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Recreational Activity Study Book system in Finland: An example from experience

1. Introduction: learning in voluntary activities – why recognition?

School is an important learning environment for young people. However, young people learn outside school, as well. Especially participation in voluntary and leisure activities offer good places for learning. Young people learn many valuable life skills in voluntary and leisure activities, i.e., co-operation and team skills, communication skills, goal-orientation and problem solving skills. These mentioned skills are also useful when a young persons attends further education or working life.

Learning in voluntary and leisure activities carries various names: it might be called "civic learning", "non-formal learning" or "informal learning". If a learning activity is defined to be "non-formal learning", the organising party should have a clear understanding of the learning that is supposed to take place in the activity. That implies at least some educational principles or an "educational program" behind the activity. One cannot argue a learning activity to be "non-formal" without a clear, well-defined understanding of the learning that takes place in activity. In addition, it is essential that both the learner and the educator are aware of the aims and methods of the supposed learning situation.¹ Without these definitions, the learning is "informal" or "occasional" by nature. In this context, both non-formal and informal ways of learning things and acquiring competencies are dealt with, parallely. Most organisations that deal with young people do have a clear educational role and many even have their own educational programs (for example the scout movement).

Formal education and non-formal or informal learning (that takes place for example in voluntary and leisure activities) support and complement each other. In line with the principles and aims of lifelong learning, the learning environment of young people should be approached as an entity, the ingredients of which are formal educational system, working life and free-time environments (such as home, leisure activities, family, peer groups, etc.). Integration of formal and non-formal learning implies actions and a change of traditional attitudes. Learning of young people in voluntary and leisure activities is usually observed from the point of view of formal education. When doing so, the essential concepts are a) identification, b) recognition, and c) validation of learning.

From the viewpoint of voluntary and leisure activities, it is important that the learning taking place in activities is recognised and appreciated in society. Thus, evaluation of non-formal or informal learning is also important. Through evaluation the learning environment produced by youth organisations can be further developed. Evaluation or measurement of informal learning is particularly difficult, though, since the learning outcomes are very difficult to place in a specific context, time or place. In addition, informal learning includes also non-course-based activities like information, advice or guidance, which do not usually have an agreed curriculum².

¹ For example Sahlberg 1999, 10.

² McGivney 1999 & 2000, ref. Katus 2002, 124-125.

Accreditation of non-formal learning in voluntary and leisure activities can also carry risks: if, for example, a formal educational institution automatically credits a certain activity, the voluntary nature of the learning activity could be endangered. In addition, the formal educational system is relatively equal (at least in the Nordic countries) in regard to place of residence, but possibilities to actively participate in voluntary and leisure activities vary a great deal, depending on which area or region of the country one happens to live in. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the learning experiences in voluntary and leisure activities always personally, case-sensitively and in regard to specific fields of formal education.

2. Towards better recognition: Recreational Activity Study Book

In Finland there has been a system called "Recreational Activity Study Book" since 1996. The system is developed by Youth Academy, which is a co-operation organisation for major Finnish youth & sports NGOs. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture supports the study book system. The study book is a non-formal and informal learning CV for young people. They can collect entries from all learning experiences in voluntary and leisure activities. There are over 70.000 study book owners in Finland (30.10.2004). The book serves young people as a tool for making all the experiences and learning – self-development, growth etc. - outside school visible. It is also an instrument for identifying and crediting non-formal learning when applying for a job or further education. Youth Academy has a written agreement with 250 formal educational institutions on how to value and credit the entries in the book. The study book is a feasible way to document and recognise the non-formal and informal learning of young people. The entries in the book can be collected either in Finnish, Swedish or English.

The Finnish study book system focuses strongly on the development of the individual learner – young people. Despite of the fact that some pathways towards formal education have been created as a part of the study book system, the idea is to cherish the very voluntary nature of the learning taking place in outside-school, voluntary and free-time surroundings. Therefore, there are neither any criteria for the measurement of learning outcomes or performance, nor any public examinations held to assess the competencies supposedly acquired.

The Recreational Activity Study Book system is feasible for the documentation – and recognition – of both qualifications and competencies acquired by participating in youth voluntary activities. More focus is, however, placed on the competencies. That has to do with the individual learner-centeredness of the study book system. In the study book, more emphasis is put on the development of each young person's personality rather than the actual qualifications of the skills required in particular job requirements.³ The underlying idea is that by participating in youth voluntary or recreational activities, young people do have a chance to acquire key competencies in regard to personal development, such as social, communicative etc. competencies.

The reasons for the openness and "non-measurability" of the Finnish study book system are several. First of all, as Bentley argues, subjective perceptions of learning outcomes or competencies acquired should not be of marginal validity, as they often are in systems depending on public examinations. According to Bentley, subjective perceptions are "central to the quality of learning, and the extent to which what has been learned will be retained and applied in other contexts".⁴

The second reason for the openness and flexibility of the study book system is the already mentioned appreciation of the voluntary nature of youth informal and non-formal learning. By formalising the system, the basic motivation for participation in youth activities, i.e. the joy of being, doing and learning together, would be endangered. Youth Academy attempts to encourage the representatives of the formal education system to recognise and value the learning and competencies young people acquire outside school, as well as to do more co-operation with organisations offering young people meaningful learning environments. But the issue is

³ See Euler 2001, 197-198.

⁴ Bentley 1998, 147.

always approached from an individual learner's point of view, not the point of view of the formal educational system, for example.

The third reason for keeping the study book system informal and flexible is that by doing so, all young people can gain access to it and collect entries from various learning activities. The Recreational Activity Study Book is not only targeted to those young people which are active in one or another youth organisation. Competencies can be acquired and things can be learned in various situations and settings, even the non-organised ones⁵. Therefore, even though the study book system is developed by Youth Academy and its twelve member organisations (major Finnish youth and sports NGOs), it is open to all young people, and the content is designed in a way that all young people "fit" in to be able to make use of it.

The study book itself is divided into nine categories, according to the nature of the learning activity. The categories are:

1. Regular participation in leisure activities;
2. Holding positions of trust and responsibility within NGOs;
3. Activities as a leader, trainer or coach;
4. Participation in a project;
5. Courses;
6. International activities;
7. Workshop activities (apprenticeship);
8. Competitions; and
9. Other activities.

By looking at the categories, one can see that there are environments of both non-formal and informal learning present. The most formalised form of learning is the category "courses" which means organised and often hierarchical educational programs offered by various youth and sport NGOs and other learning providers. The eight other categories fall more or less under the umbrella of informal learning, in which the learning-by-doing approach is often the method for acquiring competencies and skills.

According to a survey carried out by Youth Academy in spring 2003 (690 informants), the most popular category is "Courses" (17,4 %). The categories "Activities as a leader, trainer or coach", "Holding positions of trust and responsibility" and "Regular participation in leisure activities" are also quite popular (12 – 13 % each).

The following figure illustrates an example page of the Recreational Activity Study Book.

⁵ See Euler 2001, 198-202.

Type of activity:
Holding positions of trust and responsibility
within NGOs

Organisation in which the activity took place

Time/dates of the activity

__/__/____ - __/__/____

In average _____ hours per week/month

Position of the young person in the organisation

Successes and competencies acquired

Description of the activity

Place

Date

Young person's self-assessment of the learning

Signature of the person responsible of activity

Contact information of the undersigned person

Position of the undersigned person

The entries in the book are always written by an adult (= over 18 years of age) person who is either responsible or well aware of the particular activity. Young people themselves fill in the part "Self-assessment of the learning". The idea is to focus more on what and how things have been learned rather than what has only been done. The person undersigning the entry adds his/her contact information, in case someone wants to check whether the young person actually has participated in the activity or not.

The educational institutions involved in the system have a written agreement with Youth Academy on how and to which extent they value and credit the entries in the book. It is essential to bear in mind that accreditation and validation of the learning experiences documented in the study book is always individual and case-sensitive. The system does not aim for direct accreditation in formal education in any way. It is of great importance that the voluntary nature of participating and learning in voluntary youth activities, whether organised or not, will not be endangered.

The Recreational Activity Study Book is distributed to young people mainly through youth and sports NGOs. Young people usually receive or purchase the study book during being involved in the activities of a particular NGO, for example when attending courses etc. Recently, more and more private companies have purchased a limited number of study books and given them to young people locally, either through schools or youth and sport organisations.

3. Critical reflections: Strengths and weaknesses of the Recreational Activity Study Book

The Recreational Activity Study Book was originally developed by several experts from the member organisations of Youth Academy. The need for such a product was of a rather instrumental nature in the first place: how could those young people that are very active in the voluntary work of specific NGOs gain and benefit from their experiences and learning? The main focus was on the benefits rather than on the development of individual young people. A hidden agenda was also present: the NGOs behind Youth Academy felt the need for better recognition of their own activities and even existence.

The Recreational Activity Study Book was very effectively distributed to the young active members of the founding organisations in the first years (1996-1998). The organisations were strongly committed to the promotion of the Study Book, but less focus was put on the actual use of the book. Therefore, a lot of the Study Books distributed in the first years were given to the “right” young people, but after that there were hardly enough support measures to encourage young people to go on using the book and collecting entries in it.

Having learned important lessons from the first years with the Study Book, Youth Academy invested on supporting those young people that already had got or purchased the book. Youth Academy began to published a magazine for the Study Book owners. The magazine came out twice a year, and it included articles about different kind of organisations, voluntary activities, learning in leisure time, funding own projects, using the Study Book in formal education and job recruiting etc. The magazine was sent to those Study Book owners who had registered to Youth Academy.

At the same time, Youth Academy began to do biannual surveys on how the Study Book was actually used and how the product could be developed. The main results from the surveys have been that, although some young people actually have used the book when applying to further education or a job, most of the study book users are somewhat passive in using the book. The most important function for the Study Book users seems to be that the book is a black-on-white documentary for themselves on what actually has been going on in their years of youth.

The educational institutions involved in the Recreational Activity Study Book system have not always found it easy to use in recognition and valuing previous learning experiences of young people. This has mostly to do with the fact that the book is structured according to the nature of voluntary freetime activities rather than according to the curricula of different formal educational institutions. The book focuses on experiences of young people and the learning in those experiences rather than on the skills and competencies actually acquired. A more competence-based approach would suit the educational institutions better, and probably some young people as well. However, it has been a strong strategic – and even ideological – decision by Youth Academy and its member organisations that the Recreational Activity Study Book has to be structured upon the activities, not the competencies. This has to do with the more general question in youth work and youth policy about to what extent can youth work focus on the employability of young people. The answer to that question has been – at least this far – that youth work focuses on the development of the individual, not merely on employability issues.

When writing this article, Youth Academy is a national partner in a European project called “REFINE – Recognising Formal, Informal and Non-formal Education”. Youth Academy participates with the Recreational Activity Study Book. Being a partner in the REFINE project has made it possible to test the suitability of the book in formal vocational education. At the moment, 30 young students are using the Study Book in In Jyväskylä Vocational Institute, in which there’s a project aiming at prevention of dropping out of vocational education. As a part of that project, the Institute organises free-time activities for the students. The students participating in those free-time activities are testing the Recreational Activity Study Book and they are

promised to get study credits from the entries in the study book at the end of the term. Results from this pilot project are expected in spring 2005. Preliminary feedback has sent the message that the Study Book probably needs some “calibration” to be done in order to be able to serve the needs of formal education curricula.

4. Conclusion: Adaptation to the European mainstream?

The Recreational Activity Study Book system has raised positive interest on European level – it is also mentioned as a good practice in the European White Book on Youth Policy by the European Commission. The Finnish study book system could be one starting point in creating a European model for the recognition of youth non-formal and informal learning, bearing in mind the cultural and educational differences in different European countries.

There are several other European processes regarding the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Most of the work in those processes is carried out by experts in the field of formal education. From the point of view of voluntary civic activities, this is a bit problematic, since the approach towards recognition is almost always focused on skills and competencies rather than rewarding activity as such. Youth Academy has closely followed the on-going processes and is considering their possible effects on the future of the Recreational Activity Study Book. It is inevitable that for example “Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning” by the European Commission have to be taken into account when further developing the Study Book. Luckily, in most of the European processes regarding the theme, youth organisations and youth voluntary freetime activities have been – at least to some extent – treated and dealt with as important learning environments.

It may well be, that in the future the Recreational Activity Study Book will be restructured to meet the common European principles and standards better. But even when that happens, we have to be careful not to sacrifice the most valuable asset of the Recreational Activity Study Book, namely the appreciation of voluntary activities and young people’s engagement to voluntarily participate in different freetime activities.

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