

From half a piece of chewing gum.....

A reflection on the training course on 'Youth Policy, Peace Education and Participation', Belgrade, 25th-28th May 2002

Written by Howard Williamson

Introduction

The training course itself was a product both of chance and connections, and of planning and initiative. In that respect, it reflected some of the patterns and processes which also inform the development of youth policy and intercultural understanding. I was delighted and privileged to have had the opportunity to make my contribution to what turned out to be a successful event - despite the uncertainties and anxieties which preceded it. The youth organisation Hajde Da, which turned the idea of the course into a reality, should be complimented for its persistence and endeavour. It struggled to secure a robust financial basis for making the course happen, but succeeded in enlisting the support of both the Ministry of Education and the British Council in Belgrade. This established a sufficient collaborative framework to enable the course to go ahead.

Personal preliminaries

Prior to the course I had had some fleeting personal contact with some of the key players in the shaping and making of the course. Biljana Latovic, from the Ministry of Education, had been a participant in a Council of Europe education course I had directed in Donaueschingen, Germany, in May 2001. Stanislava Vuckovic, of Hajde Da, had sat next to me during a workshop at the Bridges for Training event in Brugge, Belgium, in September 2001. She had shared her final piece of chewing gum with me and, although we had not spoken at the event, it was this that triggered our subsequent communication. During that e-mail contact, I learned about her organisation and of the wider interest in youth policy development in Serbia.

It was also in Brugge that I (finally) met Mark Taylor, the 'best trainer in intercultural learning in Europe' according to many who know him. For some strange reason, despite the fact that both of us have been involved in the European context for many years, we had never met before. Mark,

of course, is more focused on training and me on policy, but it had often been a surprise to many who knew both of us. So at last that ghost was buried!

In December 2001, I met Aleksandra Vidanovic. At that time, she worked in the Youth Section of the Ministry of Education and Sports in the Republic of Serbia. Although Asha has since left the Ministry, she was I believe, instrumental in proposing the involvement of Mark in the training course.

Through discussions between Stasha and Biljana and communication with Mark and me, the concept and content of a training course was developed.

Planning and arrival

'Youth policy' has become a popular topic in many countries within and beyond Europe. Most governments recognise that the needs of their young people have become complex. Transitions are prolonged. They are multi-faceted. There are challenges around social inclusion and citizenship, and around mobility and identity. There are concerns about health and education, and about crime and the labour market. A policy framework, one which *ensures* that policies for young people are properly connected and *enables* services to be delivered effectively, is now exercising the minds of many central and local administrations. At a 'supra' national level, both the European Union and the Council of Europe have recently been exploring the idea and implementation of 'youth policy'. The EU launched a White Paper on Youth Policy in November 2001, one which both defined a 'specific area of youth policy' and argued that young people's issues had to be properly considered within broader areas of policy (such as education, employment or health). The Council of Europe has conducted a series of international reviews of national youth policy with the intention of not only supporting the development of those *national* policies but also considering what kinds of shared frameworks can be detected *across* these countries. The latter objective is not intended to offer a blueprint for youth policy, but to provide an indicative set of ideas about youth policy from which countries may draw their own strategic and operational framework.

'Youth policy' was to be my contribution to the training course. By the time the training course took place, of course, the Republic of Serbia had

already produced its own youth policy document (in January 2002) and this was presented during the training course. It was something of a relief that both the 'official' position at the moment and the views and concerns of the participants fitted well into the framework issues that I had planned to present!

For it is *always* a source of anxiety for me to arrive in another country being considered as some kind of 'expert' ready and able to dispense wisdom and provide answers. This is *never* possible and I was sure that it was especially impossible in the context of Yugoslavia - a country I had never visited and about which I knew so little. My knowledge was largely limited, sadly, to newspaper reports and television images during recent years. So I knew something of the country's political history, but little or nothing about its social and economic circumstances. I knew even less about the condition of its young people or about the political commitment to its young people. I knew that I would have to embark on a very sharp learning curve. This I wanted to do, but I did not know whether my reception would be facilitative or resentful. Many central and eastern European countries have had a gut's full of western 'experts' parachuting in with their ideas and sometimes (though not in our case) large wallets with which they have called the tune. I have worked in many central and eastern European countries and I detect a deep-rooted enthusiasm and energy to 'make something happen'. If I can play a small part in supporting that endeavour, I am willing to do so. That is my motivation. I am acutely aware of both the political and economic challenges which face governments and the youth NGOs operating closer to the ground. But sometimes the differences between 'west' and 'east' are not so stark as some often assume. The issues are often much the same (education, work and unemployment, drug misuse, criminal activity); the difference lies more in the capacity, both political and economic, to respond to them.

The overarching aim of the training course was to make connections, to build bridges, to cross 'borders' - on many levels and across many dimensions. Professionally, this was about peace education (intercultural learning), participation and inter-sectoral youth policy. It was also about the use of different methodological learning processes. Politically, it was about forging early links between young people, youth NGOs and representatives of government. Personally, it was about establishing new contacts for - as I have argued above - professional practice and political engagement is often the outcome of positive personal connection. For me, an additional challenge of the training course was working with Mark.

Sometimes the bringing of two so-called 'experts' together can work disastrously; conceivably, they may end up wondering how such reputations had ever been acquired! The fact that we shared a room together heightened the possibility of mutual 'interrogation' but fortunately (I think and hope) it cemented a mutual respect.

The training course

The course took place through the good offices of the British Council in Belgrade and few (both participants and organisers) had probably ever seen such a wonderfully technologically equipped room. No doubt it offered possibilities about which we remained completely unaware. Although we took some advantage of the facilities, flipcharts, overhead projector transparencies and Post-It Notes remained our staple tools.

It was some surprise to learn of the composition of the participants. We - the planning team consisting of Mark, Biljana, Stasha and myself - quickly realised that another bridge to be built was around age and experience. A number of participants were young people from school, aged seventeen and eighteen. This was clearly their first experience of this kind of event. It was for others, too, which was a relief. [And of course, the fact that a significant proportion of the participants were young people enhanced the prospect of 'participation in practice' - where young people's voices were equal contributors to the debates.]

We were also surprised to hear that the group was unlikely to remain 'intact' for the duration of the course. People were likely to come and go (and indeed they did). But the core of participants arrived and remained, no doubt for many diverse reasons. A core challenge for such an event is to create an environment which is safe and stimulating for all kinds of people, not only by virtue of their status and experience but also in relation to their personality. Some were clearly more confident and informed than others, and a further border to cross was that of language. Although often (usually) conducted in English, some sessions were conducted in Serbian - and at times people simply used their language of choice, with different people helping others to understand.

The course programme is outlined elsewhere. It was a skeleton, which was subjected to some change and development as the days unfolded. The dominant threads consisted of the mix between developing a grasp of

the rationale for 'youth policy' and the need for intercultural learning, the mix of different learning methods (active and didactic), and the mix of plenary activity and smaller group work.

Outcomes were, inevitably, diverse. Different evaluation strategies throughout and at the end of the course illustrated (literally) and indicated a broad sense of satisfaction with the course, a changed sense of self and direction, and (often) a powerful commitment to 'make a difference'. Of course, in the hothouse of a training course, there is some suspension from reality and people have to return to their everyday struggles and commitments. But there did appear to be a strong sense of benefit from the course - at personal, professional and 'political' levels. Participants had acquired new ideas, established new understandings, learned new approaches and, of course, forged new friendships. There were few critical comments. Naturally, some felt the 'youth policy' strand to be largely irrelevant to their concerns or their position. [And it can be a rather dry and dusty topic, however crucial it may be.] Most revelled in Mark's approach to intercultural learning. Many participants identified specific aspects of the course (and/or some of the discussions which took place during coffee breaks and lunchtimes) which they said were of great interest and help to them. No aspect of the course was consistently the subject of critical comment by participants.

Conclusion

Bridges were built and borders crossed, not always comfortably. But as Mark would say, participants were 'stretched' beyond their comfort zones but seldom taken into a panic zone. The farewell party exemplified the spirit and synergy which the course had established. The young participants, through their intellect and involvement, gave me for the first time in my life a real sense of the old youth policy cliché that 'young people are the future'. The working groups which, in a short time, explored the issues facing Yugoslavia in particular arenas of youth policy, produced an incisive analysis and some inspired ideas.

Should someone in the future produce an academic thesis on the emergence of new youth policy in the Yugoslavia in transition, Hajde Da will undoubtedly get a mention for having been instrumental in promoting the idea of this course and working hard to make it happen. Some of the

participants may well become the key shapers of that policy and leaders in its implementation.

Less than two years ago, I do not think I had even met anyone from Yugoslavia. I certainly never thought that within a short space of time I might be in Belgrade. I now have many good friends from Yugoslavia and new information and communication technologies will ensure that we remain in touch. The training course was but the visible island in a process of thinking and development. Mark is moving to Belgrade and will be more 'on the spot'. But both of us will, in different ways and around our particular areas of 'expertise', continue to support the trajectories formulated from a blank sheet of paper (and half a piece of chewing gum) towards the end of 2001 and cemented through the training course in May 2002. It was a powerful and sometimes poignant experience, one in which I was honoured to play a part.

Howard Williamson
Munich Airport, 30th May, 2002

Postscript

Of course I would like to thank everybody who welcomed me and made my stay comfortable and almost easy - something which many of them have not always experienced. Obviously those whom I had met before - Biljana, Stasha and Asha - were central to this, but so many others as well contributed to it. And I would particularly like to thank the following people for some rather extra special personal touches:

Nemanja ("You Know"), one of the youngest participants in the course, for his considerable ability to play so many of the guitar tunes which I had also learned around the age of 17

Mira who, beyond her charming smile, left at the student house reception on her day of departure the complete words of 'Side By Side', an old 1920s English music hall song

Danijela ('Danijela from the Ministry'), for having the kindness of thought to telephone me at the student house on my day of departure to wish me a safe and pleasant journey.

&

Danijela from Hajde Da for her spirit and commitment (good luck in Budapest)

Copenhagen, 31st May 2002