3.6 YOUTH WORKER ROLE

When we take on a role, in our case the role of a youth worker, we embody that role in every sense of the word. The stance that our body physically takes when embodying that role however, is often at odds with our desire to achieve our very mission which is to inspire participation and engagement in a process that we have invested in, in the hopes that the process itself will be able to help the young people we are working with. The stance I am referring to is our very presence and body movement when working and interacting with youth within the learning environment, whatever that environment might be. How we move, how we carry ourselves; as in are we up tight; are we closed off; are we projecting superiority in a way that gives off a sense of mistrust in our youth members input; or are we open and inviting and encouraging towards them is sometimes the first thing that we need to tackle when entering a room as we are about to work with youth as that will set the tone for the session and even perhaps the entire working relationship we have with them. The persona of a stand-offish, polished lecturer that stands at the front of the learning environment and dictates what others must do while keeping a distance from the learners in many ways is analogous to the boss vs leader persona we mentioned earlier in the module. As you already know from work experience, that distant persona does not work with youth, at least not when we are trying to get them to trust us enough to invest in whatever it is that we are advising them to do. For some reason the misconception was created long ago that being professional equals cold, standoffish, black and white and being dressed in very specific attire. That could not be further from the truth and while going into this further goes beyond the scope of this module, I will say this. Ideas and patterns related to professionalism when taken out of context create misconceptions and myths that can prolong antiquated notions that stagnate growth and progress.

Having said that, it is necessary for all of us who work with young people and learners in general to shift our role from the "traditional" lecturer persona to that of the facilitator/guide. As leading professor of Education Dr Leo Buscaglia said, "No teacher has taught anything to anyone. People learn themselves. If we look at the word educator it comes from the Latin "educare" meaning to lead, to guide. That's what it means, to guide, to be enthusiastic yourself, to understand yourself and to put this stuff before others..." (Living, Loving and Learning, p.6). So you see it is all about having them feel safe with you, with each other and with the space around them so that your enthusiasm about what you are presenting them with is so engaging that they will want to participate and they will want to learn.

The other problem that arises with the lecturer persona is that its stance perhaps unconsciously assumes that the learning process is a one size fits all formula which of course is false. Using the lecturer stance which essentially means we are at the front facing the rest of the entire group just like in a lecturing theatre, assumes that it's enough for us to just say what we have to say to our group at the same time at the same pace in the same verbal way using a more or less standardised form of presentation. It's not okay though. It would be okay if all learners/participants at any given time were at the same level with everything, learnt the same way and at the same pace and were exact copies of each other. But they are not. The least that we could do is incorporate breaking the larger collective into smaller groups.

But even in the case of using groups, the youth worker's role, at least the one we are trying to improve upon, needs to make a shift from using fixed groupings to dynamic groupings. Let's get into that a bit more.

At any given time in our learning space as we all know we can have varied levels of understanding and mastery of content whatever that content might be. We therefore have varied and complex needs which we need to address. That means that our job cannot be standardised which is why I would like to once again acknowledge you and express my appreciation for what you do.

Let's say that we split these varied levels into three although in any given collective there can of course be more than three. For the sake of this video let's say that these three levels are categorised as Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced. Each of these levels contain groups of students whose mastery of content reflects the category they are placed in.

 Oftentimes what we as youth workers/educators/trainers do is that we work around fixed groupings meaning that the participants in each group and level never change. For example, Maria, Tom, John, Hussein, Shakira and Elena will be together in the same group always, and always on the same level. Something like that is completely unrealistic as each of these learners' level of interest, understanding and mastery can change on a daily basis according to the unique combination of things like the teaching concept and other variables present in the learning environment. If for example Shakira one day finds herself in a lesson about a topic she has been previously exposed to and is interested in, being stuck in the Beginner category will not be ideal for her as she won't be learning anything new and thus will not be challenged enough to reach a higher level of mastery. Conversely, Vasili who was first placed in a group with the learners in the Advanced category might have never been exposed to the topic you are currently teaching and thus would need more help. If kept in the Advanced category he will lose out on the opportunity of being offered the educational foundation that he would need in order to be able to master the content you are teaching. So you see if we accept fixed groupings students will one way or another miss out. Moreover, fixed groupings contribute to the labelling of learners and the bias and negativity associated with labelling learning abilities.

That is why as youth workers/educators/trainers, we need to make a shift from using fixed groupings to using dynamic groupings which change according to the learners' needs. The only way for that to be possible is for educators, trainers or youth workers to implement a shift in their own role. This brings us back to our initial shift we were talking about. We need to shift from the role of a lecturer to that of a facilitator as doing so will not only involve a change in mindset in regards to the learners' potential but it will also force the practitioner to be more mobile. The practitioner will no longer be fixed at the front of the classroom teaching to the "middle" but will be forced to move around the classroom constantly. To help you better visualise this, imagine yourself with a clipboard moving around the classroom and listening to your learners' conversations and looking at their classwork as they focus on the implementation of knowledge and according to what you hear and see you start taking notes and diagnosing their needs on the go. Based on your evaluations you start moving them to smaller groups that consist of students with similar educational needs at that given time. That way you create dynamic groups that allow you to productively address their needs by repurposing instructional time strategically to suit their needs whether that is with hands-on workshops, quality

time with you or sending them to the computer lab to rewatch your flipped classroom lecture video that introduces your teaching concept.

Moreover, as you continue to observe and facilitate the learning process you make a shift from just focusing on prioritising knowledge acquisition to allowing space for the development of mindset and life skills. Furthermore, instead of explaining everything as a lecturer persona once dictated you now intervene only when needed. You allow them to learn themselves as in any case they do but in this case, they learn also through discovery. The shift in our role, attitude, focus and groupings would change what we usually see in classrooms and learning environments. That is, we would no longer see the educator/trainer or youth worker standing at the front of the class lecturing or presenting to the entire class by utilising a one size fits all approach that is not effective. The issue with lecturing/presenting to the entire class at the same time is that we ignore the fact that our learners:

- Have different learning styles
- Have different learning needs
- Learn at a different pace

So all in all if we were to remain in our fixed role of lecturer/presenter it is very unlikely that we would not end up doing a disservice to many of our youth members. That is why acknowledging different levels and working on effective differentiation is so important.

So to sum up the shifts we need to consider as practising youth workers, these are the following

LECTURER → FACILITATOR/GUIDE

FIXED GROUPINGS → DYNAMIC GROUPINGS

EXPLAINER → INTERVENER

FOCUSING ON CONTENT → CONTENT, SKILLS & MINDSETS

These shifts can easily and effectively be facilitated via High Quality Blended Learning. If you would like some tips on how to use Blended Learning for effective differentiation and shift implementation, feel free to reach out to me via LinkedIn.