



NON-FORMAL LEARNING PROCESS AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATOR IN LEARNING MOBILITY PROJECTS: THE LEARNERS PERSPECTIVE

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DISCLAIMER

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This is a short article that was developed on the basis of individual narrative interviews and focus groups conducted with participants of Erasmus+ Youth workers mobility projects, exclusively “Formal meets non-formal: upgraded” and “Facilitating intercultural learning in work with youth groups” implemented by NGO “Youth EPICenter” in cooperation with international partners. The individual interviews were conducted in Summer 2017, then supplemented by 2 focus groups also with participants of a training course under the Erasmus+ (KA1) programme in Summer 2018. 37 people participated in the study in one form or another, the interviews were based on the rules of narrative interview, focus groups involved some narratives on their lived experiences as well as discussions between the participants who have undergone 7 days of living and learning together.

Non-formal learning or non-formal education is an educational phenomenon that is becoming more and more important and broadly used all over the world. Originated from the developing / 3rd world countries (Rogers 2005) and used as a substitute for formal education in the parts of world that could not afford to build schools and maintain an expensive system. Today non-formal education takes many shapes and can be met in the contexts of popular education, extra-curricular education, social education, social work, youth work, etc. In Europe a strong boost to non-formal education and the development of principles and educational attitudes lies in the Learning Mobility projects that are supported by the Council of Europe – EU youth partnership and the current Erasmus+ programme (former Youth and Youth in Action programmes). Hard evidence is still lacking, but based on the hear-say, in the newer members of European Union, the programme was one of the main impetus to development of the “new” approach to learning and supplementing the programmes aiming for perfection or professionalism with the ones that are focused on holistic development of a person. There are several organizations that communicate the main principles of non-formal education in the youth field, in this article we are using the principles compiled by Žilvinas Gailius, Artūras Malinauskas, Donatas Petkauskas and Laimonas Ragauskas (2013).

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

The understanding of non-formal education and its principles that is proposed by the Erasmus+ programme guide (meaning – if the project is financed by the programme, this point of view should be followed and aimed for) is formulated as follows: “non-formal learning is learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives and learning time) where some form of learning support is present, but which is not part of the formal education and training system” (Erasmus+ programme guide). Gailius and others are going a little bit more in detail and claim that “non-formal education is a purposeful educative activity, which helps a person to become a conscious personality, capable of solving problems responsibly and creatively, and being active in their community. <...> Freedom + responsibility = meaningful self-expression” (Gailius et al. 2013). The participants of the study propose several other aspects to focus on mainly through stressing out the difference from formal education system and the importance of acknowledging the unexpected learning outcomes: “When I compare my experiences to formal education I feel the main difference of not being forced to have certain result in my head. Formal education feels to me that there is something that already exists and they try to put it into my head. But in non-formal education I feel free to develop something that plays a role for me” (P31). Another part of reflection from participants also speaks about extra learning, learning that happens outside of the programme, but adds the connectedness to life “It is structured, but I think that in non-formal our aim is much bigger. We live. We call success if we learn other things as well, not specifically of biology learning the humans bones and all the other questions and all the other curiosities. You don’t call them it was not our goal and it was not a learning” (P22). Here we can see the blurry line between non-formal and informal learning in a learning mobility project and the equal importance of both – the planned and the spontaneous learning that is acknowledged by participants through reflection.



PRINCIPLES OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

We did compare the principles that are in writing by Gailius and others (2013) with the principles that could be recognized in the interviews that were conducted with participants of the research (youth workers, youth leaders, teachers who already have experienced at least 7 days of non-formal learning process in the frame of Erasmus+ programme.

| According to the literature | According to the participants |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Voluntary | “When we are told that if we don’t want to do that, we don’t need to do something. That’s really important in non-formal education for me.” (P19) |
| Experiential | “Learning by doing, no books. Learning from experience” |
| Open and non-formal communication | “Also the freedom of expression. I feel like we are not being judged by our thoughts and as well by our looks, position and some conflicts. Tolerance.” |
| Holistic | “I really like how this type of education really involves everything. You involve all yourself. My heart, body. Everything. Feeling. Being.” |
| Specific environment | “Free time activities and living together are important for creating the more comfortable, open for sharing environment” |
| Non-competitive environment | - |

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Active participation | “All the answers are answered ourselves. The trainers never give us the right answers.” |
| Group oriented | “People who are together in group, they feel trust and feel free to share what is happening in the exercise. The trust between the group members.” |



As it can be seen from the table, the only principle of non-formal education that does not appear in the reflections of participants is the non-competitive environment. This is the principle that also gets challenged a lot in the discussions, claiming that it is impossible to avoid competitiveness and that competition is a way to encourage improvement. Even though, Gailius et al. point out that “non-formal education refuses artificial competition and formal control of results. The experience of process is considered valuable in itself and can be treated as a result. This principle allows creating a space where participants are not compared to each other, but rather they can assess themselves and how far they have come in their desired way. Here the only comparison that can occur is the one where people compare themselves to themselves – how was I at the start of the educative process and how am I now at the end of the educative process?” (Gailius et al. 2013, 37). In the description of this principle the connection with the thoughts of participants of not being forced, but choosing what to learn can be grasped. This can be easily connected to the voluntary basis and active participation principles, which the participants describe as “The person is learning not because he’s forced in some way. Not that someone is forcing him to learn, but he himself he reflects on himself, his needs and he takes from the exercise what is useful for him” (P27). Although we also see here the taken responsibility for ones own learning. It is important to pay attention that most of the principles are supplementary to each other and should be treated as a whole – a set of principles that are not up disassembling and not using the ones that are not convenient or do not suit a particular situation.

NON-FORMAL LEARNING PROCESS

According to the research, we are proposing that learning in an international training course is a combination of non-formal learning methods and learning environment, created by the educator and the informal learning that is happening outside of the programme. What is very important is the blend of personal and professional development “You can open the personality from the other side. People are discovering themselves, their abilities. Trying new things, which they haven’t done. There is no concrete frame. Can be really creative methods and even something that you wouldn’t expect from learning activities” (P21);

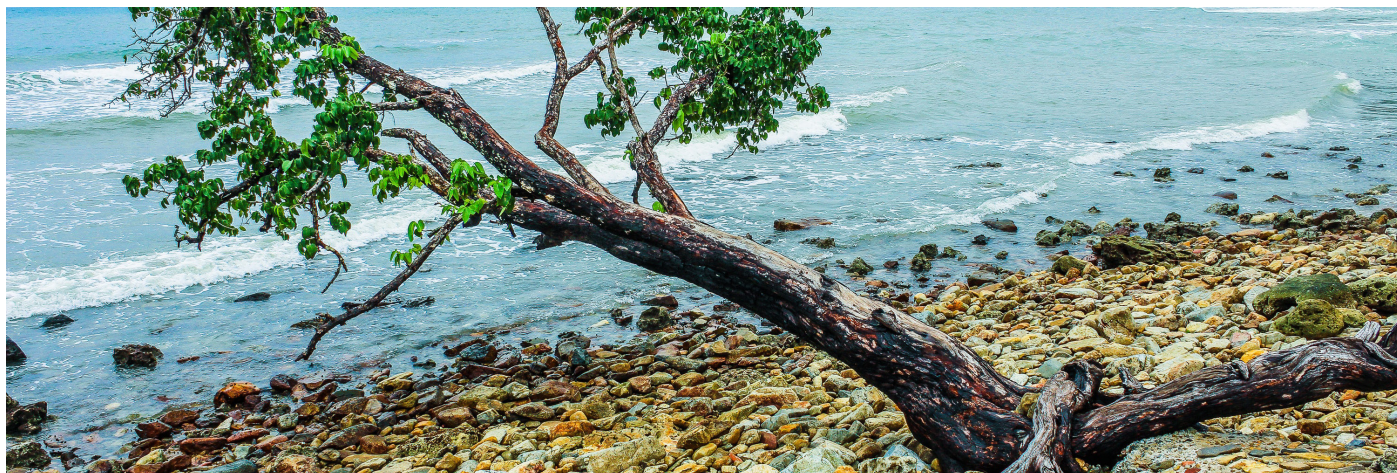
When asked about non-formal learning process in a learning mobility project, the participants kept mentioning learning from the people in the group and the noticed that the person they are learning the most from is constantly changing. We called it fluid role of educator “Also the role of the trainer or a coach. It’s fluid. It can be someone that is identified by the participants as trainer. But also it’s a role that can be taken by another participant. So it’s possible to learn from everybody at the same time” (P13). We looked more into detail what aspects of the work of a trainer or educator in a learning mobility are acknowledged:

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Attention to group processes | In all projects I’ve participated there was always group work and group dynamics from the beginning that people know each other (P1) |
| Push to practice | well because we had the task during the training course that we had to implement the activities, workshops and yeah, this is how I kind of gained the skills of being better maybe in some activities (P4) |
| Multi-layered exercises | “we had to do this bridge, but it was so many things behind the bridge: this collaboration and everything. So it was really like wow - you can use this for the first sight it looks like nothing, just build the bridge, but then there is many levels of learning” (P1) |

Although what is important to notice are the aspects of learning in an international training course that were mentioned by the participants of the study but were not attributed to the work of an educator:

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Educational encounter | “When someone tell kind of story, you learn immediately. Rather than just sitting reading it. Because it stays longer as I receive it from people in communication or peer learning or group learning or something like that” (P3) |
| Fun | “Making things more fun” (P23), “Always fun, no extra commitment” (P9) |
| Importance of feedback | “for me it’s really. I cannot imagine how important for me is to receive a feedback” (P1) |
| 24/7 learning | Cause you have time of one week when the learning happens 24/7. Well, whenever you’re not sleeping basically. <...> Yeah even in the coffee breaks things happen and sometimes they are more kind of important (P4) |
| Leaving comfort zone | Still I love him [another participant] because he’s doing a good thing for me like he is pushing me and out of my comfort zone. It’s really cool. Stretch zone is nice (P1) |
| Tiring dynamics | And there is always sense of discovering new, always new. Because in these projects all the time you have like... It’s like dynamic (P5) “It was the end of the project and I was so tired and everyone was so tired because it was very intense project” (P7) |
| Unaware learning | “I think it’s the magic of non-formal education. You are not aware. Some kind of not aware that you are learning and then “ you realize that “O! I have the skill. Wow. How? (P4) |
| Deep learning | The learning outcome is not on the surface, it’s deeper than it seems to be. The exercise can be very simple or more difficult, but from the exercise you can find so much variety on what to reflect and then learn from this” (P24); |
| Unpredictable results | “At the same time you may not learn what’s the topic of the exercise, but you will have very unusual thought and this will be your learning outcome” (P15) |
| No external evaluation | “Not getting a grade for what opinions they have” (P16) |

WORK OF EDUCATOR



From the interviews and the focus groups, the roles of the trainers and facilitators that are acknowledged by participants are the following: invisible creator, feedback source, space provider, and role model. All in all – creator of learning environment and educational interventions that learners do not notice, one can call it an invisible hand or an unappreciated job (or unnecessary?). Even though after a discussion with experts of non-formal learning, we are comfortable saying that creating a setting and an environment where the individual and group become independent learners is the greatest achievement of educator in a non-formal learning frame that is learner and not educator centered. The choices that are made by the educators team in choosing the venue, selecting participants, (not)getting involved and allowing the group to make decisions and solve any issues that arise, giving up the power etc. is an art no less. Being an artist can be exhausting, therefore based on the interviews and focus group discussions we have drawn some recommendations for the educators:

- Ambiguous learning environment to support personal development and group learning. As we found in the interviews and focus group discussions, it was important for the participants to learn from each other, to experience the stepping back of the educator and take almost full control of their learning process. In order to support this, one might look into the theory of group dynamics by Bruce Tuckman that also proposes the educational interventions according to the stage that the members of the group are. Giving time and space for the participants of a learning mobility project allows more personal development and as a result might seem on the verge of non-formal and informal learning. Although if it is planned, monitored and later on reflected with the educator is a non-formal learning by the book.
- Mix and match methods seems like a very simple outcome from the study that we believe is rather especially for the educators. Here it is important to remind ourselves to not overuse the methods that we like or the ones that proved to be successful with other groups.
- Raising awareness of one's own learning is important, as the participants tend to take more and more responsibility of one's learning over the educational programme. This aspect is also worthy to pay attention to, because non-formal learning process is often attributed to fun and games therefore it might easily slip as “we had lots of fun” activity. This is the reason why educators work even though sometimes feels invisible

to the participants is to ask questions about learning, put emphasis on reflection and even though there might be resistance, stay patient until the point where participants ask for reflection time or organize those themselves outside of the programme. “Having conversations in the evenings like evaluation and reflections about how the processes are going on and I think it’s so important to have some people with whom you can talk about it. Like what are the processes in the group and what is happening, and how are the trainers reacting, and how are participants doing and learning from all that we are doing” (P2)

- Ease into reflection. Reflecting is not something that people take for granted and especially if learning mobility project is their first encounter with non-formal learning process that is mainly based on experiential learning, meaning – learning through reflection of experience. Participants are acknowledging that keeping a learning diary helps them track their learning and the differences in how explicit their reflection is at the beginning and the end of the project.



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