

Skills and competencies in global youth work

Jackie Balmer discusses the advantages and potential dangers of focusing on the skills and competencies that have been defined for global youth workers in the UK and the young people they work with.

Considering skills and competencies in global youth work involves exploring both those required of the global youth worker and those which young people may develop as a result of their participation in global youth work projects or activities. Defining these highlights and clarifies how the broad aims of development education and youth work meet. A 'skills and competencies' approach locates global youth work in the current language of UK youth work training and professional development, and contributes to 'mainstreaming' global education as integral to effective youth work practice.

Some of the skills of a global youth worker are defined as the ability to: '...keep informed about local and global issues, make connections between personal, local and global concerns or events, motivate young people to develop a critical understanding of the world around them, be self-critical in their personal lifestyle and attitudes, and challenge discriminatory language and behaviour in a way which encourages dialogue about issues of power.' (DEA, 2004) This skills 'checklist' can support youth workers with an interest in global youth work to focus their thinking on practical ways to incorporate this into practice. It can guide training providers in meeting the learning needs of youth workers and in recognizing gaps in existing provision.

Defining skills, knowledge, and attitudes which young people may develop through engagement in global youth work serves a number of purposes:

- Firstly, it describes to youth workers how effective global youth work promotes the personal and social development of young people, and demonstrates that global youth work at its best constitutes effective youth work practice.
- Secondly, if these competencies are presented in an accessible way, they can support young people in reflecting on their own learning and personal development needs. They may identify personal aspirations and skills they would like to develop. By regularly reflecting on these, young people can recognize, value and celebrate the learning they have achieved through engaging in global youth work.
- Thirdly, youth organizations, policy makers and funders who are new to global youth work can immediately see how these skills and competencies may contribute to or coincide with the aims of their own organizations. This increases opportunities to ensure that global youth work becomes incorporated at every level of the youth sector.

Skills and competencies as defined by the DEA and others can be viewed as a helpful but not definitive framework. They can serve as a starting point from which a range of

stakeholders can base their approaches to global youth work. They can guide training providers and youth workers in setting aims, objectives and evaluation methods, and can be used as a tool for reflection to ensure individual best practice. It is appropriate to adapt the framework for use in different contexts, and there may be contexts where it is not useful to define skills and competencies in this way. It does serve however to place particular skills and competencies within a wider global youth work agenda, the aim of which is to support young people in developing the skills and competencies necessary to play an active role in local and global society.

In a critique of *Transforming Youth Work* (DfEE, 2001), Mark Smith warns against 'an emphasis on gaining, competencies (particular skills) rather than competence (ability to live well)' and suggests that this may lead to a focus on 'activities that have an obvious outcome rather than having faith in process and relationship.' (Smith, 2002) He fears that this focus on acquiring skills and competencies leads youth workers and young people to equate learning with 'gaining and possessing things' (ibid.) A further concern is the risk of colluding with a government agenda whose main aim is to produce young people who are equipped to become profitable for the economy through 'reconnecting young people with the labour market' (Ibid.).

If this danger is to be avoided, it is important that the skills and competencies of global youth work include and do not conflict with its core values of equity and social justice. Skills and competencies associated with global youth work must support young people in gaining the ability to actively choose **their own** role in a global society. In some ways, however skills and competencies are defined is of little consequence to the young person who comments that global youth work has, 'opened my eyes' or 'made me view things in a different way'. It is clear that they have begun an important journey regardless. Their definition may be of most use in demonstrating to funders and educators the essential nature of this work.

References

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