

# Evaluation: learning what matters

Rank Foundation youth work agencies' conference  
Charnock Richard,  
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YMCA George Williams College

199 Freemasons Road  
Canning Town  
LONDON E16 3PY  
UK

t: 020 7540 4900

f: 020 7511 4900

w: [www.ymca.ac.uk](http://www.ymca.ac.uk)

### **evaluation: learning what matters**

The conference was designed by a small working group: Zareena Abidi, Sharon Connery, Chris Dunning, Manjit Ganja, Charlie Harris, Ally Hunter, Sarah Lloyd-Jones, Beryl Martin, Danya O'Meally, Alan Rogers, Jeff Salter, Mark Smith and Helen Stockdale.

Group session facilitators: Zareena Abidi, Mike Burns, Sharon Connery, Manjit Ganja, Simon Hill, Ally Hunter, Danya O'Meally, Elspeth Neil, Jeff Salter, Mark Smith and David Ward.

Conference programme facilitation: Alan Rogers.

Conference administration: Helen Stockdale.

Conference booklet prepared by Alan Rogers and Mark K. Smith with the assistance of Sarah Lloyd-Jones

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### **youth work @ The Rank Foundation**

*England and Wales:* 28 Bridgegate, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire HX7 8EX. Telephone 01422 845172; fax: 01422 844329. Director of Youth Projects: Charlie Harris ([charles.harris@rankfoundation.com](mailto:charles.harris@rankfoundation.com)); Assistant: Beryl Martin ([beryl.martin@rankfoundation.com](mailto:beryl.martin@rankfoundation.com)).

*Scotland, Northern Ireland, Cumbria and North East:* 9/10 Redhills House, Redhills Lane, Penrith, Cumbria CA11 0DT. Telephone: 01768 210722; fax: 01768 210723. Director of Youth Projects: Chris Dunning ([chris.dunning@rankfoundation.com](mailto:chris.dunning@rankfoundation.com)); Assistant: Helen Stockdale ([helen.stockdale@rankfoundation.com](mailto:helen.stockdale@rankfoundation.com)).

### **support**

Additional resources are available on the rank agencies support pages: <http://www.ymca.ac.uk/rank>.

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# Timetable

## **Monday**

<i>12.30-1.30</i>	<i>Lunch available</i>
1.30-2.00	Welcome (plenary) [Orientation]
2.00-3.30	Learning what matters [Group Session 1]
<i>3.30-4.00</i>	<i>Break</i>
4.00-5.00	Reflecting & judging [Group session 2]
<i>5.00-5.15</i>	<i>Break</i>
5.15-6.15	Reflecting and judging continued/completed [Group session 3]
6.30-6.45	Plenary
7.30	<i>Dinner</i>
Evening	Quiz evening

## **Tuesday**

<i>8.00-9.00</i>	<i>Breakfast available</i>
9.00-9.20	Rank plenary
9.30-10.00	Communicating [Workshop 1]
10.10-10.40	Communicating [Workshop 2]
<i>10.40-11.00</i>	<i>Break</i>
11.00-11.30	Communicating [Workshop 3]
11.40-12.30	Planning [Group session 4]

12.30-1.00 Final plenary

1.00 *Packed lunch (only) available on request*

Planning Group/staff review meeting

# Introducing learning what matters

Welcome to our annual business conference. Our theme this year is evaluation. In particular, we want to explore how we evaluate face-to-face work with young people. This focus also links to a wider project over the next year – reflecting on, and evaluating 21 years of the *Youth or Adult? Initiative*.

This conference workbook provides you with some background material, some suggestions for follow-up – *and lets you know that you need to do before the conference.*

‘Evaluation’ has become an ever-present feature of practice – yet it is often badly done. One reason for this is that for many it is a contractual requirement; something that has to be undertaken to satisfy funders and higher tiers of management. Another reason is that evaluation, if it is to be done well, involves a lot of time and thought, and good judgement.

In this conference booklet we want to explore ways of thinking about evaluation that allow it to become part and parcel of the way we work. We also want to look at how we might develop ways of monitoring, reviewing and communicating that stay true to the processes and ethos of youth work and informal education. In particular, we want to examine how evaluation can be used to enhance day-to-day work and to inform management and policy-making within the Rank network.

## What is evaluation?

If we look at the Latin origins of the word, evaluation means 'to strengthen' or to empower. In this spirit we want to focus on ways of approaching evaluation that look to strengthen the ability of workers and their agencies to address the needs of young people and local communities. At the same time we also need to attend to the needs of funders – but not at the cost of the former.

Unfortunately much evaluation today is now largely about monitoring and the measurement of things. This has been linked to the expansion of government social initiatives from the 1930s on (especially, initially, in the United States). Unfortunately, when considering youth work and community development very little that is worth anything is easily counted.

As a way of getting started we offer the following definition:

Evaluation is the systematic exploration and judgement of working processes, experiences and outcomes. It pays special attention to aims, values, perceptions, needs and resources.

There are several things that need to be said about this.

First, evaluation entails gathering, ordering and making judgments about information in a methodical way. It is a research process.

Second, evaluation is very sophisticated. There is no simple way of making good judgements. It involves, for example, developing criteria or standards that are both meaningful and honour the work and those involved. Also, individuals and groups tend to have different perceptions and these need to be understood.

Third, evaluation is something more than monitoring. Monitoring is largely about 'watching' or keeping track. Evaluation involves making careful judgements about the worth, significance and meaning of phenomena.

Fourth, evaluation operates at a number of levels. It is used to explore and judge practice and programmes and projects.

Last, evaluation - if it is to have any meaning - must look at the people involved, the processes and any outcomes we can identify. Appreciating and getting of flavour of these involves dialogue. This makes the focus enquiry rather than measurement - although some measurement might be involved (Rowlands 1991). The result has to be an emphasis upon negotiation and consensus concerning the process of evaluation, and the conclusions reached.

### **What is the purpose of evaluation?**

Basically, evaluation is either about *proving* something is working or needed, or *improving* practice or a project. The first often arises out of our accountability to funders, managers and, crucially, the people are working with. The second is born of a wish to do what we do better. We look to evaluation as an aid to strengthen our practice, organization and programmes (Chelimsky 1997: 97-188).

We clearly need to do both and to find a balance between them. An over-focus on accountability will do little to improve the work we do. Similarly, neglecting accountability and the provision is both a mistake ethically, and sidelines an opportunity for learning and feedback.

When thinking about all this it is helpful to distinguish between programme and project evaluation, and practice evaluation.

*Programme and project evaluation* is typically concerned with making judgments about the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of pieces of work. Here evaluation is essentially a *management tool*. Judgments are made in order to reward the agency or the workers, and/or to provide feedback so that future work can be improved or altered.

*Practice evaluation* is directed at the enhancement of work undertaken with particular individuals and groups, and to the development of participants (including the worker). It tends to be an integral part of the working process. In order to respond to a situation we have to make sense of what is going on, and how we can best intervene (or not intervene). Similarly, other participants may also be encouraged or take it upon themselves to make judgments about the situation. In other words, they evaluate the situation and their part in it. Such evaluation is sometimes described as *educative or pedagogical* as it seeks to foster learning. But this is only part of the process. The learning involved is oriented to future or further action.

We need to be clear about:

- What are we aiming to do and why – what difference do we want to make?
- How would we know if we were succeeding – choosing and judging indicators?

Having got clear on these, we can gather the information we need to begin to make our judgements.

### **Evaluation as action research**

Evaluation is basically a form of research. It entails adopting a particular frame of mind or perspective. This isn't confined to people with long and specialist training. Such research involves as Stringer (1999: 5) has put it:

- A question or problem to be investigated.
- A process of enquiry
- Explanations that enable people to understand the nature of the problem.

Here we talk of action research as the research we are concerned with looks to the enhancement of our work.

### **The action research process**

Action research works through three basic phases:

**Look** - building a picture and gathering information. When evaluating we define and describe the problem to be investigated and the context in which it is set. We also describe what all the participants (educators, group members, managers etc.) have been doing.

**Think** - interpreting and explaining. When evaluating we analyse and interpret the situation. We reflect on what participants have been doing. We look at areas of success and any deficiencies, issues or problems.

**Act** - resolving issues and problems. In evaluation we judge the worth, effectiveness, appropriateness, and outcomes of those activities. We act to formulate solutions to any problems.

(Stringer 1999: 18; 43-44; 160)

The key part of evaluation, many would argue, is framing the questions we want to ask, and the information we want to collect such that the answers provide us with the *indicators* of change.

### **Thinking about indicators**

Unfortunately, much of the talk and practice around indicators has been linked to rather crude measures of performance and the need to justify funding. We want to explore the sort of indicators that might be more fitting to the work we do.

In everyday usage an indicator points to something, it is a sign or symptom. The difficulty facing us is working out just what we are seeing might be a sign of. In youth work – and any authentic education – the results of our labours may only become apparent some time later in the way that people live their lives. In addition, any changes in behaviour we see may be specific to the situation or relationship. Further, it is often difficult to identify who or what was significant in bringing about change. Last, when we look at the work, as E Lesley Sewell (1966) put it, we tend to see what we are looking for. For these reasons a lot of the outcomes that are claimed in reports for work with particular groups or individuals have to be taken with a large pinch of salt.

Luckily, in trying to make sense of our work and the sorts of indicators that might be useful, there is some help at hand. We can draw upon wisdom about practice, broader research findings, and our values.

## What might we need indicators for?

We want to suggest four possible areas that we might want indicators for:

- *The number of young people we are in contact with and working with.* In general, as youth workers we should expect to make and maintain a lot of *contacts*. This is so young people know about us, and the opportunities and support we can offer. We can also expect to involve smaller numbers of *participants* in groups and projects, and an even smaller number as '*clients*' in intensive work. The numbers we might expect - and the balance between them - will differ from project to project (Jeffs and Smith 2005: 116-121). However, through dialogue it does seem possible to come some agreement about these.
- *The nature of the opportunities we offer.* We should expect to be asked questions about the nature and range of opportunities we offer. For example, do young people have a chance to talk freely and have fun; expand and enlarge their experience, and learn? As youth workers we should also expect to work with young people to build varied programmes and groups and activities with different foci. But what should the nature and range be?
- *The quality of relationships available.* Many of us talk about our work in terms of 'building relationships'. By this we often mean that we work both *through* relationship, and *for* relationship (see Smith and Smith forthcoming). This has come under attack from those advocating targeted and more outcome-oriented work. However, the little sustained research that has been done confirms that it is the relationships that workers form with young people, and encourage them to develop with others, that really matters (see Hirsch 2005). Unfortunately identifying sensible indicators of progress is not easy.
- *How well young people work together and for others.* Within the Rank network there is a valuing of working so that young people may organize things for themselves, and be of service to others. The respect in which this held is also backed up by research. We know, for example, that people involved in running groups generally grow in self-confidence and develop a range of skills (Elsdon 1995). We also know that those communities where a significant number of people are involved in organizing groups and activities are healthier, have more positive experiences of education, are more active economically, and have less crime (Putnam 1999). However, what indicators should we be looking for with regard to this?

For some of these areas it is fairly easy to work out indicators. However, when it comes to things like relationships, as Lesley Sewell noted many years ago, 'Much of it is intangible and can be felt in atmosphere and spirit. Appraisal of this inevitably depends to some extent on the beholders

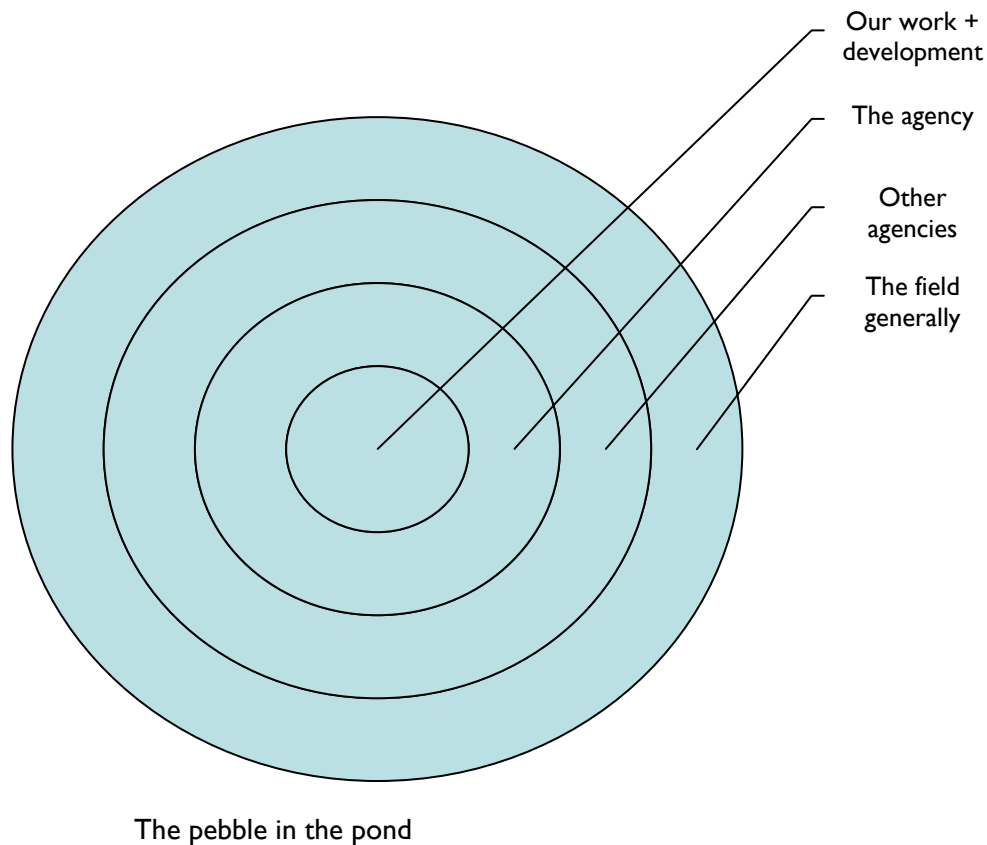
themselves' (1966: 6). There are some outward signs – like the way people talk to each other. In the end though, youth work is fundamentally an act of faith. However, our faith can be sustained and strengthened by reflection and exploration.

### **The ripple effect**

As well as looking at any possible direct impact upon participants, it is also worthwhile thinking about how our work might be acting as '*a pebble in the pond*'. It is very difficult for a group or agency to evaluate in any sustained way the broader impact of their work. However, reflecting on what might be happening can help us to think in fresh ways.

Looking at the various projects within the Rank network it becomes clear that there are different kinds of ripple. We might look at the way in which the experiences and learning of the young people involved in the project feed through into changed behaviour in their families, peer groups, local neighbourhood, and schools. In a similar way we can think about our experience as practitioners. For example, work on qualifications rippling into confidence and personal development rippling into changes in lifestyle.

We can also think about how our work and development creates ripples in our own organization; other agencies we may work or be in contact, with; and the field more generally (see following diagram)



### The Rank approach

If we look at how, on the whole, evaluation has been approached within the various youth initiatives associated with the Rank Charities we can see that there tends to be an emphasis upon:

- Dialogue and agreement.
- Encouraging forms of evaluation that have the potential to enhance practice.
- Exploring how we might identify and talk about many of the 'intangible' aspects of the work.
- Communicating findings in different ways to different groups.

As a result, we have structured the conference around four themes or areas:

- Learning what matters
- Reflecting and judging
- Communicating

- Planning

There is more about each on the pages that follow.

### **Follow-up**

There are links to various articles and materials on the Conference website - [www.ymca.ac.uk/rank/conference](http://www.ymca.ac.uk/rank/conference). A fuller discussion of the themes outlined above can be found in the main article about evaluation listed there.

## Notes

**Beforehand:**

## **Preparing for the conference**

**We ask you to do three things in preparation for the conference.**

**First**, you will need to **prepare a short presentation** for the opening group session.

Think about the best things you have done in your agency over the last year. Pick out three. These may or may not be connected with Rank initiatives.

Reflect on what it is about them that makes them good.

Choose your favourite.

Prepare a five minute presentation about it. Describe the work or event, and say what made it important for you. (Your presentation will be made to a small group. No additional presentation aids will be available at the conference centre).

**Second**, could you **bring along examples of recordings / records** you use within your agency. This will help with group sessions 2 and 3.

**Last**, could you also **bring along examples of some of the different ways you use of communicating about the work.**

## Notes

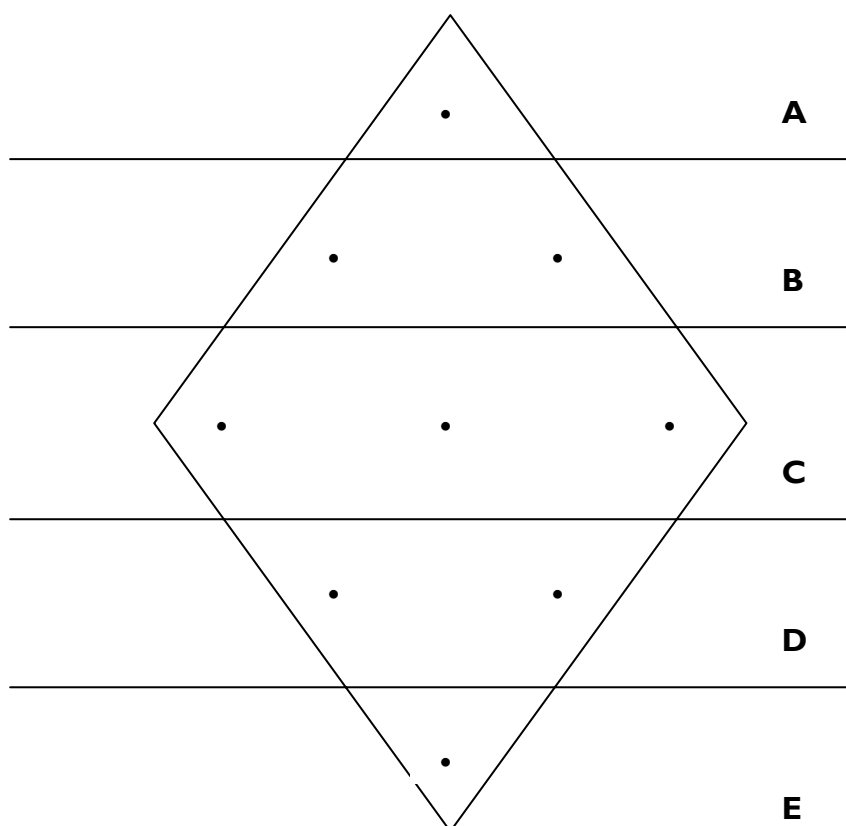
## Opening group:

# Learning what matters

Our initial aim in this session is to give you a chance to share something about your own practice, and the values and aims that underpin it. To do this we asked you to prepare something (see previous section).

Your presentations will be followed by a discussion designed to identify some key common values and aims for the group. To help with this we are asking everybody to fill in two cards. On one you briefly describe the work/event; on the other you say what made it important. We will be using the cards in the session to group people's responses and later to build a picture for the whole conference.

We will ask groups to put the values and aims identified into an order of importance. We will use the diamond below to do this. It separates them into five levels (with A being the highest). If need be you can adapt the number of dots to the number of values and aims you have.



## Notes

## Group sessions 2 and 3:

# Reflecting and judging

Our aim for these sessions is for you to share your existing evaluation activities; and to explore the processes of reflection and making judgements in the context of evaluation. We suggest we explore three areas:

1. Have we identified the indicators that matter and are we recording the right things? Are we doing it in the best way?
2. What space are we creating for reflection? How can it be improved to allow us better to return to experience, attend to feelings, and to develop understandings?
3. How can we best set about making judgements about the work?

It might help to think of how our project/agency uses recording systems and support structures to enable staff to reflect on, judge and learn from the work they are doing

## Notes

## Workshops 1 and 2:

# Communicating

These workshops explore various approaches to communicating what matters about the work. We will also look at the needs of different audiences including funders.

You have the chance to go to **three different 30 minute workshops** (which you sign up for at the conference). These broadly separate into exploring communicating with four different audiences:

- Team members and others involved in running the agency.
- Participants and the local community.
- Funders.
- The general public (what might be called 'broadcasting').

We will also be considering how we might better communicate with each other within the Rank network about things that matter.

## Notes

## Group session 4:

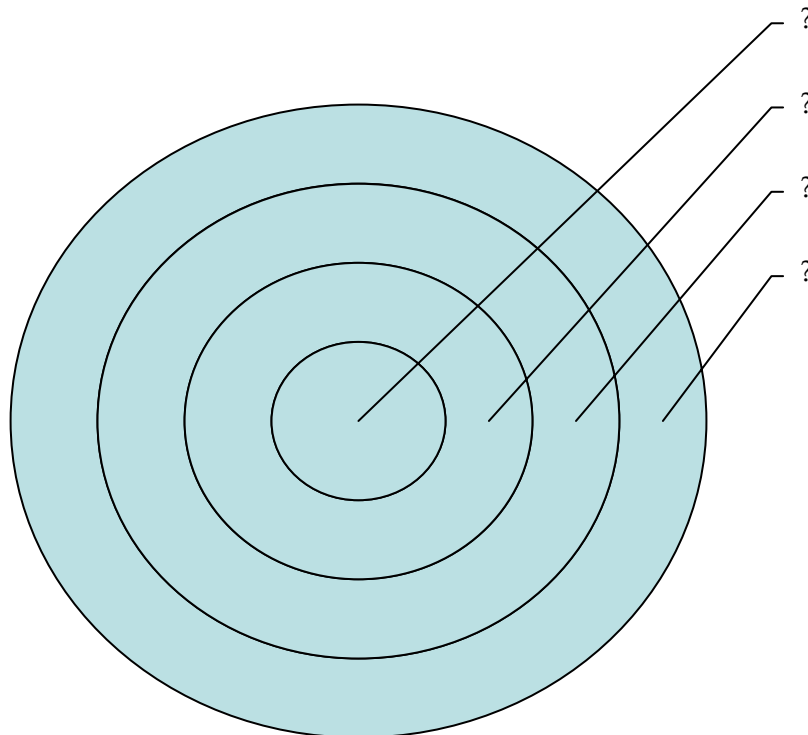
# Planning

In this session we ask you to come up with a plan for developing evaluation within your work and your agency. We want to this session to be more visionary than setting up a 'to do' list.

We suggest we explore two 'themes'. Think about:

1. The aspects of work we most want to evaluate (and refer back here to the first sessions about what's important)
2. The 'ripple effect'. How might we capture something of our indirect impact on others? [This is an issue we have to grapple with in our forthcoming evaluation of *Youth or Adult?*]

We will be asking you to put your focus (theme 1) on a card (together with your/your project's name) and to place it on a 'Rank Ripple Effect' display in the plenary.



The pebble in the pond

## Notes

Closing plenary:

## Looking forward

In this plenary session we want to draw together some of the strands that have run through the conference – what implications does it have for:

- the work we do,
- the way we report it, and
- how we might develop over the next few years.

We will also look forward to the broader evaluation that is taking place over the next few months around the *Youth or Adult?* Initiative. One of the themes of this evaluation is the way that Rank Charities' funding acts as a 'pebble in the pond'.

## Notes

## Further reading and references

### Books

There has been a lot written about evaluation, especially programme evaluation, but there are only a few books we can really recommend (all of which are from the USA).

Eisner, E. W. (1998) *The Enlightened Eye. Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. This is a very good introduction to evaluation that looks to improving the quality of practice.

Hirsch, B. J. (2005) *A Place to Call Home. After-school programs for urban youth*, New York: Teachers College Press. A rigorous and insightful evaluation of the work of six inner city boys and girls clubs that concludes that the most important thing they can and do offer is relationships (both with peers and with the workers) and a 'second home'.

Rossi, P. H., Freeman, H. and Lipsey, M. W. (2004) *Evaluation. A systematic approach 7e*, Newbury Park, Ca.: Sage. One of the standard works on programme evaluation.

### On the net

There is a full set of links from the conference support page ([www.ymca.ac.uk/rank/conference](http://www.ymca.ac.uk/rank/conference)). However, you might to look at the following:

An introduction to evaluation for informal educators:  
[www.infed.org/biblio/b-eval.htm](http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-eval.htm)

Setting up and managing projects:  
[http://www.ymca.ac.uk/rank/publications/managing\\_projects/](http://www.ymca.ac.uk/rank/publications/managing_projects/)

### Other references

David Boud *et. al.* (eds.) (1985) *Reflection. Turning experience into learning*, London: Kogan Page.

Chelmsky E. (1997) Thoughts for a new evaluation society. *Evaluation* 3(1): 97-118.

Doyle, M. E. and Smith, M. K. (forthcoming) *Christian Youth Work: Legacies and lessons*, see [www.infed.org/christianyouthwork](http://www.infed.org/christianyouthwork).

Elsdon, K. T. with Reynolds, J. and Stewart, S. (1995) *Voluntary Organizations. Citizenship, learning and change*, Leicester: NIACE.

Jefferies and Smith, M. K. (2005) *Informal Education. Conversation, democracy and learning* 3e, Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press.

Putnam, R. D. (1999) *Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

Sewell, L. (1966) *Looking at Youth Clubs*, London: National Association of Youth Clubs. Available in *the informal education archives*:  
[http://www.infed.org/archives/nayc/sewell\\_looking.htm](http://www.infed.org/archives/nayc/sewell_looking.htm).

Smith, H. and Smith, M. K. (forthcoming) *The Art of Helping Others. Being around, being there, being wise*. See [www.infed.org/helping](http://www.infed.org/helping).

Stringer, E. T. (1999) *Action Research* 2e, Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage

## Notes



