

Professional Conduct

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Principles and Practice of Youth in Development Work

Unit 6: Professional Conduct

Unit introduction

This unit will help you to develop as a professional youth in development worker. It aims to assist you develop the skills you need to:

- identify principles for your youth in development work practice
- set learning goals to improve your professional conduct
- develop strategies to achieve your learning goals
- develop support networks; and
- identify key support people to help your life-long learning as a youth worker.

Before you commence the process of developing a learning contract for improving your youth work practice, we will look at five professional conduct issues that relate to our work with young people. These include:

- establishing boundaries
- equity
- support
- power; and
- empowerment.

Unit learning outcomes

By the end of this unit, you will have improved your ability to:

- show understanding of the professional role of the worker
- identify how inequality affects different groups of young people and know about the role of youth development work in intervention
- analyse your own practice in terms of the history of youth in development work in your country
- work effectively with young people and adults in enabling them to improve the quality of their lives; and
- be able to address professional dilemmas in youth in development work and, in particular, to prioritise the use of time and resources.

At the end of the module you should be able to answer yes to the following questions:

- Have I developed a set of principles for my youth in development work practice?
- Have I set at least five learning goals?
- Have I identified at least one strategy for change so as to improve my youth in development work practice?
- Can I name at least two people to whom I can turn for professional support?
- Have I completed my learning plan?

Suggested study time

This unit should take about 8 hours to complete. This includes reading the study guide, completing the activities and reviewing the material at the end of the unit.

Professional conduct

In this unit you will examine your own principles and practice for youth in development work.

You may wish to review the learning material in Unit 2 on youth work models of intervention to help you work out your own perspective on youth in development work.

It is expected that at the end of this unit you will have:

- identified your own set of principles for practice; and
- written a learning plan identifying your goals and strategies for undertaking youth in development work.

Values and principles

Let's begin by looking at five professional youth work issues:

1. establishing boundaries
2. equity
3. support
4. power, and
5. empowerment.

Establishing boundaries

Many young people who use youth services have experienced a series of broken relationships and separations. As a result, they may find it hard to trust adults. As a youth worker, they may see you as representing another form of power or as an untrustworthy adult. You will have to carefully work out how to gain young people's trust but, at the same time, not give them false expectations.

One way of achieving young people's trust and not giving them false expectations is to clearly establish your role and your responsibilities as a youth worker. This entails developing a clear boundary between:

- yourself as the worker, and
- the young people with whom you work.

You will also have to develop a clear boundary between:

- your job, and
- your personal life.

If you are clear and consistent with your boundaries it will help you deal with any young people who might try to overstep your limits. When a young person tries to overstep your boundaries, consider the issue behind their behaviour and think about how you will respond to that behaviour.

For example, let's say that one of my boundaries is that young people can not go home with me. When a young person asks me if they can go home with me, I already know that I will not agree to this. In this situation I can politely refuse the request but I can also look at some of the reasons for this behaviour:

Is s/he homeless?

Is s/he feeling lonely?

By exploring the issue with the young person, I can work out with them if there are other ways to meet his or her needs.

A healthy relationship with young people, based on clear boundaries, will assist them to:

- ask any questions necessary to enable them to understand your role in helping them, and
- express their feelings confidently knowing that you can handle their feelings and assist them in expressing their feelings.

As a youth worker you must be clear that your behaviour in relation to young people cannot be interpreted or misinterpreted as abusive, aggressive or sexual.

Young people expect a youth worker to behave as an adult and not as part of a young people's peer group. This means that you will need to feel comfortable in disagreeing and being firm when working with young people.



Activity 6.1

What are some of your boundaries or limits that you can set for yourself when working with young people?

For example:

- No name calling.
- No giving out my home address.

Write these in your learning journal.

Equity

Another important principle and practice in youth work is to treat all young people in a fair and just manner. Your job as a youth worker is to work with all young people equally. You need to consider equal access for young people to the service, the opportunities and information you provide.

While some of your youth work activity may concentrate on certain target groups, such as young mothers or school-aged youth, it is important to remember that youth workers can not discriminate against a young person on the grounds of:

- gender
- age
- culture
- race
- religion
- ability/disability
- marital status
- pregnancy
- sexuality; and/or
- class.



Activity 6.2

Answer the following questions in your learning journal:

- How can I promote non-sexist relations in youth work?
- How can I promote non-racist relations in youth work?
- How can I promote non-heterosexist relations in youth work?
- How can I promote non-ageist relations in youth work?
- How can I promote non-sexist relations in youth work?
- How can I promote the rights and access of young people with disabilities?
- How can I assist young people on low incomes participate in community life?

Support

In most of the youth work intervention models we looked at in Unit 2, the role of support to young people in youth work is common.

Young people need to know that youth workers have young people's interests as their first priority. This often causes some tension, especially when it conflicts with a legal or statutory requirement such as the mandatory reporting of sexual assault.

In order to support young people, youth workers need to clearly communicate the responsibilities and limits of their role to young people. From that mutual understanding they can then seek to support young people in the best possible way.



Activity 6.3

To work out your own views as a support person to young people, answer the following questions in your learning journal:

- What types of things might a youth worker do to support young people?
- Think of someone who was helpful to you when you were a young person. What qualities did they have that you found were helpful?
- Think of someone who tried to help you as a young person but was unsuccessful. What were the factors that contributed to this lack of success?
- In which areas do you feel confident in supporting young people?
- In which areas do you feel unsure?

Power

There are certain types of authority and power that apply to you in your role as a youth worker. The first is the power and authority invested in you by the organisation you work for. Your role as a youth worker is largely determined by:

- the legal function of your service
- the function of the service as expected by the community, and
- the procedures and standards by which those functions are achieved.

The second form of power that you have is your inherent authority. This relates to your own personal power and the boundaries that you set for yourself as a person. This authority is likely to come from young people's recognition of your life experience, your ability to function independently and your personal strength to make decisions and hold to them.

People have very different notions of power and how it can be used and under what conditions. The following Activity is designed to help you define your own inherent power and its relationship to your youth work practice.



Activity 6.4

In your learning journal write notes on the following questions:

- What life experiences can you think of which have influenced your own views about authority and power?
- To what extent do you wish to be liked by other people?
- What qualities do you think lead others to respect you as a person?
- To what extent do you wish to control young people?
- What effect has this had, or might this have, on your role as a youth worker?
- In what ways can you develop your own inherent authority as a person without controlling and oppressing others?

The next Activity is designed to help you define the power and authority that you believe is vested to you by the organisation/s you work for.



Activity 6.5

Imagine you are a youth worker in a youth centre. You provide information and support services to young people. Given this context, answer the following questions in your learning journal:

- What is the purpose of the youth centre?
- What powers do you think would be delegated to you as a youth worker in this service?
- What is the role of a youth worker in the service?
- What standards of behaviour would you expect from the young people?
- What rules/guidelines would you establish to outline these standards?
- How would you use inherent authority to enforce these rules/guidelines?
- What would you do if the young people did not agree to abide by the rules?

Empowerment

Feelings of powerlessness are common in young people. The enormity and complexity of the problems young people face in their everyday lives can overwhelm people and cause feelings such as anger, despair and loneliness.

As youth workers, we need to consider the difficulties for people who feel powerless. We also need to consider that youth in development workers are in positions of power over young people and therefore it is important that we do not use this power to further oppress them.



Activity 6.6

Write notes in your learning journal about the following questions:

- What do you believe are the causes of young people's oppression and feelings of powerlessness?
- In what ways do you believe youth workers have the ability to oppress young people?
- How will you ensure that you do not oppress young people in your work?

One way to ensure that you do not oppress young people is to think about your work as practice of empowerment. Instead of using power in a way to oppress young people, you use your power in a way that helps young people take control of their own lives.

Empowerment refers to the way in which a youth worker helps individuals and/or communities to:

- define their own problems, and
- explore and decide on the solutions to their problems.

In this way people and communities develop the confidence and skills to make changes for themselves. Rather than telling people what to do, youth workers encourage them to work out their own problems. Sometimes we may not agree with a young person's decision. It is important to remember that it is their decision, their life, not yours. Of course you have a responsibility to help young people make informed decisions and explore the likely effects of their decision, but ultimately the decision lies with them.

Katrina Shields (*In The Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide to Social Action* Millenium Books, pp. 80–85) suggests there are a number of ways workers can help people feel empowered:

- letting people know they belong and are valued
- creating safety by listening and respecting people's feelings
- consulting and listening to people's ideas and concerns
- respecting diversity and uniqueness in people's racial, age, cultural, sexuality or class backgrounds
- being aware of oppression in our own actions — sexism, racism, ageism and classism
- working on conflict resolution and staying with difficulties until they are resolved
- developing people's skills in old and new areas
- sharing visions and dreams with people
- making room for fun and laughter.

Empowerment doesn't just happen. It takes skill, practice, patience and a commitment from you as a youth worker for it to happen. Sometimes it is hard to empower some young people, especially if they hold opposing views and/or values to us.



Activity 6.7

Think back to a situation you were in recently where you had to work with someone with opposing views. Then answer the following questions in your learning journal:

- > How did I feel?
- > What physical sensations did I get?
- > How did I view this person?
- > How did I view myself?

Trying to empower people with different views to ourselves is hard. Sometimes we lose our own sense of self and at other times we deny the other person's self worth. We need to develop a situation where we feel our own sense of empowerment without putting others down in the process (oppression).

One way to resolve this tension is to learn to listen, be open to people's ideas and be prepared to discuss our own views. Often it is best to start with the areas of agreement.

Identifying principles for practice

Now that we have looked at some of the issues central to your professional conduct as a youth worker, it is your turn to develop a set of principles to guide your own youth work practice.

The following Activity is set out in 5 parts. The aim of this Activity is to help you to develop your own set of principles. Take plenty of time to complete these exercises and where possible, discuss the issues with others: family, friends, tutors, supervisors and/or fellow workers. Talking helps thinking.



Activity 6.8

Write your responses to the following in your learning journal.

Part I

- Which model of youth work practice do you feel best summarises what you understand or have experienced of youth work?
- In what ways did you agree with this model?
- In what ways did you disagree with this model?

Part II

- What are some values that are important to you?
- How do these values relate to your reasons for choosing youth work as a career?
- What impact do you feel your values have on the way you work, or will work, with young people?
- What changes could you make to improve the way you work with young people, especially those who have different values and/or backgrounds from yours?
- What impact do you feel your values have, or will have, on the way you work with other youth workers?

Part III

In this part of the activity, you are presented with 5 scenarios. For each scenario, answer the following questions in your learning journal:

1. What is your first reaction?
2. What would you do?
3. What values are informing your practice?

Scenario 1

You are walking outside a restaurant in the evening (it is not in work time) and you see two police officers shouting at a young person.

Scenario 2

You are asked to do a house visit to talk to a young person about a job vacancy and you walk into a house where a number of young people under 16 years of age are drinking and smoking.

Scenario 3

You see a male youth worker acting flirtatiously with a group of young women.

Scenario 4

A young person at your service asks you if you take drugs.

(continued over)

Scenario 5

A young woman asks you for help. She has just been sexually assaulted by someone you know in the community.

Part IV

Now that you have had the opportunity to test out some of your values in practice, make a list of principles that you will use to guide your youth in development work practice. As a general rule you should have no less than 5 principles and no more than 20.

Part V

Given your guiding set of principles, what are some dilemmas that you can expect? For example, what issues will you find difficult to work with? What sort of decisions will you find difficult?

Developing an action plan for on-going learning

The following part of this Unit will guide you through one of your first assignment: your learning action plan. (For more information, turn to the end of the module where you will find information on your assignments.

There are three parts to this:

1. setting goals based on your principles and practice
2. setting strategies to achieve your goals
3. identifying a professional support network.

Setting goals

Now that you have identified your principles and model for youth in development work, you are in a position to set some goals that you might like to achieve in youth work.

Your goals could relate to:

- the sort of job you would like to get
- further studies and/or personal skills that you feel you need, and/or
- what you would like to achieve with young people.



Activity 6.9

Set yourself between five and eight goals for your youth work practice. Write these in your learning journal.

For example:

To improve my communication skills.

To improve the quality of life for young women.

To empower young people.

Setting strategies for improving your youth work practice

By this stage you will have developed some goals for your youth work practice. Now it is time to think about some changes that you can make to improve your youth work practice and achieve your goals.



Activity 6.10

Re-write your goals in your learning journal and set yourself some strategies for achieving each goal.

For example:

Goal

Improve the quality of life for young people in my community.

Strategies

1. Do some research to find out what issues are affecting young people in your community.
2. Set up consciousness raising activities to facilitate analysis of the problems:
3. Generate discussion of possible solutions to help them resolve the issues.
4. Help the group develop an action plan.

Professional support

It is hard to work to a set of principles and try and improve your youth work practice if you do not have any professional and personal support. If we are going to be good at helping young people, we need to accept that at times we need help ourselves.

One way to achieve support is to network. Networking involves giving and receiving within a peer group; it is mutual support. It is a process of gaining and using contacts with other youth workers to support the work you undertake with young people. Your networking contacts can provide:

- information
- ideas
- advice, and
- support.



Activity 6.11

To help you recognise your current professional and personal networks, answer the following questions in your learning journal:

- Who is in your current professional network? (e.g. co-workers, peers, tutors, supervisors, etc.)
- Who do you turn to when you need information about youth work?
- Who do you turn to when you need someone to encourage you and listen to you?
- Who do you turn to when you need to have some fun and forget about work?
- Who do you turn to when you need someone to challenge your ideas about youth work and help you learn?
- Who do you turn to when you need to talk to someone who has similar views to yourself?

It is important to have at least two or three key people who you can trust and rely on to discuss the problems and issues that you encounter in your youth in development work practice. You should always be looking to extend or develop your existing network to include new people, especially as your work changes.

Activity 6.11 (cont'd)

To help you do this, answer the following questions in your learning journal:

- What qualities, information and skills do you have to offer other youth workers?
- What qualities, information and skills would you like from others?
- Do you get the opportunity to meet other youth workers or people who are studying youth work? Where?
- How could you improve your networks with these people and extend your networks further?

This Activity should have helped you identify two or three key people that you can turn to for support. You will have noticed that different people offer you different things. This helps you identify what you really need from each person. Having more than one support person helps to prevent any one support person from feeling over-burdened. It also avoids a sense of loss for you if any of them moves on to work elsewhere.

Learning action plan

The Activities in this unit will have helped you to prepare for completing a learning action plan. The learning action plan is your first assignment for this module. You will not be assessed on the implementation of the learning plan, only on the plan itself.

Based on what you have learnt in this unit and module, you are now ready to complete your learning action plan. Turn to the section at the end of the module and read *Assignment 1*.

Unit summary

In this unit, we looked at issues relating to the professional conduct of youth workers. We examined five issues related to professional conduct:

- establishing boundaries
- equity
- support
- power, and
- empowerment.

The rest of the unit should have helped you to develop your own set of principles and some strategies for improving your own youth in development work practice.

It is important to remember that improving ourselves is a life-long process. The process you learnt in this unit for continuing your learning can be applied throughout your career. This continual quest to learn, change and improve helps us to evolve as critical and reflective practitioners. In this way, we continue to examine our role and accept our responsibilities as youth workers.

A critical and reflective practitioner is a youth worker whose purpose is to improve the quality of life for young people in an ethical and professional manner.

We hope that you have enjoyed studying Module 3: *Principles and Practice of Youth in Development Work*

References

Flowers, R., King, L. & Bowie, V. 1992. *Directions: A Youth Worker Trainer's Map*. NSW Youth Sector Training Council, Sydney.

Shields, K. *In The Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide to Social Action*. Millenium Books.