Historical Consciousness in Youth Work and Adult Education[1]

Walter Lorenz, Free University of Bozen/Bolzano

Filip Coussée, Ghent University

Griet Verschelden, *Ghent University College*

1   A social pedagogical perspective on youth work and adult education

During the past decades, the fields of youth work and adult education are concerned with questions concerning their identity. Questions that cannot receive a full answer without taking into account our (shared) social and pedagogical histories. For many practitioners, policymakers and researchers the confrontation with our history means a renewed acquaintance with social and pedagogical questions that constitute our field, often in a rather 'natural' way, which means that they are not open for critical inquiry (Heyting, 2001). So, in discovering the past we also hope to renew the 'social pedagogical eye' (Stickelman, 1993) in our work by investigating how pedagogical questions are always related to social problems or broader questions concerning social cohesion.

The concept of social pedagogy takes different shapes and positions in Europe describing a range of practices encompassing social work and education (Coussée et al, 2009; Hämäläinen, 2003; Lorenz, 2008). In this article, we show the potential of social pedagogy as a perspective on youth work and adult education. A social pedagogical perspective helps us to put today's discussions on youth work and adult education, as a part of social work, into their historical and social-political context. It questions the historical inevitability of our practices, and promotes the methods development and differentiation of the social professions.

2   On historical embarrassment and professionalisation

The history of the social professions cannot be caught in a simple, linear discourse. It is a complex story involving periods in which the development of the professions was based on legitimations which we find hardly acceptable today and which are to a certain extent even embarrassing. For instance, the way in which many pioneers of adult education ascribed social problems to moral corruption and a lack of religious practice is no longer acceptable to most of us. However, this should not keep us from exploring our own history. On the contrary, this embarrassment now forces us to focus on the underlying problem definitions of our actions, which are rarely explicitly called into question these days.

The historical development of the social professions is often presented from the perspective of professionalisation. Throughout history, professionalisation was an expression of the urge to

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emancipate the profession (Roessingh, 1977). The social professions too wished to be distinguished and recognised. That is why they wanted to distance themselves from pre-professional types of social work and to ensure a more rational, theory-based practice supported by certified training courses. This was expected to result in a more efficient practice. This endeavour was completely in line with the progressive rationalisation of modern societies, driven by the firm conviction that we were able to overcome social problems by optimising the way we dealt with pedagogical issues.

There has always been a tension between professionalisation and the development of practice on the basis of voluntary commitment, especially in the sectors which are today defined as youth work and adult education. The least we can say is that professionalisation in the social-cultural field is imperfect, certainly when compared to more "traditional" sectors such as healthcare or justice, sectors we tried to emulate in the past. If this is less the case in adult education and youth work today, this is because the care component of original social pedagogical work is gradually being separated from its educational component. Professionalisation was better suited for what today is called social work. Conversely, in youth work and adult education, discussions about the status of the profession, access to the profession, the curriculum of the training courses and the definition of the fields of activity seem to be less in order. There appears to be a consensus that the profession of youth worker and adult educator is an open profession. Still, there are developments which are threatening such a consensus, for instance the "youth-work licence" in England, a movement which clearly intends to separate youth work further from adult education. There are movements in the opposite direction as well, such as social work training courses (e.g. Ghent University and University College of Ghent) which reject an excessively sharp distinction between social work, youth work and adult education and which give a broad social pedagogical definition to the concept of "social" work again, in analogy to the situation in most of Germany (Hamburger, 2003; Thole, 2005). This broad approach does not reflect an aversion to professionalisation but reminds us that this evolution is not an unequivocally positive given. Professionalisation may have resulted in a wider recognition and appreciation by society (albeit to different extents in different sectors), but it has also disrupted the unity in social pedagogical work. This makes it harder to bring to light and call into question the underlying problem definitions as well as the constant transformation of social problems into pedagogical issues (Hafeneger, 2001).

3 Professionalisation, specialisation, demarcation

All social professions witnessed this trend towards rationalisation and methodological optimisation. A generally unintentional side-effect of this development was that the social professions gradually became estranged from their own roots (Van Gent, 1982). Indeed, researchers and practitioners were seeking a universal and timeless profession which no longer depended on a context supported by social, political and cultural conventions based on language, religion or traditions. This tendency to throw history overboard was present in all modern professions. It was driven by the urge to write a new chapter in the development of practice, a chapter emphasising the universal, timeless and scientifically grounded nature of our goals and methods. This alienation from our own history and the optimisation of our methodological identity was accompanied by a far-reaching de-contextualisation. The social aspect and the pedagogical aspect, which in a lifeworld context belonged together and meant a collective striving for improvement and integration, became separated (see e.g. Ten Have, 1961). This resulted in increased specialisation and a differentiation into distinct sectors: youth work, adult education, social work, community development, etc. Several educational

practices with adults emerged at the crossroads of three major social domains, namely education, economy and culture. In Flanders for instance, these practices were identified and institutionalised in three sectors: informal adult education, labour- and profession-oriented education and training, and second-chance education including basic education in formal settings. To address the growing demand for coordination in this scattered landscape of adult education, various projects are currently being developed, such as the "cooperation in basic education and informal adult education" project, an initiative in view of improving and extending the cooperation between the Centres for Basic Education and the "*Volkshochschulen*". Paradoxically, the renewed attempts at coordination confirm the boundaries between sectors, problem definitions and target groups since they do not start from a historical unity but from the restrictive problem definitions which have developed historically.

These supply-driven developments also encouraged a differentiation on the demand side. The "market" was split up in distinct segments, affecting the extent to which users or target groups were able to identify themselves with and feel acknowledged by specific services and organisations. For instance, youth work claimed that assistance was no longer one of its dedicated tasks. The unwanted and probably also unintended result was that "problem groups" of young people were excluded from mainstream services and the "pistachio effect" was reinforced: "The harder nuts to crack are, at best, left until later, or, at worst, simply disregarded" (Tiffany, 2007). The pistachio effect illustrates that efficiency-enhancing developments often are at odds with how users perceive the usefulness and the acceptability of the service. However, the historical evolution in which youth work and adult education became alienated from their common roots in civil society movements and lifeworld contexts is not recognised today as an evolution which made it harder for certain groups to access and use the offer. Indeed, the different "sectors" have in the meantime become strongly anchored in institutionalised society structures. The groups which can no longer identify with these specialised offers are construed as "hard to reach". They are seen as target groups which are difficult to address through a methodology which has nevertheless proved its effectiveness conclusively – and for the latter claim we *do* rely on evidence from history.

4   A crisis of faith and identity

Social work in the process of professionalisation and in the quest for recognition was supported by – and itself also supported – the strongly held belief that society can be shaped rationally. The methodisation and differentiation of the social professions therefore reflected the abstract laws of science and aimed to achieve reliable and sustainable solutions to problems such as sickness, social instability and ignorance. However, the principles on which the project of modernity was constructed are beginning to falter. As a result, the legitimacy of the social professions, which is built on these very principles, can no longer be taken for granted although the demand for effective intervention and for risk elimination steadily increases. The social professions are not up to the mark and fail to fulfil their promises. Their reputation was shaken badly by the numerous signs of malpractice or of ostensibly pointless activities or bureaucratic activities which waste taxpayers' money. Public support for the social professions is dwindling, especially in the professionalised, and hence expensive, sectors of social work, while the call for solutions to social problems becomes ever louder. Some believe that public support for social work and its professional status can be restored through increased transparency, an even more prominent quest for tangible results, and the creation of strictly useful knowledge via practice-oriented research (Banks, 2007). These ambitions run more or less parallel with the evolution towards "new public management"

aimed at rendering the public sector more efficient and establishing "evidence based practice" regardless of professional affiliation. But behind these developments a crisis of confidence is looming in the relationship between experts and the public, between professionals and the users of services. The shared belief in the possibility of striving towards a better future with the help of expert, professional systems, has ruptured. In the mean time professionals have become estranged from their history and thereby from the processes which are necessary to build public confidence and a shared "project". They are in danger of stranding between the project of modernity and "betterment", which has lost its appeal, and an over-emphasis on identity, which is gaining ground in society today with partly worrying implications. In constantly progressing globalisation processes which appear to propagate universal equality, being able to identify oneself with a distinct group offers some counterweight, and it becomes important to be understood by members of an identity-sharing group, though at the risk of contributing to a fragmentation of society. Youth workers and adult educators appear to shy away from this. Their methods are supposed to be applicable to any group. An excessive and uncritical emphasis on contextual factors such as social class, age, gender, religion, life experiences and ethnicity is felt to be threatening.

Still, these evolutions pose challenges to youth work and adult education which evoke long-forgotten memories and call for a closer engagement with what is happening historically right now (Reisch and Andrews, 2001). We were – and often still are – obsessed by quality controls, measurable indicators and formal qualifications, and we appear to forget how defining and interacting constructively with the abovementioned contextual factors are for our practice. The introduction of intensive labour planning has urged lots of organisations to perform environmental analyses which produced a clearer picture of the context in which they operated. Still, the aim of these analyses was typically to differentiate professional methods and responses according to the position which groups occupy along these different fault lines. In contrast, the social analysis – which precedes any social work practice – aims at more than just methodological differentiation. It fundamentally determines our raison d'être. Although various projects and ancillary activities in all sectors have constantly placed such questions on the agenda, this has has not been absorbed into identity discourses of youth work and adult education. The time is therefore ripe to thoroughly redefine the supportive aspects of our practices and of our social pedagogical identity. Otherwise this leaves a vacuum at the centre of our professional identity which gets filled from external sources and factors from above as well as from below. For it is not only the rationalising state which pressures youth work and adult education into expressing its social role in clear indicators: conscious citizens also expect transparency and clarity from services vis-à-vis the users and the general public. Neoliberal approaches extend market logics to services which, especially as far as social (care) work is concerned, were traditionally organised in a paternalistic manner and which were wary of the participation and involvement of non-experts. Conversely, youth work and adult education had a stronger tradition of user participation. However, in this field too, the application of new public management principles is often considered as an attack on professional autonomy. A more market-oriented approach could bestow greater public recognition and status on this profession, but social and pedagogical practices thus risk evolving more and more towards technical interventions relying on methods which have already proven their effectiveness, irrespective of the social and political context.

The combination of these challenges imposed from below and above will in any case require a thorough revision of the principles from which the social professions derive their credibility and authority.

5   Incomplete professionalisation as an asset?

Youth work and adult education is also increasingly under pressure – from the European Commission, mostly – to adjust itself to the demands and expectations of a neoliberal market logic. Still, this pressure is less strong than in social (care) work, which is professionalised to a higher degree It may even be an advantage that youth work and adult education are less professionalised in these times of fundamental transformations. The crisis mitigates excessively ambitious suggestions that continued professionalisation and far-reaching specialisation are the only options available to social professions if it they are to restore their autonomy and self-respect. The "incomplete" professionalisation of youth work and adult education is not a weakness but a real opportunity to reflect more fundamentally about our mandate. What are our core principles and how can they be reconciled with further professional development which will not happen automatically? In what kind of agendas will youth work and adult education therefore fit in, intentionally or unintentionally? These are important questions in the current social-political climate. Reflecting on our principles is therefore crucial, and reviewing our history gives us the instruments for deepening this reflection. This involves more than a simple history of facts. Evolutions in our operational methods are not abstract, academic developments but are invariably rooted in national and cultural contexts.

One of the main challenges arising from this reflection is how we can reconcile cultural particularity with a justifiable striving for greater universality? It is a complex field of tension in which youth work and adult education are major players. On the one hand there is the pursuit of equality and the commitment to fight social processes and structures which create exclusion, on the other hand there is the wish to respect individuality and cultural identity.

6   A surge of historical consciousness?

It is probably no coincidence that the interest in historical research in the social professions is on the rise just now. It comes at a time when society as a whole appears to have broken its ties with history. The post-1989 era was labelled "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992). The battle between the two big ideologies has ostensibly been decided. Although the rush of victory was quickly tempered by a new confrontation, labelled "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1993) and, today, by the global financial crisis, capitalism as yet remains firmly settled on its self-styled throne. Capitalism has redefined itself and presents itself no longer as a product of history but as a kind of law of nature which says that no central political steering is possible, only that of the "invisible hand" of the market. However, societies are at the same time being plunged into the depths of their own histories. It is becoming increasingly problematic for population groups to live together, witness the struggles for independence or for greater autonomy in post-colonial crisis areas and post-communist regions. This is especially evident in the seemingly strongly established West-European nation states, where separatism and nationalism are thriving. At such a juncture, our own history is catching up with us, although this history is very often instrumentalised and used (or misused) to legitimise territorial claims or to support a defensive stance against the uncertainties and fears of societies that are becoming more than ever aware of their ethnic and cultural diversity.

The transformations affecting the mission and the positioning of the social professions are therefore inextricably linked to these broader historical and social-political transformations, which impact also on the academic disciplines grounding these professions. Not only is the identity of youth work and adult education constantly being redefined, changing societal values also expect us to legitimise ourselves on fundamentally different grounds. In this process, "history" is approached in two different ways. The functionalist view ignores the

importance of history, whilst the iconic view approaches history uncritically as a line of "important" people and ideas. Both aim to reinforce the status of youth work and adult education, but they do so in an insufficiently critical manner. We believe that this may eventually harm the identity of youth work and adult education.

6.1   A functionalist approach to history

In a functionalist approach the efficiency argument prevails. Youth work and adult education are expected to position themselves in a market-driven society of choices in which the ultimately anti-pedagogical principle "just ask and you will be given" rules. The customer (or the state) demands a certain type of service and the services endeavour to meet this demand at the best possible price. In this approach, "traditional" principles and starting points are ignored or even explicitly renounced. The only criterion for acquiring identity and status is the answer to the question: "What works?" Today this is also referred to as "evidence-based practice", in some views reverting to the days in which medical science served as the model for other social professions (Webb, 2001; Gray, 2005).

In essence this is an a-historical approach which will ultimately have negative consequences. Not because this neoliberal approach pays too little attention to the boundaries between sectors and to historical delineations, but because it makes us ignore the "social pedagogical" dimension in our work. We are reasoning in market-related terms of supply and demand and hide ourselves behind ostensibly neutral concepts such as efficiency and evidence. We advocate demand-driven action. Although this may help to develop "tailor-made" services, it at the same time produces a logic of categories emphasising and reinforcing differences between people and communities. This is the consequence of a strategic-functional approach to identity issues. We either essentialise differences and reduce people to one aspect of their identity (religion, background, wealth, etc.), or we trivialise differences and pretend that they are just a matter of choice and life-style. In both cases we help to erode "the social", which has traditionally been the very mandate of the social professions: it is our task to shape "the social", this social area where the organisation and solidarity of our society are called into question (Kessl, 2005; Seibel et al., 2007; Harris, 2008). The social area is the forum where discussions are conducted about how to cope with differences, about values and norms, about tensions between individual aspirations and social expectations and about the way we cope with these tensions. A focus on social processes and relations prevents the debate from getting bogged down in a technical discussion focusing on "organisation" rather than on "policy". The way we organise our living together is not merely a technical but also a social pedagogical issue. How do we perceive social relations and the problems they cause? How critically do our pedagogical practices resonate with these social relations? A critical and differentiated commitment towards our own history helps to revalorise the social pedagogical identity of our work. Such a commitment assumes that the users of our services are not people and communities with pre-structured qualities and characteristics we have to take into account. The relations between people are fluid and shaped in "the social arena", partly on the basis of our interventions. It is our task to forge ties between people who are different in a multitude of ways. This is not an argument for seeking a "social mix" in everything we do but for recognising and acknowledging our own positions and importance vis-à-vis those of others. Youth work and adult education help to create the conditions in which this process can take place. Indeed, developing solidarity is more than merely a technical question. If we deal with rights and interests only in a functionalist manner, we bolster a society in which ghettoisation and identity politics set the tone. Children, adolescents, women, foreigners, the poor or the disabled, senior citizens, families, etc. – every group would only claim their own

rights, without relating them to rights and positions of others. There is nothing "social" about an approach which strengthens this kind of identity politics. The social pedagogical mandate of our work resides in this constant awareness that identity is shaped in the social arena, in our relations vis-à-vis others (Masschelein, 1990; Somers, 1994).

6.2 An iconic approach to history

This approach relates to current political trends was well, but although it refers to our history, it does so extremely one-sidedly. A specific territorial or cultural domain is claimed on historical grounds: "We were here first!" Our territory, our mandate and our competences are ours by tradition and should not be altered, contaminated or called into question. The revived interest in history is at least partly inspired by the fear of having to relinquish an acquired (privileged) position. This fear is particularly present amongst those who risk losing "market share" in the functionalistic approach described above.

The concern for the specific social pedagogical mandate of youth work and adult education disappears in this iconic approach to history too when professional self-interest prevails over a responsible response to this mandate. Abstract notions of history and identity serve to consolidate privileges and acquired positions also in relation to professional work domains. This defensive attitude prevents a genuine and committed engagement with one's own history, a history in which the boundaries between social and pedagogical work, between care and education, between working with children, young people and adults etc. are extremely fluid and are in fact of little relevance to the lifeworld of the individuals and groups concerned. It is as if the iconic approach to youth work and adult education wanted to determine our identity independently from transformative processes in society and from the lifeworld of our target groups.

6.3 A social pedagogical perspective on history

This is the core claim of historical consciousness: The confrontation with history has an immediate impact on our professional practice, but it cannot be constructive unless we introduce a critical distance vis-à-vis current issues and unless we guard against all linear notions of "historical development". The dialogue with history is a two-way process. We interrogate the past but are aware of our subjectivity. In a dialogue with history we investigate the past and put the current "facticity" and the obviousness with which "new" challenges are presented in perspective. Only thus do we remain true to our social pedagogical mandate. Solidarity and social cohesion do not rest on a-historical facts but on a genuine, permanent quest for shared values, symbols and aspirations, in an ongoing dialogue with history. Only the constant elaboration and re-elaboration of the ever incomplete project called society can ensure social cohesion and at the same time respect for cultural diversity.

7 The field of tension in the social pedagogical mandate of youth work and adult education

Youth work and adult education have an important role to play in society. The tension between individual aspirations and social expectations emerges clearly in our work. On the one hand, we are expected to support the self-organisation of individuals and groups in their quest for identity, autonomy and authenticity. It is our task to foster social movements as a source of renewal. Beyond that, the mission of youth work and adult education is to question the established order of society time and again and thereby to "destabilise" it in a certain sense. This work is hard to organise and systematise and attempts to professionalise it risk making it an instrument at the service of adjustment and assimilation. On the other hand,

youth work and adult education also play a stabilising role in our society. It is not our task to pit groups against each other. Cultivating solidarity requires an open and permanent questioning of power imbalances, not the replacement of one power imbalance by another. This stabilising role makes "social" work an instrument for those groups who approach social integration essentially from within the existing social order (Donzelot, 1984), or for a state which prioritises integration through building organisations and structures and advocates rational and systematic planning. This attitude is inconsistent with a more "organic" bottom-up method which does not reduce social integration to inclusion into the existing structures. In this stabilisation perspective, the social pedagogical mission of youth work and adult education is reduced to "social education". People should be guided in their evolution towards becoming socially responsible citizens. Societal and collective learning processes thereby disappear.

The history of youth work and adult education illustrates the tension between system and lifeworld (Wildemeersch, 1993) and reveals the promises and risks of each position. History constantly raises the question: "Head of a movement or arms of the state?" (Maunders, 1996). The history of the youth movements is significant in this respect. Such social projects in nation states such as Germany and Italy drew a lot of inspiration from romantic youth movements such as the *Wandervögel*, which opposed the cold, industrialised capitalist nation states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with their call for a return to nature. As a matter of fact, the balance between stabilisation and destabilisation quickly shifted towards the other side. The ultimate consequences of an over-romanticised community feeling became evident in Nazism and Fascism (Giesecke, 1981). During the social revolutions of the 1960s, the rebellious youth movement (often operating outside the existing institutionalised youth organisations) again played an important part in condemning colonialism, oppression and authoritarian relations.

In British adult education, Marxism offered (and still offers) the basis for innovative radical movements within the trade unions. Historically, educational work in the Trade Unions was highly diverse, however: some believed it offered an opportunity for improving the workers' efficiency and their knowledge of the industrial process, others viewed it as an opportunity for critically questioning processes of oppression within the existing system. This commitment to the position of the working class and the action of the trade unions also became increasingly defensive and a-political, aiming to divert workers from radical ideas or revolutionary approaches and to make them realise that they stood to gain from supporting positive and active capitalist developments and collaborating with them (Steele & Taylor, 2004: 582).

From a social and cultural innovation viewpoint, it can therefore be argued that many countries have reduced the influence of the state and of professionals on policies and action. At the same time, history shows that people invariably take a defensive stance towards the social pedagogical issue in times of crisis and of radical social transformations. There is a strong urge to put youth work and adult education services at the service of a systems perspective which confines social integration to the social education of the individual.

However much we might want it, there is no way out of this complex field of tension. Developments which are steered one-sidedly from the lifeworld perspective emphasise uniqueness and exclusiveness, thus potentially reinforcing existing social inequalities and generating social exclusion. This clashes with the state's mandate to pursue social equality and prevent social exclusion. Conversely, overemphasising the systems perspective leads to totalitarian regimes and ideological manipulation. History also teaches us that a

professionalised, methodical and rational approach to youth work and adult education per se cannot resolve these frustrating ambivalences. Reverting to an established method and applying it as well as possible appears to make the tensions manageable, but at the same time it removes the levers for critically discussing our social pedagogical mandate. We cannot hide behind a methodology and think this relieves us from our accountability. Although the methodical approach may teach us to do things right, we should ask ourselves in every concrete action context whether we are entitled to act in this way and how this legitimacy is negotiated both with the users of a service and with the wider society. This reflection requires specific competences. These competences cannot be simply added on to existing competence profiles but rather constitute the core of our profession (Lorenz, 2009). We could call them "hermeneutic skills", or the competence of "making sense". Making sense of people's lives, not in an objectivising or psychologising perspective (although sociology and psychology can also play a role in this process), but by committing ourselves to a shared sense-making process. A social pedagogical process which connects with traditions, lost hopes, life goals and roots, but at the same time transcends them in order to achieve something new, something that is relevant here and now in a precise historical context. This constant reproduction and renewal process operates in various domains. An "historicised" approach of youth work and adult education gives us the impetus for making the field of tension manageable without removing or evading it (Fisher & Dybicz, 1999).

8   Dealing with identity issues

The social pedagogical mandate of our work is prominent in the way we deal with identity issues and confirm any existing or non-existing fault lines in a society. Here again an encounter with historical issues can teach us some very inspiring lessons. How did we in the past deal with issues such as gender, ethnicity, religion or disability? Historical analysis can tell us where the boundary lies between a legitimate craving for belonging somewhere and the discriminatory effects of cultivating a group feeling. At what point does the provision of culturally, ethnically or religiously biased frames of reference turn into a call for exclusion and racist practices?

Interestingly, identity issues are often associated with age, gender, ethnicity or religion nowadays, whilst the "social class" aspect appears to have vanished. And yet, our work has always witnessed a clash of initiatives which cherish class consciousness as a positive and constructive aspect of identity, and others which make a case for a "moral crusade" that suspends thinking and acting in collective terms. An example is the youth work discussion between the Belgian cardinal Cardijn and Baden-Powell. Baden-Powell wanted to appoint Cardijn as Belgian Chief Scout, but Cardijn refused. Where Baden-Powell applied a class-neutral concept of youth, Cardijn openly argued for a categorial approach to working-class youth (Coussée, 2010). Throughout history, both strategies have proved successful in the social integration of youth, although the class-neutral approach was successful only on an individual basis and often (unintentionally) caused exclusion, whilst socially speaking it appeared to confirm the social inequality between the different classes. The history of community work is illustrative in this regard as well. In the 1960s and 1970s, poverty was as it were "rediscovered" (Lovett, 1975), thus establishing a tie between community work, and social and cultural action. It led to the study of communities in all their complexity, in view of creating opportunities for shaping a feeling of identity, integrity, security and dignity among people (Martin, 1996: 128). Today, the individualised, class-neutral approach to identity development has become popular again (Dominelli, 2007). However, current political discussions show that this strategy does not work in diverse neighbourhoods, especially

neighbourhoods with high concentrations of disadvantaged groups. Collective consciousness is coming more to the fore, whether we like it or not. Confining these identity issues to aspects of ethnicity or religion opens few constructive perspectives.

9 Youth work and adult education are political (and hence never neutral)

As a result, youth work and adult education must not skirt around these political issues. Indeed, history illustrates the consequences of an alleged politically neutral stance. For instance, scouting spread at high speed throughout the world as an educational *method*. Catholics, liberals, socialists, communists and fascists enthusiastically made use of this politically neutral method. The activities, rituals and uniforms as well as the principles of self-organisation and participation supported young people in their identity development, but at the same time offered an ideal channel for the "social education" of young people and for their smooth integration into the existing order of society (Depaepe, 1998). Ignoring the ambivalence inherent to our social pedagogical identity makes us extremely vulnerable to instrumentalisation in function of political objectives. Again, we cannot prevent instrumentalisation by ignoring or methodically controlling this ambivalence. There is no point in pursuing an ostrich policy, nor does running away from political issues make any sense. On the contrary, we should explicitly recognise that we are – and wish to be – an instrument for shaping our society. Only then can we help to determine the grounds on which we will intervene and can we critically investigate who is defining problems for whom. The field of tension now appears to become increasingly selective: emancipatory opportunities for the most advantaged, controlling initiatives for the most disadvantaged. "Social" workers in all sectors can only stand and watch.

A detailed and thoroughly documented survey of our own history as a profession and a discipline is therefore indispensable. It will help us to sharpen our core competences. These competences should concentrate on how to deal with identity development questions and how to address needs and necessities, but also – and especially – on how identities, needs and necessities are construed (Lorenz, 2007). These core competences offer tools for reflecting on our social pedagogical identity. This involves the capacity to perform social analyses, the "problematisation" of existing problem definitions, the historical and social understanding of the situation people are living in, questioning our own intervention in people's lifeworlds, etc. Oscar Negt describes this as individual and collective learning processes: discerning the relations between things, reflecting on the development of ties between exemplary experiences and social processes, revealing the impact of culturally defined meanings on one's own life, being attentive to experiences of injustice and humiliation, and developing this into a basis for political consciousness and a meaningful relation with the past (Negt, 1997).

This historical dialogue holds a huge potential for the innovation of social and pedagogical practices. In this sense, international comparative historical studies also offer an undeniable surplus value. We all too often ignore the history of youth work and adult education in Central and Eastern Europe, pretending that this work in communist regimes is ideologically driven and hence cannot be compared with the liberal approaches developed in the West. This attitude underpins an almost neo-colonial strategy in which western-oriented services are constructed on a massive scale in various post-communist countries. Whether it is in the East or in the West, ideologically motivated social pedagogical work can never – and has never been – imposed unequivocally and completely from above and from the outside. In a certain sense and to a certain extent, it always addresses a specific need, the pursuit of autonomy, rebellion, or the search for a proper identity. Incidentally, it is equally true that ostensibly neutral initiatives are invariably integrated into political agendas in one way or another

(Hermans, 1988; Depaepe, 1998). Our ambivalent position between lifeworld and system forces us to keep one foot outside and one foot inside the system (Kane, 2001).

10 Questions of guilt

The dialogue with history eventually also makes us feel ill at ease. When we look back upon how "social" work approached and treated people in the past, historical consciousness often generates a massive amount of guilt. It makes us aware of the suffering we helped to inflict under the pretext of noble pedagogical intentions. We feel ill at ease when confronted with the "it's for your own good" arguments we used all too easily in the past, thus often legitimising a society based on oppression and exploitation. Child care, youth work, youth care, adult education, commumnity work, social (care) work, etc. have all been transformed profoundly in the past few centuries. Methods which seemed perfectly acceptable or even "enlightened" at one time are now looked upon with shame. It is only fairly recently that the revelations about abuses in psychiatric institutions or children's homes are being taken seriously. The way in which many youth workers and adult educators tackled poverty by "remoralising" the poor also makes us shiver today, although it does not keep some of us from uncritically agreeing with discourses on activation, employability and the individual ability to cope. Such stories remind us of the limited lifespan of any method or approach. That is why we should constantly ask ourselves how our current methods will be assessed in the future. How will future generations look upon the use of computer games in youth clubs, bans on gatherings for young people in certain neighbourhoods, constant supervision of families by social workers, community art projects in the framework of the fight against poverty, treatments for ADD and ADHD, etc.? The boundaries between lifeworld and system which we establish and modify are not universal and eternal. We cannot define them on the basis of abstract moral principles or exact scientific knowledge. These boundaries need to be renegotiated time and again by every new generation and in every cultural and political context. Becoming aware of the historical relativity of any perspective is a lesson in humbleness and thus offers a useful and even necessary starting point for facing up to this enormous responsibility.

11 Conclusion

Embracing our history generates few certainties. On the contrary, it confronts us with uncertainty and relativity. A method without history is a method without identity (Davies, 1999), but any attempt at searching history for a fixed identity is doomed to fail right from the start. So why bother? The answer may lie in a permanent, fragile search for human dignity. Indeed, a dignified existence is not a biological "given" but a social construct which every epoch and every culture shapes differently.

Youth work and adult education are delicate practices which reflect the values and norms prevailing in a given society at a given time and at the same time create scope for critically calling these values and norms into question (Böhnisch et al., 2005). It has a mission which is supported by the realisation of one's own historical relativity and which places youth work and adult education, like all other types of social work, at the centre of a dialectical field of tension on that constantly shifting polarity between lifeworld and system. On the one hand, this means we are asked to adjust people to the existing order of society and to what is presented as "reality". On the other hand, our mission is founded on the realisation that innovation and progress require bottom-up spontaneity and creativity. Both poles cannot be dissociated from each other. Together they determine the social project which focuses on the pursuit of human dignity. Although this project is fraught with misunderstandings, it is also a source of cultural inspiration, an innovative social practice and a true scientific endeavour. At any rate, it is a project which is and will always remain incomplete. There are no fixed points

of reference: existing boundaries and categories are constantly redefined and transcended. Remaining true to our mission clearly takes more than technical competence profiles. After all, human dignity can be achieved only in a social context. We cannot allow this to be dissolved in a technical and ultimately dehumanising process. The confrontation with our own history teaches us humility but at the same time urges us not to forsake our social pedagogical mandate.

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Author's Address:
Walter A. Lorenz
Free University of Bozen/Bolzano
Faculty of Education
Regensburger Allee 16
I-39042 Brixen
Tel: ++39 0472 014000
Fax: ++39 0472 014009
Email: walter.lorenz@unibz.it