

Constancy and Change

The Hero's Journey: A Framework for Understanding Youth Transition and for Designing Youth Work Interventions

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Youth and Youth Transition

The concepts of youth and youth transition have developed alongside the social changes of the last 100 years. In the last 50 years in the UK the age of financial dependency of a young person on their family has changed from 16 to 25. This provides one measure of an extended period of youth to which social institutions have only partly responded. At the same time the rise of individualism and the plurality of western culture means that the experience of transition from a youth to an adult identity has shifted from a train ride (in which the time of departure, route and destination and largely known and determined by others) to a car journey (in which the youth are the drivers, they can leave when they want, take as long as they like exploring many paths and arrive when they want at a destination not predetermined) (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

This social mobility has been enhanced by education and employment policies. In order to respond to the changing nature of work the emphasis in education has shifted from manual to technical and knowledge based subjects. In response to these changes the percentage going into higher education has changed from 10% in the 1960's to 42% today and with a current government target of 50%. As a response to a delayed adult status a vibrant youth culture has also emerged based on self expression supported by consumption. Identity is increasingly found through economic rather than social activity (Roche and Tucker, 1997).

As a result of these shifts in society the marginalisation of some young people has increased. Those suited to manual work have fewer opportunities and a lower status. Some argue that reductions in social cohesion result in greater numbers of disturbed and disaffected young people. The increased length of the time of youth increases the challenges presented to youth and their families and communities to find and maintain a path to adulthood. This marginalisation is from both pathways to adult identities and from the means of support to find a pathway (The Prince's Trust, 2004).

An added problem is that, at a time of increasing questions about environmental and social justice on a global scale, a growing number of young people capable of finding pathways into established adult identities find these routes ethically unacceptable. They are marginalised by the lack of opportunities to transform rather than reproduce the culture through their agency.

Youth Work Interventions

In the UK public funds support formal education through schools and colleges and informal education through youth work until the age of 19. Interventions to help those aged 19 to 25 who find themselves marginalised is largely left to the efforts of voluntary youth work organisations. There is a growing but patchy response. Most of these initiatives simply extend the kind of support offered to younger groups to the older cohort. They continue to treat youth as a time of transition to adulthood and work as the central pillar in building this adult identity. A few are beginning to ask whether the idea of youth should be reconceptualised as a valid stage in development in its own right rather than as a time of transition. Both approaches raise questions concerning the appropriate ways to provide support to young people.

My research (Loynes, 2004) suggests that, given the plurality of the social situation and the increasingly adult nature of young people, interventions need to be person centred, adult in style and tailored to the individual. Nevertheless they can still draw on inter-generational relations and collective support. These are all values considered desirable by traditional UK youth work practices (though sadly undermined by recent government policy) (Jefferies and Smith, 2002). Effective strategies that I have studied include certain types of outdoor education, voluntary work, creative arts projects, mentoring, peer education projects, community transformation projects, social and business enterprise and vocational training. These are often combined with other interventions such as education, social or probation work and health care.

An Integrated Model of Youth Transition

My practice has involved developing a conceptual model of youth transition (Doughty, 1998, Loynes, 2003) based on the hero's journey (Campbell, 1968) and the transition change curve (Kubler-Ross, 1997). I have been using this as a diagnostic and programme design tool to help address the contemporary challenges for youth work discussed above.

My interest in the hero's journey started when I noticed parallels between the narratives of outdoor adventure and the hero myth. The parallels included symbolic landscapes such as mountains, roles such as mentors, a challenging journey that turns into a quest, developing skills for the means to travel and finding resources such as specialist equipment and finding a symbolic treasure to return to the community from which the hero departed. Bettelheim (1979) suggested that the experience of growing up in the absence of a strong oral culture is psychologically challenging because the stories that support the development of the child are missing. It occurred to me that the growth of interest amongst young people in outdoor adventure (and in visual media such as movies based on myths) could be thought of as a response to this lack in youth culture.

Applications of the Model

The psychological model of the hero's journey, combined with other models of youth transition from a social perspective, can help with the diagnosis of youth development issues. It can support the professional in the identification of the stage in the process a young person is working on and so help to develop a congruent response. In this way it provides a structure for designing interventions. The model can also be readily shared with the prospective participants so that they can become involved in the diagnosis and design processes. The stages of the hero's journey model are tabulated with some possible diagnostic interpretations of youth transition issues and youth work responses in table 1.

The model can also be used as a programme design tool. The model has the benefit of providing a framework that can operate on different time scales from the length of a short residential programme to the entire span of youth transition. Table 2 provides an illustration of the model in relation to a programme just a few days long.

The model can also be integrated with other useful programme planning tools such as conceptual models of facilitation style, group and community development, vocational training, drug rehabilitation, organisational change or therapeutic recovery. It has proved useful in a range of professional development contexts providing a readily understood framework for sharing and combining the lay knowledge of professional and volunteer practitioners. Perhaps the imaginal roots of the model help to unlock the creative processes of groups supporting a collaborative culture and helping to maintain a youth work practice that is closer to the life world of the young people it is meant to empower.

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