

THIS BOOK EXPLORED THE TENSIONS, CONNECTIONS, CONTINUITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS of teaching youth work in higher education. It does not intend to create a common vision or voice but to allow the multiplicity of visions to be heard. Similarly, while we intend that the book has some authority, presenting a multitude of perspectives in pedagogical thinking based on thorough research and tested approaches, it is not authoritative, nor does it intend to be. However, we hope that the book can serve as a point of reflection for one's own work and 'illuminate' practice.

CENTRALLY EXPLORED IS THE TENSION OF TEACHING YOUTH WORK, WHICH IS INHERENTLY spontaneous, organic, democratic and barrier breaking, and offers a counter to more formal education that has often failed young people in universities, which are formal, rule bound, elitist and with distinct hierarchies that often reinforce multiple hegemonies. Other tensions include that of defining and locating youth work, the contested terrain of teaching it, and its curriculum. We explore the degree to which youth work and youth work education has and should change as societal and governmental views and policies change. We see youth work as an ever-evolving practice, rooted in a dynamic, dialectical view of knowledge creation, and praxis that entails reflection upon the world and a commitment to act at its injustices.

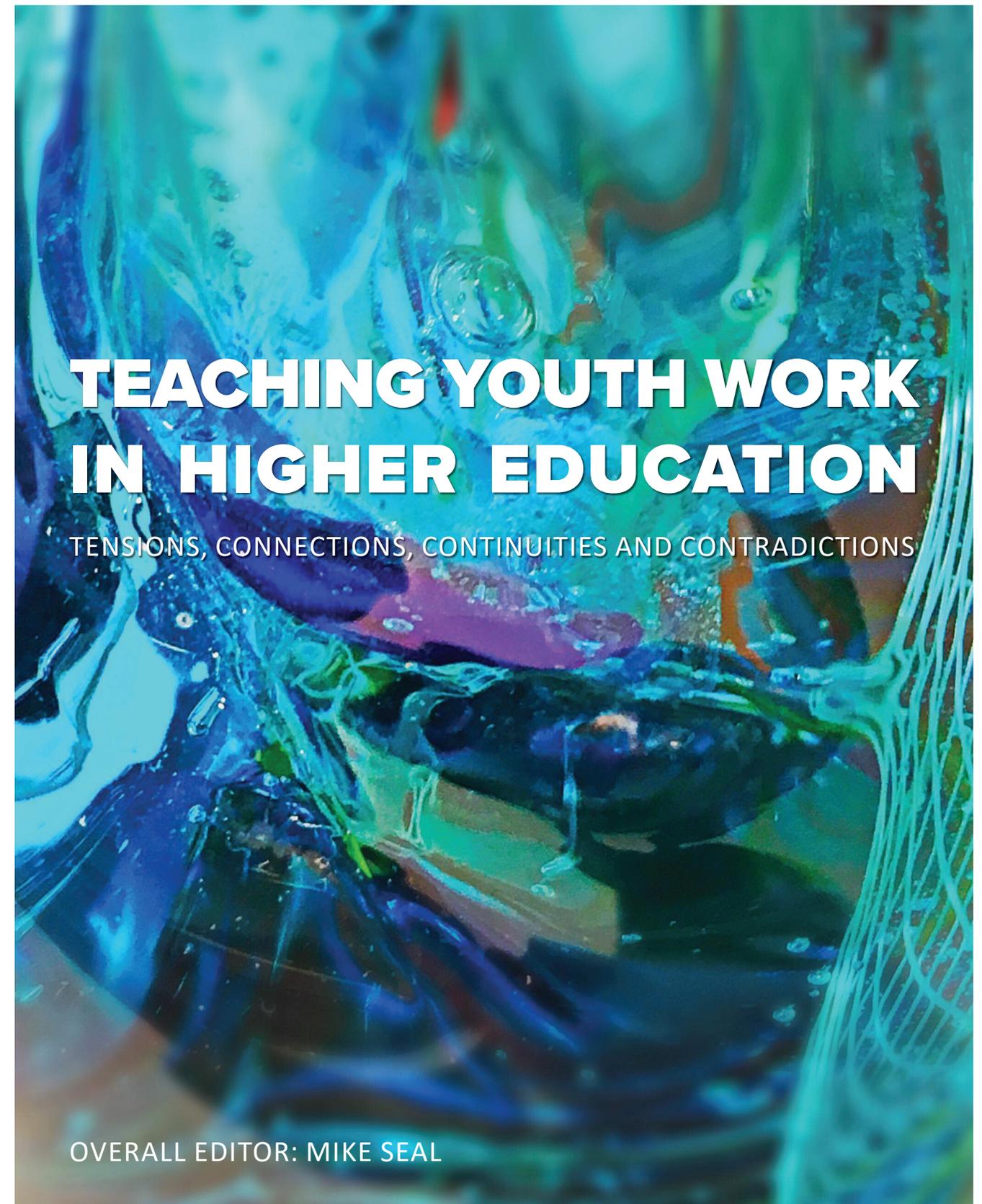
FINDING COMMON TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK WAS AT TIMES DIFFICULT. The contested centrality of critical pedagogy, while central in the UK, its Marxist roots and associations make it tainted in post-Soviet countries. In turn concepts such as social inclusion and exclusion and integration have different negative associations in the UK. In common we found a commitment to social justice, social change, and to taking an approach rooted in young people's experiential understandings of the world. Another thread running through this book is the importance of community and collectivism, contrasted with the individual and individualism underpinned by a belief that the individual flourishes best through the collective, but that the collective should not be sovereign over the individual.

AGAIN CONTESTED, DEVELOPING CULTURALLY COMPETENT YOUTH WORK WAS ONE OF THE central planks of many countries' educational approaches. In common was that youth work educators should enable youth workers to continue privileging the tapping into and building on indigenous ways of knowing, and enabling communities and young people to explore, articulate and have legitimised their understanding of their own cultures. We also conclude that rather than a focus on curriculum, we should perhaps move from privileging what we think youth and community work practitioners should know, to what practitioners should be: pedagogical practitioners.



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TEACHING YOUTH WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION



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TENSIONS, CONNECTIONS, CONTINUITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

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CONTRADICTIONS

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19 IN DEFENCE OF YOUTH WORK STORYTELLING AS METHODOLOGY AND CURRICULUM IN HEI TEACHING

P. Connaughton, T. de St Croix, P. Grace, and N. Thompson

Introduction

This chapter explores the use of storytelling as part of a curriculum and method for teaching youth work within a Higher Education environment, focusing on the In Defence of Youth Work (IDYW) storytelling process and resources. IDYW, a collective of youth work practitioners and lecturers based in the UK, has developed and undertaken a series of storytelling workshops both nationally and internationally; the process is described in their book 'This is Youth Work: Stories from Practice' (IDYW, 2011), and resources and further reflections are shared on the web resource 'Story-telling in youth work' (IDYW, 2014).

Storytelling is well regarded in certain academic fields of practice; for instance, in history, there is a long tradition of using narrative and oral history methodology to illuminate specific events; and in research informed by Critical Race Theory, narratives and testimonies are valued as an insightful method that builds on the oral traditions of cultural groups. Within the youth and community work context, storytelling is part of everyday practice in the form of (for example) case studies written up in annual reports. The IDYW approach attempts to bring rigour, criticality and collective reflection to this everyday use of stories. It builds on community philosophy adaptations of Socratic Dialogue as expressed by Sarah Banks (2013), in which complex questions are explored by a facilitated group using concrete examples.

As youth and community work lecturers, we seek to enable students to explore their practice from personal, political, philosophical and social perspectives. By using the IDYW storytelling approach in our youth and community work teaching and learning, we have created a space where participants' examples are subjected to scrutiny through peer questioning, followed by the identification, analysis and recording of fundamental principles.

In this instance, storytelling and story writing are valid methods of enquiry, methods of research, where "writing no longer merely 'captures' reality, it helps 'construct' it" (Bolton 2010: 84). This point is crucial to the overt political nature of the IDYW stories methodology. It is the very act of countering the dominant discourse, of challenging the prevailing attitudes, what Gramsci called 'hegemony'; that

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the telling and sharing of stories becomes a radical transformative act, and youth workers become Gramsci's 'organic intellectuals'.

In this chapter, we begin by setting out the political context in which youth work teaching and learning is situated, which prioritises measurable outcomes over narrative and qualitative evaluation. We then explain in more detail why IDYW was set up, and how and why the storytelling approach was developed. We then go on to explain how we and others have adapted the storytelling method in our higher education classrooms, and share a case study of how this works in practice. This is followed by a discussion on what storytelling contributes to youth and community workers' practice and academic development, as well as an acknowledgment of some key limitations and challenges. The conclusion pulls out some of the key aspects that need to be considered in using storytelling in youth and community work training and education.

Youth work in England under neo-liberalism and austerity

The UK youth work context of austerity and cuts in the years after the financial crash in 2010 was preceded by a phase of relatively generous funding in the context of strong government control. Through the 'Transforming Youth Work' policy agenda, the New Labour government (1997-2010) imposed new expectations on local authority youth services, requiring young people to achieve recorded and accredited outcomes. There were also performance indicators around issues such as reducing numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), reducing crime and anti-social behaviour and other 'negative' outcomes. As well as focusing on measurable outcomes, 'Transforming Youth Work' introduced an agenda to target certain groups of young people who were deemed as 'at risk' of social or educational exclusion. Targeting was further formalised within Every Child Matters (2003) and, particularly, Youth Matters (2005) which explicitly outlined objectives around targeted provision for addressing 'risky' behaviours. The identified target groups included young people who experienced a combination of factors such as behavioural problems; learning difficulties and disabilities; poor family support, and poverty (DfES 2007:4). Outcomes were measured through tick-box ways of recording young people's performance in accordance with certain governmental priorities such as 'improving attendance and behaviour, narrowing attainment gaps, reducing teenage pregnancy, and raising the participation age' (DCSF 2009:2).

The youth policies introduced under New Labour created a formalised targeting and outcomes culture that has prevailed under successive governments. Cooper (2012) outlines the 'neo-liberal wave' that youth work was subject to under New Labour where evaluation was focused on demonstrating 'value for money' and measuring performance. She argues that this developed into an 'evidence wave' in which impact is expected to be demonstrated through scientific facts and figures detached from the peoples and practices being evaluated. Youth work has not fared well when measured in this narrow way and the lack of scientific 'evidence' has been used as justification for the significant cuts to youth services that have occurred since 2010 in the era of austerity. Notably, the House of Commons inquiry into services for young people in 2011 emphasised a lack of scientific evidence of impact:

Despite the weight of individual testimonies, we experienced great difficulty in finding objective evidence of the impact of services... This problem plagued our investigations and was recognised by many in the youth sector itself as a historic and continuing problem. (Education Committee, 2011).

Yet youth work does not fit well with a form of evaluation through quantitative measurement (de St Croix 2018). Hansen and Crawford (2011: 78) argue that quantitative measurement distorts practice, in relation to youth work programmes in the USA:

'Social decisions that affect youth programs and youth work must not solely rely on quantitative measures ... Individuals and institutions adapt behaviours in order to meet quantitative performance standards, particularly when such performance is tied to funding.'

The current generation of youth workers have only known this context, where youth work is measured through predominantly quantitative methods. Youth work does, however, draw on forms of continuing qualitative evaluation through its focus on reflective practice and experiential learning and it is these processes that the IDYW story-telling method is borne out of. How we measure the impact of youth work affects how we define its value and how those coming into the field understand and articulate it. Therefore, those of us working in Higher Education Institutions have a moral responsibility to provide a space for youth workers in training to reflect on the core values of youth work beyond the values of the market, of return on investment, and through defining young people through their deficits rather than their potential.

In Defence of Youth Work: our cornerstones for youth work and how we use story-telling

The IDYW campaign emerged in 2009, through an open letter written and circulated by Tony Taylor in consultation with other youth workers in the UK who were critical of the status quo (IDYW, 2009). From this open letter, a collective of practitioners, lecturers and others formed to defend youth work. At this point, the New Labour government was still in power, and there was still ring-fenced funding for Youth Services at national level. It was not until 2010 that the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government came into power and implemented 'austerity localism', which led to the shrinkage and closure of Youth Services across the country. As such, IDYW did not emerge to defend youth work from cuts in funding but to defend it from the neoliberal values imposed upon both local authority Youth Services, and increasingly those in the voluntary and charities sector, which we believed were distorting and misrepresenting youth work.

The open letter and subsequent statements and papers are based on a belief in an emancipatory and democratic youth work, based on the following cornerstones (IDYW, 2009):

- the primacy of the voluntary relationship, from which the young person can withdraw without compulsion or sanction;
- a commitment to a critical dialogue, to the creation of informal educational opportunities starting from young people's agendas;
- the need to work with and encourage the growth of young people's own autonomous networks, recognising the significance of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and faith in shaping their choices and opportunities;
- the importance of valuing and attending to their here-and-now as well as to their 'transitions';
- the nurturing of a self-conscious democratic practice, tipping balances of power in young people's favour;
- the significance of the worker themselves, their room for autonomy, their ability to fashion an improvised, yet rehearsed practice.

IDYW has stood against the imposition of quantitative forms of evaluation and measurement on youth work, believing them incompatible with a practice premised on these cornerstones. At our first national conference in 2010, Bernard Davies launched 'The view from the grassroots', which aimed to provide qualitative evidence of the special impact of youth work on young people's lives and communities. While some of these stories were written up independently by young people and youth workers, the group coordinating the project and the subsequent book '*This is Youth Work: Stories from Practice*' (IDYW, 2011) found that the most productive and critically reflective method for gathering stories was – perhaps not surprisingly – based on a more collective approach. Thus began the development of IDYW story-telling workshops, in which facilitators from IDYW led workshops in which youth workers and others were encouraged to reflect on the distinctive nature of youth work through the rigorous unpicking of stories from practice.

Over 40 workshops have been held to date, and the story-telling method has been used by local authorities and community organisations in the UK as a tool for reflecting on and evaluating practice, as well as being adapted for use in Japan, Ireland, Finland, Argentina and the Czech Republic. To democratise the ability to run the workshops, we have developed a website to host resources including session plans, facilitator notes, and reflections from workshop participants and facilitators on using storytelling workshops in different settings and for diverse purposes (IDYW, 2014). Higher education institutions have been one of the key contexts for IDYW story-telling workshops, both by hosting open workshops (building on links with local youth organisations and practitioners), supporting participants to write up stories (including for *This is Youth Work*), and embedding storytelling as part of youth and community work courses. The use of storytelling as part of courses is the focus of this chapter, and we will now explain how it works in practice.

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Story-telling in Higher education

Reflective practice and the sharing of stories has long under-pinned the training of youth workers. Until recently, most youth work courses in HEIs required students to keep a reflective journal whilst in their professional placements. Telling and sharing stories is a fundamental element of reflective practice:

Effective reflective practice is the focusing upon detailed stories of practice and life, and upon the thoughts and feelings associated with the actions in them. These stories are imaginative creations drawn from experience. Seen as a set of interlocking plots, the problems, anguishes, and joys of practice become comprehensible: to be dealt with creatively and developmentally.
(Bolton 2005: 18)

The story-telling method provides learners with the opportunity to reflect on practice in the context of specific workplaces and the wider policy context. Indeed, methods of story-telling have a long history in community and youth work, where oral histories have been used as qualitative evidence that captures the spirit, essence and less tangible aspects of the work (Button 1971). This is a dialogical pedagogical approach in which learners are also educators, their own experiences forming an essential part of the learning (Freire, 1978); this potentially creates a different balance between the role of 'university teacher' and that of 'student'. Story-telling thus helps students explore how they might work within tensions and contradictions in ways which enable them to develop independent, critical educational thinking and, through this, learn how to become better decision-makers.

Our approach to the storytelling process is, as previously mentioned, rooted in Socratic dialogue and starts with the individual, what Turnbull and Mullins (2007) describe as a dialogue with the self; it requires a form of multi-perspectival thinking. Through this simple process of reflection and then sharing stories, the process becomes an active co-operative inquiry as it ensures that all those involved are co-researchers; they help to generate ideas about the issues and draw conclusions. The idea is that those involved are active co-subjects, participating with awareness, in the activity being researched and the knowledge created (Reason, 1995).

The IDYW process of using stories, of placing them at the centre of the 'experience' of open youth work, facilitates the asking of critical questions; with the aim of revealing the key elements and locations of practice of open youth work. Telling a story, answering questions, re-telling the story again and again acts as a refining process, one which enables the story being shared to be captured in writing. This process of refining stories through immediate peer review, serves to validate both the process and the practice.

IDYW story-telling workshops start from the premise that collaborative inquiry can support students in their exploration of theory and practice – from understanding what youth work is, to exploring the wider policy context, to reflecting on the 'taken for granted' nature of practice. It contributes to both their understanding and their ability to articulate the key dimensions of their work. The story-telling process can provide potential for fostering high levels of student engagement in the classroom, enabling them to reflect on their practice and explore the complexities of youth work through an examination of the 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions.

How does this work in practice? The storytelling workshop focuses on one student sharing a story from their practice, which is then unpicked and explored by the group, before reflecting on what it tells them about youth work. After agreeing ground rules for the discussion, the stories are chosen democratically; those students who have a story they would like to share give brief information about it, before the group votes on a story that will best enable them to explore the nature of practice or policy challenges. The storyteller then gives a fuller description of the story before the group ask questions and begin to unpick in depth what took place. As part of the discussion that follows, the 'IDYW cornerstones' may be used to discuss makes youth work distinct from other forms of practice with young people. Students working or on placement in youth work settings have been enabled to articulate the key components of youth work: the skills, knowledge, values and ethics, and process which together form its distinctness as a practice. Those in a multidisciplinary team or integrated agency, where there is a lack of understanding of what distinguishes youth work as a professional practice, have felt better able to articulate the distinctive nature of youth work.

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A case study of story-telling on a youth work course

What follows is a 'real life' extract from a story-telling workshop that took place in a university setting where the interrogation of a student's experience of open-access youth work provided evidence, beyond anecdote, of important practice experiences. What emerged was a first-hand account of opportunities for young people to share their concerns and interests, as the youth worker (story-teller) demonstrated the importance of conversation and open dialogue embedded in an appreciation of the importance of context. Similar to Button's (1971) concern for student learning, this workshop came about because of the tutor's observation that, though students were receiving inputs of knowledge,

ideas and theoretical concepts, these were not always being internalised, giving rise to a concern that attitudes and ways of working were not being affected.

Unpicking the story

The story-teller was a student on a university youth and community work course who had worked with a local youth group for many years. The story focused on an experience of an open-access youth club residential. The story-teller described how the young people often sat and chatted with the youth workers around a campfire during such events. One young person, 'Joe', had been coming to the group for a number of years, and one night at the residential the youth worker was to learn much more about his concerns. As part of an ongoing conversation with the youth worker, when nobody else was around, Joe told her about domestic abuse he was experiencing at home. Below are extracts from the discussion after the story about the residential was told.

Story-teller: Residential are good because we can build strong relationships, there's opportunity for discussion – informal ones – whatever young people want to talk about. On one occasion, a young man, 'Joe', told me about domestic abuse and how once it ruined Christmas in their house.

Respondent 1: What difference does a residential bring to the relationship between youth workers and young people that any other setting would not, which meant Joe wanted to share his concerns with you?

Story-teller: I don't know, it's just different – we planned for a campfire at the end of each night – it's an opportunity to talk to each other; I think that's really important for getting to know the people you are with, and building on bonds started in the club.

Respondent 1: What do you think helped Joe to open up to you when he had never done this before?

Story-teller: It's the space, it's the environment, it's relaxing, pleasant... [pause] I think it's this that provides young people with a sense of escape, to offload in a relaxed space with people they trust, as Joe did.

Facilitator: But why do you think Joe specifically chose to tell you? What is it that your practice brings that assured him he could open up to you?

Story-teller: I have known him since he started coming to the club a few years ago. I recently helped him with his application for university when he said that he thought it was pointless putting in for it when he wouldn't be accepted. He didn't have the belief in himself but over a few weeks I encouraged him and reassured him of his abilities. Sometimes I just sat with him while he sat at the office computer looking at courses on the web. And, in the end, Joe made the decision himself to go to university.

Respondent 2: How did you encourage and reassure him besides sitting with him?

Story-teller: Oh, you know, just talking, listening and responding to him – I suppose I reassured him he could come and talk to me anytime he wanted to... [pause] Joe knew that I wouldn't share his worries with others because we discussed it – he didn't want his friends or anybody else knowing about his 'problems'. I had to respect his decision on this, although I did say there might also be other professionals who could help him, too.

Respondent 3: So would you say conversation between you both had been the result of building trust over previous encounters?

Story-teller: Yes, but also, I think it's the fact that he chooses to come along and isn't forced – so it's a different kind of relationship to, say, a teacher or his parents. We just talk and chat about things that young people want to – in Joe's case, it has been about university and then recently his disclosure about domestic violence.

Facilitator: What approach did you take to having a conversation with Joe that was perhaps different to a teacher's?

Story-teller: I'm not saying that teachers don't do good work and support young people, but as a youth worker I'm mindful that young people, once they have your trust, will open up to you. It's because once they know you they see you as an equal. It's not about telling them what to do, what to wear, but about conversation and from that change happens within themselves – like Joe did – he's now at university and he still comes to the club as a volunteer. It might be because it gets him out of the house, but I think it's because he likes being around other people and getting involved in activities he might not have done otherwise.

This 'unpicking' would be followed by a wider group discussion which could, for example, focus on the extent to which the story represents IDYW's cornerstones of youth work. While some of the richness and subtlety of this discussion is inevitably lost in the writing down of these short extracts, we want to highlight the role of the storyteller in sharing practice and (through the process of questioning) becoming more articulate and reflective about the role of the residential, of youth work generally, and of their own role. We would also emphasise the collective and collaborative role of fellow students in asking questions (perhaps akin to what they might do as supervisors), and the active role of the facilitator – in this case, the lecturer/tutor – in modelling the asking of questions and enabling the group to unpick practice in more depth.

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Impact of story-telling on students' understanding of youth work

As Davies (2005) argues in *Youth Work: A Manifesto for our Times*, youth work has a number of essential features that distinguish it from other practices. In particular, the narrative above demonstrates the unpredictability of youth work, as the storyteller described an 'incidental moment' when Joe disclosed to her his concerns whilst on a residential. At the start of the story-telling process the youth worker describes how Joe found a place to offload his worries because the campfire created a fun environment that was a safe place for him. However, as the story was unpicked it became evident that this could have only happened because the youth worker had already built up a strong relationship with Joe and that her practice demonstrated the importance of starting with a conversation. It is through the unpicking of the story that the storyteller was able to recognise that her focus on practice demonstrated the value of her work from Joe's point of view.

It became evident that this could have only happened because the youth worker had already built up a strong relationship. The youth worker assessed Joe's situation without being judgmental of his home life or telling him what he should do, and whilst she did not share information with other professionals, the focus was on getting Joe to move beyond his present situation by encouraging him to be more outward-looking. In this sense, the storyteller was able to link the importance of association and

of fostering supportive relationships in a youth club that provides a space for young people like Joe, to being around other people and getting involved in activities they might not have done otherwise.

At the end of storytelling workshops it is useful to ask students to reflect on their learning. Some examples of student reflections are included here:

I am now more aware of some of the important things, such as details of the 'soft skills' that I use in practice that can easily be missed from my reflective recordings.

The use of the story-telling model allowed certain aspects of youth work to be described in more depth, and gave underlying meaning as to how youth workers use different 'tactics' to engage young people in order to gain their trust.

Listening to the story helped me to understand that youth work is a process and sometimes can be slow or fast, and that every story doesn't have to have a happy ending to demonstrate that it was youth work that was taking place.

Conclusion

Storytelling is a particularly productive method to use as part of youth and community work education. It enables a collective approach to unpicking practice, and emphasises the unpredictable and process-oriented nature of youth work. Through using story-telling methods in our own classrooms, we believe that this method can be adapted for a variety of purposes: reflecting on placement and workplace experiences; developing skills in reflective practice; exploring professional dilemmas in practice; experimenting with storytelling as a method of monitoring and evaluation; developing students as supportive and challenging colleagues and supervisors; and as part of assessment (for example, the placement portfolio could also incorporate a storytelling assessment). As well as telling and discussing stories, educators can use existing stories – such as those in the IDYW book, *This is Youth Work: Stories from Practice* – to explore issues without a focus on one particular student's practice.

We finish by clarifying that we do not suggest the IDYW storytelling method is an 'ideal' method of reflection or evaluation. There are a number of challenges and limitations; like all education and youth work, the 'success' of a storytelling workshop is unpredictable. In particular, the facilitator (whether tutor or student) needs to be skilled in maintaining momentum, pushing the storyteller to unpick the 'taken for granted' aspects of practice, and encouraging rigorous yet supportive questioning. Storytelling works best in a 'safe' yet challenging space, and ground rules or a group agreement are essential in clarifying (for example) issues of confidentiality, and discussing the nature of questioning that is not intended to criticise the storyteller but that will nevertheless push them to consider aspects they had not previously had space to think about. Overall, we believe that storytelling can play an important role in youth work education – encouraging students to reflect on and articulate the special nature of their role as professionals in a challenging context.

Resources

See story-tellinginyouthwork.com for free sample session plans, facilitator notes, example stories, and reflections from workshop participants and facilitators.

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