

REFLECTIONS ON NON-FORMAL LEARNING

Residential training courses took many short breaks during the global pandemic in 2020-2021. Travel restrictions, limitations of the number of people in the same room made a turn in how learning is happening. Many organisations, educators and learners explored online learning opportunities, yet also many of us kept looking back (or forward) to contact-learning. In summer 2021 together with international partners we have decided to use the temporary lift of restrictions and implement an international learning mobility of youth workers – a 7-day residential training course “Facilitation of learning in international youth projects”*. With this article we want to share some insights on international learning mobility post-covid and reflect on the importance of being together and having unstructured time for the learning process. This article is based on the literature review, the ideas from the participants of an international residential training course, the reflections of trainers. 24 people took part in the study by participating in a focus group, through individual interviews or providing their opinions in a written form. One of the focus groups was conducted 6 months after the residential training course – in order to assess the impact of the project and what are the learning outcomes that remain with the participants therefore can be considered as most relevant.

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How informal is informal learning?

For many years learning continuum was described through distribution into formal, non-formal, and informal. Many authors claim that the division began with the work of Coombs and Ahmed who prepared clarification and descriptions for the parts of educational system. Coombs and Ahmed wrote: "Formal education as used here is, of course, the highly institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured "education system", spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university. <...> Nonformal education <...> is any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children. <...> Informal education as used here is the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play; from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally, informal education is unorganized and often unsystematic; yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person's total lifetime learning – including that of even a highly 'schooled' person" (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974, p. 8) [1]

While having a clear division is great and makes life easier in understanding what is what, but the division, created in 1974, is rather simplistic and suggests organised learning activities can be either formal or non-formal. At the same time it seems that informal learning is something that just happens in daily life. In the frame of international learning mobility this means that informal learning also encompasses all the activities that are happening during a residential training course - may it be traveling, living together, any given conversations, any activities that are happening outside of the planned learning programme. Here is the question that is important ask: is informal learning really uncontrolled and unstructured when it is happening in the residential training programme? Or the whole experience of 5-9 days of living together should be taken as a planned and structured learning activity? The practitioners know it very well - a lot of learning, especially intercultural learning, will happen through having a coffee together or sharing a room with someone. Therefore we can also claim that in a residential training course, a lot of out of the programme activities (informal learning) becomes somewhat of a controlled activity – through planned space and time for the interaction of participants.

[1] Coombs, P. H. and Ahmed, M. (1974) *Attacking Rural Poverty: How non-formal education can help*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Spaces -> relationships -> learning

Physical being together outside of the programme is considered an important aspect that makes the learning experience rich and contributes to a learning-suitable atmosphere: *“Free-time activities and living together are important for creating the more comfortable, open for sharing environment”*, says Andrej. In the focus group with a 6-month gap, when asked what they remember from the training course, the group double-checks if I mean *“content-wise”*. Since it is an open question and all the answers are correct, Costas tells his memories from the training course: *“I remember the landscape and the place of the training course was amazing. <...> I remember the house, the pond, the green, the walks. <...> I remember playing ping-pong. <...> There were really young people, we were not-so-young people. We were fine. We were having conversations. There was no big difference. <...> I didn't get bored any time. So I enjoyed not only the training, but the coffee, the lunch, the walks.”* (Costas) In the story from Costas, the physical space aspect is also interlinked with being together / relationship building during the programme and outside of it. He talks about the diversity of the group and after half a year it is still something that stayed with him.

“our own reality”

It was underlined by the participants of the study that to live together was very important for their learning experience. It could be a result of the global pandemic and the fact that many of us were restricted physical contact with other people for over a year, therefore physically staying together became a big hit. In a residential training course, learning extends outside of the pre-planned programme and takes different shapes that are formed by the group of participants. Although before that happens, a separate space for the group of learners contributes to disconnecting from the outer-world: *“What excites me the most is the whole surrounding that I have during the projects. So starting with living in the middle of nowhere or in a kinda closed environment where from the morning till the evening you have some things going on. So you live like... Like a small community. You have your own reality there basically. Already this idea kinda excites me.”* (Maria) What is interesting is that participants are talking about their own reality, which shows a sense of ownership of the processes that are going on throughout the training course. It is their own and it is created through being and learning together, through building a temporary community of learners that has its own unique ways of working.

Extended learning

In a residential training course learning extends and the participants are taking the content-related topics outside of the programme to deepen it, to reflect: *„I love those like we have trainers of midnight or something like that. 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“*, shares Anita. Of course, this type of learning requires a high motivation, openness to learning and high reflectivity of the participants. As Maria says, *„things happen 24/7 and if you're open to the learning process then you can learn from anything.“* (Maria). Daniel also speaks about a deeper immersion into learning: *„I feel very tired at the end of the day and I try to make up my mind to do something different. Go out or talk to people but even talking with people is an education and learning process. Because I hear a lot of stories and a lot of problems or conflicts people have and how they resolved it or I share and then they tell me. And then I feel yes, you did it in the right way or you did it in wrong. Ok, next time you will change it. Makes me think a lot.“* (Daniel) It is interesting that the participants are taking their learning to another level themselves – it is their free time that they chose to spend with the other learners who made a commitment to be here, to bring the topics that are important to them and to deepen their knowledge or gain experience that is the most relevant to each individual. In this case for the educators and the organisers of the training activities it is important to give up the control of the time and to give the space. To not overcrowd the programme and to let the participants take their learning into their own hands instead of imposing an extra workshop that is defined by the educators. This strategy might not be understood by the participants with extensive formal education experience or have an expectation of all the learning (teaching) will come from the educators and the pre-set programme. Our recommendation is to be patient, talk to participants about voluntary participation and self-directed learning. The people will come around. If not in your activity – in some other one.

Beyond professional development

It is interesting that in a residential training course we can say that the learning is limited in time and space – the duration of the training course and the location of it. At the same time it is unlimited by the programme that is provided by the educators or the working hours. Let's say learning experience is limited by time and space – one location [2] creates the opportunity of full immersion into the learning: *„Because you have time of one week when the learning happens 24/7. Well, whenever you're not sleeping basically. This is the surrounding where I can learn in any situation <...> even in the coffee breaks things happen and sometimes they are more important than [the programme]“* (Maria). What Maria talks about is again the full alert to learning and reflectivity. When we look at the definition of informal learning, we see that it is something that happens in daily life. But it only becomes a learning outcome if it is acknowledged and understood which comes through reflection. In this case it is important to accept that the learning outcomes might not be fully connected to the topic of the course. Initially international training courses are meant for the youth work professionals or volunteers to develop or strengthen the competencies needed for their work with young people. Although it is very important to take into consideration that because a lot of learning is happening through relationships that are built during the programme and outside of the learning programme, the social aspect and personal development part is very important to the learners. Many research participants noted that this is something that they appreciate about learning mobility: *“For me it is the fact of the openness and flexibility. We don't go by the book: “today we're learning this specific topic.” And once we leave the room we know it at least in theory. But you never know what you will learn or how you will learn it and you can easily do it by... You know... Staying outside of the exercise or being present in the exercise but 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. And with the formal education there is no room for this flexibility“* (Diana). Diana is underlining the openness of non-formal learning in terms of ones own responsibility to take learning and use the opportunities to find out things about the topic, others, yourself. By raising the awareness of the participants on learning and reflectivity, it is possible to reach a big diversity of learning outcomes, may it be planned or unplanned ones.

[2] The location can also be extended by introducing online learning environments, but in the research that we conducted, the online spaces were not discussed, therefore they are not included into this reflection.

The learning that *just happens*

Aside from taking the learning, forming it yourself, another interesting and rather important process is happening – the realisation of ones own learning that comes later than the actual activity happens: *“I think when you are in a non-formal education activity, you are not really learning... <...> It just happens and then you get a question about what you have done. It's not that you have something to read first. <...> I don't think that I'm learning, but I'm learning. I'm just enjoying, I do things, I'm just enjoying them and at the end you realise that you are enjoying and learning. And you learn more, because you are sharing with other people what they are learning. And sometimes they see things that you didn't realise. <...> my feeling was that I'm just enjoying my time, but I came back with a lot of things in my mind and a lot of energy and a lot of ideas what to do.”* (Costas) This fascination with learning and the outcomes of it can be connected with many aspects of non-formal education. First of all – the interactive nature of it, the methodology that is based on experiential learning and game pedagogy, the interaction of the participants – learning through a relationship and many more. This takes the attention away of the traditional / common understanding and expectation of what education needs to be – monotonic in activities, heavy on the content, cognitive and based on individual work with text and/or listening to someone giving the correct answers.

To answer the question raised at the beginning of this reflective text, the participants of international learning mobility activities do not distinguish the learning into non-formal and informal. The learning during the sessions and outside of the pre-planned programme is valued equally therefore physically being together enriches learning: it makes it broader - participants can have unplanned learning outcomes and deeper – participants discuss and reflect on the sessions after the “official” programme is over. It's important that the educators are aware of many conditions and situations in which learning can happen and utilise them for the educational purposes.