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Programmes, programming and practice

Ruth Gilchrist

In this chapter sustained attention is paid to the content, structure and, above all, the centrality of the programme within youth work. The previous chapter discussed ways in which young people can engage with the process of developing programmes of activities. Here Ruth Gilchrist considers how this can be encouraged and the challenges this poses for youth workers in various settings.

In *Reckoning with Youth*, a classic youth work text, Anne Armson and Stanley Turnbull (1944: 23) said, 'The club programme is the scaffolding around which the whole structure is built.' This generally remains the case. Just as a detached worker must create a routine and persona that allows young people to both find and approach them so, for much the same reasons, club and project workers must pay careful attention to programme content. For it is the programme that initially draws many young people into contact with the worker, and frequently it will be the quality of the programme that determines how long such contact is sustained. Good programmes help sustain relationships, while poor ones lead to their disconnection. Fundamentally an effective programme focuses on the expressed and felt needs of potential and existing 'members'. In other words it offers those activities and encounters young people tell workers (and each other) they want. These – the expressed needs – usually include sporting opportunities, trips, computer games and 'enjoyment'. But an effective programme should not overlook the frequently unvoiced but felt needs of young people and here we are referring, for example, to the chance to make friends, share problems, resolve tensions

and secure advice. The need to attend to both expressed and felt needs means constructing a programme can never be simplistically left to the 'customers'; the youth worker must be prepared as an educator, and, one might add, as an adult to intervene in order to ensure that the unspoken needs of the shy, awkward and as yet unaffiliated are taken into account. This means they must negotiate and endeavour to create programmes that are socially and educationally balanced; offer young people opportunities to be both adults and 'teenagers'; and are predictable and safe, yet challenging and developmental. Given such countervailing pressures it is little wonder that programme planning has always been a difficult, if at times neglected, task, even art.

Any discussion regarding the importance of programme planning inevitably strays into the realms of content. Armson and Turnbull (1944: 24) recommend that a good programme will incorporate a mix of activities and inputs falling within three headings – Physical, Mental and Spiritual. These are the categories that echo the essential core identified by the first national and international youth organisation, the YMCA, a hundred years earlier, a core that sought to focus on Mind, Body and Spirit. Once allowance is made for changes in the way we now describe such things, it is astonishing how much current documentation relating to the priorities and purposes of youth work continues to embrace these categories. For example, Pauline Riley (2001: 148) reported that, at the time of writing, the Cheshire and Wirral Federation of Youth Clubs aimed 'to help young people so to develop their physical, mental and spiritual capacities that they may grow to full maturity as individuals and members of society'. Much consistency remains regarding content but it is important to acknowledge from the outset that profound changes are afoot and, in particular, programmes are increasingly being shaped by external factors that are pulling in new directions.

First, funders are increasingly imposing packaged learning upon projects and clubs. As a pre-condition for the provision of funding workers are being required to focus on particular topics, for example, health education, safe sex, anger management or the raising of self-esteem. This is partly because funders do not trust workers to undertake the preparation and self-education to ensure they will 'deliver' the correct facts and the prioritised information. But also it is to enable the external agency to monitor the quality of 'delivery' and assess outcomes, something made far easier by the production of pre-packaged materials and 'recommended' forms of delivery.

Second, funders and local and central government agencies are insisting that workers 'deliver' measured outcomes – awards, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and such like. In other words, many youth

workers, just like schoolteachers, are obliged to operate in ways designed to ensure young people are driven towards acquiring accredited outcomes rather than engaging in open and negotiated educational encounters. However, although state-funded youth clubs and projects may be increasingly constrained as to how they assemble a programme they still possess substantial freedom albeit generally far less than colleagues operating in settings funded and linked to voluntary and faith-based agencies.

Uniqueness of youth work

What has historically made youth clubs and projects unique as an educational experience is that they operate in radically different ways to the schools, colleges and workplaces the young people spend so much time in. Curricula, syllabi and timetables are the bedrock upon which the school experience is built. Each provides a framework within which schoolteachers operate. The timetable divides up the school day, week and year distributing the allotted time according to what the managers consider to be most beneficial for the pupils (or conducive towards the smooth-running of the institution). The first two itemise what is to be taught (and hopefully learnt) and identify the starting point and culmination of the learning experience. Within a school setting the content of both a curriculum and a syllabus is now usually imposed on teacher and students alike by government-appointed bodies such as curriculum councils and examination boards. These variously compile the syllabus, or list of requirements for passing a particular examination, and construct the curriculum, the course of study to be followed, leaving the teacher to obediently deliver the packages. Alternatively both can be negotiated. With the teacher and students collaborating to assemble the syllabus and curriculum, and even the mode of delivery of each, however, although frequently discussed (see, for example, Stenhouse 1980; Newman and Ingram 1989; McKernan 2008), this negotiated curriculum is rarely encountered within the school and college system. For in contemporary Britain, as indeed for most of the preceding two centuries, neither schoolteachers nor pupils are trusted to structure the content of the curriculum or the means by which it is 'delivered'. Rather someone up the chain of command tells the former what (and how) to teach and the latter what they must learn (Griffith 2000). Therefore both march in a pre-ordained direction to a mandated drumbeat. Historically the relative freedom of youth work from such constraints has helped set it apart from the educational mainstream.

Traditionally clubs and projects have been places where attendance is on a voluntary basis, the young people being free to come and go

as they pleased. Even most of the adults are there out of choice rather than because they are paid to be in attendance. Voluntarism means youth work and youth workers have since the earliest beginnings been obliged to develop discreet ways of operating. The adults wish to educate and teach the young people but they have scrupulously avoided being designated teachers – opting instead to be known as leaders, workers, ministers or secretaries. Partly because they do not wish to be tarred with the brush of compulsion but also because they have created a different educational tradition, a *modus operandi* that sets them apart from the schoolteacher and college lecturer. Like schools and colleges clubs, projects or troops, call them what you like, are places where formal and informal education mingle. However, the balance between the two is reversed. Whereas in schools and colleges informal education intrudes into the gaps in the timetable and curriculum, occurring largely 'beyond the classroom' in break times, during lunch and before and after lessons (Hazler 1998; Luxmoore 2000; Jeffs 2007), in the youth work setting the informal is the dominant educational model. Here the formal 'lesson' is slotted into an environment overwhelmingly structured to cultivate and foster opportunities for informal educational encounters. The prime reason for this reversal is not difficult to unearth; fundamentally it is the inevitable by-product of attendance being voluntary. Managers and funders may not be happy with voluntary attendance as this makes it difficult to control what the young people learn and who they learn from, namely, their peers as well as the workers, but they can do little about this. Therefore rather than youth work being dominated and shaped by curricula, syllabi and timetables it has historically been constructed around the potentially more democratic concept of a programme.

Dividing time

Superficially the youth work programme is akin to a school timetable in that it divides the life of the club, group, project, troop or pack into blocks of time. However, there are a number of distinguishing features separating the two.

First, given that attendance is voluntary, a programme must be constructed around the enthusiasms, interests and concerns of the young people who are involved, or may become so if it is attractive enough, in the life of the youth organisation. As Baden-Powell (1908) stressed, the youth worker must scatter bread on the water to entice the fish. The programme is the bait. Consequently as Spence and Devanney with Noonan explain, 'the ability to think creatively about activities and programmes is therefore an important feature of the youth worker's skill' (2007: 60).

Indeed the composition of a programme is in many respects the point of commencement from which so much youth work originates, a starting point radically at odds with that of the schoolteacher drawing up a timetable.

Second, it must be reflexive for unlike the school or college timetable this is an entity that must, to some degree, be negotiable and responsive. Negotiable because those who construct it can only make intelligent guesses as to what may or may not prove appealing to potential 'members'. If they wish to retain the interest of the young people it must be responsive to their expressed desires and preferences. As Lily Montagu rapidly learnt, her club began to thrive when she allowed the members to shape the programme for 'they knew more about the needs of their fellow members than we did' (1954: 36).

Third, because youth work is primarily built around informal education, rather than formal instruction, it has to allow space for the former. In themselves activities, games and outings have only of limited value for educators – although young people may well have fun taking part. Their worth primarily resides in the degree to which they create openings for educational dialogue, for reflection and for the building of relationships. That is, they draw in young people and provide the opportunities for the young people to engage with the youth worker and each other. The school timetable seeks to eradicate as much as possible of the time spent outside the classroom. Unsupervised minutes, necessary for the pupils to visit the toilet or consume their victuals, are kept to the minimum for it is in those instances the influence of the teacher is at its weakest and can easily be supplanted by that of peer groups. Indeed some new academies have gone so far as to eliminate breaks, lunch-hours and playgrounds so young people are denied any opportunity to engage in casual conversation amongst themselves or with teachers during the working day of the school. The youth worker's programme on the other hand is usually designed to maximise the opportunities for groups to form, conversation to take place and relationships to develop.

Fourth, youth work seeks to extend and induct young people into the lived experience of democracy. Within the life of the youth project workers frequently seek to find openings to let democratic decision-making create what Desiree Edwards-Rees (1943: 84) called a 'little commonwealth'. While the school offers a curriculum imposed from outside and restricts student participation (if it occurs at all) to the discussion of trivialities – and sports and leisure-centres provide readymade activity programmes – youth projects and groups are generally able to use the programme as a vehicle for fostering democratic engagement. Indeed the ambition of many youth workers is to achieve what Walker (1943: 109)

calls the 'free programme' – whereby the formation and management of the programme is placed in the hands of the members. In other words enabling the 'young people led organisation' to become a reality (Badham and Davies 2007). However, as Robertson reminds us, clubs and projects must be places 'where things happen', therefore, although it may be the 'aim of every worker to get young people in organising the programme' the worker must be prepared to 'help and be a role model' if this is to stand a chance of happening (2005: 66). Whatever may be the level of participation on the part of the young people, the planning of a programme can nevertheless provide a unique starting point for democratic engagement, as well as for teaching the arts of conversation, negotiation and engagement.

Purpose and planning

Programming may be central to much youth work practice; however, the concept is certainly not unproblematic nor is it always clear-cut. Although the terms and language of the debates concerning the nature and content of programmes change over time, two key themes constantly re-emerge. The first of these is the extent to which a programme is managed and structured. Josephine Macalister Brew in her usual trenchant fashion makes it clear where she stands on this issue, vigorously arguing

There are only two essential guiding principles in programme planning. Neither the programme nor the plan is sacred – a great deal of work amongst adolescents is a process of trial and error and, as we must be prepared to build and plan so we must also be prepared to discard.

(1957: 202)

Others are unhappy with this position. They are concerned that such pragmatism leads to a lack of structure and to a tolerance by workers of the acceptability of 'hanging about'. In particular, the approach advocated by Brew is viewed by some as being especially problematic, even harmful for those most likely to drift into offending and other 'risk behaviours'. Therefore they argue for the 'provision of common objectives, a range of curricula such as sport and music, and engagement in structured youth activities' on the grounds these 'may provide developmental opportunities that can significantly transform their life paths at key transition points' (Feinstein *et al.* 2006: 324). Indeed this viewpoint has been extended to embrace an element of compulsion with young people being 'obliged' to partake in approved activities for a allocated period of time each week with clubs being vetted to ensure they offer structure and activities and promote regular attendance (Margo *et al.* 2006).

employment, and cultural subjects such as history are no longer compulsory post-14. Consequently fewer young people are able to enjoy a range of artistic, cultural and sporting subjects – activities that once occupied substantive portions of the school timetable. Increasingly educational institutions teach to the National Curriculum and exam syllabi ignoring anything that will not improve their league table positions – as a museum-based community education worker found who organised an event celebrating the life and work of local suffragettes. Not one school turned up to her highly publicised and exciting exhibition. The reason being, she subsequently discovered, that it was not on the curriculum that term so teachers could either not justify or had no interest in finding the time to visit. Also the erosion of catchment areas, the rise of specialist schools and the overall decline in the numbers of young people all mean pupils and students commute far greater distances to school or college. When this is set besides changes in teacher contracts it is not difficult to understand why in recent years there has been a sharp decline in the number and range of after-school clubs and activities being offered. Overall each of these changes can provide opportunities for youth workers to enlarge the scope of their programmes to look beyond the historic standbys of pool, table tennis, five-a-side and the occasional art and craft.

Economic, cultural and social background of the area. It may seem obvious but programme planning has to take account of the location and catchment area a project serves. For example, some projects and groups serve specific geographic areas; increasingly this means in our polarised society the project will be catering for young people of a specific social class or ethnic grouping. Consequently what the programme contains must avoid alienating potential participants before they have crossed the threshold while seeking, over time, to expand the horizons of those who do. It is a difficult balance to achieve. Housing, transport and education policies have each in recent years either encouraged or colluded with those social trends that have generated heightened social and economic polarisation (Power and Tunstall 1995; Dorling *et al.* 2007; Hanley 2007). As a result much youth work, often unconsciously, is socially divisive, reinforcing rather than eroding difference. In particular, it is rare for projects to cross class divides (Coles *et al.* 1998). Programmes need to address such macro social issues, albeit without adopting a ‘holier than thou’ attitude. Opportunities need to be created for encouraging young people not merely to flavour the unusual and unexpected, but also to encounter those who otherwise they might only perceive as being ‘different’ or ‘threatening’. Programmes should strive to involve a wide section of young people in order that they may contribute to their mutual growth

through learning about each other and considering themselves a part of society as opposed to being apart from it. However, it is naive to imagine in a society where adult leisure activities overwhelmingly serve to reinforce social segregation, rather than erode it, that youth work can make more than a small impact on this.

Type of young people one wishes to attract and retain. This may seem contradictory given the previous point but workers when developing a programme must have a clear idea of the characteristics, and interests, of the young people they are seeking to attract and keep affiliated to a project or centre. No programme will meet the needs of more than a segment of a given youth population. It is foolish to imagine otherwise. Even the school- or college-based worker must recognise that young people are divided by class, gender and religion in ways that will often lead to an activity or project becoming dominated by one grouping rather than another. Equally young people who opt to affiliate to specific sub-cultural groupings tend not to contentedly mix one with the other. Types of music, activities and structures all function to both attract and repel young people; this is unavoidable and workers should not be uncomfortable with this reality. Therefore hard choices arise regarding, first, who should be prioritised, and, second, how can some of the barriers, artificial or otherwise, be wholly or partially addressed.

Resources. Once every allowance has been made for the creativity and determination of a team of youth workers to develop a broad, rich and attractive programme, it is inevitable that what is offered will be constrained by access to resources. Availability of resources impacts equally on centres and projects big and small; it always has and always will. At both ends of the continuum, resources partially determine the style, ethos and content of a programme shaping what young people can and will ask for as well as what staff can realistically lay on the table for discussion.

Once all these factors have been taken into account, the task remains of how to create a balanced programme. Riley (2001), in a helpful article, suggests youth workers need to focus on and balance:

- *Short-term activities* that enable workers to get to know young people, will appeal to significant numbers and allow workers the opportunity to address such ‘issues’ as responsible modes of behaviour and sensitivity to the needs of others;
- *Medium-term projects* such as monthly trips, discos and activities requiring specialist staff. These provide opportunities for young people to be involved in planning and preparation with appropriate support and guidance;

- *Long-term projects* that can include peer education programmes, drama productions, annual camps and residentials. These gift opportunities for sustained engagement between the young people and the workers as well as extensive openings for the former to undertake leadership and organisational roles.

Achieving an equilibrium between each of the above is as important within the context of a one-night-a-week club meeting in a church or village hall as in a purpose-built youth centre or wing open everyday. However, getting the balance right is never easy, whatever the setting. In part because what works this year may seem outmoded and old hat next month. Consequently clubs and youth projects have ups and downs. Needs change, as can tastes, and therefore programmes must be constantly evaluated, critiqued and tinkered with. Perhaps the only rule to be heeded is that workers must avoid the trap of allowing the programme to become a fixed entity to be adhered to until the bitter end.

Planning and programming

For youth workers operating in centres, schools and colleges much of their practice amounts to a drawing together of a series of 'programmes'. Each is a part of a bigger programme that sets out what they will be offering over a year, month or week. One worker, based in a further education college, divided up her time in a programmatic way. Specific times were set for being around – in her office, in the canteen, walking the corridors or hanging out with the smokers congregating by the wheelie bins – so young people knew where to find her if they wished to talk, seek advice, information and help. Other segments of her time were allocated to discrete activities such as the DJ or drama workshops which had prepared programmes and time slots that young people 'signed-up' to. A third part of her wider 'programme' was allotted to developing work with 'excluded' groups within the college community including asylum seekers, refugees and overseas students away from their homeland for the first time.

For this work to be effective careful attention had to be paid to short-, medium- and long-term goals. So, for example, in the short term it was vital to meet and greet students, at whatever time in the college year they arrived, to ensure they were made aware of what support services and help was available. In the medium term they needed to be offered the opportunity to make friends and contacts, to 'settle in' and better understand the nuances of the culture they were entering. The way in which this was approached provides an example of how careful

preparation and flexibility can co-exist in relation to programme planning and implementation.

A group of young British-born students, who had been in regular contact with the worker for a year, volunteered to set up a conversation group for peers whose first language was not English. Their aim, shared by the worker, was to help the overseas students 'practise' conversational English and provide a space where friendships could be formed. For the youth worker involved, a number of secondary aims existed including to help the volunteers to learn how to teach informally; develop their own language competency; acquire inter-personal skills; and secure a better understanding of other cultures and life experiences. To enable all this to occur, the worker needed to create a programme that would be attractive to the overseas students, sustain the interest of the volunteers and address the wider educational ends that she sought to meet. A series of meetings, which were held before the new term started, between the volunteers and worker enabled a programme of events and activities to be formulated and subsequently advertised via leaflets and word-of-mouth within the college. It was hoped this would attract additional volunteers and participants. The group designed a programme they hoped would look purposeful and enjoyable. Therefore the initial sessions were an eclectic mix of games and 'ice-breakers' calculated to help the group gel, members to learn something about each other and provide opportunities for conversation and discussion. The focus was on informality and activity. Meetings went well and volunteers took responsibility for planning individual sessions which meant coming prepared with the equipment for a specific activity and thought through ideas for topics.

However, by session four the group decided there was a need for some activities that would get them out and about. A couple of volunteers suggested when they next met if the weather was good they should 'walk along the river' looking at the bridges and talk about their history, design and changing roles. This was enthusiastically agreed and the two who made the suggestion agreed to come with some information on the 'waterfront' and bridges. Fine weather meant the next session became a walk. Henceforth, although elements of the initial programme remained fixed – for example, Bonfire Night, Remembrance Day and a Christmas Party – far greater flexibility became the norm and it was commonplace for volunteers and overseas students alike to suggest activities for following or subsequent meetings. This meant new volunteers and overseas students could join and feel free within a couple of sessions to make 'suggestions'. A combination of planning and improvisation allowed the 20 or so members of the group to produce a varied and responsive programme

comprising a mix of conversation, topics, activities, dance, walks, cooking and 'outings'. This programmatic structure allowed new members to be accommodated and fresh ideas tested out – evaluated – for possible inclusion in future programmes.

Having a programme encouraged people to suggest ideas, to offer to bring things. It also meant volunteers knew what was happening in advance and cut out the need to have weekly planning meetings that they had neither the time nor the inclination to attend. What evolved – and not without problems – was a balanced programme that took into consideration the needs of both groups and the restrictions of the environment (e.g., in the first year the base was re-allocated twice). Balancing availability of students and volunteers was an ongoing problem but the students' enthusiasm kept this group going from year-to-year despite annual personnel changes. Often the group moves away from the designated topic but the flexibility of the staff and volunteers ensures the programme is not a straightjacket, but a framework for relationships to form and conversation to take place.

In conclusion

There are different ways of devising a programme. It can be imposed from above by the funding, or workers can find themselves expected to devise the year's programme by consulting the young people involved. This, again, can be handled in alternative ways but can be problematic. For example, one local authority naively expected workers to devise with the young people they were working with a programme of activities for the year. No parameters were given and it was left to the workers to suggest what costs and resources would have to be taken into consideration. Ideas from young people ranged from visits to the ice rink, residential visits and visits abroad. As far as the authority's managers were concerned, the important thing was the process of involving young people, the taking account of their ideas and the consultation – included in the setting of the programme. However, this is where it began and ended. Once the consultation was finished and their plans submitted, nothing else happened – the process ended and the devised programme given scant attention due to a lack of funding and shortages of specialist workers. Expectations raised were then dashed, and this confirmed in the minds of some of the participants that young people are neither listened to nor taken seriously.

But there is also another point here. Our job as workers is to raise people's awareness of themselves and the world – to educate in the broadest sense. Therefore by only working with what the young people want

they would miss out on what we know to be worthwhile, and the new experiences that open up new horizons. A negotiated programme should be just that, a dialogue between worker and young people. It should also be realistic with young people given information on all the boundaries imposed by funding and restricted resources.

Good programmes link the needs of the young to the enthusiasms and skills of the workers. However, we, as workers, must never get carried away by our enthusiasms. For example, I recall the residential Murder Mystery Weekend – organised down to the last detail by staff who thought it would be a great experience to take the young people on. Every one had a role, every thing was timed, the venue booked and all arranged. The problem was that no one had considered that the young people might not fit in to this organisation, may not want to play the parts allocated to them or would not actually enjoy such an elaborate and complicated game. This was an activity in which an admirable amount of time and thought had been invested but unfortunately the underlying purpose, and the young people themselves, was forgotten. The idea had great potential and with a little more flexibility and involvement by the young people might have been a great success.

Likewise it is vital to ask if what is being offered within the programme is worthwhile or effective. For example, the regular Healthy Eating session organised over a number of years outwardly looked to be a success. In one way it was working very well. The team of workers running the sessions had them operating smoothly – the buying of the food, the setting of the menu or the involvement of young people were all outwardly 'successful'. However, while the young people could prepare the food and were able to talk about the benefits of eating it, as soon as they were finished instead of eating it they immediately went out to the local 'chippy' and bought their usual diet of chips and pasty which they brought back to the project to eat. While they had learnt about healthy eating no way were they actually going to eat the stuff. The manager pulled the plug on the session against fierce opposition from the workers involved who had got so attached to the mechanics of the session and to the weekly routine that they'd lost sight of the purpose. It was not working and better ways needed to be found that engaged the young people but which offered a purposeful outcome.

There is no off-the-shelf formula for constructing a successful programme. Care and attention to detail are vital, as is a willingness to constantly ask if what we are offering coincides with our aims as a centre or project. If it does not coincide then it probably has no place. Even the most experienced worker will include elements that fail. Too little

programming and young people don't know what we offer; too much and we become inflexible and leave no room for spontaneity or for involvement in self-education. However, if we seek to ensure the content and activities grow out of the desires and needs of the young people we are over time unlikely to go far wrong.