

# A curriculum for youth work

## The experience of the English youth service

For the past 20 years, youth services in England have increasingly articulated their work in terms of curriculum, yet youth work academics have consistently maintained that a youth work curriculum is anathema. This paper argues that youth work necessarily has a curriculum; however, it is not the formal school curriculum, nor is it explicitly focused on either the efficient transmission of knowledge or the successful achievement of pre-specified outcomes, rather it is based on the 'process' of learning. The explicit articulation of the process of youth work through a curriculum promotes and sustains its unique practice against the external threats of unfavourable government policy. While the curriculum debate is unique to the English youth services, it is believed that it offers important lessons for the articulation of youth work in other settings.

by Jon Ord

**T**he purpose of this paper is to present some of the recent research undertaken into curriculum in the English youth service, in the hope that it will be of interest and value to Australian colleagues in their conceptualisation of youth work practice.<sup>1</sup>

This is not a paper about youth work in Australia per se. It is a paper about a solution to a problem which youth work in England has struggled with, as well as some of the lessons learned from that struggle. It is acknowledged that youth work in England, and the UK as a whole, varies from that in Australia. For example, there are some acknowledged differences in relation to professional identity, codes of ethics and the accreditation of youth work training (Bessant 2004) in that these aspects of youth work are reasonably well established in the UK, while the efficacy of all three is debated in Australia. In addition, there are also some key differences in how youth work is articulated. For example, the emphasis on the primary client is strong in Australia (Sercombe 1997, 1998; YACVic 2004) while the notion of "client" would be frowned upon in the UK, as it tends to be the sole preserve of social work.

There are also, however, important similarities. In both settings there are competing claims as to the theoretical basis of youth work – in Australia between the liberal and radical perspectives (White 1990), and in the UK between informal and social education (Jefferies & Smith 2006; Bradford 2005). What is probably the case, however, is that the similarities both within the competing perspectives in each setting, as well as between the UK and Australian context, probably outweigh the differences. However,

whether or not this is the case does not undermine the central objectives of this paper. What is important for this paper, and what also unites the two contexts, are the increasing effects of managerialism and the impact on youth workers of pressure to achieve “outcomes” with young people. This is evident in the UK (Ord 2004a, 2004b, 2007) and in Australia (Bessant, Sercombe & Watts 1998). The problem of curriculum arises out of this demand for outcomes, and the lessons learned from the resolution of the “problem of curriculum” are, therefore, at least potentially transferable to the Australian context.

## The problem of curriculum

Explicit use of curriculum in relation to youth work in the UK does not have a long history. The first reference to the term appears to come from Ewen (1975) who suggested it might be a useful concept for framing the work undertaken in youth clubs; however, little interest ostensibly resulted from his suggestion. The “sea change” in relation to curriculum occurred in 1989 when, shortly after the introduction of the 1988 Education Act and the imposition of a national curriculum for schools, the Thatcher government attempted to introduce a similar concept for youth work. Alan Howarth, MP, then attempted to introduce (or impose) a core curriculum for youth work (National Youth Agency (NYA) 1992; National Youth Bureau (NYB) 1990, 1991) via a series of three ministerial conferences.

Although Howarth was largely unsuccessful in his primary task of obtaining agreement on a national “core curriculum” and establishing the “outcomes” of youth work, the final conference generated an expectation that individual local government youth services would produce their own locally agreed curriculum. The National Youth Agency was then tasked with the job of supporting and guiding this process (NYA 1995). From the early nineties, therefore, youth services in the UK have articulated their work in terms of curriculum.

How youth work moved from a position of not having, or at least not appearing to need, a curriculum to one in which youth work explicitly articulates its work in terms of a curriculum requires some explanation. First, an important factor in the resistance to curriculum

during the period of the ministerial conferences related to the perceived “imposition” of curriculum, and indeed the majority of delegates at the first conference expressed a desire for “ownership” of any core curriculum (NYB 1990).

Furthermore, as Newman & Ingram’s (1989) research showed, when youth workers, independent of any government imposition, were asked both what they thought a youth work curriculum was, and to develop a locally agreed youth work curriculum, they had no problems expressing their practice in terms of curriculum. It is argued that during the 1990s the curriculum moved from being implicit to explicit (Davies 2005a).

An important context for this paper could, therefore, be described as: “The ever widening gap between youth work theory and youth work practice [in England]” (Ord 2007, p.xii). On the one hand, youth workers in the field of statutory youth services in England continue to utilise curriculum within their work, while, on the other hand, informal educators argue that curriculum is anathema to youth work (Jeffs 2004; Stanton 2004; Robertson 2004; Smith 1988; Jeffs & Smith 2005). This sets up a dilemma: either curriculum is incompatible with youth work, and youth work in England is itself becoming an approximation of formal education, or informal education has erroneously objected to curriculum in youth work.

In order to find a resolution to this dilemma, objections to curriculum in youth work must first be addressed. The following quote exemplifies the main objections:

Informal education is, thus, not curriculum based. It is driven by conversation and informed by certain values (Jeffs & Smith 2005, p.78)

The first reason implied, within this objection, is that as a result of the spontaneity of engagement in conversation with young people, youth work cannot have a curriculum. This objection is problematic, however, as conversation-based learning, involving open dialogue and discussion, is not incompatible with a curriculum. It is only incompatible with certain types of “product based” curricula, which are characterised by definable inputs and outcomes

that the educator is attempting to achieve with the participants. This model of curriculum, based on the “transmission of specified content” (Kelly 2005), is clearly inappropriate for youth work. However, there is an alternative notion of curriculum – the process approach (which will be explained shortly) – which is not opposed to the development of conversation. Jeffs and Smith’s (2005) particular objection is, therefore, not sustainable.

The other objection to curriculum is based on “values”; Jeffs and Smith (2005) presumably argue that as our interventions are guided by our values, they cannot be specified in any detail prior to an engagement. However, values, it is argued here, do not preclude curriculum, on the contrary they actually imply it.

The values of informal education are broad and general, Jeffs and Smith describe them as:

- respect for persons
- the promotion of wellbeing
- truth
- democracy
- fairness and equality (2005, p.95).

However, as Banks (2001, p.64) suggests, they could be said to be the fundamental values of any liberal democracy. These values therefore tell us very little about what informal educators actually do in their educational practice.

Also, importantly, because we live in a pluralist society, disagreement exists in relation to values. As a consequence, youth work values need to be made more specific and articulated through a curriculum, otherwise youth work is beholden to the mere whim of the individual practitioner.

The example of gender illustrates this point. Unless gender is explicitly incorporated into a curriculum framework, it is unlikely that a collective commitment to address young people’s (as well as our own) “gendered lives” can be harnessed. As Spence rightly points out, “gender questions cannot be fully addressed unless they become part of an integrated (youth work) curriculum” (1990, p.69). This point is acknowledged from within the Australian context, where Bessant and Evans argue that “issues relating to gender” (1996, p.34) need to be addressed in the training of youth workers. In short, where is

the formal commitment to anti-sexism without a curriculum that specifies it?

It would appear that the arguments offered by informal educators against a curriculum for youth work are untenable and that informal education is only incompatible with certain “types” of curricula and not with curricula per se. Indeed, to oppose curricula completely is tantamount to saying that, as an educator, one has no agenda and takes no responsibility for the facilitation of the young people’s learning.

Therefore, it is evident that youth work cannot avoid the notion of curriculum, but the question remains: “What type of curriculum is appropriate?” In order to begin to answer this question, we must apply curriculum theory. The most appropriate of which, for youth work, is that proposed by Lawton (1996) and Kelly (2005). They conceptualise curriculum in three categories:

- content
- product
- process.

### Curriculum as content

Curriculum as content, or as it is traditionally known, curriculum as “syllabus”, is potentially problematic for youth work, as youth work does not have a “set curriculum” or a syllabus to follow. Indeed, if it did, it would fall victim to the objection offered by Jeffs and Smith (2005) that it produced an educational setting that was not based on conversation, but on the passive transmission of knowledge as represented in the “banking” analogy of education (Freire 1972).

However, to maintain that youth work has no content appears to be untenable. It does have an “agenda”, which can be made explicit, as we saw with the example of gender. This sets up a subsequent dilemma in that youth work clearly needs to specify its content, but a transmissible syllabus is inappropriate.

This dilemma is resolved by the establishment of “content areas”. In formal educational terminology these would be articulated in what Curzon (1990) refers to as an “outline or general syllabus” as opposed to a “specific syllabus”. Thus the content areas broadly categorise the kinds of areas that youth workers would be expected to have conversations about. Hampshire County Council Youth Service in England describes

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its content areas as “the priority areas of skills, knowledge and understanding” (2003, p.11). Content areas broadly describe or categorise the issues or concerns that are likely to underpin the educational engagements of youth workers, but do not tie workers to the manner in which they are addressed, or specify outcomes in relation to them.

Indeed this is how the majority of curriculum documents from youth services in England and Wales express their content (Ord 2007), and it is also the method recommended by the NYA (NYA 1995; Merton & Wylie 2002). An example of this categorisation can be found in the “key themes” from Nottingham City Youth Service’s (2003) Curriculum Framework, which include: inclusion, personal development, citizenship, environment, creative expression, sports and adventure, health and wellbeing, and family and relationships.

#### Curriculum as product

Curriculum as product is the second theoretical approach to curriculum (Lawton 1996; Kelly 2005). It is characterised by the setting of specific learning objectives, and it involves conceptualising curriculum exclusively in terms of planning, delivery and achievement of preset objectives, as the following quote by Hirst, an advocate of product curriculum, makes clear:

If what it is we want to achieve is first indicated in expressions of great generality, these need to be unpacked into much more specific terms or little positive guidance is provided for educational purpose. To be of value we must eventually analyse these ends down to particular achievements we wish pupils to reach, detailed enough for us to be able to judge how to promote these (1974).

This is the most dominant approach to curriculum, certainly in England, and perhaps in many other places as well. In fact it is so dominant that it is often assumed that it is the only conception of curriculum (Jeffs 2004). As Grundy points out, the product approach is “the gospel according to curriculum” (1987, p.1).

The product approach, with its familiar emphasis on session plans and “intended learning outcomes”, is becoming, in England at least, ever more present (Ord 2007). This approach also characterised the attempts to impose a curriculum (initially during the

ministerial conferences) and more recently through the specification of curriculum within the UK government’s Transforming Youth Work policy (Department of Education and Skills (DfES) 2002). The following quote, with its striking similarity to Hirst’s original explanation, exemplifies this approach:

Such broad goals need to be expressed in a set of more specific outcomes if they are to be helpful in the planning and in practice. The more clearly we can specify the ends, the better we will be able to choose the means for achieving them (DfES 2002, p.11).

#### Curriculum as process

The third theoretical approach to curriculum, the process curriculum approach, is founded on opposition to the “means–ends”, “product model” of curriculum. It does not regard it as either desirable or possible to deliver a curriculum by planning for the achievement of specific objectives. Its starting point is a rejection of this “technocratic” approach to learning. It is in part founded on the following argument:

- Knowledge is inherently controversial and contains opposing viewpoints.
- Knowledge as an educational end point therefore involves individuals coming to their own understanding based on a synthesis of those opposing views.
- The eventual outcomes therefore will be indeterminate at the outset.
- As a result no objectives can be set meaningfully in advance.
- On this basis, therefore, the curriculum must be based on the ‘process’ by which the students can best be facilitated in the acquiring of knowledge and understanding of the topic in question.

(Stenhouse 1975, cited in Ord 2007, p.33)

The process curriculum has two primary theoretical strands:

- child-centred curriculum (Rousseau 1762; Dewey 1900, 1916, 1938)
- principles of procedure (Stenhouse 1975).

The child-centred curriculum, originally derived from Rousseau (1762), is a primary theoretical strand of the process curriculum. In

many ways the child-centred or, in youth work's case, the young-person-centred curriculum, can, according to Ross (2000), still be traced to four of Rousseau's original five principles:

- children will develop naturally, given a suitable environment
- children's development is best self-directed
- subject/discipline divisions are artificial
- the role of the teacher is to enable learning, not to transmit knowledge (p.138).

The child-centred curriculum is consistent with the accepted notion in youth work of "starting where young people are at", and this is echoed by a number of curriculum documents produced in England. For example, Leicester Youth Service's curriculum document concurs that the "young person-centred approach is central to the youth work process whatever the context" (2003, p.10). The service also suggests that this approach is exemplified by a commitment to:

- active responsive listening
- recognising and respecting the importance of young people's experience and how it shapes their lives; not being judgmental
- acknowledging their capacity to think and act for themselves and their peers in a responsible way
- valuing young people even when, at times, their behaviour is unacceptable
- allowing young people to set the pace
- being interested in their lives and wanting to spend time with them
- enjoying their company and having fun together (Leicester Youth Service 2003, p.10).

Two of Davies' nine principles in his manifesto (Davies 2005b) also reflect the young-person-centred curriculum:

- Young people are "perceived and received as young people rather than ... through ... adult-imposed labels" (p.11).
- Practice starts "where young people are starting" (p.11).

However, as a theoretical basis for a young-person-centred curriculum, Rousseau's "naturalistic" articulation is problematic. For Rousseau:

The child is a noble savage, a primitive unspoiled by the vices of a corrupting society. The child's needs, instincts, impulses are to be trusted and relied on (Guttek 1997).

The resulting educative process is, therefore, indulgent, permissive of children's behaviour and laissez faire. It does not give sufficient value to the interventions and guidance of the educator.

A sounder theoretical basis for a young-person-centred curriculum is to be found in Dewey (1900, 1916, 1938) and his emphasis on "learning through experience". According to Dewey:

Education in order to accomplish its ends, both for individuals and for society, must be based upon experience – which is always life experience of some individual (1938, p.89).

Dewey's conception of experiential education is founded on his principle of "interaction", which is based on a belief that "all experience is ultimately social: that it involves contact and communication" (Dewey 1938, p.44):

Experiential education is therefore the unique combination of people places and objects; it is the interaction of these factors "with the personal needs, desires, purposes and capacities [of individuals] which create the experience which is had" (Dewey 1938, p.44).

Dewey is to some extent utilised as a theoretical basis for youth work (Jeffs & Smith 2005; Young 2006). It is of note that neither Jeffs and Smith nor Young argue for a curriculum for youth work. However, one cannot utilise an experiential education, which follows Dewey, and at the same time reject curriculum. Dewey himself was critical of the formal school curriculum, but he was equally critical of the laissez-faire approach of those who "mistakenly" followed his approach and then abdicated their responsibility for inputting into the learning environment, and let children follow their own interests (Dewey 1900).

Dewey maintained that it was the responsibility of the educator to be proactive in the learning environment and to provide stimuli. The stimuli, however, were not specifically linked to pre-specified ends, not least because educators must acknowledge and engage with the "experience" of the pupils (Dewey 1900, 1916, 1938).

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Part of the problem is that Jeffs and Smith, and Young are under the misconception that what is meant by curriculum is exclusively a “set curriculum” akin to a syllabus or a strict version of the product curriculum (corresponding to a lesson plan with pre-set objectives), which, as noted previously, is inappropriate for the dynamic youth work process. Dewey articulates a process curriculum, but it is a curriculum none the less.

For Dewey, the “centre of gravity” needs to shift, whereby, “he [the learner] is at the centre” (Dewey 1900, p.34). The educational process needs to be based upon, and respond to, the interests, desires and inclinations of the young people. But, importantly, Dewey also identified a clear, proactive role for the educator. Indeed, he was critical of the erroneous implementation of some of his ideas in the early progressive schools:

Some teachers seem to be afraid even to make suggestions to the members of the group as to what they should do (Dewey 1938, p.71).

Dewey made the distinction between what he referred to as the internal and objective conditions of curriculum. The internal conditions refer to the needs of the child, and the objective conditions refer to the role of the educator to manipulate and intervene in the educational environment. The educative experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions, they combine to produce what Dewey refers to as the “situation”.

In England, many curriculum documents do acknowledge the importance of experiential learning, but do so with reference to Kolb and not Dewey (Luton Youth Service 2003; Cheshire Youth Service 2005; South Tyneside Youth Service 2005). Indeed, for many, experiential learning has become synonymous with Kolb (1984). It is argued (Ord 2007)<sup>2</sup>, that Kolb is, in its interpretation at least, a simplistic conception of experiential learning and does not give due credit to the dynamic experiential nature of the “learning situations” contained in Dewey’s educational philosophy.

The interpretation of Kolb conceives of “experience” as a separate experience in terms of an additional activity rather than the life experience of the individuals concerned. It is,

therefore, the contention of the author that experiential youth work curricula should be based on Dewey’s educational philosophy.

Principles of Procedure (Stenhouse 1975) is a second important theoretical strand of the youth work curriculum. As a result of his objection to objective-setting, Stenhouse argued that curriculum should be based on “principles” that guide and inform educational interventions as these do not tie the practitioner to a prediction about end products:

Stenhouse’s great achievement was to have produced a rationale for education ... which whilst giving sufficient detail to both guide the educator, and provide justification to the onlooker (other professional or politician etc.), it did not rely on specifying the expected outcomes of a session in any detail, beyond the statement of broad educational aims (Ord 2007, p.43).

In a similar vein, it is argued that “principles of procedure” are the guide for the process of youth work. They are to be distinguished from value principles which, though important as a framework within which practice develops, are not detailed nor specific enough in many instances to provide genuine guidance on practice nor do they provide sufficient detail for non-youth workers to understand the process of youth work. Principles of procedure, although often derived from value principles, relate more specifically to “how” the educational process is delivered. “Procedural principles fill the gap between values and practice” (Ord 2007, p.43).

Davies’ *Youth work manifesto* (2005b) can be seen as an example of “principles of procedure”. In his manifesto, he articulates principles which define, underpin and guide practice. For example:

- Is the practice seeking to go beyond where young people start, in particular by encouraging them to be outward looking, critical and creative in their responses to their environment?.
- Is the practice concerned with how young people feel ... as well as with what they know and can do? (2005, p.11)

A curriculum document from the Isle of Wight in England (Isle of Wight Youth and Community Service 2000) also illustrates how a “process” curriculum can be devised on the

basis of principles of procedure. Its content areas have been articulated by key questions which inform practice. For example:

In relation to sexism: Good practice will result from asking:

- How sexist am I? Do I collude with sexism?
- What do I do to challenge sexist attitudes, assumptions, language and behaviour of colleagues and young people?
- Does the environment reflect sexism? Look at the activities, do they involve both young women and men? What are the notices, displays and posters like? (Isle of Wight Youth and Community Service 2000, p.10).

The process curriculum still faces the issue of outcomes, particularly in the current policy climates of the UK and Australia. However, it should be stressed that the process curriculum is not opposed to outcomes per se, it is only opposed to the pre-specification of them.

Outcomes are potentially problematic in the process curriculum. Stenhouse (1975) admitted that his was a learning not an assessment model of curriculum, and does not tie itself closely to predicted outcomes. The process approach is orientated to facilitating learning, not necessarily to producing outcomes.

Smith (1988) elucidated the problematic relationship between educational interventions in the youth work process and their resulting outcomes when he referred to the “incidental” nature of outcomes in informal education: outcomes may be unplanned and unintended, but they are the result of purposeful activity.

In describing outcomes as incidental it could be implied that they are detached from the process and are “accidental”, thereby occurring by chance. However, there is a causal relationship between what is both inputted into the process (for example, in terms of the workers’ interventions), as well as the dynamics of the experience (for example, the thoughts and feelings that the experience brings out in the participants) and the eventual outcomes (perhaps in a realisation about one’s self), but it is an “indirect” causality.

For current policymakers this lack of a prescribed causal relationship between “inputs” and outcomes in the process curriculum, and in youth work itself, is problematic. This is unfortunate, but that is how youth work works:

to deny this and insist on a technocratic and linear conception of learning would deny youth work its *raison d’être*. Importantly, however, the process curriculum provides a theoretical framework to justify and explain youth work practice.

Within the process approach, outcomes must emerge out of a process of engagement and the developing experiential situation. These “emergent outcomes” (Ord 2007) are specifically related to the process of youth work, and the interventions within it, but they are not causally related to specific inputs in a linear fashion. Indeed, in relation to personal and social development outcomes such as confidence and self-esteem, it is actually necessary to NOT focus on the outcome, as this will undermine the process. This is the “paradox” of the youth work process (Ord 2007). For example, if you want to raise someone’s confidence and self-esteem, tactics such as focusing specifically on their confidence, or lack thereof, and intervening to raise their confidence, are liable to undermine their confidence further.

## Conclusion

The process curriculum is a necessary condition of youth work: it makes public the implicit purposeful educational engagement of young people, but does not tie the practice of youth work to pre-specified outcomes. Youth work is delivered intuitively according to a number of diverse and interrelated “principles of procedure” (Stenhouse 1975) from group work to participation and from gender to anti-racism, which can be made explicit through a curriculum. It makes explicit its educational aims, but, in principle, and most often in practice, it is inappropriate to set objectives prior to engagement with young people.<sup>3</sup> By embracing the process curriculum, workers and organisations can articulate, protect and develop their practice. A “process” curriculum, far from being a threat to youth work, is a means by which youth workers can express, communicate, legitimate, develop and celebrate their unique educational practice.

The process curriculum approach does not entirely exclude the other two theoretical positions. The inclusion of content areas or of a general syllabus is not inconsistent with a process approach and does commit youth workers to making public the broad content

## GLOSSARY

**DfES:** Department for Education and Skills – central government department formerly responsible for formal education and youth work.

**DfCSF:** Department for Children Schools and Families – current central government department responsible for formal education and youth work.

**NYB:** National Youth Bureau – an advisory body on youth work, precursor to the NYA.

**NYA:** National Youth Agency – a semi-independent government body, founded in 1999. It is the body that published the ethical standards for youth work in 2001, accredits youth work training, and promotes and supports youth work in the UK.

of their educational intentions. Indeed Dewey himself (1900) made clear the necessity of appropriate “subject matter” to guide and stimulate the experiences of pupils.

This paper has also shown that the process approach does not stand in opposition to products or outcomes; it is only, in the main, in opposition to the prior identification of them. It is, therefore, a curriculum based on aims, not on objectives – a subtle but significant difference. If a product approach were to be taken, the outcomes of youth work would be aligned with the specific objectives. In reality, the objectives only begin to become apparent during the process and can only become fully comprehensible and articulated in detail after a sufficient part of the process has been completed.

One problem in the UK is the lack of a sufficiently well articulated theory of “process curriculum”. This has meant that the implicit youth work curriculum (Davies 2005a), which embraces a commitment to process and contains many of the essential person-centred features of practice, is being undermined by the demands placed on workers to justify their work in terms of outcomes. As a consequence, in some cases workers are increasingly planning and organising their work in terms of a product approach (Ord 2007) by establishing session plans that are designed to “achieve” intended learning outcomes. It is with no little degree of irony that such an approach will eventually undermine a number of the outcomes for which youth work has belatedly been recognised (DfES 2001, 2002).

Finally there are those who, despite the arguments, resist articulating their work in terms of curriculum in the belief that this stance somehow liberates them from the auspices of government and its attempt to intervene in determining the outcomes of youth work (Stanton 2004). Not only is this position naïve in its belief that avoiding a curriculum escapes the “gaze of the state”, but it is also the case that, as Rosseter (1987) rightly asserts, youth work is first and foremost educational. Therefore, ipso facto, it is argued it has a curriculum – the essential debate is, “What sort?”

### Endnotes

1 The context for this particular paper is a presentation made to the International Conference on Youth

Work at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, in July 2007, but it is based on research undertaken in 2005–2006, which culminated in the publication of: Ord, J. 2007, 2007, *Youth work process, product and practice: Creating an authentic curriculum in work with young people*, Russell House Publishing P/L, Lyme Regis.

2 See Ord 2007, chapter 3.5 for a fully explanation of this (mis)interpretation of Kolb (1984).

3 One can think of some examples whereby it may make sense to set objectives. For example, if you want young people to be safe, then a product, such as awareness of the risks of unprotected sex, would be a desirable outcome of that process. Indeed Stenhouse (1975) himself agreed that, in relation to skills, a product (objectives-based) educational scheme was appropriate. One should not, however, use the exception to prove the rule and, in the main, the kinds of outcomes that youth work is working towards (in relation to knowledge and understanding, as well as aspects of ‘ourselves’, such as those related to personal and social development), necessitate that a process approach must be the primary basis of a youth work curriculum.

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