

‘Talking the Walk’

Youth Workers’ Critical Reflections on Practice

some emerging insights from an ongoing action research process

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Undertaken by



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

in collaboration with



Kildare
Youth Services
Youth Work Ireland

and supported by



Youth Work Ireland

Background

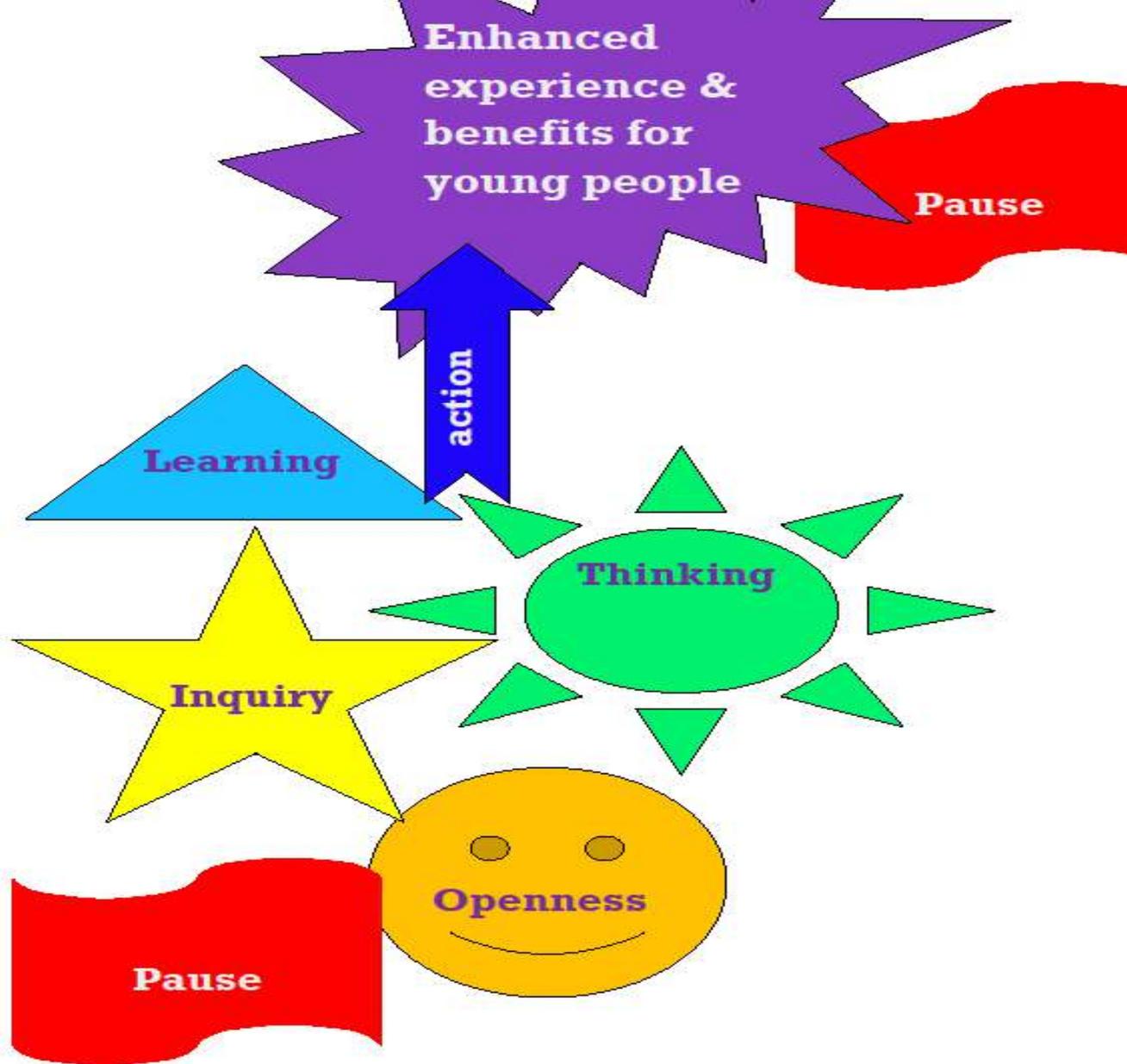
- Action Research Project with Kildare Youth Services
- Designed to build on *The Purpose and Outcomes of Youth Work*, report to the Interagency Group (2009)
- Intended to contribute to development of analytical and explanatory frameworks for understanding and ‘communicating’ youth work.

Action Research (Dick 2002/O'Brien 2001)

- flexible spiral process
- concurrent action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge)
- understanding allows more informed change, which in turn is informed by that change
- participants as co-researchers & collaborators
- understanding shared / commitment to action
- regular critical reflection tested in action

Objectives

- To explore how the organisation's mission are arrived at and how practice is set to achieve the stated outcomes
- To generate new insights into the integration of youth work theory and practice
- To communicate to others the distinct purpose, value and benefits of youth work processes



'Theory of Action for Reflective Learning'

York-Barr et al 2006

Process

- Workshops/discussions with KYS management & staff
- Development of a reflective practice tool for use in four settings over a period of 4-8 weeks
- Ongoing engagement/Interviews with youth workers reflecting on practice
- Seminar with youth workers
- Use of video to enhance ed. dimension
- Analysis & feedback to participants

Kildare Youth Services (KYS)

- working in Kildare 30+ years
- 1,200+ participants in Volunteer Led Youth Clubs, Community Youth Projects (incl. Garda Youth Diversion Projects & Youth Information) Youth Counselling & a Springboard Family Project
- ethos of, & a commitment to research & development as a learning organisation in Strategic Plan (2007-12)
- focus on the development of research participants in KYS/the Youth Work Team in identifying their practice towards achieving (and articulating) objectives and the journey with young people

Some challenges so far which 'provided great learning for everyone' Siobhan & Anna

- process guided by what came out of the previous stage → built on what emerged from the previous stage
- largely unstructured → more used tostart, middle/end to the process which is clearly articulated and defined.....
- Learned/learning as we went along
- youth workers engagement over weeks rather than a one off interview → pressure on them in a busy work context so action research immersed in day-to-day work

Insights from Anna & Siobhan

- the focus of the broad research focus → outcomes used in many contexts .. 'explain' many aspects of youth work practice (obviously with a big editing job!)
- embedded reflective practice very much into the action research
- everyone came to a realisation that reflective practice is, in its own way, action research.
- reflective practice tool and they reflected on the work 'in action' and learned from that process
- as researchers felt we were getting to the 'core' of the work where workers were 'explaining' what they did and why they did it, ... not 'having a chat about the work' → essence of AR
- process of action research was dynamic and 'live'

Which meant that

- our own (full research team) reflection & discussion explored a broad range of youth work theories, processes and current trends
- considering how we locate the research within those broader themes....these discussions were very insightful and helped to focus the questions we asked at the various stages of the process....
- workers attempted to explain the work as it happened ... rather than retrospectively
- 'unstructured' approach meant that workers were both 'reflecting in action' and 'on action' feeding that into the process.

KYS reflection

Committed to 'ensuring that the learning from this research will include an element of creativity in the way that it can be disseminated to youth workers and youth organisations nationally and beyond. We look forward to the final stages of developing the visual practice tool that will underpin the research project itself in keeping with its action based approach'

Some insights emerging from conversations with workers in one project

Background

Two workers, working on a 12-18 month project with a group of young people in their late teens, who have been involved in youth work for a number of years.

Workers kept a reflective 'journal' & then had an open ended conversation with researchers

Thinking about the Youth Workers Role & the Youth Work Process

Starting Point

Conscious decision to make projects 'youth led' – requires youth workers to do less and listen more - to be in the background but attentive/engaged.

How does that work, what does it look like?

- Asking open questions, issues to do with the project
- Reflective – turning questions back – getting them to come up with an answer – 'hypotheticals'....
- Young people will drop into the project during the week – do the general running of things – 'open' engagement is not limited to the couple of hours a week the group is scheduled for

‘Handing Over’ and Taking Over’

‘it was time for them to take on something themselves’ – a process of empowerment .. giving and taking power

As workers:

‘ Not being afraid to let it happen – not intervene – let the mistake happen & learning take place ... not keeping them in a safety bubble’ ...

Being 'conscious'- reflections on practice

- Sense that youth workers can 'take on the role of speaking for young people rather support them to speak for themselves'
- Conscious adoption of a 'critical social education' model in practice

What does that look like in practice?

- Be in the room with the group & workers – see how conversation happens
- Open questions
- Young people talking openly about their experiences & aspirations
- Listening to young people's voices
- Young people as leaders/coordinators
- 'You can talk to my colleague' (one of the young people on the phone about the project , referring to the worker)

Next Steps in the Process

In the following slides, some themes in existing literature are highlighted as a possible basis for the next part of the process.

We then go back to the workers, and the young people, involved for a further conversation and validity check.

Youth Work Process – adopting an attitude of Inquiry

Where we might start:

- ***Who are these young people?***
- Why are ***they*** here?
- Why are they ***here***?
- Is some ***youth work intervention*** in these young people's lives ***justified?***

(Davies, 2005)

How does youth work *work*?

Informal education recognises that social learning takes place through:

- the programme content
- the youth work *process*
- the structures that enable young people to participate in effective decision making

Underpinned by values evident in action
(Treacy, 1992)

Communicating an 'unfinished'* practice

'unfinished' ...in that whatever clear and 'hard' outcomes may be generated over time – it requires a constant exercise of choice, recurrent risk-taking, a continuing negotiation of uncertainty.

as a 'professional' practice, we (youth workers) are guided by vision combined with tactical 'nous' ... requiring balance, timing and nerve

the actual course of practice.... is ultimately decided by human interactions which are always *fluid, continuously shifting* and which therefore can offer no guarantee of reaching certain and final endpoints. (Davies, 2005)

Youth work as a way of 'being' ...

In much the same way as reflective practice is as 'much a state of mind as a set of activities' (Vaughan, 1990) informal education in youth work can be thought of as a way of 'being' with young people as much or perhaps even more than as a way of 'doing' with them