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**‘Catching the Trapeze in a Lifelong Learning Society’:
A comparative discussion of unconventional educational strategies
for ‘disadvantaged’ young people.**

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One of the key conclusions of the first conference on ‘lifelong learning’ in Dresden, 28th to 30th of november 1996, was that certain precautions need to be taken in order that the concept itself does not degenerate into little more than a euphemism which only serves to conceal real divisions in access to education and training. Many policy-makers believe that ongoing changes in European societies actually make lifelong learning inevitable (cf. European Commission, 1995). It is the responsibility of those who operationalise the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ to use it in a pro-active fashion (df. Stauber/Walther, 1998). In this paper, which reports on material gathered on an on-going European collaboration, we focus on groups of young people who appear to be distanced from conventional education systems and whose inclusion in the ‘learning society’ is therefore compromised. A particular problem in this context appears to be that more conventional educational institutions do not always have either the patience (nor often the resources) to support those young people who on the surface, at least, do not appear to have the patience or the desire to learn.

With the changing nature of youth transitions, the number of young people experiencing phases of unemployment, and joining vocational and non-vocational training schemes is growing throughout Europe (Walther et. al., 1999). From our discussions in the field of vocational training we know that training measures and programmes often do not reach their potential beneficiaries because there is a communicative, cultural and social gap between the young people and the institutions concerned (cf. Drury, Catan & Dennison, 1998). In other words, young people are resigned to the fact that such programmes are of limited value in terms of their educational biographies, insofar as they often have a stigma attached to them, in the eyes of both potential employers and the young people themselves. (cf. Stauber/Walther, 1995; Furlong, 1993; Mørch, 1996).

Bearing in mind the apparent limitations of conventional forms of training, it is interesting to note that discussions in the field of cultural education show that learning experiences in the field of culture and arts strongly differ from those in other settings, where learning is more formalised (e.g. schools, vocational training

institutions). The less structured and formal types of learning engendered in cultural and arts programmes appear to give young people more freedom and responsibility for their own learning and as such provide an environment within which the creativity, strengths and social competencies of ‘disadvantaged’ young people in particular, can flourish. The objective of this project is to construct a comparative understanding of culturally-based forms of learning, the benefits of which can hopefully inform youth policy in general.

Our intention is to identify how the conditions under which informal learning processes operate respond to the changing demands characterised by youth transitions. The key trends we are concerned with are as follows:

- labour market integration has become increasingly insecure transition, biographical deviations, backlashes and new orientations having become a reality for a significant proportion of young people,
- changes in gender relationships and lifestyles demanding a high degree of personal reflexivity and the production of meaning by the individuals themselves.

In this context this project is concerned with:

- the extent to which the three projects are able to contribute to a maximisation of the benefits of self-directed forms of learning, especially by young people who have difficulties in other more conventional programmes,
- the insights these sorts of socio-cultural projects can give us about the nature and effectiveness of the learning process (How do they work, which are the conditions and prerequisites for their success?),
- the extent to which these projects help young people to gain social competencies and to which such competencies can be recognised as “key qualifications”,
- the conditions necessary if young people are able to develop life models which can cope with traditional and often negative forms of social integration such as restrictive gender models,
- the appropriateness of cultural activities to facilitate processes of self-motivation necessary to deal with the flexible and unpredictable nature of learning biographies,
- knowledge about differences in trans-national conditions to inform the broader debate about ‘lifelong learning’.

The project as a whole consists of an inter-cultural evaluation of three youth work projects in three European cities Lisbon, Liverpool and Mannheim. The research methods chosen consist of a combination of group interviews, expert interviews

and biographical interviews as well as document analysis and participatory observation. A key priority of the research was to analyse the preparation for performance and the performance itself as undertaken by the young people in each of the three sub-projects. The rationale behind this approach is that once young people are given the opportunity to depict themselves, they are potentially able to demonstrate their own strengths and competencies. In this context, the ways in which young people invest their own meanings in the learning experience can be related to wider questions of social integration whilst avoiding the limitations of the 'problem-oriented' approach normally associated with 'disadvantaged' youth which tends to ignore the actual 'voices' of young people.

Results of the first year

Mannheim - JUST (,Youth in the Neighbourhood')

JUST is a community youth work project in an inner city neighbourhood of Mannheim in southern Germany. It was set up five years ago, when youth unemployment and its disintegrating consequences, such as the consumption of hard drugs, rose, notably among young people with an immigratory background. It was established to offer young people a centre for leisure time including cultural activities such as music and drama and for providing support for young people on a wide variety of issues that concern them (e.g. school, apprenticeships, career, police, parents, friends, partnerships). Although the centre is open to all young people who seek advice, the main target group are young men and women between 14 and 22 years of age. The majority of these young people's families immigrated from Turkey and Italy within the last two decades, but there are also many youngsters with their own unique migration biographies. The main focus of the empirical work was a drama group in this centre. The drama group was initiated by an actress and drama teacher of Italian origin. It is organized as a continuing group process with a three-month workshop to begin with and, in addition, 2 three-hour meetings a week. The participants of the drama group are mainly young men from the local neighbourhood.

Most of the participants have passed through the lowest level of the German school system. Half of them left compulsory education without any qualifications. Of those participating in the first group interview, three were unemployed with no prospect of training or schooling ahead. The majority though, have participated in youth training schemes for disadvantaged young people which lead to either to a training or school certificate, but which provided little in the way of hope for the

future.

Thus, when the respondents concerned were asked about the career prospects, they dismissed any such possibility of a career as an hilarious impossibility. When asked if they had a “dream job”, a typical reply was “if we get one at all, that one will be our dream job”.

One issue pursued in the research was the motivation young men had in participating in the drama group. One respondent for instance, said, “It was cold out there the winter we started to attend the drama group, you know”. This statement shows very clearly that the participants did not have any specific expectations of the drama group. None of them had performed drama previously. What was important was the fact the group was highly accessible insofar as it was embedded in the social structure of the local community and therefore an acceptable past-time as far as the participants’ peer groups were concerned .

As time went on, the participants’ expectations appeared to alter somewhat. For instance, three months after joining up a long discussion developed amongst the participants as to how far attending the drama group might boost their respective CVs. Although some of the young men felt the drama group would be of no benefit in this respect, most of them agreed that at least this would be a counter-weight to the first impression the employers usually have when they face young men “looking like us”,

“At least, if you tell them that you’re in a drama group, they are likely not to think what is he doing all day long? He might be one of those drug-selling Turkish boys hanging around all day long.”

Participants were also asked what they felt they had learnt from the drama group. As one young person put it,

“concentration is the main thing you learn here. Before the course started I could never concentrate on one thing, I always thought of a thousand things at a time. But now, I have learned how to concentrate. You will see, when you see us perform.”

Performing for them is a means to get a message across to their audience. That message is mainly about what it means to live in Germany as a young migrant with poor job prospects. The plays which they develop out of improvisations are all set in their everyday life. “You can do anything you want on stage. Then you see, normal situations in the street, they could be like this, but on stage they can be different”. Thus, starting from the basis of those everyday issues the participants bring along with them into the work, their own behaviour is analysed by the group.

One example is a scene set in the local labour office. The group take over the different roles associated with the scene: of the young man angered and disappointed by his search for a job, and the discouraging officer who tries to give him some advice, however poorly received it might be. All the ingredients of this scene derive from young people's own personal experiences. Alternative strategies the young man might adopt and different versions of the scene are discussed as the scene is put together.

This example shows that the plays the group develop pick up a wide range of concerns of the members: the different expectations they face from their families and their friends, job, girlfriends, drugs, violence. As one interviewee put it the main learning effect is: "You see yourself from another perspective, and you see, yeah, it could be different".

Lisbon - Chapitô: evaluation of learning effects in an art school

Founded by Teresa Ricou (Tété, a well-renowned Portuguese clown) in 1987/88, Chapitô is located in Costa do Castelo (a historical neighbourhood of Lisbon). Chapitô is an association devoted to educational activities, and notably the Course in Circus Expression - which was recognised in 1991 as part of the present Professional School of Arts and Crafts for Entertainment. The courses are three years in duration and are equivalent to the last year of Grammar School. They are supported and subsidised by the Ministry for Education.

This school offers two courses working in tandem:

- Course for Arts and Circus Entertainment - "Arts" (attended by those wanting to perform)
- Course for Handworks for Entertainment - "Crafts" (attended by those working back-stage)

The Art and Circus Course of Chapitô, like other professional schools, follows the model of learning-apprenticeship. It contains 3 formative areas: social-cultural, scientific and artistic. The latter constitutes 50% of a student's learning time. Chapitô is a vocational school and prepares artists and performers in the skills necessary for them to take part in socio-cultural projects. Our research evaluates not only the art course, but the Chapitô project as a whole, which is pedagogically oriented towards integration in the world of entertainment.

The central aim of this pedagogical model is therefore to adjust the students

learning to the realities of the “world of work”, in terms of the show business world, as induced by teachers who provide the young people concerned with important role models. This is done by combining different forms of artistic expression (music, dance, theatre, circus arts etc.). The Professional School Chapitô is, very much a modern school concerned with the changing nature of the “entertainment world” as represented by the diverse activities undertaken by the teachers themselves outside the school environment. The teachers are actively involved in the show business world as stage directors or teachers in the official Theatre School. On the one hand the Courses of Arts and Handworks of Entertainment are an aim in themselves (as a way of preparing for professional life) on the other they stimulate the pupils and give them skills with which they can extend their learning. These skills are of a technical nature producing the tools necessary for a young performer. The teaching is therefore tailored to the specific needs of young people. In a group of 80 pupils, around 2/3 attend the course of “Arts”. They are all between 15 and 23 years old, and on average around 19 years of age.

The students arrive at Chapitô with a wide variety of academic backgrounds. 80% of them have had to attend school for longer than is normally required (Year 9) which means that the majority of them have had unsatisfactory experiences in school (only one student has graduated). Half of the boys have attended college, as compared to only one girl. Broadly speaking, these students would be described as middle urban classes and as such in some respects have to deal with a somewhat different set of problems to those young people participating in the other two projects. However, students at Chapitô are equally contaminated by negative school experiences, and will rarely have had any experience at all of the world of work. Those who had been involved in work outside the entertainment business appear to have been attracted to Chapitô’s Professional School of Arts, precisely because of their bad experiences in more conventional spheres.

The main motivation behind all these young people coming to Chapitô, regardless of age or gender, was their desire to learn about art and entertainment techniques. Other reasons mentioned were the opportunity to seek self-fulfilment (male opinion), and the opportunity to learn about working in the theatre (female opinion). Half of those attending the arts course want to develop a career in entertainment. Many of the participants refer to street entertainment (mentioned mainly by boys) and theatre (preferred by girls).

Instability appears to be a key aspect of these young people’s futures as well as their past. The way of life associated with the mobile and transient world of the circus has considerable appeal and owes much to the tradition of gypsies and

acrobats who have long been associated with circus life. It is in this context that the young people at Chapitô define their 'dream jobs'. They want to do 'everything', and also to maintain the direct contact with the public which are so important to the theatre and the circus. The important thing for these young people is 'to be on stage'.

Chapitô provides these youngsters with the technical and social foundations for the fulfilment of these dream lives. Chapitô teaching has a good reputation in the professional artistic world. One of the main reasons for such a reputation appears to be the way in which it actively engages with the world of professional entertainment through the sponsorship of artistic projects and through the hiring of inspirational teachers who are themselves active in the world of entertainment.

To most of the members of the Chapitô 'family', this is only a place of transition in their course of apprenticeship into the artistic world. They want to continue learning theatre, dance, music, juggling or arts in general. This is a school where apprentices start their artistic careers, honing their abilities, working their bodies so that they respond to the high demands that an artistic job makes of them. In this sense their careers are located between the trapeze and the net, between flying and landing. One gets completed with the end of the other, in a succession of sketches characterised by what is essentially a life of risk: risks worth taking, as long as the body permits, the scene inevitably ending with the public laughing or crying. Chapitô gives young people the hope that they too might laugh and that they too might succeed.

Liverpool - Acting Up

Based in Liverpool Acting Up is a course aimed at 18 to 25 year old 'disadvantaged' young people, most of whom have failed to maximise any opportunities they may or may not have had in the conventional education system. The course offers young people practical experience in everything to do with drama and music. Acting Up is a pre-vocational course accredited by the Merseyside Open College Federation and runs over a period of nine months. Young people joining the course are unemployed but generally already have some degree of interest in the performing arts. The course is very practical and at least on the surface, informal in nature, with the main emphasis being on preparation towards public performance. However, although there is a clear intention to introduce young people to the performing arts in many respects this is also a social course which provides young people with all sorts of skills applicable to other types of work.

Many of those interviewed therefore referred to Acting Up's "hidden agenda". Indeed, the real benefit of Acting Up appears to be as a means of giving young people confidence in their own abilities and potential.

"I'd never done drama apart from school pantomimes. So it was a chance to get involved in the whole process of things. Doing workshops. Getting to know people and that kind of thing. And having to perform and exercise as we did. It was a real confidence builder. I was quite confident anyway, but in the sense of performing I wasn't, so I was able to achieve that. And the idea of playing games again. I was coming back here and we were playing games again. And I was thinking "why the hell are they making me to play these games?" What's the point? And it was amazing. The difference it makes: letting all your inhibitions go, having a laugh and breaking down barriers and inhibitions between people. Because you were being so stupid you were able to perform."

The informal nature of Acting Up and the way in which students are motivated by the desire not to let each other down is clearly in evidence here. Teamwork appears to be of particular importance, "When you are working in a team you have to keep your energy up 'cos if one person starts to sag the rest of the group starts to sag as well. So everybody's responsible for keeping their own energy up and that brings the team together. Someone struggles. Someone whose perhaps had more experience steps in and helps them.... We all trusted each other. For example in our first play we had a girl standing on top of someone's shoulders and she had to fall off his shoulder into our waiting arms. Now on your first day you think of doing it but the trust we had for each other and the respect allowed us to pull off some amazing acrobatic techniques."

Within this group context many of the young people interviewed referred to the way in which Acting Up brought them out of themselves, how it located abilities in them that had previously laid dormant,

"Do you know that person in the mirror when you're on yourself in the bedroom and you're singing with your brush in the mirror and you'd never do that in front of anyone. It brings that person out in yer [sic] and in the group. You don't have to pretend to anyone. It drags that person out of you."

The value of Acting Up appears then to lay in the way it teaches young people, who in many respects have little hope as regards the future, to believe in themselves and to accept that even they can have dreams and work towards objectives. They may not be the next Leonardo di Caprio or Kate Winslett but they can at least aim for a career, whether or not that be in the performing arts, within which they can fulfil their potential and apply the skills learnt during Acting Up. In effect

then, Acting Up as one young person said “gives you a go”. It gives young people some light at the end of what is generally a very dark tunnel. The benefits of this sort of informal self-motivating approach to learning are considerable. One young person described Acting Up as “explosive” and “over-powering” what they meant was that it becomes everything to the young people concerned and gives them hope and confidence and that is very probably what effective lifelong learning should be all about.

Conclusions

The comparative evaluation of the three projects so far shows that the main effects of the informal learning engendered in performing arts are that:

- the projects provide the participants with a status they have been able to procure previously and in this context they are able to begin to recognise and realise their own self-worth.
- this contrasts considerably with the generally de-motivated nature of most of the participants previous educational experiences.
- performing as an actor or actress is a particularly good way of providing young people with an opportunity for self-reflection and to give serious thought to their futures which they may have previously have been too anxious to even begin thinking about.
- participants are given the opportunity to see learning and training as a personal project again, rather than as a onerous demand on their free-time.

All three projects follow a labour market training strategy that could well be labeled “innovative” (Manninen, 1998), in the sense that they do not restrict their curriculum to narrow labour skills, but in actual fact widen their educational objectives to teach more general “life skills”. However, there are still enormous differences in the projects’ relationship to the official education and training system of the respective countries. The three projects can be described as lying on a sliding scale with the official education system at one end and independent informal education at the other: the German project being the one with most informal nature and least official recognition and the project in Lisbon being the most formally recognised one. Equally, the differences in the target groups, the projects actually reach, are obvious. In this context, a fundamental question arises: how can the clear benefits of the sort of education provided by these projects, and by performance art training in general, be integrated into educational systems throughout Europe without the particular informal benefits of those projects being sacrificed?

It is difficult to generalise about the benefits to be had from the sorts of learning

that the projects we are evaluating have engendered, because many of the skills acquired by the young people concerned are life-skills that are not easily measurable. But if self-motivation and personal aspirations represent major resources in the attainment of personal skills for changing demands in a constantly changing world, these projects provide their participants with experiences that play a fundamental role in promoting the principles of lifelong learning. The evidence discussed above suggests that by integrating cultural elements into young people's training biographies, learning that was previously characterised by de-moralisation and de-motivation can actually be a force, at the very least, for improved self-esteem and, at the very best, for a hopeful future. Thus it can be concluded: without entirely neglecting structural effects lifelong learning policies have to be aware of the fact that as far as young people concerned the cultural contexts in which they learn may play a key role in how effectively they learn.

The informal nature of the learning processes we have discussed here have presented the young people concerned with the opportunity to learn how to learn. As such, educational institutions need to be more aware of the problematic nature of youth transitions and of the need to actively engage with young people's learning requirements at a time in their lives when their identities are under considerable strain. One way of dealing with this problem is by recognising that young people's lifestyles can actually provide a positive and beneficial means of coping with the problems characterised by an increasingly problematic labour market. By creating an environment within which young people want to learn, not only young people, but the 'learning society' in general, may well begin to fulfil its potential.

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