

Innovation as a neoliberal ‘silver bullet’: critical reflections on the EU’s Erasmus + Key Action 2

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This paper critically evaluates the concept of innovation, in the context of the funding of youth work within Erasmus+ Key Action 2, but the findings are applicable to other settings which emphasise innovation. The paper argues that, first, innovation is problematic because it lacks a definition. Second, innovation is founded on a neoliberal business model, where solutions are identified and mainstreamed, and the consumer is the ultimate arbiter. Third, the importance of innovation as both context dependent and contested is not appreciated. One result of these problems is that established professional knowledge (Eruat, 1994) is undermined, and an emphasis on innovation also has the potential to run counter to the existing established educational practices of youth work. It is argued that innovation is becoming a euphemism for quality, and therefore innovation is taking on the guise of a ‘silver bullet’ for wider EU policy problems.

Keywords: Innovation, Neoliberalism, Youth Work, EU Policy, Context, Established Educational Practices

Introduction

This paper provides a critical examination of the role of innovation in EU policy discourse by focusing on its prominence in the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (KA2) funding stream, entitled ‘Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices’. It analyses the proceedings of a conference that showcased 60 ‘best practice’ projects funded by Erasmus+ under the auspices of Key Action 2 (KA2 Now, 2019). The arguments contained within this paper are also supported by detailed documentary analysis of key sources from the Commission of the European Communities, Council of Europe, European Commission and Erasmus+. This includes examination of policy statements, formal recommendations, research reports and funding programme guides. The purpose of this documentary analysis is to enhance understanding, develop knowledge and ‘elicit meaning’ (Bowen, 2009, p. 29).

It is evident that the EU regards innovation as important, highlighting ‘innovation activities and promoting new technologies as drivers of improvements in education’ (Erasmus+, 2018, p. 106). Despite this, however, it is unclear what innovation really is, and this question is largely unanswered in the Erasmus policy guidance. This paper will argue that there are three specific problems that arise as a result of this. First, there is no specific definition of innovation in the policy discourse, with a consequent lack of clarity. Second, Erasmus+, like the EU as a whole, is underpinned by a

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neoliberal ideology (Hermann, 2007), and therefore implicitly embraces a neoliberal business model of innovation. And third, a consequence of the first two problems is a tendency to try and ‘reinvent the wheel’ and in so doing, emphasising the search for new and novel methods can undermine successful existing educational practices.

What is neoliberalism?

Before discussing the issue of innovation, however, it is necessary to explain what is meant by the neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism has been a dominant force exerting a significant influence over social, political and economic affairs since 1979. It has created what Clarke, Gerwitz and McClaughlin (2000) describe as ‘post-welfarism’, characterised by a systematic dismantling of the welfare state and the beliefs, values and practices of social democracy that underpin it. Neoliberalism emphasises the primacy of the individual and the importance of individual responsibility (Makovicky, 2014), leading to Thatcher’s infamous statement that ‘there’s no such thing as society’ (Evans, 1997, p. 137). It is opposed to the state playing a significant role in the lives of its citizens; instead, the market and competition are primary in responding to and meeting human needs, through the ‘invisible hand’ of the market (Smith, 1789). The role of government is restricted to the promotion of entrepreneurial freedom, the promotion of strong private property rights, and the preservation of free markets (Harvey, 2005). As Klein (2001) suggests, however, the neoliberal ‘turn’ does not merely respond to human need; it reframes and recreates it, in order to generate and maximise profit. The dominance of this state of affairs has led Sandel (2009) to argue that we now have a ‘market society’ (rather than the separate spheres of the market and society), where everything has a price and can be bought and sold. Education is therefore no longer conceived of as a social good, independent of the market, but rather as a commodity.

Neoliberalism has also brought about fundamental changes in the leadership and management of organisations, with the result that private sector principles and practices have been imported into the public sector. Not only has this introduced competition between providers through tendering and commissioning; it has also fundamentally changed organisational custom and practice (Ord, 2012a). Public sector organisations are now driven by a managerialist concern for accountability, underpinned by the three Es of efficiency, effectiveness and economy (Farnham & Horton, 1993). These private sector management principles are underpinned by systems theory, and as Ford et al. (2005) suggest, ‘most organisations use an open systems model approach to understand and monitor their performance ... [which] involves identifying inputs, the process of transforming inputs into output, and the outcomes these can lead to’ (p. 163).

The notion of quality in organisational provision has also been reformulated with an undermining of professional knowledge (Eruat, 1994), and it has been replaced by the primacy of consumer choice (Giroux, 2008). The neoliberal turn is also characterised by the dominance of ‘science and technology’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001), resulting in a technocratic world view where problems are invariably deemed to have technological solutions. Importantly for this paper, technological change and innovation in the drive for new products and production methods play a significant role in the neoliberal world. As Harvey (2005) points out:

This drive becomes so deeply embedded in the entrepreneurial common sense, however, that it becomes a fetish belief: that there is a technological fix for each and every problem ... that can become destabilising, if not counter-productive. (pp. 68–69)

Youth work and EU policy

As Lawn (2003) pointed out, the EU has become ‘a major discursive space, centred on education’ (p. 236). Within this space youth work has risen in prominence, since the ‘field of youth work’ was first established in European funding streams in 1993 (Commission of the European Communities, 1993a, 1993b). This funding stream has been incarnated under several guises and is now known as Erasmus+. In 2010 the Council of Europe resolution on youth work was accepted, enacting a formal commitment to establish and promote the role of youth work across Europe, albeit under the rather formal legal title of ‘socio educational instructors’:

The Treaty provides that EU action is to be aimed at encouraging the development of ... socio educational instructors (hereafter called ‘youth workers and youth leaders’). (Council of Europe, 2010 p. 1)

Since the resolution the emphasis on youth work has grown considerably within the EU, particularly in the last five years with attempts to both demonstrate the value of youth work by providing detailed case studies (European Commission, 2014) and promote quality youth work (European Commission, 2015) with an emphasis on the professionalisation, qualification and accreditation of youth workers.

Youth work is an educational practice which contrasts with formal education and schooling in a number of ways. Youth work is ‘person centred’ (Ord, 2016), concerned with addressing the developmental needs of young people on their terms and in negotiation with them. It has been defined within the EU as a ‘voluntary, youth centric, self-reflective and critical, value driven and relational practice’ (Council of Europe, 2018). It is an informal practice, based on conversation and dialogue with young people (Jeffs & Smith, 2005), and is underpinned by voluntary participation where young people choose to take part and help set the agenda (Davies, 2015; Council of Europe, 2017). Youth work responds appropriately to young people’s lived experience of the world and is therefore best described as ‘experiential learning’ based on the principles outlined by Dewey (1916, 1938; Ord, 2012b). The central concerns of youth work according to the Council of Europe (2015) are ‘social inclusion, cohesion and equal opportunities, and [a] commitment to values of democracy and human rights’ (n.p.).

The new youth strategy (European Commission, 2018a, 2018b) places significant emphasis on the role of youth work in fulfilling a range of its strategic priorities, including increasing ‘participation’, ensuring young people acquire ‘key competencies’, and enabling successful ‘transition[s] to adulthood’. Building on the 2010 resolution, in 2017 the Council of Europe produced a new ‘Recommendation on Youth Work’ (Council of Europe, 2017), arguing that member states should ‘renew their support for youth work’, as well as promoting, strengthening and developing it. The recommendation concludes that:

Youth work makes an important contribution to active citizenship by providing opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes for civic engagement and social action. (n.p.)

Erasmus+ is a significant funding stream within the EU, supporting a commitment to promote and develop youth work. Its total allocation between 2014 and 2020 was €14.8 billion (Deloitte, 2014, p. 23), of which around €134,000,000 was allocated to Key Action 2,¹ with a total of €38,615,500 allocated in 2019 (European Commission, 2018c).

Innovation is clearly a key aspect of this policy priority for youth work, both within the EU as a whole and specifically within the Erasmus + funding programme itself. Innovation features prominently in the programme guide, with 72 separate references to it. It forms a major part of Key Action 2, where applications for funding are invited which develop strategic partnerships, with an emphasis on ‘[c]ooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices’ (Erasmus+, 2018, p. 11). It is perhaps also worth noting that this focus on innovation is not exclusive to the Erasmus+ programme; it also features heavily in the Horizon 2020 programme, where it is mentioned 115 times in the programme guide 2018–20 (European Commission, 2018d). However, the Horizon programme does not have a particular focus on youth or youth work.

Defining innovation?

As Bullen, Fahey and Kenway (2006) point out, ‘[t]he knowledge economy is a dominant force in today’s world and innovation policy and national systems of innovation are central to it’ (p. 53). Innovation is unsurprisingly a prominent feature of wider European policy (Borrás, 1999; Shackleton & Raunio, 2003). However, despite the prominence of innovation within the EU and in particular within Erasmus+, it is not entirely clear what is meant by the term. It is linked to a wide variety of disparate entities, including ‘economic advantage’ where it is pointed out: ‘EU businesses need to become more competitive through talent and innovation’ (Erasmus+, 2018, p. 11). It is linked to language teaching and to the development of a range of linguistic skills (Erasmus+, 2018), and also to sustainable investment, where ‘[p]riority will ... be given to actions supporting the development of innovative ways to ensure sustainable investment in all forms of learning’ (p. 106).

Innovation within Erasmus+ is also linked to policy innovation, where efforts ‘aimed to develop new policies or prepare their implementation’ are encouraged (p. 187). It is also linked to ‘innovation in teaching and research’ (p. 196). There is also a particular emphasis on innovative products, where it is made quite clear that:

Projects are expected to develop innovative outputs, and/or engage in intensive dissemination and exploitation activities of existing and newly produced products or innovative ideas. (p. 103)

Despite the various allusions to innovation – for example, in language development, learning or economic advantage – there is distinct lack of a definition of the concept. There is an implicit assumption that we all know what it means, with a ‘taken for granted notion’ of innovation prevalent (Winslett, 2014). To some extent innovation is explained in terms of itself – innovation is what innovates – as in the following quote from the assessment criteria for Erasmus+ funding: ‘Innovation: the proposal considers state-of-the-art methods and techniques, and leads to innovative results and solutions’ (Erasmus+, 2018, p. 142²). The result of this is that innovation becomes like a Rorschach ink blot test – we can interpret it in any way we want, and it means different things to different people.

It could be argued that there is a straightforward solution to this first problem of innovation – that the broad aims can be defined by the applicant, as alluded to in the Erasmus guidance, where applicants are encouraged to frame their own priorities and concerns. For example, funding can:

Support the sector in addressing its most pressing challenges and achieving its medium and long-term goals, including where relevant in terms of growth, innovation ...
(Erasmus+, 2018, p. 140)

However, as will be made clear below, this solution, where innovation is simply self-defined, is at best only partially successful. The problem is far more complex than this solution allows.

The neoliberal ‘business’ model of innovation

One of the main problems of the framing of innovation within Erasmus+ (and arguably within the EU policy discourse as a whole) is that it is underpinned by neoliberal ideology. This is evidenced by the strong links between innovation and notions of entrepreneurship. The Erasmus programme guide contains 45 separate references to entrepreneurship, and explicitly links together the ideas of entrepreneurship, innovation and education (Erasmus+, 2018). Like entrepreneurship, innovation is more central to the neoliberal world of private sector business practices than it is to the world of youth work or education more broadly. Entrepreneurs must continually innovate to maintain their market share and create new markets (Klein, 2001). For example, the manufacturing of new cars involves a continual development of innovative gadgets, intended to persuade the driver that they need to upgrade to the latest model. As an educational practice youth work does not innovate in the same way, since it has a set of established and embedded practices that have largely stood the test of time and have become embedded in professional knowledge (Eruat, 1994). In youth work these practices have been demonstrated to work successfully with young people, a point that will be discussed in more detail later.

Innovation in the neoliberal world of private sector business practice is more straightforward. Simply put, the market dictates and the consumer decides; innovative solutions that are brought to market either survive and thrive, or fail and disappear. The market is the ultimate arbiter of innovation. However, a major problem in applying such notions to youth work is the difficulty of judging what innovative youth work looks like. Similarly, it is not clear who makes these judgements. In the neoliberal model of the ‘citizen consumer’ (Giroux, 2008, p. 171), a solution to this problem would be to let the young people themselves decide; if a new type of provision meets their needs and adds value, then it is innovative and successful.

However, this does not constitute a viable solution, as the following example attests. An innovative programme of leisure nights in South Devon was highlighted in a government report on youth work (DCSF, 2009), heralded as a great success and as an example of ‘innovative’ and ‘state of the art’ practice. References were made to the reduction in crime figures, while dozens of young people attended local leisure centres on Friday evenings, staffed by youth workers. However, in the eyes of many of the youth workers who were brought in to ‘police’ these events, they were anything but progressive or developmental. Furthermore, it was felt that the minority of young people who were responsible for the previously high crime figures would likely return to crime and anti-social behaviour if, and when, the leisure nights ceased, since no

meaningful ‘embedded’ educational process had been engaged in (Davies, 2006). The problem here is that youth workers themselves possess notions of quality provision which are underpinned by their professional knowledge (Eruat, 1994), but these are not recognised or valued in the neoliberal world view.

Another aspect of innovation which reflects its underpinning neoliberal ideology is the notion of ‘mainstreaming’. This is referred to several times within the Erasmus+ programme guide, where it explicitly encourages ‘mainstreaming the results throughout the sector’ (Erasmus+, 2018, p. 153) or where participants in receipt of funding are expected to ‘ensure the mainstreaming and effective use/implementation of the project results’ (p. 163). Allied to other notions such as ‘rolling out’ or ‘upscaling’, we begin to see even more clearly how innovation is framed in accordance with private sector business practices. There is a distinctly instrumental rationale in operation (Lubberink et al., 2018; Ord, 2014; Solomon & Lewin, 2016) which presents problems to be analysed, solutions to be identified, and then the roll-out or mainstreaming of those solutions. This is explicit in the Erasmus+ guidance, which ask organisations to ‘contribute to innovation by ... developing, implementing and testing the effectiveness of approaches...’ (Erasmus+, 2018, p. 142).

As we saw earlier, educational practices such as youth work in the neoliberal managerialist world are mechanistic and instrumental (Ord, 2012a), with practice framed as input, throughput and output (Ford et al., 2005). This has been referred to as a ‘medical model’ (Coburn & Wallace, 2017) because of its clinical, problem-focused approach. Innovation within the Erasmus+ programme has a similar instrumental framing, which is described here as a ‘business model’ of innovation given its neoliberal foundations. At the very least this framing needs to be made explicit and be open to challenge – not least because, as Raby (2014) argues, this neoliberal turn can and does affect even the most person-centred of social practices such as children’s participation, fundamentally undermining their purpose. This point is discussed in more depth later.

Innovation and the importance of ‘context’

Innovation is presented as a ‘silver bullet’ to resolve problems. However, this denies the importance of context, assuming that innovation is context independent. An appreciation of context demonstrates that innovation in youth work is very different to innovation in the world of business and entrepreneurship.

Deciding whether something is innovative in youth work requires a judgement, and whenever we make judgements we must understand and appreciate the context within which they are made. Context is all important when considering innovation in youth work, as in all social phenomena. Context also operates on multiple levels, including the context of one’s own experience, and the context of the young people and their needs, interests, concerns and issues. There is also the organisational context, in terms of their strategic priorities and how these might differ from one organisation to the next; clearly, what is innovative in one context might be established practice in another. The policy context is also important, encompassing local, regional, national and European policy. Cultural context matters too; what is innovative and different within one culture is commonplace and established in another. Historical context is paramount, as practices may appear to be new but may in fact have been applied in the past and discontinued for good reasons. The political context is also important, as are issues of race, gender, sexuality, and disability.

The author was personally reminded of the importance of context when reflecting on why a German Erasmus-funded youth work project appeared to be so ‘innovative’. Entitled ‘*Between Ages*’ (Enger et al., 2018), the project involves a three-month rehabilitative trek involving a single young person accompanied by one youth worker. They have no mobile phone or other connection to the wider world, and the project is premised on the idea of ‘walking away from prison’ or ‘walking away from drug abuse’, both metaphorically and literally. On first glance this struck the author as exemplifying innovative practice, but upon reflection, as someone who likes walking, is suspicious of the pull of digital connectivity and has a fascination with wilderness – as well as a keen interest in restoration and rehabilitation – it became clear that such a project was bound to appeal to the author’s personal context. In terms of the wider context, there is nothing particularly novel or innovative about this project; wilderness treks have been utilised in many parts of the world for a number of years (Cumes, 1998; Houge-Mackenzie & Kerr, 2017). This was a timely reminder that we should be very wary of making judgements about innovation based upon our own personal contexts and our resulting preconceptions.

Other contexts are equally important. For example, the social and political context is paramount in appreciating the value of innovative practice. The practice developed by ‘#unexcited’ (2019), presented at KA2 Now and intended to engage young people in conversations and group discussion about sexual health and safe sex, is far from innovative when seen in the wider European context; in the UK and particularly in a more sexually liberated country like the Netherlands, it would be commonplace. Importantly, however, this work was developed in the Hungarian context, where it is delivered against a background of conservative religious beliefs. In the context of right wing populism in Hungary, this youth work is regarded as highly innovative and challenging (KA2 Now, 2019). Indeed, the project was only possible because of explicit support and funding from the EU.

KA2 Now (2019) clearly illustrates the importance of context, offering a plethora of examples of high-quality youth work practice, all characterised as innovative but with a wide variety of different aims. These ranged from exploring ways to accredit and validate learning to working with young people to lobby city officials to create youth friendly cities; from developing entrepreneurship in young people to utilising open spaces as creative and dialogical spaces for learning; from creating a ‘MOOC’ to a undertaking a camping project with Roma youth; and from using virtual reality to engage with and educate bullies to a project teaching young people how to keep bees and make honey. It is quite clear that different contexts can produce a wide variety of innovative practices.

Innovation as a contested concept

The context-dependent and multi-layered nature of innovation results in it being very difficult, if not impossible, to define. Not that this is necessarily out of the ordinary; there are many concepts that we use regularly but which are problematic to define, such as the concept of art (Davies, 1991). However more importantly, innovation is not just different in different contexts; it is contested across different contexts, and therefore it must also be seen as a ‘contested concept’ (Godin, 2015).

The technological context illustrates and exemplifies this contested nature of innovation. The question of how youth workers should respond to young people in the

digital age prompts very different responses from different youth workers; this is clearly demonstrated across the youth work projects identified in KA2 Now (2019). On the one hand, there are those who cite evidence of the overuse of digital media by young people – for example, the fact that 70% of 12–15 year-olds have a profile on social media, while the OECD reported in 2015 that 94.8% of 15-year-olds in the UK used social media sites before or after school (House of Commons UK, 2019). Similarly, as Twenge et al. (2018) point out –

Adolescents who spent more time on new media (including social media and electronic devices such as smartphones) were more likely to report mental health issues, and adolescents who spent more time on non-screen activities (in-person social interaction, sports/exercise, homework, print media, and attending religious services) were less likely. (p. 1)

This results in many concluding that young people need to be encouraged away from screens, and youth workers need to develop innovative and appealing alternatives to a digital existence. Kirby (2001) also questions the extent to which one can have a conversation in the digital sphere. Opponents of ‘digital youth work’ argue that working with young people in digital spaces encourages them to exist online and merely exacerbates the problems.

However, there are others who argue that if workers do not engage with young people in the digital environment and are themselves not ‘digitally illiterate’, they immediately ‘lose’ young people and lack credibility. Arguably, youth workers need to be engaging with young people in digital spaces and encouraging them to think critically about that world, in terms of its addictive qualities, its negative representations, and its profit motives. KA2 Now (2019) showcased a number of such projects including ‘virtual youth work’ (2018), which developed creative ways of working with young people in the digital realm. Other projects such as ‘Natari’ in Finland create exclusive online settings such as internet-based youth club (Natari, 2019).

Presented as a duality this can certainly appear to be a dilemma, but perhaps in reality it is not a question of ‘either/or’ but rather ‘and/both’. A middle way could be found, where youth workers need to both engage critically with young people in digital spaces, as well as encourage them to develop alternate interests. Nevertheless, the technological context clearly exemplifies the contested nature of innovation in youth work practice.

Innovation in youth work: *‘Not reinventing the wheel’*

The cumulative effects of the problems referred to above, namely that innovation in youth work lacks definition, that it is dominated by a neoliberal business model, and that it is context dependent and contested, create an additional problem – there is a tendency to ‘reinvent the wheel’. Underlying the focus on innovation is an implicit assumption of ‘out with the old and in with the new’ – a belief in the inherent value of doing something different, new or original. This approach tends to denigrate the old, the traditional and the ‘tried and tested’, in preference for anything which is new and different. In searching for innovation there is a danger of ‘throwing the baby out with the bath water’, getting rid of something that seems to be no longer wanted or needed but in fact losing something valuable. It is paramount that youth work values the tried and tested; for example, the Scouting movement is the largest youth organisation in the world, founded in 1908 (Davies, 1999). It is over 100 years old and remains one of

the most participative youth organisations in the world, where young people consistently take responsibility for programming (Smith, 2013). Before we innovate, we must be clear what aspects of the old we are losing or changing, and why.

As previously argued, education (of which youth work is a part³) has a set of established practices that are embedded in professional knowledge (Eruat, 1994). Examples of such practices in youth work have been demonstrated to work successfully with young people, such as utilising conversation in order to explore and engage with young people's experience of the world (Jeffs & Smith, 2005) and build educative relationships (Ord, 2016). Such approaches are encapsulated in the principle of 'starting where you people are' (Davies, 2015), where practice begins with an appreciation of the needs, concerns and issues as expressed and articulated by the young people themselves, with responses to these concerns unfolding over time.

This paper is not denigrating creativity and novelty in youth work. Youth workers need to be creative in their approach, but it is argued that true innovation is of a different order, and must always be set in the context of established practices. Neither is it being suggested that existing practices are perfect and beyond critique; certain practices are clearly contested, such as the extent to which youth workers should be 'proactive', planning and initiating conversations, or whether they should be 'reactive' and simply 'go with the flow' (Jeffs & Smith, 1997, 2005) in existing conversations. However, the notion of established practices themselves is not contended, and they are used here to contrast with the neoliberal 'business model' of innovation which mitigates against them.

Micro and macro innovation

Youth work at its best is flexible, responsive, dynamic and spontaneous, but with this creativity comes uncertainty. As Schon (1983) illustrates very well, educators operate in the 'the swampy lowlands of practice', where the way forward is not always entirely clear and where judgements need to be made about how, when or whether to intervene. This is particularly the case for youth workers, who are often operate 'on the wing' (DES, 1987 p. 2) in uncertain dynamic environments. Trying to understand this aspect of practice in terms of innovation, it is best to describe it as the 'micro' context, operating in the realm of the specific interventions and responses of everyday practice. This aspect of innovation is sometimes referred to as improvisation, for example where Harris (2014) argues that 'a readiness, willingness and ability to improvise are central to the role [of the youth worker]' (p. 1). In this sense, youth work practice is part systematic and part organic (p. 7), underpinned by a set of values and practised using certain skills and dispositions to deliver outcomes for young people, emerging out of an uncertain, dynamic social space (see Ord, 2016, pp. 148–153). Of course, the antithesis of youth work practice is a tightly planned programme with prescribed outcomes which do not respond to the expressed needs of young people.

The framing of innovation within Erasmus+ is more accurately described as the 'macro' – the wider context of youth work practice, including social dimensions (Dutilleul & Birrer, 2010) as well as economic, environmental and rural/urban contexts. KA2 Now (2019) illustrates this very well, describing a wide range of contexts within which innovative practices have been applied. These include 'political education, empowerment and civic action', 'accreditation, validation of learning', 'addressing disadvantage and providing greater opportunities', 'creating and applying

new technologies’, and addressing ‘employability and entrepreneurship’. Importantly, these issues may be responded to best and perhaps even solved by new and innovative responses. However, as evidenced by another recently funded Erasmus+ project, a number of the social issues identified in both national and wider EU policies, such as employability or educational attainment, can be addressed through ‘traditional open access youth work’ which does not attempt to ‘reinvent the wheel’. This research project (Ord et al., 2018) assessed the impact of youth work by collecting 715 stories from young people across five European countries. One of the five overarching themes which emerged from the data was ‘social inclusion’. This theme included such factors as ‘improvement in job chances’ in Italy, ‘increased interest in learning’ in France, and a ‘reduction in risky behaviours’ in England (p. 223). Importantly, these were achieved within traditional open access youth work, utilising tried and tested methods of youth work practice. What this research demonstrates is that many of the policy goals of the EU are being advanced by youth work practice, without any particular emphasis on ‘innovative solutions’ at a macro level.

Innovation as a euphemism for quality

Analysing the framing of innovation further, it is evident that it communicates two separate aspects. First, it is creative, original and new, and second, it is special, uplifting and inspiring. Importantly, however, it also adds value. Utilising these essential components innovation becomes a euphemism for ‘quality’ and in so doing quality implicitly becomes synonymous with ‘the new’.

The result of redefining quality in terms of innovation is that there is a tendency to elevate the importance of innovation in youth work. Innovation is *one* aspect of quality youth work, but it is often presented within EU policy discourse as if it is the *only* aspect of quality youth work. Innovation is one of the things youth workers do, but much of what they also do is derived from tried and tested methods such as building educative relationships (Ord, 2016; Sercombe, 2010; Wood, Westwood, & Thompson, 2014) and engaging in educative conversations (Batsleer, 2008; Jeffs & Smith, 2005).

Conclusion

Given the vast sums of money that are made available for youth workers and youth work organisations to develop innovative practices, it seems a little strange that such a lack of clarity exists around the concept. Reflecting on the framing of innovation within Erasmus+, in one sense it could be seen as unproblematic, in that (given the lack of definition of innovation within EU policy discourse) youth workers can frame innovation on their own terms, within their own unique set of individual, social, cultural, organisational, political, historical, and policy contexts.

However, in other senses there are serious problems with the framing of innovation within Erasmus+, as well as within the wider EU policy discourse. It advocates a business model imbued with an instrumental rationale and a problematized discourse, underpinned by a neoliberal ideology. Innovation is therefore framed as a ‘silver bullet’ to resolve problems, to be mainstreamed across the sector, but this ignores social, economic and political contexts. Youth workers are by necessity creative and innovative in their practice, but this is set firmly in the context of a set of established educational practices.

The neoliberal business model of innovation has the dual problems of encouraging ‘reinventing the wheel’, as well as denigrating the ‘tried and tested’. This is exacerbated by the framing of innovation as a euphemism for quality. Over time the EU’s concept of innovation and its associated problems may well undermine established and embedded sets of youth work practices.

Innovation beyond youth work

The arguments above which provide a detailed critique of innovation, although set in the context of youth work and European policy discourse, are not unique to this sphere and they are it is argued transferable to a variety of other contexts within which innovation is emphasised. For example, formal education in the UK has a similar focus on the role of innovation in improving educational practice (DfE, 2014; Ofsted, 2008, 2010). According to Williamson & Payton (2009, p. 3), ‘it is the keyword in much policymaking’ and innovation is central in concepts of curriculum design and planning, and in attempts to improve teaching and learning. Gulikers, Runhaar, and Mulder (2018) also emphasise the importance of innovation in assessment, arguing that innovation in assessment should precede innovation in curriculum design. Interestingly Williamson and Payton (2009) in attempting to: ‘clarify what is meant by curriculum innovation’ (p. 3), fall into a similar circular trap (that we saw above where innovation is defined as what innovates) suggesting curriculum innovation results in ‘transformations in classroom activity’ (p. 4). Clearly arguments about context and judgement are central in discerning whether any transformation is appropriate, desirable, or beneficial.

The focus on innovation is not exclusive to UK educational contexts. There is an emphasis on innovation within the wider OECD, where there are clear expectations on ‘education [to] reinvent itself’ (OECD, 2019, p. 3) and where innovation is perceived to be central to the need to ‘improve’ education. Similarly their definition of innovation as ‘a new or improved product or process (or combination thereof) that differs significantly from the unit’s previous products or processes and that has been made available to potential users (product) or brought into use by the unit (process)’ (p. 2) has no appreciation of context or acknowledgement of the need to make judgements about the effects or impacts of the new products or processes in the given context. The neoliberal turn is also apparent in the framing of innovation within the OECD report, with its emphasis on measuring innovation and ‘scaling up’ (p. 31).

In a globalised world (Stiglitz, 2002) where neoliberal ideologies dominate (Harvey, 2005) the taken for granted notions of innovation and the implicit neoliberal business model which invariably underpins innovation need careful consideration wherever it appears.

Notes

¹ Worked out on the basis that ‘[a]t least 28% of total Erasmus+ budget [is designated] for KA2 ... [as a whole, and of which] at least 10% [is allocated] for the Youth field’ (Deloitte, 2014, p. 25).

² This same criterion is utilised a number of other times in the guidance – see pp. 145, 146, 150.

³ Youth work is often characterised as informal education (Jeffs & Smith, 2005).

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