

Review of the book “Professional Secrets of a Trainer”

(from experience within non-formal
education in the third sector)*

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I was waiting for the book about professional skills of a trainer with a certain interest and impatience as I was expecting some pedagogical texts of good quality. As an expert I took part in one seminar within the project area of “School for trainers” which resulted in writing this book. That is why I was interested in the results of my work and also how it is possible to later negotiate the introspective work of an expert and how they function in the third sector of Belarus.

Having defined myself intellectually in one of the most serious of directions – system-thinking-activity (STA) methodology, both in life and in a professional sphere, I adhere to the active position regarding realization of this direction through cultural policy. It resulted in my specializing in the sphere of education. It is natural that the objects of realization for STA methodology must be within this direction. That is why the work is being carried out regarding the whole system of education in Belarus. Such objects are composite, substantial and dynamic. In doing research, carrying out expertise and programming, the education reform methodologist regards both formal and non-formal education. There is an important task of finding existing sources of development in the system and looking for new ones. That is why the process of interaction and exchange of ideas is very interesting as well as products and results of activity among various institutions in educational sphere.

The book “Professional Secrets of a Trainer” at first glance is solely addressed to the specialists from the

third sector in Belarus. The authors make an assumption that this text may be used by other specialists in the educational sphere. But let's think what and how can be transferred through the text of such kind? Why it was written at all? There aren't a lot of good books in the third sector. I will even say that a reader is tired of waiting for a good book. In the beginning of 1990s we read everything new which was “not soviet” with delight and then we started to write ourselves. Finally in a formal way, the demand is met. And now there is a question about quality. It means there should be set certain criteria at a certain level. If we set high criteria then may be we get a quality product.

Let's take a look at this intellectual product within the context of some activity. The text can have several effects: 1) to reproduce and open some content, idea; 2) with the help of the content change in the future the activity of a reader or the author. If there is a task to write an effective text then it must be appropriate and relevant at the present moment in time. It means the readers should wait for it. A reader doesn't wait for a text which represents a report, compilation or interpretation about something that a reader already knows. But a reader is waiting for a text which can help in solving relevant tasks for a reader in his intellectual and practical activity. A text for the sake of text is an example of yesterday's postmodern. Intellectual Belarus which wasted too much time on this, hoping to fit the European elite. It didn't work. At the moment when it was necessary to arrange

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frame communication and quickly solve complicated practical tasks, the intellectuals just got absorbed in talking and lost the time.

So can we consider this text as an exception? What is the reader waiting for right now? The authors don't intend to appeal to a wide range of readers, only trainers and may be state educational sphere employees. Are there many trainers in Belarus? And how many of them are needed? Alas there aren't many; they can all be counted. Is there a need to widen this circle? What for? There are enough people. In business structures, trainers mainly use perfected foreign methods. And in the third sector may be there is no need for higher qualifications in trainers? And there is so much information written about training. It is impossible to count all of the books. Not interesting! A book about educational experience is only relevant when there is a task to influence another sphere of activity. And not in a "may be" way but directly. It means there should be enough courage to compete with other specialists in this sphere to change the situation in general and not somewhere in Sweden but here, in Belarus. And why not to try to do something with the whole Belarusian pedagogic? Or you are not strong enough? To tell you the truth, you are a bit late.

The text mainly represents not the trainer's experience but the intellectual introspection of pedagogic (though very specific trainer's) activity. And this can be interesting. For me, the description of the whole trainers work and the technique is not important though the authors tried to describe it in detail both in the main text and in the appendix. The main indicator of this text is introspective work of the team of authors. And it is not about the experience of others but their own. The authors don't speak directly about introspection as some methodologists do but they do the introspection and shape it in the text. So this is a good example to be followed by the other "teachers".

The analysis of problems and tasks of democratization in society is well made though in my opinion, too well made. You should be more courageous when speaking about democratization in Belarus. The next thing that catches the eye is "modesty" of announcing the problems and correspondingly the topics covered in the book. But it is only at first glance. The authors consider the problems that seem to have been discussed many times, i.e. the effectiveness of work, about work with a text and seminar programs... But they write about it in a very interesting way.

The question "Who is a trainer?" is quite introspective in itself and requires not practical and simple discussion about the benefits of the trainer's work, but theoretical and framed discussion which comes from trainer's self-determination. Please show me your own criteria! But the author of this chapter

chooses a standard way of referring to international standards in trainings. It is also a way out. But we would like so much to see the attempts of modeling the trainer's activity. Then the basis could be not only referring to other trainers experience but the whole theory of modeling specialists activity.

I have to admit that I don't like the position of the trainer which is based on "participant-centered" approach in the way it is described in the text. The participant-centered approach is secondary in the way it is described in the text. If a trainer wants to help, lead and be interesting for somebody, a trainer should be interesting for his/herself and answer their own question "Who are you?" i.e. to become a subject. Without such self-introspection the participant-centered strategy is not effective. Subjectivity doesn't appear itself. It appears as a result of self-definition of a person towards future activity, through correlation of personal opportunities and wishes with objective requirements for the activity.

Speaking about working out the program of a seminar and defining the trainer's aims, it seems to me that the authors consider the problem which is external towards the program itself and its aims and takes us away from discussing the typology of seminar aims and programs. I believe that it is not necessary to follow the program exactly and follow the aims and tasks that were put before because during the seminar there should be introspection of the situation "here and now" and whether is necessary to refuse the previously chosen program. In this flexibility and dynamics lies the skill of being a trainer. The program itself is of no value. But the decision to refuse from the program of the seminar is not a simple one. It should be mentioned that the participants can not and sometimes should not know the aim of a seminar. There is a danger in following participants' tastes and not reach anything. Quality is better than quantity!

In this chapter of the book, the emphasis is on the educational program being applied in a participant-centered approach and a certain technique is offered. But there is no answer to what is the most important thing for a trainer when producing a seminar program. The authors moved on further, placing emphasis on the methods and techniques. But all of these proposals have to have some basis. And such a basis (methodologists call it the "frame") is the activity's task. Any seminar or game is an imitation of some main activity which is being taught. And the task of the seminar should not be educating or imitating but, activity. The problem with the trainer's work is that a trainer should keep separate both types of tasks: that of the activity that should be taught and that of the learning task. But it is not necessary to open for the participants learning tasks, this is trainer's secrets and the more invisible it is the better, because then the participants will not get lost in frames and problems. Learning methods, the aims of forming and "growing" →

some knowledge and skills should be allied to the main activity process which is being taught. It is necessary to understand the reasons why the skills are being taught. It is natural that there are laws and algorithms of the main activity development. That is why if something is not clear for the participants, it shouldn't be neglected for the sake of the program and time limits. Discussing the program makes sense if the participants on it help by starting to realize what is necessary to be done and don't discuss how the topics should be formulated i.e. they define the zone of close activity and make the frames for this activity. From my own experience I know that setting up the frames is the most difficult and time-consuming.

So the most important thing is keeping the frames of the activity. A trainer only accompanies a participant along this way. That is why the question of time is very important. One shouldn't set big tasks if there is no time for it. Education technology is a factor of fulfilled space and time — this is just the means of fulfilling aims and tasks. And naturally, aims and tasks should be correlated with technologies. But then the problem of time should be considered depending on the difficulty of the tasks. The laws of activity technology are formulated as the laws of correspondence and negotiation. And the main criteria of technology effectiveness is fulfilling the work within a unit of time. ($E = W/T$). Effectiveness is higher if one and the same work is fulfilled within a shorter period of time. But there are certain limits for corresponding tasks. For example, it is impossible to do research within a day — one should spend a year on it. Of course one can try but the quality will be different. The author of the chapter "about a lack of time" refers to this problem, not to frames and tasks but rather makes introspection about the number of conditions and factors and considers the problem not theoretically but practically. This has certain advantages. The author raises the level of introspection from certain difficulties to thoughts about it. And even leads the introspection to certain recommendations not claiming to embrace everything.

Even more interesting is the chapter about work with a text. In my opinion, the authors raised a very interesting problem — why should one read the texts written by others and what happens as a result of such reading? It is well known that everybody can read. Though experience shows that reading is not an easy process. Does a reader understand the meaning? What is more important for him and what is less? Can he or she understand the authors' position and apply it to their own? A text is means of activity. And if misused, it loses its effectiveness. The authors of the reviewed book based on Blume's scheme are really worried about the necessity to achieve the transmission of the text content and build up a critical attitude to the information. The authors offer a number of interesting techniques and methods of trainers' work

i.e. they carry their ideas to a logical, practical conclusion. Though in the text, the activity context of using the texts is not revealed, from which appears the necessity and pragmatics of such skill as reading.

The chapter about the effectiveness of seminar work is a good conclusion for the content part of the book. The authors highlight a number of important criteria: the need for feedback and the level of the reaction of seminar participants, the level of learning, behavioral levels, orientation in practical aspects and the effectiveness of a seminar. There are not so many discussions about the content of the criteria but those offered are quite applicable and appropriated methods of work with reference to the Kirkpatrick model. This is a good benefit of the book. Applied character and introspection are the main principles that the authors successfully try to follow. These methods can be used by other trainers and teachers who practice active learning methods. The main task is fulfilled — the introspection of the trainer's practice. And it is good. The authors of the text are not responsible for what happens later. It is common knowledge that the text will have a target group. So why can't the author be such a reader? The main thing is to fulfill an activity task. And introspection is quite a worthy and important task for any text.

It would be good to discuss about something higher and with frames. Reading this book made me think about the state of Belarusian educational and intellectual authorities in pedagogic. In Belarus there are a lot of specialists who would like to develop a world culture and complete it with their own material. But how is this possible if their colleagues don't want to recognize this? Recognition is something that doesn't depend on the author; it comes from outside. Degradation of criteria at intellectual level and ability to work at a high level leads to the absence of cultural elite both in Belarusian society in general and pedagogic, in particular. Why Blum and Kirkpatrick? Why not Gusakovskiy and Mackevich? More acceptable and simple discussions are more popular than serious theory, explaining it with applied character and emphasis on practice. But, dear colleagues, working with the mind is also a kind of practice and no less important than transmission of methods and techniques.

The problem is that nobody but us can make the elite in pedagogic. And not only should academic circles work on it but NGOs as well and non-formal education. And I hope you agree with me that the main task is not just writing the text about the trainer's work but the task is both cultural and political. One should be brave enough and have certain ambitions to think at such levels, setting up a certain norm of professional and inter-professional communication. So the beginning is not bad and we will see what comes next.