

THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROGRAM: A REFLECTION ON GOOD PRACTICE IN THE USA

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ABSTRACT: This good practice essay puts the Community Education Program (CEP) as a focus for comparison between West Virginia (USA) and Germany/European Union (EU). The essay is a combination of reflections on qualification frameworks, learning outcomes, lifelong learners/learning, transnational organisations, the Scottish Framework, a number of good practices, and accreditation from a research and practical perspective. Despite substantial research efforts, a national qualifications framework (NQF) or accrediting body for the CEP could not be identified in the US. The goal is to continue research on a national and international level. In the meantime, the good practice efforts, established through various features, continue to apply.

1. Setting the scene

In 2012, I was hired by West Liberty University, West Virginia, USA, to newly develop, design, and implement the Bachelor of Arts in Community Education Program (BA in CEP) as a non-formal and progressive educational alternative to formal and traditional education programmes. The BA in CEP is the main focus of this essay, even though there is also a programme at the master's level [Master of Arts in Education (MA Ed): Community Education – Research and Leadership].

This good practice essay on the CEP reflects my good practice perspective in connection to exploring different roles that national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and learning outcomes play in national policy contexts. It describes the influence of national (and international) initiatives on curricula design, qualifications, and lifelong learning from a research/theoretical and practical perspective.

1.1 CEP design and development

The programme was designed on the basis of a comparative research study, in connection with a document analysis of data on community education/non-formal education, available in research articles and the world wide web. Using this theoretical research as a foundation, the-

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ory was put into practice by designing the CEP with its seven majors: Community Arts, Disabilities Services, Educational Leadership in Faith-Based Organisations (Youth Ministry), Museum Education, Outdoor Education, Sports, Recreation and Wellness, and Teaching English and Global Education.

1.2 Practical aspect

The programme was developed for students interested in becoming educators working with the Lifelong Learner (LLL), outside of the traditional classroom in a non-formal and/or in-formal learning environment. Graduates of this programme will be able to work in non-formal educational/out-of-the-classroom educational settings, non-profit sectors, and community-based organisations. The programme proved to be one of the most progressive programmes locally, but also nationally. Research and needs assessment at the time found no other programmes of this kind locally or nationally.

1.3 Learning outcomes

When the BA in CEP and the MA Ed programmes were designed and developed, applicable NQFs did not exist in the US. Consequently, a guiding framework for learning outcomes was missing.

1.4 Practical aspect

Learning outcomes in the CEP framework were based on goals and objectives that I developed newly and individually for the CEP (Table 1). This resulted from the fact that I was not able to identify a framework or accrediting body in the US that would provide a clear outline, including (learning) outcomes, for a non-formal educational programme in higher education. Even though NQFs are developing rapidly in Europe and other parts around the globe, this trend does not appear to have reached the US. While learning outcomes and standards are the norm in formal educational settings, this is not the case for non-formal educational models. Learning outcomes and NQFs are supposed to solve many educational problems, but the US appears further away than other countries (many in Europe) from bridging this gap between education, the economy, and support mechanisms for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

1.5 Lifelong learner/learning

Lifelong Learning (LLL) is one of the cornerstones of the Community Education Program. The definition of LLL used for the CEP appears to differ from the European ones. As Laal (2011) points out, «to think that one

can find an essential, basic or incontestable definition of LLL is to embark upon a search for a chimera» (Laal, 2011:470). She further adds that «the term of LLL has a wide currency and great practice in contexts, its meaning is often uncertain» (Laal, 2011:470, as quoted in Aspin & Chapman, 2000). The following definition by Laal (2011) applies to the described CEP:

LLL comprises all phases of learning, from pre-school to post-retirement, and covers the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. It means that learning is a process [that] occurs at all times in all places. It should be a process of continuous learning that [is] directed towards not only providing [for] individual needs [but] also [those] of the relevant community (Laal, 2011:470).

In contrast to this definition, the prevalent definition of LLL in the US refers more to adult education and learning, as well as outdated adult learning policies. The European Association for the Education of Adults states on its website that the US and Europe both approach lifelong learning mainly from an adult learning perspective (Cooperation, 2016), which stands in contrast to the perspectives and definition of LLL in CEP and Laal (2011). Both view lifelong learning more as learning «that should take place at all stages of life cycle (from the cradle to the grave) and [...] life-wide; that is embedded in all life contexts from the school to the workplace, the home and community» (Laal, 2011:471). Elken (2015) states that the EU «has been on the forefront of developing lifelong learning (LLL) policies» (Elken, 2015:710). It becomes evident that, compared to the US, Europe is at the forefront of LLL research and its practical application through policies.

1.6 Practical aspect

The idea of progressive lifelong learning is practically reflected by and implemented in the CEP through collaborations of non-profit organisations in the tri-state area of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio and higher education (West Liberty University). CEP students and graduates serve, among others, the underserved by teaching in non-formal learning environments or keeping and/or starting non-profit organisations in their smaller cities instead of migrating to wealthy, larger cities and communities.

2. Implementation and challenges

2.1 Transnational organisations

Transnational organisations that put national qualifications into frameworks, and hence spark policy discourses, are indispensable systems for the

validation of non-formal and informal learning. Higher education frameworks, like accreditation and quality assurance, should be mentioned in this context. These formal systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in formal learning environments of higher education (e.g. universities) are mostly unavailable in the US but are fairly typical in other countries (especially in Europe).

2.2 *Practical aspect*

It was the goal for CEP to link transnational perspectives, systems, and frameworks to be one of the first programmes in the US to be either accredited by national qualification networks or at least to apply their frameworks and/or objectives to secure credibility, validity, reliability, and quality. CEP was intentionally designed with an international, global, and transatlantic aspect to enable students to experience a different culture and approach in a comparative way by participating in study abroad trips to Germany. The Higher Education Policy Commission (HEPC) of WV received this idea well, reflected by its decision to award a grant. Ultimately, a memorandum of understanding with Julius Maximilian University, Würzburg (Germany) and West Liberty University, West Liberty (USA), was brought to fruition.

2.3 *The Scottish Framework*

Allais (2010) claimed that the Scottish Framework, which is the ‘paradigmatic example of a comprehensive communications framework’, is the most successful and useful one (Allais, 2010, Raffe, 2013:155). Despite my research efforts, no accrediting body for the CEP could be identified in the US. Outside of the US, I found an accrediting body supporting the BA in CEP at the University of Edinburgh. Scotland’s Standards Council for Scotland (CLD) appeared to be the most useful, practical, and applicable one (Professional approval process, n.d.).

Even though this model covered many of the learning objectives and goals that CEP strives for, evidence from national case studies suggests that cultural and country-specific educational variables have to be considered (Raffe, 2013). I concluded that a NQF that is effective for one country cannot simply be transferred to another country and prove successful.

2.4 *Practical aspect*

Raffe’s (2013) article on *What is the evidence for the impact of National Qualifications Frameworks?* Was eye-opening regarding the difficulties I was facing when applying the Scottish National Qualifications Framework to the programme I am leading in the US. Raffe agrees with Allais (2010) that «the Scottish framework is widely recognized as relatively success-

ful, but it built on incremental policies pursued over several decades; its success would therefore be difficult to replicate» (Allais, 2010, as cited in Raffe, 2013:158), especially when taken out of context.

Other research and statistics, like the Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks (2017) suggest that «the USA already has a well-developed system of recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning, but these systems often refer to high school programs or non-credit instruction» (Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks, 2017:607). Programmes in higher education are not considered.

Even though there is a major movement nationally towards the development of programmes similar to CEP, accrediting bodies have not yet been established. None are currently available in the US. As a consequence, and as an unfortunate solution to this challenge, programmes have to stay ‘unaccredited’, and/or have to look to other countries to find accrediting bodies. In those cases, the major challenge of replicating other countries’ NQFs becomes apparent (Raffe, 2013:158).

3. Outcomes

3.1 Good practice/s

National qualification frameworks in Europe and developing countries around the globe are a recent development and can best be described as ‘a work in progress’. It was suggested that practitioners should ‘not only focus on qualifications frameworks as independent phenomena, but should consider [the] wider context in which they are embedded’ (Miculek, 2018).

3.2 Practical aspects

The good practice efforts regarding CEP reflect this idea of qualification frameworks, embedded in a variety of ways that lead to good practice, through the following applied features:

- Programme/s: The graduate programme is a Master of Arts in Education degree with an emphasis in Community Education – Research & Leadership. The undergraduate programme consists of a Bachelor of Arts in Community Education with seven majors (previously listed).
- Partnerships: The CEP partners with the Center for Arts and Education on West Liberty’s main campus. It is a «multi-faceted hands-on learning laboratory and resource center focused on the integration of the arts, creativity, and technology» (Center for Arts & Education, n.d.). Since 2016, it has been a partner in the Data Fluency Programme with Carnegie Mellon University (Zambito, 2016). Lou Karas, director of

the centre, is also one of the main instructors in the BA and the MA Ed programmes at West Liberty. Other partnerships include public and private schools, as well as non-profit organisations in the tri-state-area of West Virginia, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is another partnership effort in which CEP is getting educated and striving to be more actively involved.

- Committees: The Internationalisation Committee is one of several committees on which I serve as chair. Its goals include study abroad trips, semester long exchanges, and the internationalisation of the curriculum. CEP students are highly encouraged to participate in these programmes. They have the opportunity to receive credit by participating in a two-week summer study abroad trip to Würzburg, Germany. Other opportunities, partnerships, and collaborations are in the works. The Outdoor Learning Spaces Committee's mission is the creation of outdoor learning spaces across West Liberty's campus.
- International/Global Internationalisation and global education play an important role in CEP (Table 1). West Liberty University established a memorandum of understanding with Julius Maximilian University. The goal of this memorandum is closer collaboration and partnership of the two universities with the objective of creating a variety of international opportunities for both entities.

4. Lessons Learned

4.1 Accreditation – Data collection and research

Although there is currently no applicable accrediting body available for CEP in the US, the programme engages in various efforts to collect data and other reliable information for possible future accreditation. LiveText is used as a data gathering tool. It is 'a leading provider of campus-wide solutions for strategic planning assessment and institutional effectiveness' (LiveText, n.d.). This tool is used to add credibility, reliability, and validity to CEP.

Since accrediting bodies or national qualification frameworks are difficult to find in the US, one goal is to research and find them in other countries (e.g. Germany) and/or support their development.

4.2 Practical aspect

Throughout my research, I have networked with and learned from other organisations, including the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories (LifBi) in Bamberg and the Leibniz Institute for Research and Information in Education (DIPF) in Frankfurt am Main.

I worked on this topic on top of my full-time teaching and administrative load at West Liberty University. Part of my upcoming sabbatical leave will be used for in-depth research, additional work, and expanded networking on this topic.

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