DEVIANT COMPETENCES IN THE MIRROR OF NON-FORMAL LEARNING AND WORK

DEFINITION INTRO
Key words: *social integration, culture, employability and recognition, integration collaborative practice.*

> "*Show me your colors*" is a name of the workshop, one of methods within non-formal learning that we use in our projects, to get people talk with and about each other, getting to know each other and discover alternative types of communication. It is a lovely metaphor referring to diversity of human personalities. Surprisingly though, how many participants actually perceive this workshop not at all in terms of metaphor, but very specific, in terms of lights, tones, opacity and saturation. Even more amazing is how many of them for the first time manage to find a matching definition of themselves. Amazingly for them is how fast they manage to find, articulate and communicate definition of other people, to other people. Not news for any trainer in field of non-formal learning but just as fresh and inspiring, a shared feeling of accomplishment and cohesion arises. Miracle?

The heart of non-formal learning is the principle of discovering and enhancing **people's own special composition of skills and capabilities** with respect but not determined by, their social and cultural identity. And throughout years, the methodology of this approach has been developed as open source so much by so many versatile specialists, it has become astonishingly efficient which had been witnessed many times. Within only one or two weeks, getting young people to approach other cultures, to open up and share their views and ambitions, to find ways of collaborating with other youngsters from different social and cultural contexts, and most important, to find the way to define themselves and their relation to the world: that is something that surely differs non-formal learning from its formal and informal siblings. To difference from form

Integration is a challenge of growth of awareness, not shrinking of space for expression.

In terms of integration, non-formal life-long learning has demonstrated presence of powerful personal development techniques, possible to apply to a young person from nearly any cultural or social background, with a result of awakening a specific person-bound set of competences and talents, appreciated by the group despite backgrounds and defining the core of identity of this person. This process of empowerment and self awareness brings a stronger self esteem and natural curiosity for representatives of other cultures as other cultures themselves, rather than suspiciousness and alertness, and encourages people to seek collaborations with the starting point in their background as inspiration for contribution, rather than strive to protect their borders as a framework for their identity. In that way integration process becomes a human designed process instead of a political program, and it is driven by people's natural search for outstanding and unique attributes and new "life hacks" providing them with advantage in competition in local community.
If set up as a politically defined, publicly administrated efforts, integration initiatives often tend to become a discourse of attitudes and values rather than unique collaboration opportunities. Within methodology of non-formal learning and vocational training, this natural strive for creative solutions and opportunities is a focal point of activities. Refined from values and frameworks as a part of learning paradigm, focus on one person's capacities, competencies and skills create a precedent of positive experience of **getting outside of our comfort zone, relying on your personal rather than cultural identity,** therefore establishing a new paradigm for an individual and even through dissemination activities, wider groups of people. And guess what. Getting into that paradigm is hard without paying dues to each participant's own possibility and capacity of contribution, often presented and met as a unique set of competences, revealed through more or less unexpected circumstances. To engage into integration process, we always first assess the constellations of skills and competencies originating from each member of the group, whatever form och shape these may take; to see integration processes develop sustainably, we grant ownership of the process, to its participants, by facilitating their collaboration work rather than leading them to a certain solution. Integration is about acknowledging and accepting differences when it is yet possible and for benefit of collaboration; can there be any better way to search for

innovations than let members of the group shine with their multiple perspectives? That is an unpredictable yet highly fruitful process of co-creation that we can call integration collaborative practice.

> "*Investment management*" is another workshop we use in order to de-dramatize responsibility and choices that young people face on their way to adult life of active citizens. No we don't talk about finances as a value in itself, however, we talk a lot about value, and resources that have value and that bring value to our lives. It is not uncommon that during discussion about priorities and what resources do young people have, we end up with "work" and "time". Another round of reflections and - surprise surprise - priority of *joy* from what you do, beats *work*. "If you gonna invest time of your life, do it in the area you feel strong for, because there you will constantly grow as a specialist and meet people matching your ambition with challenges, "- is a repeated outcome. To find your **true passion is tool number one on the way to higher employability**. Surprise?

Obsession with solutions for a happy life, versus process of living happily.

A situation when we go through life pursuing a certain image of success is quite international. Funny how this involves two diametral opposite concepts: a process of going, and a picture of achievement. Cases of people **focusing on their inner compass** are often dismissed from the discourse of success as either religion practices or exceptions proving the general rule of constantly empowered rush for prestanda. In my opinion it has a simple explanation, a person aware of her core competence and true needs is a happy person and happy people don't fall as easy for new promotions of universal remedies for a notched soul, like brand shoes or high-status profession. Meanwhile, lacking experience or mentor support, many young people direct their sights towards specific "posters", images of certain contents and value: a business manager, a successful sales person, a doctor, a car mechanic, a lawyer, a teacher, a journalist. In that, they choose the image as goal and consider reasonable to invest time into affiliating with this image, often underprioritizing opportunity to invest in their own natural unique combination of competences and talents, often due to lack of definition and therefore acknowledgement of these sets of competences. There are always examples of rebellions of course not following groups' expectations, the problem is that meanwhile for us he or she is an example of natural development, for the wider community it is rather an exception, a deviation from the normality.

The question is, if talent is personal and unique, what is in fact, a deviation? How normal a deviation is? How common should a phenomenon be in order to be accepted as normality? According to observations over the last four years, a deviation is another name for a less encountered normality, when applied to a limited and specifically described group of people. The point is, there is no prevailing normality, but a public consent about its existence. It makes a lot of people unhappy by forcing them to constantly race to reach this normality, which is in fact fictive.

What happens if we encourage conscious deviation from the accepted picture of success? Will young people stop educating themselves to become for instance, architects? No I don't think so. Yes the "poster" of "an architect" will still exist as one of alternatives for let's say creative construction design, set of skills and competences. But on the way to reach this "poster", some of young people may discover that the engine of their interest for it was passion for urbal planning, some - passion for composite materials engineering and some were driven by a wish to help people live together in harmony. All these are different paths and may indicate completely different competences: a system designer (possible programming and AI genius), chemist (possible Nobel prize winner for invention of organic self-restoring building materials) and a group therapist. The amazing part is, (or would be) coming from different areas of expertise and (would have) developed their competence powered by natural instinct and sensitivity due to their own unique talens, these people could work together in a team on common challenge of sustainable communities; too bad they all are stuck competing for one place available at the university, architect department, that no-one of them feels particularly absorbed by.

Culture carried on you, carried by you

After some years of meeting young people from different countries and cultures, facing same challenges of learning, communication and group dynamics/behavior, maybe it is time to ask, if

the differences between us causing problems are indeed culturally or nationally bound, and is there a connection ground wider than nations, deeper than background?

Discussing same issues referring to them as "in our culture", and "in their culture", there is a time for an international group of young people to acknowledge that there are more common grounds in our problems and ambitions than differences between our communities, and these common grounds lay in structures like human nature, attitude towards bread bringing, feeling of security, transfer of knowledge and so on. Our conflicts in communities are often similar, though conditions for development and evaluation of learnings/results are different and therefore differences arise in one or another process or solution to be more supported in one society or another.

But is it the way the **conflicts are depicted** and viewed today? Not really, and sadly, another universal trait that many counties and cultures share due to human nature, is laziness to analyze and hunger for power. Populistic manipulation of people to believe that the source of the biggest problem is their neighbor, how common is that? Even though neighbors can be difficult to deal with at times, none of neighboring community will be exceptionally villain due to their culture. A cultures' meeting broken down to a meeting between people challenged with the same quest (yes, a classic form of non-formal learning), quickly shows opportunities for flexibility and tolerance. Must be magic…

At the same time, if we look any deeper, there is always something that defines us as persons, before and beyond our families' expectations, education, age and gender. Some kind of core that contains a unique set of attitudes, ambitions, priorities, talents and capacities, as well as psychological gender, pattern of learning and communication, and behavior towards the outer world and people. Each individual has a unique and custom designed "tool" to tackle the world knowledge and find his/her place in it: a learning pattern, behavior and communication routines. If we could understand this "tool" and match it with a proper "toolbox": methodology of learning and development, we would manage to separate education (providing people with new knowledge) from recognition of personal capacities (validating skills and supporting individual learning-to learn process). If in this way we separate personal conditions and achievements from unified system of evaluation; we create premises for more systems of evaluation to emerge, based on different normalities instead of deviations from one. Therefore we would be able to identify each persons unique set of competences as a holistic core, not as a scale of reference to a certain non-personal unified standard. There is logic in investing in personal development, but is it the way the education is designed today? Is it what is even expected from it? Not really. If it would, we wouldn't face what we face every time we practice methodology of non-formal human centered learning: small genius discoveries time after time after time. After time.

And strange enough, this process of discoveries takes place no matter which cultures are presented in the group of participants. Even a matter of negligence of personal capacity and competences, for the sake of general unified planned development, seem to be quite common and international…

Education! Proudly brought to you by…

Education is seen as a key to social dialogue and development of the society, away from dark ages of xenophobia and in general, fobia of all that cannot be controlled. Throughout ages it has been provided by the stakeholder who's interest in educated people was biggest. First the church investing in monks and priests (today we could refer to them as a group of corporate educated copywriters), later development of industry investing in a easy replaceable basic literate working force, anyone who can read/write will do.
For 500 years ago we faced promotion of glorious perspective of eternal life through contribution to church; isn't it what today is enriching social media with posts brings in a more or less unified system of training of promoters and acknowledgement of success? Back then as now, we all share a common picture of relations in social structure, and somehow similar evaluation of different levels of progress, what is good and what is great. This knowledge comes to us through both formal, informal and non-formal education: from upbringing in the family to apprenticeship in professional career, we still have kinda general vector of evaluation, like a solar system with one center and several other important bodies, aligned in their own orbits defined by gravity towards the sun. That's what we call a norm: an orbit predictable enough to invest into bodies, that will

start rotating and producing outcomes (even it is only reflection of the sun) anytime soon. A deviation from the orbit is costly failure of investments since the outcomes are unknown; a person deviating from normative educational system is a threat to stakes at educational market, where investments may be reduced or cancelled. What we have is a clash of two long stories: system of investment in education with a certain supra-organization interest behind it, and a constellation of personal capacities and competences, developed unique within a person. Just as a school dropout starts with inner and outer conflicts long before the day a youngster actually skips lessons, the same way validation of education and its value is defined by bigger stakeholders benefitting from a specific way of learning, and outcomes, which has nothing to do with person's own dreams, goals and skills. When we say, school is important, which part of this meeting do we mean? Societal good of predictability or realization of a person's potential? Because as it is comes up, these may be just the opposite targets.

Throughout times, predictable and expected skills declared as ultimate competences were used to demonstrate valuable outcomes of formal education. Its value has a condition that people included in this education, in fact do share same perspective of evaluation, and measure for different levels of success. We know that teachers and professors caring for their subject and party of their field of study, are common. We know however cases when students are not demonstrating either motivation or any interest in common values supporting the process of education. So we have a smaller group of previously educated within the system professionals, executing their mandate of definition what true outcomes of education and learning are, and a bigger group of people hosting multiple possibilities of outcomes. The question is hardly what is it that allows a smaller group to maintain the monopoly of evaluation; the question is rather what prevents other smaller groups emerge within the learning community, introducing alternative learning patterns and values of outcomes?

Unless we want to classify this as an attempt of sabotage of the system, we may suggest that there must exist a different solar system for values and therefore promotion of education and learning, with different kind of outcomes that would motivate the students to participate. Eventually following this logic, we may also suggest that there may be more than one way of similar evaluations of success, in fact, we may deal with multiple dimensions of progress, that we need to acknowledge in order to understand. Next step is also to acknowledge complexity of these dimensions, that there may also be levels and relations, and even space for competence growth and development. It means that there is possible development of knowledge in a non-linear simultaneous process, where expansion of levels and interpretations create a possibility of linking them with other cognitive learning structures. In a way it can be seen as **equality 2.0**: manifesting supremacy of uniqueness of composition of skills, capacities and competences powered by will to make the best decisions for your life. That means, any person possesses both a measurement of her or his learning outcomes as well as a structure for competence growth and development, all is concealed within each individual. The problem is, in order to pull these out of the shadow and make people aware of them therefore activate them, one needs pedagogy where mandate would be given to the young person herself. Completely natural approach for non-formal learning; nearly banned from formal education.

This type of equality challenges even another more fundamental principle: the mandate of knowledge and agenda. As long as we evaluate inputs in a certain coordinate system, the outputs can only contain evaluation of relation of phenomena towards normality, and seen as satisfactory or not, development. This means that if phenomena belongs to another coordinate system, its possible development will not be reflected or acknowledged until this another coordinate system is. If inequality 2.0 remains, we are blind to recognize growth of unique unnamed competence, seeing solely stagnation of expected/normal learning process. We will see it as an unfortunate, maybe funny maybe sad, deviation.

But let's say deviant competence is not the same as a deviation.

Deviation contains an idea that there is a dead-end of some process that is occupying some place in a known universe of learning, communication or behaviors. It is an error that occurs normally in any process, and it is usually assessed from perspective of damage control, how bad or dangerous it is. In terms of practical approaches, deviations tend to be identified, isolated and treated by the society, with a honorable purpose to make the carrier of deviation as comfortable

as possible, and as "close to normal" as possible. The more substantial impact a deviation can cause, the more dangerous it is. Therefore, the stronger expected influence of the deviation, the stronger is the response from the respective environment. In terms of evolution, this is the mechanism that keep human communities alive for centuries. In terms of intellectual and spiritual development, this is the mechanism that usually sets up witch hunt in the area.

Deviant competence however means that person possesses a way of learning, communicating or behaving other than is known and commonly used in her/his respective environment, regarding any conditioning like culture, age, gender, time actuality, priorities or social rituals. It means that inside of the person, values for development in life and assessment of success, has a different center of gravity, and it goes on a different orbit. It means that skills and competences may be combined in a way that has not been yet recognized by the society, or even requested. It means that the person may feel uncomfortable but not due to organisation of life around her, but because of her way of recognizing the world, that doesn't make sense described in a "normal" common terms. Acknowledging the deviant competences however is not enough. People who feel special because they don't fit in the picture at home, know that they are special. Matters of self-esteem are important to work with and that is what people in their closest social network usually are good at working on. What is needed, is to start building on this acknowledgement, and put a solid structure for growth of competence,

Deviation and deviant competence may be the same thing, difference is in how they are perceived: as a dead-end alternative, non- och hard changeable in the process of achieving a "normal life", or an alternative road to unknown destinations that has not been placed on the map yet. The difference between them today as I see it, is that common "normal" competences are provided with logical sustainable pedagogic methodology all the way through person's career growth. Deviant competences remain being called "funny", "special", "peculiar", "different" with its carrier, the young person, being left alone to figure out methodology of pedagogic for her personal and career opportunities. There might be a reason why there are hundreds of successful entrepreneurs, leaders and project coordinators who had experienced difficulties of recognition at school. They had to find the way to teach themselves to learn to swim in ocean of social interactions and jobs. How many millions drowned trying…

This brings us back to discussion about what's best is who's best. For a classic expansive growth that has been appraised since… well, coincidentally since industry flourished and public education has been established, development has to be predictable and quantifiable, following the linear logic of 1-2-3. However, last decades clearly showed that this way of development has weak capacity of meeting social and economic challenges and complexity of sustainability should be rather seen as a star, not a vector, organized and producing effects as circles on water rather than steps on a stairway. The question is, what would be the center of these stars? For in terms of discourse of deviant competences, there is no zero count because the discussion is not held in terms of lack of something on the way of reaching aim set up by someone; on the contrary, it is held in terms of present resources and conditions needed for them to reach their potential. May we suggest that the center of growth would be person's self-definition. Understanding what kind of resource and unique set of competences is present within each one individ, creates conditions for what we called earlier, integration collaborative practice.

Equality of personalities

In this process actual enlightenment, raise of tolerance, interest for life and other cultures, search for sustainability and why not - salvation of the world, has been a bi-product, secondary effect due to sustainable choices made by people. Funny how hospitality and willingness to help are same in different countries where each one nation considers it to be strictly culturally defined and typical for respective country. Well, yes it is easy to be kind when it doesn't cost anything; in all other equal conditions, there is astonishing for xenophobic people unity among people from different countries, about doing good rather than ill, and humane choices rather than assaults.

Where does this behavior comes from? Obviously, meeting personally in youth exchanges or trainings between colleagues, people wish each other well. Where does it go then when I comes to politics, or rather, where does the voice of our values ad sustainable choices go? With all weight put into education, how are we taught to make our choices and what give voice for?

Subjects of education has been and still are, defined by the societal needs. At some point there is a picture, a "poster" of a missing position that the social system will probably be missing by the time the young person will grow up. That's quite some uncertainty in this concept already as it is: the planning of education starts at least two generations before the graduate student can put newly acquired skills and knowledge to use. Taking into consideration that a process of education is a long term investment, the only way to secure the profit of this investment would be to secure that the value of the outcome will not deteriorate since the time of the investment, the start of the education.

I think we should once again think what do we mean when we say, we secure the quality of education. The amount of information, ability to apply the knowledge or the habit of learning and questioning yourself? Are we pursuing first of all diploma or certificate, systemic intelligence or personality growth? That would influence a lot learning methods, mentorship and evaluation of results. In some societies still, there is a strong and oppressive system of education that minimizes mandate of a student to design his/her learning process and define objectives, in these systems, priority is given to formal recognition like a diploma, that gets an absolute value in itself. The danger in that is that while majority of young people strive to get higher education for the sake of diploma, the qualitative contents of the education will be exhausted, and both its value, and uniqueness will be denominated. In these countries is it also common to have a strong political steering with low democracy level.

In other systems, education is encouraging development of skills and entrepreneurship; in respective societies priority is given to working experience and early start of working life and diploma is less important than actual participation in the process. This is common for societies with high level of democracy and pluralistic political representation, this also creates favorable conditions for pluralistic development of topics for research and development of innovations. The question however remains, whether it is the most updated system corresponding actual needs of the society and its challenges? Is it fast enough?

Regardless which tradition of education or support for young people's personal development we turn our attention to, we can see the same pattern: youngsters with unusual abilities, or difficulties in socializing, communication and behavior, do get support and attention, and are taken care of. The problem is that their caretakers often come from "another planet" and don't share the same perception of the world. They can learn but not necessarily understand the nature of capacities, therefore needs for learning, of the youngster.

Another side of this pattern is, being a teacher is a privilege. It means that as a teacher, it is easier to get acknowledgment and attention for your inputs. However, people are not born teachers, but being schooled into the profession. They are being equipped with pedagogical skills as well as perspective for world order as it should be seen and learnt, and given mandate to promote it.

I think, bringing up a generation of teachers and mentors coming from youngsters with deviant competences is giving them a mandate to introduce alternative ways of seeing the world, and change it or save it, on their own premises.

Why is deviant competence not a deviation?

When all these pictures in your head, letter and color combinations, symbols, unwritten rules and coincidences start to make sense... Possibility to establish a system of dealing with one's unique set of perceptions and reactions, and to build on it, reaching new heights of knowledge, skills and abilities, that is what defines deviant competences and distinguish them from deviations from the norm. There is nothing wrong with the norm; however, there are many more of them than we know names of. Names we know often refer to diagnosis or special perception ghetto known as autism: a generic name for huge amount of unknown states and capacities. There is nothing wrong with the norm, there is nothing wrong with the deviation either. Two problem that occur are 1) discourse of deviation, often led in negativ or diverging terms ("we don't talk about it like that", "we don't say that about that"...), and measures taken towards the obvious carriers of deviant competences; rather pacify and silent than push and develop. What would happen if we addressed these two problem?

1) institutions that nourish of specific state of people, would have hard times because the society not longer claims that these people need a special treatment.

2) We would not consider helping people with different perception level, to adjust to conditions around them; instead, we would focus on helping them get the taste of motivation, and choose to invest in their inner compass and abilities.

While a deviation if okay for learning but not for living, it is perceived a dead end; it needs to be tolerated or if possible worked out to by people to fit in the "normal" program; deviant competence is something that does make people different from each other and their environment, but it is just the start of the journey, with a whole pile of mapping let to be done.