely have to conclude that:

- From the moment Anne crossed Grace's path that evening, Grace was acting with what Stuart and Maynard call 'goals'.
- By deciding later to sit herself next to Anne to 'create an opportunity', Grace took a calculated decision – one which I and many other youth workers might not have taken on the grounds that Anne might find it too intrusive.
- The highly unconventional form of Grace's second approach indicated a carefully thought-out structure shaped by the 'failure' of her earlier one.

## *Learner – or worker – directed?*

Some complicating factors to Stuart and Maynard's rather one-dimensional perspective here would seem to include the following:

- In the story, ultimately Anne was certainly in control, not least because, as in all open access youth work, she had chosen to come to the club and could have left at any point she experienced Grace's behaviour as unacceptable.
- In reality however Anne's hold on this 'leadership' was, it would seem, flexible even in the very short time gap between Grace's first approach (when clearly the outcome was 'learner-led') and her acceptance of Grace's first note to her.
- Anne's readiness to let go of some of her 'leadership' may also have been influenced by how Grace made that second approach, with the note-passing perhaps leaving Anne feeling more in control than a conversation would have done.
- Nonetheless, that Anne did respond to the first note suggests that she was willing, to let go of some of her control of the situation and even accept some 'leadership' from Grace.

Much of this is speculative and is certainly not intended to provide definitive answers to the question: so who was leading who here? On the contrary, its aim is to suggest that monolithic notions of 'self-directed learner' and 'learner directed' have little operational value within the complex human dynamics of young people – youth worker exchanges. Indeed, such notions may act as barriers to adult (worker) interventions which a young person may welcome and need. Though young people's agency will remain a paramount consideration for youth workers, this cannot reduce them to passivity. Indeed if youth workers are not prepared to take some initiatives in their encounters with young people then why are they putting themselves in these situations in the first place?

### ***The adult role***

Far from having 'no role' therefore (as Stuart and Maynard's depiction of informal learning suggests) Grace the youth worker had an – at times low key, at other times active and indeed proactive – role to play. Moreover, not only did she go into that club session clearly assuming this, but many of her reactions to Anne can only be explained as stemming from her definition of herself as in a youth worker role. For example:

- However implicitly defined this role may have been for both Anne and Grace, and however contested it might still be generally, Grace's two attempts to draw Anne into conversation were clearly shaped by her conscious embrace of the youth worker label – ultimately her *raison d'être* for being in that place at that time.
- Anne, too, will also have had her perceptions and expectations of someone so labelled which will have fed into her exchanges with Grace – not least when she opened up to her in a way she hardly have done to that casual passer-by in the park.

As This is Youth Work (IDYW, 2011) highlighted many times, not just in Anne and Grace's story; for youth workers, these complexities are amplified by the fact that the role boundaries in youth work are seen and, at times, treated as permeable. A range of ethical as well as practical

considerations will of course always limit what a youth worker can and cannot do. Nonetheless, in situ, judgements are constantly being made, many 'on the wing' (DES, 1987: 2), on where to draw the lines – judgements which during the evening Grace apparently made at least twice – in that:

- it was OK for her to try again to 'talk' with Anne – something, as suggested earlier, another worker might not have done; and
- because it might help Anne, it was within her role at that moment to share with Anne Grace's experience as 'a mother' and even 'as a parent (who)... didn't always get it right'. This after all was a decision containing substantial ambiguity which others might have judged:
  - negatively – as a risky extension of the youth worker role into a 'private' sphere of Grace's life;
  - positively – as Grace's attempt to express in that role some aspects of herself as 'the person' playing it.

What this 'unpicking' of Grace's behaviour reveals therefore is that Stuart and Maynard's simplistic assertions about informal learning such as 'no adult role' fail completely to engage with the 'unfinished' elements of the youth work process, as well as, in this case, the often shifting, nuanced and tentative but nonetheless – even in 'informal' situations – ascribed role which adults take on when they commit themselves to being a youth worker.

### ***Planning – why and how?***

Clearly Grace had not arrived that evening knowing Anne might be unhappy – or indeed even that Anne would be in the club. In that sense, therefore, she had done no 'planning' for what turned out to be, for Grace, a very testing piece of practice.

Nonetheless, very quickly Grace picked up – interpreted Anne's non-verbal communication – that 'she (Anne) looked subdued and withdrawn' and that 'something was clearly affecting her'. Later, again through observation alone it seemed, she added to these insights that Anne was 'making little contact with other young people'? This cumulative 'reading' of Anne's state of mind (and therefore potential needs) suggests that at the very least a prepared mind and sensibility were at work which provided the prompt for a far from straightforward but, for Anne, important youth work intervention.

Two conclusions here would therefore seem to be that:

- to reduce the notion of planning to, in effect, 'lesson planning' is to remove some of its most subtle and indeed human features; and
- to talk about planning in this simplistic way is to give it a rigidity which is incompatible with the responsive person-centred practice to which youth workers aspire. Like others in *This is Youth Work*, the 'Pen and Paper' story is an example of what Tony Taylor in

his earlier article calls an ‘open and improvisatory practice’ – a practice which, ‘though boundaried by commitments to consistency and reliability … enables workers to respond flexibly and creatively to young people’s interests and concerns’ (IDYW, 2011: 3).

Here, as in so much else in their analysis, Stuart and Maynard seem to need to gloss over and even remove the complexities of the real life demands faced by youth workers in order to make their practice amenable to the ‘scientific’ measurement and statistical ‘outcomes’ demanded by youth work’s currently dominant paymasters.

### ***Providing ‘evidence of achievement’***

Stuart and Maynard clearly appreciate the challenge facing youth work as it tries to meet policy-makers’ currently unremitting demand for ‘evidence-based practice’. They note how this ‘has … overlooked key evaluations that were not evidence based’ but ‘chose qualitative methods’ (2015: 247) and even argue that ‘evidence based practice is not fit for all youth work contexts’ (2015: 256).

However, they go on to suggest that ‘many youth workers reject the very notion of outcomes…’ (2015: 245), even, as Tony Taylor points out, unfairly referencing Jean Spence’s work in support. They also seriously misrepresent the position of many other youth workers, with *This is Youth Work* for example unequivocally asserting ‘… the need (for youth workers) to be accountable to elected representatives, management, communities and especially young people themselves’ (IDYW, 2011: 7).

However, as *This is Youth Work* also makes clear, the book was in part prompted ‘… to call the bluff on that feigned ignorance, which claims that youth work is a bit of a mystery and asks “how do we know it’s doing any good, giving value for money?”’ It also describes itself as a response to a debate within IDYW focused on ‘how we might illustrate the qualitative dimension of a youth work practice which sees young people as the active and critical citizens essential to an authentic democracy’ (IDYW, 2011: 7).

The challenge for youth workers in fact is decidedly *not*, as Stuart and Maynard suggest, whether to be accountable. It is *how* to provide that accountability in ways which – through sensitive human processes rather than highly instrumental tick-led procedures – are congruent with the practice’s defining features.

In this context, using the ‘Pen and paper’ story as evidence of youth work’s ‘outcomes’ poses a number of problems. Because of that entirely fortuitous meeting in the town centre two years later – and, for this purpose, aren’t we all relieved it happened! – we can assess what Grace did over that one evening as a most striking ‘success story’. What more could you ask of a youth worker than,

from body language alone, to pick up that a young woman was ‘feeling low’; and then, despite an initial ‘dismissal’, use a highly imaginative intervention which deflected the young woman from self-harming? How warmly the funders of targeted youth work would embrace that; how eagerly managers would incorporate it into their monthly returns.

Yet – questions remain:

- *On the night*, what could Grace have put into her ‘evaluation’ forms? That Anne’s sad face had become a straight face? And how would that have gone down with her managers and ultimately perhaps the funders? As a sufficient justification for two-and-a-half or three hours’ work?
- *In the longer-term* what would Grace have known she could claim as other, even ‘soft’, outcomes from her efforts that night? She couldn’t even have pointed to the start of an ongoing relationship with Anne who subsequently came to the centre only ‘infrequently’ until eventually ‘contact was lost’.
- And how useful would that eventual ‘successful’ outcome have been in the Stuart and Maynard scheme of things? Very little, it seems, given that:
  - Anne’s own very revealing (and positive) evaluation of this piece of practice was so delayed that it could never have been available for the kinds of imposed evaluations Stuart and Maynard advocate;
  - the very fortuitousness of Grace’s eventual meeting with Anne demonstrates how big the odds often are against important youth work ‘outcomes’ ever becoming available for Stuart and Maynard’s kinds of evaluative procedures.

### So ... where does all that leave ‘youth work’?

My reason for selecting the ‘Pen and paper’ story was not because it was ‘a success story’, nor even to illustrate high quality youth work practice, but because:

Firstly, it provides some credible grounded evidence of youth work in action which contradicts Stuart and Maynard’s hugely oversimplified representation of such practice and their resultant under-estimation of the informal learning, broadly conceived, which young people can derive from it. Especially in the present ideological and funding environment, such distortions offer so many hostages to fortune that they need to be challenged head-on, and in an evidence-based way.

Secondly, in making a positive case for youth work, including its honest and realistic evaluation, it is vital, too, to confront its complexities and ambiguities – something which (at best) Stuart and Maynard play down in their mission to convince us (and perhaps also themselves) that there are no serious obstacles to adopting the ‘scientific’ forms of ‘measurement’ to which they are so strongly committed.

In a further challenge to some of Stuart and Maynard's core arguments, this 'story' surely also carries another important message: that, without relying on highly structured pre-planned programmes and curricula, purposeful youth work can support and indeed prompt forms of informal learning which young people experience not only as educationally developmental in the longer term but also, at moments of uncertainty and stress, as highly supportive and motivating in their here-and-now.

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