

Evaluation of youth camps and international youth exchange programmes

Impressions of an evaluation system in Germany, France and Poland

Research activities regarding youth camps have hardly been linked at an international level so far. This article depicts a German evaluation procedure for youth camps, which already has been adopted in different European countries. The procedure is based on questionnaires, which were developed by means of a baseline survey. Camp organisers, who adopt these questionnaires independently, can use a simple software to create a scientifically based evaluation. Evaluation results show coherences between employees' goals and participants' feedback as well as other interesting findings.

Group travels are among the most attractive activities of youth work: In Germany it is very common that groups of approximately 10-30 teenagers participate in youth camps, which are led by volunteers or professional youth workers for about two weeks during summer vacation. Youth exchange programmes are further attractive ways of youth travel, for example the meeting of German, French and Polish groups of young people at a youth hostel, that are supported by the Polish-German and the French-German Youth Office (www.dpjw.org and www.dfjw.org). There are many good reasons, which show the necessity for evaluations in this field. Pedagogical challenges, responsibilities, possibilities, risks and the amount of money exceed those in other fields of youth work by far. The ability to carry out an appropriate evaluation offers many advantages: Internally it supports the development of a clearer and stronger profile; externally it facilitates a self-confident depiction of pedagogic chances within the working field. Additionally the establishment of an "evaluation-culture" can contribute to an increased quality discussion within the whole organisation, which offers supervisors the chance of a goal oriented development of their work.

But: Appropriate evaluation instruments were missing for a long time. Many practitioners worked with "self-made" questionnaires, which often (if at all) had to be evaluated through tallies. On the other hand, current academic research only shows intricate studies of selected programmes (if at all), which are not transferable to a wider context. Consequentially, a cooperation of academics and practitioners initiated the development of standardised and widely applicable questionnaires for the evaluation of youth camps. The studies resulted in a standardised evaluation-procedure that can now be used by anyone who leads youth travel groups. The CD-Rom "Youth and Europe" (sponsored by the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany) costs only 4 Euro and contains all questionnaires, tables for the comparison of the results, and an easy-to-use computer programme called "GrafStat" for statistical analyses. To avoid fears of external control the procedure can be used by the organisations independently. Afterwards they can voluntarily email their data to the project team, where all data is anonymously collated for a continuous evaluation.

Methodology of the standardised evaluation

The CD contains a series of questionnaires, which can be used for different programme concepts. The language within the questionnaires is easy to understand for young people from an age of 13 years and onwards. The questionnaires consist of 4 pages. They are designed as protected Microsoft-Word documents, which can be complemented with further items. These can either be chosen from a series of scientifically tested items ("item pool") or supplemented with individual questions.

A questionnaire for members of staff (referring to the team's goals) has to be filled in by the whole team either before or during the first days of the programme. The questionnaire for participants should be completed on the penultimate day. The completion of the form takes about 20 minutes. Alternatively, GrafStat also offers the opportunity for a "screen interview", where participants answer their questions directly onto a computer.

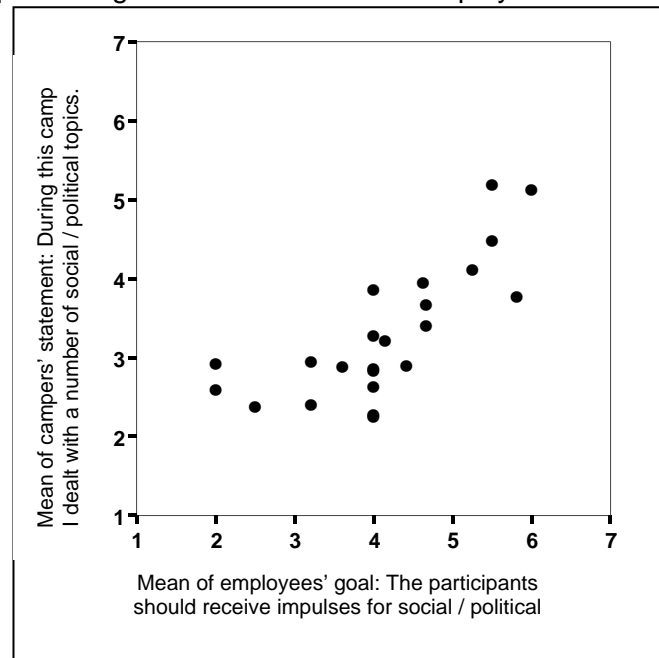
The answers of all questionnaires (members of staff and participants) are now entered into a template, which is provided by the software, the rest is automatically done by GrafStat. Directly, the user receives data, graphics and tables with statistics like mean values for all aspects of the youth camp. The evaluation provides information such as sociodemographic data (e.g. age and type of school), degree of satisfaction (e.g. journey, food, rules), answers to central statements such as "We (the campers) had enough opportunities for an active participation within the youth camp".

Advantages of the evaluation procedure

As there was a high demand for the CD "Youth and Europe" a second edition had to be published briefly after the CD first came out. What are the reasons that led to this increased interest among operators of youth travel and international exchange programmes?

- Reliable results can only be achieved through a scientifically developed questionnaire. The wording of questions as well as the design of the questionnaires (a predominantly sevenfold ranking scale) had been iteratively refined in a long process. Test runs with thousands of participants were carried out and finally confirmed an efficient procedure. The questionnaires only contain questions, which have proven to make sense and which have shown stable results over a longer period of time (assured through a follow-up questionnaire in the baseline survey). Thus, a reliable evaluation instrument could be provided.
- The benefit of a questionnaire is strongly linked with important prerequisites: a) Participants have to understand the questions and b) they have to be prepared to complete the form. Therefore an additional item within the above mentioned baseline survey was dedicated to the question, of how participants assessed the completion of the questionnaire. Answer: Only 15% said that the completion of the questionnaire irritated them. 62% thought the questionnaires were "okay" and 23% said that filling in the questionnaire was fun (N=1415). Therefore, young peoples' disposition to feedback should not be underestimated.
- The interpretation of data is particularly interesting, if further comparable data is available. Data that originates from the baseline survey in 2005 can be used for such comparison. Every organisation can compare its own data self-critically with those results of 2005. A comparative table is added to the CD "Jugend und Europa". The table allows the comparison between one's own results and the results of other camps. This supports an independent benchmarking while the sovereignty over the interpretation stays with the camp organiser. The continuous data flow from camp organisers to the project team provides a data-basis for updating the comparison tables.
- An evaluation of data shall rather clarify and appreciate the individuality of different types of programmes, than equalising them: According to the principle that a good youth camp / exchange programme is a programme that achieves its own goals, the goals of the team will be compared to the statements of the participants in the end. It is particularly interesting to compare different camps with each other as this will show clearly if and to

which degree the goals of the teams can be found within the participants' feedbacks. The following graph depicts this kind of coherence for the subject "political stimulation": Each dot represents a different camp within the baseline survey. On the x-axis it shows the intensity of the average employees' goal "The participants should receive impulses for social / political themes". An average participants' feedback with regards to the question "During this camp I dealt with a number of social / political topics" can be found on the y-axis. The ellipse shaped cloud of dots depicts a high coherence between employees' goals and actual achievements (correlation between goals and achievements $r = 0.76$): low goals among the members of staff correlate with low results among participants; high goals correlate with high results. Every team decides individually if political discussions are desired. The message is: Those, who want to stimulate political discussions normally succeed in doing so. A similar scientifically recorded influence of predefined pedagogic goals on the effects described by participants is very rare. The evaluation of youth camps / international exchange programmes can open supervisors' eyes: it can contribute to a general recognition of the meaning, which one's own pedagogic work can have with regards to young peoples' experiences during their stay.



Perspectives

The described evaluation system (in German: *Freizeitenevaluation*) sees itself as a free service to camp organiser that is designed to support (and not to control!) teams leading youth travel groups. It has become the standard procedure for evaluating youth group travel in Germany, France and Poland.

The approved procedure is currently adapted and further developed for several projects in different contexts. The development of new versions in different languages is one of these processes (there is currently only a first test version of the questionnaires available in English). Another step is the development of shorter and simpler questionnaires for children between 8 and 12 years of age. The further development of the evaluation tool might also become a starting point for cross-Atlantic exchange on academic research concerning youth travel – there is quite a lot to discover on both continents!

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References

Ilg, W. (2008). Evaluation von Freizeiten und Jugendreisen. Einführung und Ergebnisse zum bundesweiten Standard-Verfahren. Incl. CD „Jugend und Europa“. Hannover (Germany): aej. *This book is only available in German.*

Dubiski, J.; Ilg, W. (eds.) (2008) Evaluation Internationaler Jugendbegegnungen. Ein Verfahren zur Auswertung von Begegnungen. Incl. CD "Jugend und Europa". Berlin (Germany) / Paris (France) / Warsaw (Poland): Deutsch-Französisches Jugendwerk und Deutsch-Polnisches Jugendwerk. *This book is available in German, French or Polish.*

The CD „Jugend und Europa“ is enclosed to the books above. It contains all material in German, French and Polish as well as a first pilot version of the questionnaires in English.

Order of books or CD “Youth and Europe“ and further information:
www.freizeitenevaluation.de

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