

1

How to Use This Book

‘Informal Education’ is an educational practice which can occur in a number of settings, both institutional and non-institutional. It is a practice undertaken by committed practitioners. It may also be engaged in—at the margins of their activities—by other professionals, such as teachers, nurses and social workers. Most professional informal educators are not described in this way in job titles or job descriptions. Instead, job titles are associated with a particular client group. Common terms include: community education; community learning; lifelong learning; mentoring; social pedagogy; popular education; youth and community work; project work and youth engagement. The term ‘non-formal learning’ is also used in the context of European debates, as are the terms ‘social pedagogue’ and ‘animateur’, and these people engage in the same practice as youth and community workers. As I have been teaching for many years in the context of the professional training and education of youth and community workers, I refer interchangeably to youth and community workers, youth workers and informal educators.

This book addresses questions of power, recognition and redistribution indirectly but persistently. In particular, themes concerning gender, sexuality and race discrimination and social class will be found throughout the book and particularly draw on examples from urban contexts in which I have worked. These themes are interwoven in a framework in which informal learning as conversation is discussed.

Part One, ‘Whose Agenda?’ offers a framework for the social, political and personal reflection to be undertaken at the beginning of any informal education project. Part Two, ‘Getting to Know Young People’, follows the agenda set by Bernard Davies’ *Youth Work: A Manifesto for Our Times* in addressing the questions: Who are these young people? Why are *they* here? Why are *they here?* (Davies, 2005). Part Three, ‘Getting Deeper’, explores a range of themes and contexts for informal learning which characteristically engage practitioners and young people once the initial periods of boundary-setting and testing-out is over. It might be called ‘the middle period’ of conversations, and is the heart of practice. The final part of the book, ‘Unfinished Conversations’ suggests some of the ways in which the practice of informal education overlaps with therapy on the one hand and community development and civic engagement on the other. These chapters enable reflection on the ways in

2 Informal Learning in Youth Work

which the everyday elements of informal learning have sometimes been implicated in profound personal social and political transformations. Each section ends with points for reflection for students and practitioners.

This book should not necessarily be read in order. It can be read by jumping about in it and finding the sections which hold the most interest for particular readers or sections on particular aspects of youth and community work training courses. The early chapters are rather more theoretical than many of the later ones and readers new to the subject of youth and community work might do better to read some of the later chapters first. Every chapter has a series of key points at the beginning and end and a set of suggestions for further reading which guide the reader, as well as examples from practice to reflect on. Some are long and accompanied by a commentary. Others are brief snapshots to spark ideas.

Part one: whose agenda?

The early chapters of the book concern work that needs to be undertaken at the beginning point of the cycle of engagement in youth and community work, and which will be returned to over and over again. Chapter 2 on 'Informal Learning and Informal Education' makes clear the basic understanding of youth work, conversation and empowerment which informs the book.

Chapter 3, 'Identity, Identity Politics and Rights', focuses attention on the significance of identity both as a theme of adolescence and as a highly politicised term which draws our attention to issues of power and the struggle for justice and recognition. This chapter offers an introduction to the subject of 'identity politics' and why it matters to youth and community work and an introduction to the idea of rights-based practice.

Chapter 4 on discourses of 'Social Inclusion and Exclusion' considers in depth the ways in which public policy—in particular social policy, education policy and criminal justice—has an impact on the work of youth and community workers. It offers a detailed analysis of how current policy discourses are operating. It encourages committed practitioners to take up a position of critical dialogue with those policies and offers some directions as to how this might be done.

Chapter 5 is concerned with reflective practice and how youth and community workers working in the context of diversity might use critical and reflective practice as a method for developing their work. This chapter presents an in-depth case study using the Johari window as a method of analysing the work of a diverse team of women educators working with Black young men.

Part two: getting to know young people

This section is concerned with what happens near the beginning of engagement in youth and community work.

Chapter 6, 'Understanding Young People', offers a discussion of some theoretical frameworks for understanding the term 'youth' and suggests ways in which

youth workers need to consider the life stage and life context of the people they are working with as they begin the work. It offers a number of resources for doing this.

Chapter 7, 'Boundaries in Practice', discusses the meaning of this term both in the lives of young people and in the work of the professional youth and community worker, who very often has to establish professional boundaries and safe space for the work. This chapter also discusses the practice of 'positive action' in challenging boundaries which limit and restrict particular groups of young people.

Chapter 8, 'It's Boring', is about some significant starting points for engaging youth work conversations. It offers examples of conversational repertoires, of starting points in discontent, dissatisfaction and disrespect. This chapter considers how youth and community workers respond to prejudice, put-downs and wind-ups among groups of young people.

Part three: getting deeper

The chapters in this section are attempts to convey some of what happens once relationships are established and the informal learning is really happening.

Chapter 9 looks specifically at the creation of closed groups, particularly identity-based groups of various kinds—cultural groups, gender groups, faith groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans groups—and explores possible rationales for such groups and the ways youth and community workers have developed them.

Chapter 10 considers the importance of voluntary relationship in informal learning and the nature of the relationship between the youth worker and young person as a source for learning about other aspects of negotiation, agency and competence in adult life. Youth work as a practice of accompaniment and of respectful relationship is discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 11 is concerned with the role of friendship in the practice of youth and community work. The question of professionalism and the nature and purpose of professional boundaries is also discussed here.

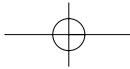
Chapter 12 develops the theme of the work of youth and community workers as 'animateurs' by focusing specifically on the role of imagination and creativity (rooted in play) in practice and drawing on examples and case studies from arts-based work.

Part four: unfinished conversations

In the final section, the book opens up discussion of directions in which both youth and community workers and young people may be led, which may go beyond some of the limits of professional practice and engage in wider conversations, both personal and political.

Chapter 13 considers the experience of silencing and being silenced in conversation. It focuses on youth work responses to bullying, to anger and self-destructive behaviour, to attempted suicide and to death and loss.

Chapter 14 explores the theme of silence from the other side: as a place of solitude, solidarity and delight. This chapter considers the place of outdoor education in



4 Informal Learning in Youth Work

youth work as well as offering insights into the contribution of models of spiritual development to youth work practice. It investigates the difference between loneliness and solitude, and the place of faith-based practice.

Chapter 15 explores the theme of democracy and participation and suggests that the models of citizenship and citizen participation on which youth workers may draw are highly contested. Nevertheless, the opportunity to make the links between the personal and political, the local and the global is significant and is offered to youth workers by participation programmes.

Chapter 16 investigates the politics of 'community cohesion' and offers a number of alternative models drawn from international contexts for ways of exploring the issues of commonality and difference in communities divided by histories of migration, of racism and of war.

