

**CARN STUDY DAY, 'YOUTH WORK' HOSTED AT BRATHAY TRUST, 10TH SEPTEMBER 2011.
REPORT AND REFLECTIONS BY KAZ STUART, RESEARCH PRACTICE LEADER.**

I had been to a CARN conference and a CARN study day and knew them to be open, inclusive and stimulating inquiry spaces. This coupled with the rising discourse that problematised young people and discounted youth work led me to propose a study day at Brathay Trust, a National Youth Work Charity for disadvantaged young people. I was delighted when CARN accepted my proposal and agreed to sponsor the day.

An idea for the conference came easily to mind – months before the riots! I wanted to convene a group of young people, practitioners and academics to consider youth work as it is today, tackling three key questions:

- **Is youth 'risk' or 'at risk', what conceptions of youth and society are useful?**
- **How can we support the youth work profession?**
- **How can Action Research Help Youth work?**
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I knew that I had valued the space for discourse and critical inquiry that a CARN event had afforded me in the past, yet as the day drew nearer I found myself anxious about what the attendees would 'get' from a day I hosted. I noticed that I have a strong urge to engage in 'transactions' with people. To my largely unconscious mind, these professionals were giving up their Saturday to come and talk about youth work...what would I be giving them back in return? Partly in order to give the day some focus, and to meet this internalised demand, I created a 'programme' for the day. I planned a couple of key inputs to the event as well as time for discussion and reflection. One of the inputs I hoped could be from young people, to set the day off to the right tone, hearing from them about their reality rather than adults making yet more assumptions about them! I also wanted to offer a stimulating session that would push thinking and criticality – in doubt of my own ability to do so. The programme is shown below:

1000 Introductions and welcomes – ice breaker
1015 My life, my experience, my realities – Miriam Khan
1030 Tackling the three big questions – workshop and dialogue
1115 Coffee
1145 Moving from what is, to what could be – building a framework of possibility workshop
1230 Lunch
1330 Youth work, action research and collective action – Professor Margaret Ledwith
1415 Pledges to action
1445 Coffee
1500 CARN steering group meeting – review of the day
1600 Close

Fifteen people attended the day, these were a rich mixture of youth workers, researchers and academics, some with experience of CARN and some new to the network. A highlight of the event was the opening presentation by Miriam Khan - a peer youth worker from Brathay – who spoke very openly about how she has overcome the difficulties she experienced as a young person to be a youth worker. This certainly did anchor the day in reality, possibility and hope. Miriam's experiences were inspirational, and ensured that we were aware a) of the realities of being a young person today, b) that young people are resilient and successful, c) that youth work support is important to young people and d) that adults still discount young people, make negative assumptions about them and treat them in tokenistic ways. Key points to bear in mind for the day. Miriam engaged in a lively and thought provoking question and answer session.

There was then time for us to discuss the key issues and key conference questions, and the participants all divided up into groups around the question that most interested them. Groups I hoped would allow more people to speak and debate – as large group discussions can be intimidating. I was also aware however that this would mean that not everyone was party to all the discussions of all the questions – a constant

tension! To address this I asked people to record their discussions to share in a plenary. Of course, once we got engaged in dialogue it was hard to stop, and there was little time to share our discussions effectively. I ended up restricting people to reporting back on the three key points from the discussion, which didn't feel great. The explorations of these questions are summarised below:

Question 1: Is youth 'risk' or 'at risk'?

This group considered the question: is risk a useful label? Key points were that:

- This is not a new idea.
- Risk does not capture the fact that some people are living by whatever means they can, and for some people these are not risk free activities, and they are not 'choices'.
- Labels are unhelpful, they are negative and they limit who people can be.
- Risk is not a tick box exercise, and we need to see beyond the boxes to the stories and realities.
- Risk is not objective, it can be played up or down. Young people are played in these situations, and also know how to play 'risk', they are both victims of and savvy users of the discourse.
- The safety 'net' is ever widening as we are expected to cover more aspects of risk, and keep more people safe, but the mesh is ever tightening – there is less wriggle room, less room for meaningful experience. Can we catch all risk? Do we want to?

Question 2: How can Action Research Help Youth work?

Is there a conflict between the needs of research / evaluation commissions and doing action research?

The group changed the question above to the one below:

What kinds of action research can best support young people and practitioners?

We can answer this as involving:

- Reflective spaces
- Collaborative approaches
- Questions that arise from...
 - Formal/informal research
 - Insider/outsider position
- *power* cannot be ignored in research and a stakeholder analysis is vital

QUESTION 3: How can we support the youth work profession?

In discussing this question, the group came up with a range of observations, and further questions:

About the profession:

- Why do we do it? Because young people are treated badly we want to support them, but we don't engage politicians in this
- What characterises 'a profession'? Is that term elitist? useful?
- We need to stop being modest and talk about what we do!
- All youth work has good intent, but is it all good?
- We defend young people's rights but not our own!!
- Youth work as a blank canvas... vs. structure...can lead to negative views of youth work as 'just a cup of tea'... we need to reinforce its value!
- We don't shout about what we do and how we do it and how it's developed.
- We maybe need to develop our confidence in resistance and build our resilience → but that can be tricky to balance with other people's perceptions.
- We comply and stay compliant – why don't we take action? But public campaign plays us into a negative light...
- Be able to justify what we do from the young people's point of view.
- This is a boundary crossing profession
- About the ways in which research can help support youth work:
- Doing research → not standard research – collage/montage
 - Telling the stories of / by young people

- Embedded into your practice – not ticking boxes
- We need young people, practitioners, academics and policy makers to come together

About the societal conditions in which youth work is situated:

- We must challenge the media and get new messages out
- We must challenge politicians and disrupt the status quo.

Critical pedagogy → do we need a movement? The In Defence of Youth Work Campaign?

A similar pattern occurred after break – I set people up to identify the successes that had been gained, the barriers to and the dilemmas inherent in each area, and after further discussion, to also identify the possibilities that there were for action. This would create a framework of possibility. Whilst a laudable aim, there was little time to complete the exercise. Discussion was curtailed, and we assembled the work into a framework that became a gallery as we did not have time to hear from the range of discussions that had created it. By pure coincidence, we had all chosen yellow paper on which to write down the successes of each area – the power of association! The framework is recreated below:

Successes	Barriers	Dilemmas	Possibilities
1. Does society view young people as risk, or at risk? Successes where not problematizing young people: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Partnership working ▪ Reciprocity with young people/all round ▪ Experiential learning ▪ Valuing people's experiences ▪ Young carers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ticking boxes ▪ Stereotypes and assumptions ▪ Top down direction/directors ▪ Media ▪ Net widening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Earning a living and living a useful life (balance) ▪ Re-labelling/ de-labelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New concept ▪ Questioning the old concepts ▪ Enabling voices, forum of expression
2. How can action research support work with and for young people? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Articulation of the 'local' ▪ Informing practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Propensity to generalise, rather than resonate ▪ Paradigm wars – qualitative vs. quantitative ▪ Expectations/agendas funders, various stakeholders ▪ Language of practitioner research ▪ Who really benefits from research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The 'local', the 'outlier' can be taken as the 'norm' and used to inform/lead public/political opinion 	
3. How can we develop and support the youth work profession? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Miriam's story – represents a LOT of other young people ▪ Relationships between AR and youth work – some shared core values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Power imbalances – we know about them, they don't know about us. ▪ Young profession ▪ Being funding dependent ▪ Language and values mismatch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How much to know about young people before we meet them? ▪ People join youth work to work with young people, not to be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Action research to support and coalesce a defence of youth work ▪ Young people representing themselves ▪ Exposing 'discourse' and 'assumptions'

<p>→ 'REAL'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Young people becoming critically aware – a skill for life that they may not learn elsewhere ▪ Youth work journals, networks ▪ PARTICIPATION – young people as experts ▪ Professionalization BUT ... barrier 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Media representations ▪ Government framing of young people/society ▪ 'The Academy' ▪ 'THEY' don't value our forms of evidence? ▪ Degree level access route 	<p>academics or activists ... so we don't get heard.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How to dissent/resist without being discounted or having funding pulled. ▪ 'Using' young people to gain funds etc.... what are the ethics ▪ Language – doing 'prosocial behaviour' support, but having to sell 'anti-social behaviour prevention' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collectivity → academics/young people/practitioners ▪ Get radical! ▪ Bombard media with happy stories. 'Positive news' ▪ Get innovative and creative with new forms of young people led youth work and ADVERTISE ▪ 'Experience' based degree ▪ People's past experiences celebrated, drawn on, informing practice.
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After lunch Margaret Ledwith generously gave an excellent presentation on “Youth and community practice: Using participatory action research to change power, poverty and inequality”. Margaret had four key points. Power is often invisible to us and becoming critical is thereforecritical. Margaret outlined the new 'ism' of 'povertyism' and how new policies reinforce rather than remove poverty. Youth work was presented as a contested space whose principles of social and environmental justice can be obscured if we uncritically collude with unfair policy and practices. Developing our own and others critical consciousness is transformative in the youth work process. Participatory action research (PAR) and collective action are key to achieving a socially just world, in Margaret's own words, “PAR is the glue that binds theory and practice, but unless it moves out in iterative cycles from the personal/local to the political/structural nothing will change.”

This sparked further rich conversations that ran free, and I abandoned the idea of pinning people down to a pledge to action...it suddenly felt very undemocratic. The afternoon concluded with a 'steering group session' which involved the remaining members discussing the day, personal actions, and potential future events.

The narrative that I have added to the 'report' of what happened are not to do the day down, it was a fantastic and stimulating experience and I left buoyed up! There was much lively discussion, dialogue and networking, we all raised our critical consciousness and concrete ideas were captured as per this output. My reflective and reflexive comment do however illuminate how tempting it can be to fill a programme with structural activities and inputs as it then seems as if more is on offer, and more people will attend as they 'get something'! This in itself shows just how pervasive societal materialism can be! People clearly gained much from the day as some of the following couple of comments show:

“This was a really fruitful and enjoyable Study Day and I very much enjoyed meeting you all and being a part of it. I hope we get the opportunity to meet again in the not too distant future.”

“I wanted to contact you all to say what a great event this was for me....for me it felt like the start of something special....I do hope to develop and maintain further links with more than at least a few of you....

if possible.... I too found the day inspiring and strengthening...and would welcome the chance of attending further events.”

I highly recommend joining CARN and attending CARN events – it is such an inclusive, welcoming and mind altering community! And if, nay when you are planning a CARN event, I would encourage you to have some stimulus and structure, but not too much. Leave plenty of space for open discussion and debate. Trust that people will come for the space and the dialogue, not just for ‘take-ways’, leave plenty of time and space, and trust the force!

So what next?

I now plan to make some changes to my practice, and to the practice of Brathay Trust. I am picking up Annette Coburn’s excellent idea to get youth work students, practitioners and young people to make ‘good youth work’ films to add to the IDYW campaign, and I am actively making connections and networks to start to build a critical mass. I am looking forward to attending the CARN conference in Vienna in November (see details at:), and to the CARN conference the following year in Kent in November 2012. I also plan to follow the study day by planning a two day ‘youth work’ CARN collaborative action meeting point (CAMP) at Brathay in February 2011...details to follow, but do contact me if you are interested in attending. What will you do?

I look forward to supporting young people, practitioners and the profession in future spaces of debate and dialogue.

Warmly, Kaz.