

Valuing Youth Work and Youth Workers



Thinking, Being, Doing



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#youthworkerchangelives #itdepends #itscomplicated

Where to start?

An
invitation

Present

Past

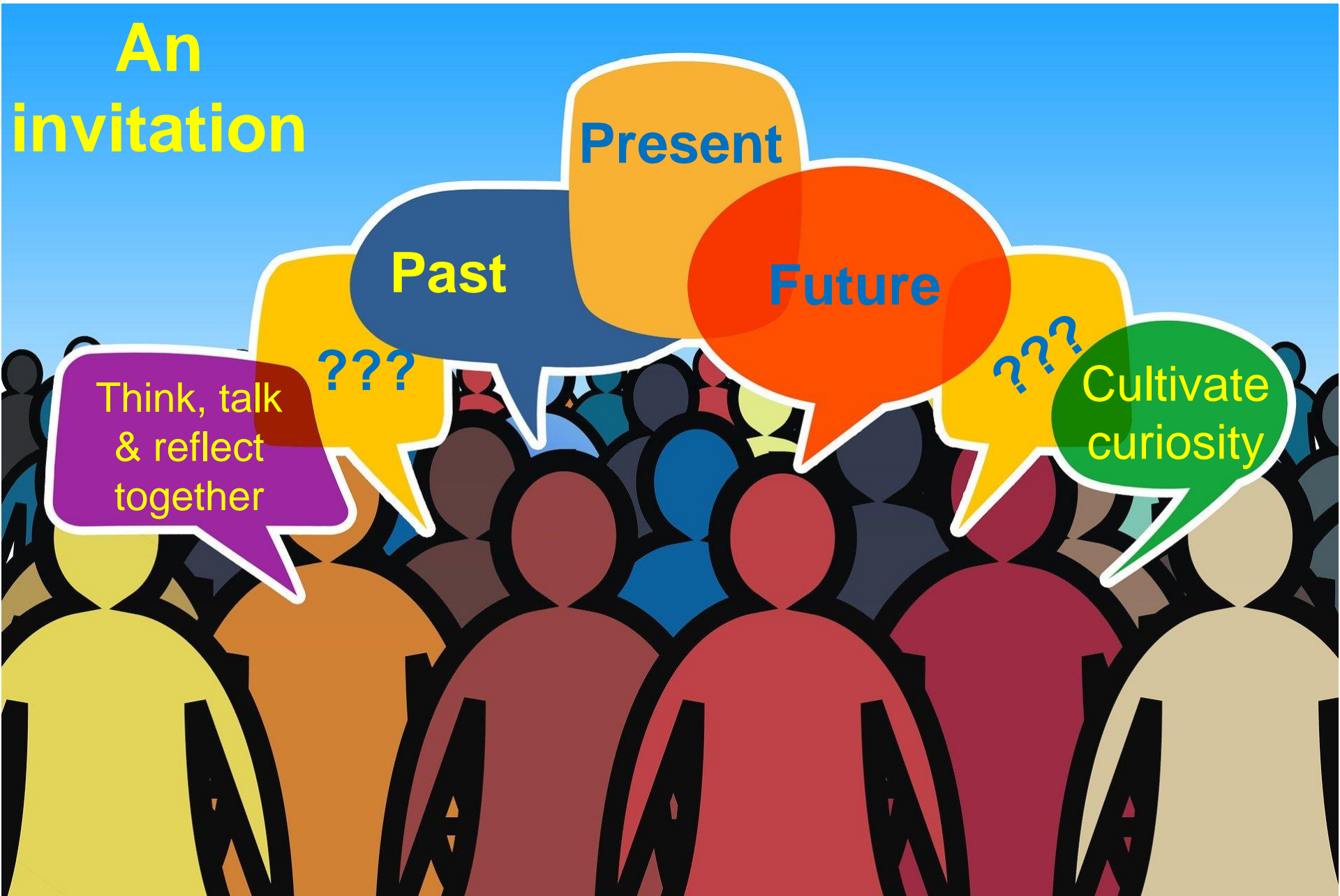
Future

???

Think, talk
& reflect
together

???

Cultivate
curiosity



It shouldn't surprise us that

Youth work was not invented by young people ...

The O'Sullivan Report (1980)

Recognised Youth Work as an integral part of the educational system with youth organisations considered as providing a *'vital form of education for young people in an informal and leisure environment'*.

Costello Report (1985)

“ to offer young people on the basis of their *voluntary involvement, development and educational experiences* which ...equips them to play an *active part in society as well as meeting their own development needs* through a challenging programme of *social education* ..assisting young people to be an *active critical participant* in society and social development

.....

Youth work must *empower* young people and *enable* them to ...have *some control over their situations in the sense of being able to influence* what happens to them and their community.”

Irish Youth Work Act 2001

(Ed & Training Boards Act 2013)

“A planned programme of *education* designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the *personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement*, and which is *complementary* to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations”.

How is Youth Work Different? [Treacy 1999]

There are some similarities with other educational interventions – the distinguishing features of youth work include:

- Young people are involved on a **voluntary basis** and can withdraw at any time.
- Is **enjoyable** for both young people and adults.
- Is **mutually beneficial** to both adults and young people.
- promotes **equality of opportunities** for all young people.
- is a **partnership** between adults and young people working in ways that **promote active participation** of young people.
- recognises that **inequalities of opportunity exist in society** and need to be addressed
- seeks to raise the level of **awareness of young people about society** and of how to **act upon it**.

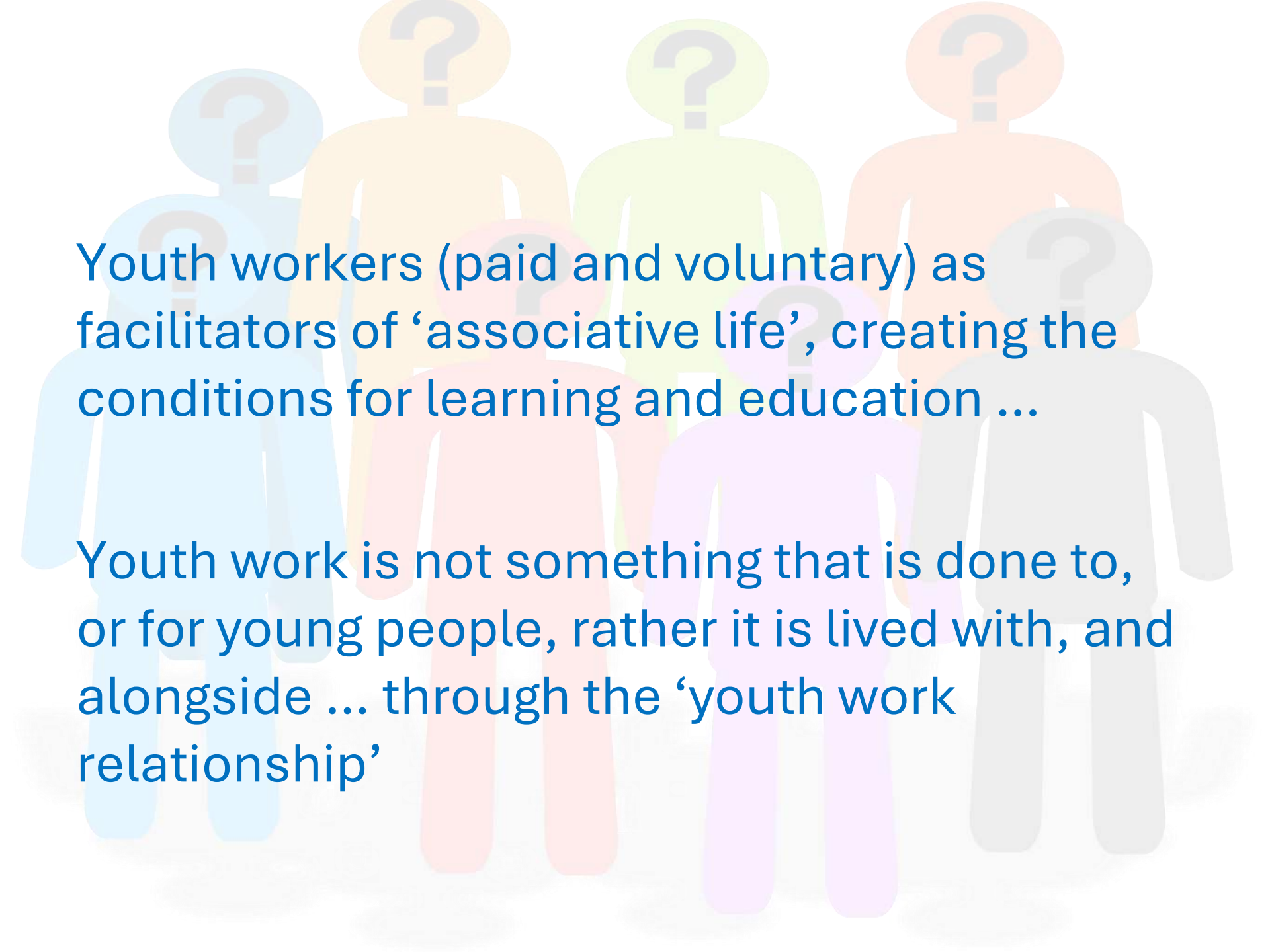
Opportunities for Youth (2024-28)

.... quality services that are fundamentally shaped by an ethos of *partnership with young people* and dedication to *creating space for the voice* of young people and *empowering them as active citizens* p7

p. 9 ... building *mutually trustful and respectful relationships with and between young people* and by providing *out-of- school opportunities* that are engaging, *developmental, educational,* challenging, supportive and creative, and are designed to extend young people's *agency over their own lives and within their wider community.*

An Educational Purpose

- Dual purpose of education (individual and societal): ‘to prepare people to live well in a world worth living in’
- Education must be conducted in ways that model and foster the ‘good life’ for humankind—what it means to live well in a world worth living in ([Kemmis et, 2014](#)).
- a social process, giving time to discovery– ‘a process of living and not a preparation for future living’ (Dewey, 1916)
- educators look to learning and being with others rather than acting upon them... with and alongside young people
- Never neutral or automatically benign



Youth workers (paid and voluntary) as facilitators of ‘associative life’, creating the conditions for learning and education ...

Youth work is not something that is done to, or for young people, rather it is lived with, and alongside ... through the ‘youth work relationship’

Intentional, Relational & Dialogical

The **youth work relationship** is crucial to the process of youth work. The relationship is one in which **youth workers seek to engage** with young people in the **deliberate and purposeful process of experience, reflection and learning** through which they gain the **motivation and capacity** to:

- ◇ **examine** their values
- ◇ **deliberate** the principles of their own moral judgements
- ◇ **develop the skills and dispositions** to make **informed decisions and choices** that can be **sustained through committed action**

(Kerry Young, 1999, 2006)

Julie Tilsen (2018:52) says that 'while youth work occurs in many different contexts and involves many different experiences and activities **conversation are central** to our work with young people.'

In a narrative approach the **youth worker's job is as a conversationalist**; someone who **partners in the co-creation of meaningful stories and experiences through collaborative conversations with young people.**'

Some Youth Work 'givens' across Europe

- Concerned with **personal, social and societal** development → **social and just** Europe
- **Starts with young people's** needs, interests, ideas and experiences – **how** do we know?
- **Empowering and engaging** processes – young people's active **voluntary*** participation in all aspects of that process
- **Informal and non-formal learning** (knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) → **Dialogical & Educational**
- **Accessible, open, flexible** ([CM/Rec\(2017\)4](#))

Lest we forget



Acknowledges the **‘positive contribution of youth workers** in all member States to:
empowering* and
engaging young people in developing
inclusive democratic and peaceful societies’
(CM/Rec(2017)4)

**BIG ASK of YOUTH WORKERS & A BIGGER PROMISE
TO YOUNG PEOPLE!**

What is **asked of us** as youth workers?

Youth Work as a Social Practice



‘a way of thinking’ about young people, society and youth work, ‘a way of being’ with young people not only ‘a way of doing’ with young people ‘social and relational practice ...

‘a way of being in the world....’ both passionate and professional

The ‘promise’ of youth work to young people

Activity is not the purpose → medium of engagement in ‘service of purpose’

‘It’s totally professional, yet more casual here’. Ben (2009)

‘I get that my teacher really cares about my education Just not sure they care about me’ (Anon, 2018)

The 'promise'.....

- **Profess** (verb): 'to avow, acknowledge or confess'
- **Profession** (noun):
 - 'a **solemn declaration, promise or vow**'
 - 'a vocation in which a **professed knowledge** of some department of learning or science is used in **its application to the affairs of others** or in the practice of an art founded upon it'

[Maurice Devlin \(2012\)](#)

Question for Consideration

What *commitments/imperatives* arise from the *principles and values* of youth work as a *relational educational/pedagogical* practice?

Tough Times for youth work(ers)

- Inadequate funding/resources/supports for the scale and complexity of the issues facing young people and communities
- Recruitment and retention crisis - paid staff* and volunteers
 - Different rates of pay across (and sometimes within) organisations
 - Short-term contracts – consequences
- Need for a more diverse youth work ‘workforce’ to reflect changing demographics
- Lack of recognition for the educational role of youth work and youth workers

'Private troubles' are 'public issues'

- Resist attempts to focus only on individual young people and their troubles/problems of young people
- Lived reality of young people in an increasingly unequal society
 - Poverty
 - Homelessness
 - Health inequalities
- Experienced individually but part of a pattern, a societal issue
- The language of risk & vulnerability can serve to obscure the impacts of systematic inequality
- What is asked of youth work and youth workers?

A Question



Action 7 in Opportunities for Youth (p52) ‘Produce a Workforce Development Strategy in respect of the youth work sector, to include consideration of training needs and the requirement for high-quality, accessible and inclusive youth work services and opportunities’.

DCEDIY; DFHERIS; QQI; ETBs; funded youth organisations

We know that youth work is concerned with promoting young people’s voice and agency:

Where is youth workers’ voice and agency?

The time is now ...

Youth workers recognise each other across organisations, contexts, countries and continents... through shared values and principles.

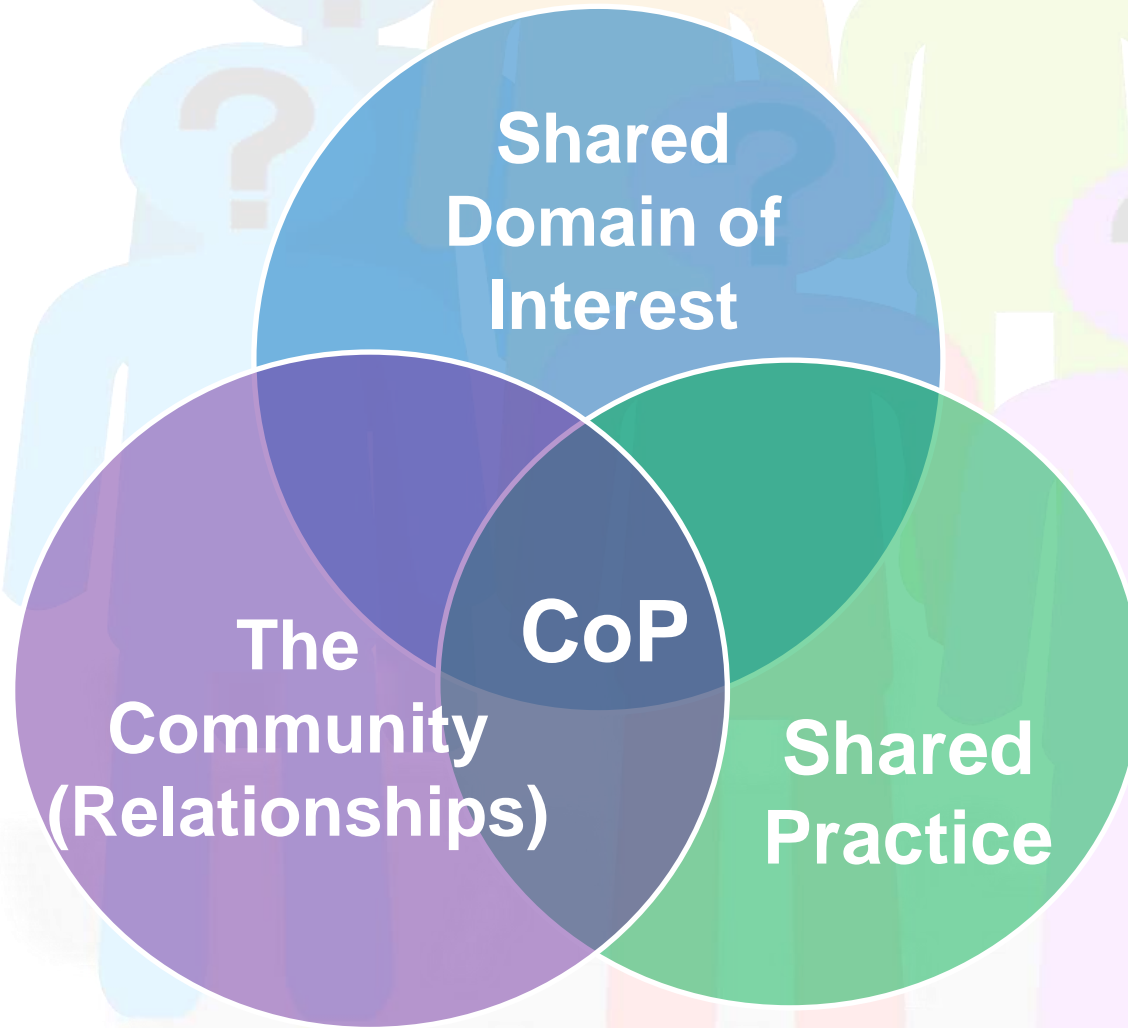
Youth workers and youth work organisations interests are aligned, but they are not the same.

Youth Workers Organisations/Associations are central to the recognition of youth work and youth workers.

Opportunity for Irish youth workers to organise:

- [European Youth Work Agenda](#)
- [4th Youth Work Convention 2025](#)

Communities of Practice (We & Us)



Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly over time

(Wenger-Trayner, 2015)

Question at the heart of practice

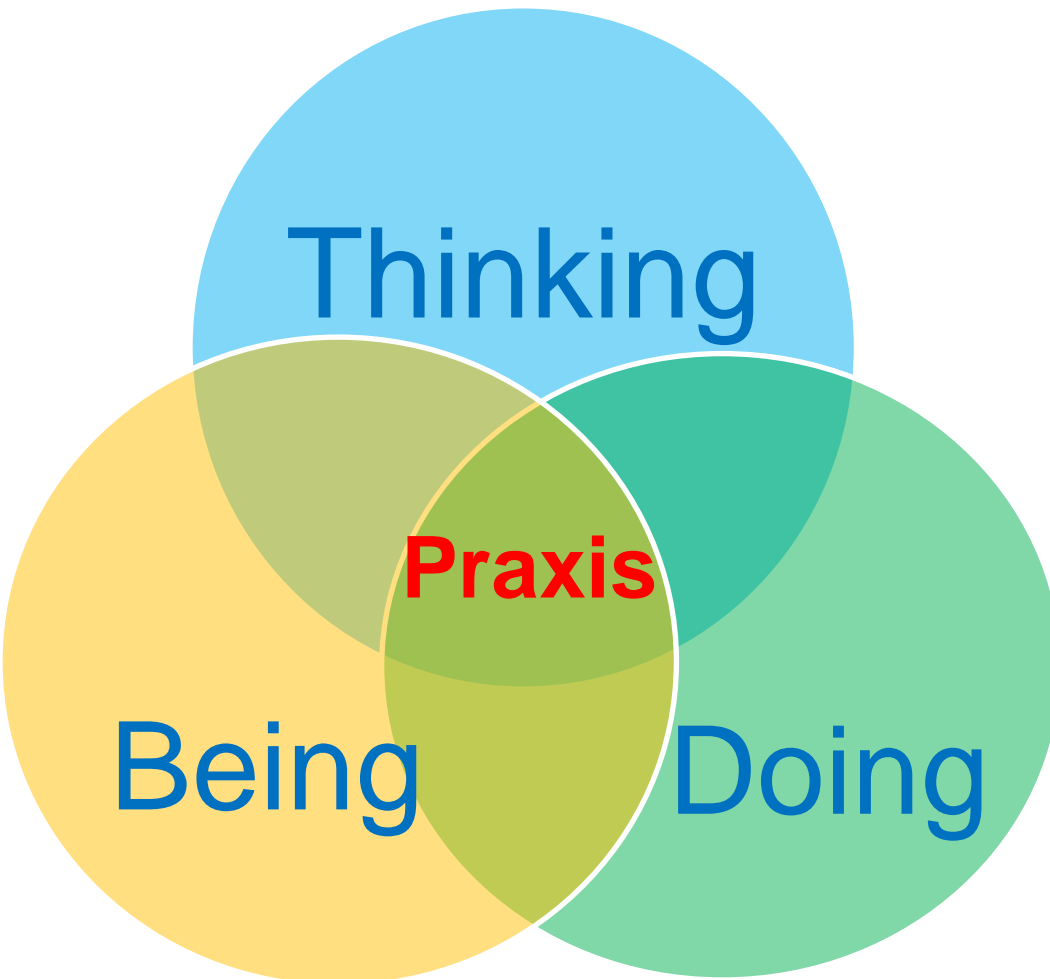
- what is to be done?



Praxis as *action* that is:

- Ethical
- Self-aware
- Responsive
- Accountable

Praxis = **active integration** of knowing/thinking, doing and being. (White, 2007)



Towards a Community of Praxis

#keeponkeepingon

- Embrace the possibility and certainty of change
- Develop your ‘critical curiosity’ – ask why.
- Take the long view/play the ‘long game’
- Cultivate collaborative relationships within, across and beyond CoP – bring people with you
- Do what you can, where you can, when you can
- Celebrate the ‘small wins’
- Use those to ‘leverage’ the next actions
- Keep on Keeping On

A time to speak and a time to act

“Vision without action is just a dream, action without vision just passes the time, and vision with action can change the world” Nelson Mandela.

“Speak up. Speak out. Get in the way. Get in good trouble, necessary trouble ” **John Lewis** 2020

Joanna Macy talks about **Active Hope** as something **we do** rather than have. It involves **being clear what we hope for** and then **playing our role** in the **process of moving** that way.

