



EPF EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Today, when education and learning are some of the most frequently mentioned areas of improvement that Armenia needs, EPF looks back at its work of the previous years, trying to identify projects and approaches that constitute the essence of its education and learning methodology. In fact, most of the work that EPF does is relevant for education and learning: trainings, coaching, mentoring, brainstormings – all of these types of EPF’s work are devoted to providing its beneficiaries (as well as itself) with new knowledge, skills, competences, and capacities. EPF has used specific methodologies that it calls its signature methods for this aim: Methodology of Systemic Thought Activity (MSTA) and Creative Games¹; Conflict Transformation School; Critical Thinking School; NGO Capacity Building School; Local Democracy School; etc. A related large-scale informal educational strategy is EPF’s work through the Youth Bank network², with the network of InfoTuns, covering entire Armenia, including trainings in media literacy and periodic Mardamej Social Innovation Camps. EPF’s website contains numerous public lectures and presentations under the ‘Jam Session’ heading. Finally, EPF has developed a series of publications under a general headline of ‘EPF University’: these include research materials that contain an important educational/learning component.

EPF has worked on research and development of specific collections on the topics that have not been much articulated or debated in Armenia: research projects on such values as democracy in Armenian literature; the roots of violence in

1. <https://epfarmenia.am/thought-leadership/creative-game>

2. <https://epfarmenia.am/project/youthbank>

Armenia; expressions of tolerance and intolerance in literature and education; a study of 20th century Armenia with special emphasis on the impact of the Soviet times on today's Armenia and alternative history education. Over the years, there have been several practical manuals developed, on conflict reporting by the media, critical thinking, Armenia and European Union, democracy and human rights, gender, various aspects of judicial reform, religious tolerance, etc. Most of these materials are available on EPF's website. Also, within the Civil Society Development Program, funded by USAID (2014-2019), EPF developed a website hkdepo.am, which contains major learning and educational resources for NGOs, such as modules on communication, fundraising, advocacy, financial management, leadership and management, grant-making, etc.

EPF has also addressed formal education, particularly targeting higher education in Armenia. The initiatives were directed towards enhancing academic independence, the need in a fit between education and business, reforming post-Soviet universities, and legislative amendments. EPF staff has participated in the formal education reform ideas generation and policy advocacy in a variety of ways: via being engaged in the various government-initiated councils, and/or media and public discussions, etc. Many of EPF staff are university teachers, graduate students, or fellows in Armenia or internationally, which gives them first-hand expertise on the needs and ways of formal educational reform in Armenia.

This experience will be upheld and enhanced thanks to the new project that EPF is starting in 2021 with the support of European Union. The project is aimed at protecting the rights of young people and strengthening the capacities of students and student organizations and encouraging their engagement in public affairs. It will be implemented with EPF's partner, 'Restart' Student Civic Initiative³, a country-wide movement of university students working for change.

3. <https://www.facebook.com/restarttotale/>

METHODOLOGY

Having done so much in the areas of formal and particularly informal education, EPF has built, over the years, both its areas of engagement in the education and learning, as well as its specific approaches to this public need. Informal education and life-long learning are at the core of this approach. EPF is studying, over the years, the effectiveness of its educational and learning methods, trying to find best ways of providing a learning environment to its beneficiaries so that there is a discernable process of transition from abstractly accepting values to their critical discussion; to moving to the change of attitudes; and to eventually having an impact on behaviors.

In its educational and learning methods, EPF focuses on **thinking** and **critical thinking**; providing beneficiaries with an opportunity to develop, build and/or change their value systems; attitudes; and therefore behaviors; focusing on practical learning but not forgetting that best learning is if the learning methods are consciously understood and appropriated by the learners; studying various learning methods which have been successfully used internationally; making the concept of elicitive learning (which means that the beneficiaries are provided not so much with data and information as much as with the capacities of making use of the data and information that they already possess) the core of its approach; using the 'fractal' method of learning, the essence of which is that every good professional should become an educator (at least informal educator) of the competences that he or she possesses; and that best learning is when one's work is presented as an educational source to those who need to do the same type of work.

Several of EPF-produced lectures and presentations within its Jam Session series are devoted to the methodological aspects of learning, presenting important views on the history of education; psychology of learning; impediments to effective learning; the crises of the formal educational systems globally and in Armenia; and priorities in learning areas/subjects for Armenia's citizens today - emphasizing, in this respect, the need in learning on how to build values and social skills.

Among the priorities that the formal educational system of Armenia does not address sufficiently today EPF has identified critical thinking; conflict transformation skills (rather than conflict resolution and conflict studies; history of diplomacy and war; or adversarial negotiation skills); capacity to read and understand texts and evaluate the ideas expressed in them in a valid way; capacity to write texts about texts; capacity to paraphrase; capacity to edit; capacity to express valuable ideas via communication; capacity to see things from another perspective and therefore to innovate; capacity to understand what is a law and what are the law systems; capacity to cooperate in teams and communities; capacity to evidence-based rather than dream-based planning; capacity to do valid research; capacity to successfully address the gaps between values, ideologies and false knowledge propagated by the official systems versus individual behavioral rationality; etc. EPF meets many people who, having studied in the universities, often lack understanding of what is science and how scientific approaches differ from non-scientific ones or simply from opinions. These folks have de-learned valuing individual hard work and creativity as opposed to cut and paste, copycatting or plagiarizing the ideas and work of others. They often have gone far away from appreciating the need in and being capable of hard work if one wants to learn, and have to make special efforts to come back to a learning mode. This makes EPF to conclude that it is social and formal educational systems that adversely affect the primary and basic creative capacities of youth over the time of their official learning processes.

All these priorities are being addressed by EPF in its educational/ learning approaches. By contrast, such capacities as abstract creativity and project idea development are not among the priorities that the Armenian public lacks, according to EPF's observations.

Via providing educational and learning opportunities, EPF is incessantly in a learning mode itself. Its methodology of the 'life-long learning' cycle can be presented as follows: helping the outstanding professional understand why do they do things the way they do, i.e. discerning the methods of their

work; making these methods explicit and therefore teachable; helping the professional become a teacher (trainer, mentor etc.) in their area of work; making a good educator from a professional; via teaching, the professional understands better their ways of working and improves them; this generates a need in re-evaluating and re-defining one's new working aims, and therefore ways and methods; explicating them in the next round; and imparting to their pupils and beneficiaries; etc.

The other element of EPF's 'life-long learning' approach is its principle of not letting go the beneficiaries. Even if the limitations of its projects may not allow it to continue working with the same group of people for a very long time, EPF a) collects feedback from educators and learners after every event; b) analyzes the feedback; c) offers participants opportunities to stay engaged with EPF, be it via internet networks and social media or via opportunities to participate in other activities in other projects; d) offers participants opportunities of becoming educators themselves in the areas they immersed with EPF; e) builds a network of beneficiaries from a variety of learning projects and situations so that they have opportunities of working together, mutually enriching their endeavors already outside EPF's remit with their own expertise; f) builds clusters of outstanding professionals who help it increase its educational and learning resource via participating in a variety of its activities as leaders and educators; g) promotes participation of such individuals in other relevant change projects of other entities and organizations, including policy and international networks. Thus EPF tries to offer its beneficiaries a variety of chances of achieving a sustainable impact and further development of their learning experiences with EPF.

Many of EPF's learning projects are built as a combination of a training, or School, with an opportunity for the participants to engage afterwards in a practical project implementation after the learning process, a project based on the ideas brainstormed during the learning process. Thus the beneficiaries acquire a chance of using knowledge they acquired theoretically in practical work; as well as of learning several competences which accompany the main topic of the project, such as project

management, administration, team work, leadership, discerning the unexpected impact in addition to the expected impact, flexibility, risk management, forward looking, etc.

Finally, EPF is also engaged in managing a network of local and international fellows and interns, as part of a variety of its projects. Fellows and interns are being accommodated for several weeks or months both in its premises as well as in partner organizations. Working on this, EPF not only provides practical learning opportunities to guests, but also provides learning opportunities to the host organizations. EPF has analyzed the reasons for a success or failure of a variety of internships and has come to a conclusion that internship is not so much a way of acquiring additional workforce for free as much as (or at least in an equal part) an opportunity for the learner to be immersed in a learning environment. EPF makes it clear to its staff as well as partner organizations that they should devote resource – time and planning – to creating a learning environment for their guest learners; they should artificially plan and build time and effort to work with fellows and interns, otherwise interns will not acquire learning sufficiently. This means that host organizations should become educators themselves rather than expect that the guest visitors will immediately embark upon helping them effectively with no significant effort of induction and teaching.

In all this work EPF's aim is to provide the Armenian society and international community learned and learning individuals and teams with leadership skills in their areas of interest and specialism.

EVERY ACTIVITY IS LARGER THAN ITSELF; LEADERS ARE EDUCATORS AND LEARNERS

Every EPF's endeavor has a concrete aim but at the same time it also aspires at having a symbolic significance, to mean more than a project or its part: EPF tries to model its actions as the ones that can be useful to the others and replicable. This refers first of all to its style of using MSTA as well as critical thinking in its management. EPF tries to be an organization which is an

example for learning itself. In its work on CSO DePo, EPF presented management and administration as a creative and fun, rather than boring and monotonous activity. Its focus on innovating management that it uses trying to enhance its own operation is being transmitted – via its trainings and examples – to all those who can benefit from it via observing, understanding, learning, perhaps partly replicating, fitting to their own circumstances, and creatively developing further. If EPF conducts an activity, it is not just for the beneficiaries to participate and benefit passively; it is also for them to actively understand how it is conducted, why in this particular way, and how one could do the same or a similar thing with the same or better result. Thus, making beneficiaries into leaders goes, in EPF’s approach, side-by-side with making beneficiaries and clients into educators, and reciprocally learning from them as well. The first step in this strategy is to create conditions for self-reflection. EPF develops algorithms and business processes that are useful for its internal operations, such as event organization, facilitation, empowerment, grant-making, working with the consortia, database and communication tools, institutional memory, the editing and publications tool, etc. Topics that are prioritized are the ones which, in EPF’s observation, lack clear-cut principles aimed at maximizing the effectiveness of their impact. Usually the organizations, particularly in Armenia, do not focus on them, whereas they play a crucial role in contributing to the impact of projects. These tools then become a learning resource that EPF offers to other organizations.

For more information, please follow the link:

<https://epfarmenia.am/document/EPF-Education-and-Learning-Continuation>