

Empowering **YOUTH**
for School and Community
Change

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Chapter 2 Youth-Driven Work

Imagine working on a project. You are brainstorming, thinking about who and what connections you have to assist with the project and how you are going to finagle through possible conflicts and limitations. Now imagine a young person you work with walking into your office and handing you a pair of glasses. You decide to put them on. Wow! As you look around the room, you do not see the confining walls that surrounded you. It is a vision of little to no limits! A young person gave you a new vision of how to see the world.

This chapter is about what happens when youth use their talents and perspectives to make decisions, plan projects, and take on active roles in making community change. It includes defining “youth-driven work” and why it is important, the roles adults can play, strategies for supporting youth to take the lead, and examples from the Harmony VISTA project.

Defining Youth-Driven Work and Its Benefits

“Research demonstrates that young people learn best when they take on active roles, when they have opportunities for meaningful choice, and when they become contributors and change-makers.” –International Youth Foundation¹⁰

Most young people bring freshness—a vision of few limits. Often they see what is possible in what adults may see as impossible. Youth-driven work means that young people are using their unique perspectives and talents to make decisions, plan and implement projects, connect with others, and hold themselves accountable for actions. When youth take leadership in a community project and take action on what matters to them, they have a greater sense of ownership over their work. By taking on active roles and meaningfully contributing, their creative juices flow, and they are able to create new possibilities for how they can make a difference.

Defining the Roles of Adults

“Youth-driven work” does not mean that adults stand back and disengage from what youth are doing. Even if young people are leading the way in a program or project, they still may need adults for support, resources, ideas, or advice. There are many roles that adults can play in youth-driven work.

Adults sometimes disengage youth or perpetuate inequitable models of youth participation without knowing it.¹¹ This can happen by engaging youth in a token manner; asking for young people’s opinions after decisions have been made, engage youth who already are in leadership positions, or making all of the decisions for a “youth project” without asking youth at all. These events may happen if adults are afraid to let go of how things have always been done. There may be fear of losing control or of something going wrong. Engaging youth in new ways or engaging youth who have not previously been in leadership positions may be scary at first but these risks also allow for learning and growth.

Harmony VISTA Volunteers have found that the best way to determine the role of adults in youth-driven work is to get cues from young people themselves. Here are some tips and exercises for getting clear on what your role could be.

- Have a conversation—Talk with the young people you’re working with. Ask them how you can support them in their work/project/learning. Maybe the conversation could start with all the ways they DON’T want you to be involved. This could be very humorous and could lead into a discussion about what they want and need from you. It may also be beneficial for you to speak openly with them about what you need from them. Create a written agreement and keep it visually posted throughout the



¹⁰Tolman, Joel. What Works in Education Reform: Putting Young People at the Center. International Youth Foundation

¹¹Checkoway, B. Adults as Allies. University of Michigan School of Social Work

project. This conversation can be ongoing because what youth want and need may change over time.

- Continuum dialogue on decision-making—The purpose of this exercise is to determine which decisions should be made by adults, which by youth, and which by adults and youth. This process is done with equal voice of youth and adults and can help create a clear plan of decision-making. (see Appendix for a full description of this activity)

Strategies for Supporting Youth Driven Work

- Listen—Actively listen to what youth are saying. You may hear what young people are trying to explain not only by what they ARE saying but by what they are not saying. By listening to what they want and need, you most effectively support them because your mind is not focused on what you THINK they need. This also means limiting how long you speak at meetings or in discussions with youth.
- Initiate a positive attitude—The best way to create a desired outcome, when it comes to communication, is to BE what you desire. For example, if you want youth to be enthusiastic and excited about a project and/or subject, you must initiate that enthusiasm and excitement. If your attitudes and actions are exactly what you want to see in young people, you allow them to have similar attitudes and the experience with them will more likely align with your goals for the group.
- Ask questions—Help students realize their vision and clarify their thought processes by asking open-ended, unbiased questions. The most effective questions are those that allow young people to reflect on their actions and enable them to find answers on their own.
- Reach out to underrepresented youth—Encourage youth who are not necessarily the most outgoing participants to take on leadership roles. Reach out to youth who have not been engaged or who have not had leadership positions. Work with them to build their confidence in their leadership ability.

You may notice that these strategies for supporting youth-driven work are very similar to strategies for building connections found in Chapter One. This is not an accident or an oversight. Since building relationships is an evolving process, consistently listening, asking questions, mentoring, and initiating positive attitudes are key to empowering young people.

types of Youth-Driven Work

Youth led Meetings

Youth led meetings are just that- young people leading discussions and activities. Leading a discussion can be challenging and empowering, especially if the young person is inexperienced at generating ideas from his or her peers. If the project includes ongoing meetings, Harmony VISTA members have found that it is helpful to choose a discussion leader at the end of the previous meeting. This allows for time in between meetings to work with the discussion leader to prepare the agenda and practice facilitation strategies. If your young people are not ready to lead an entire meeting, you might offer the opportunity for them to lead components of a meeting. Harmony VISTA members have found that youth often feel comfortable leading icebreakers and the popular meeting-opener, Connections (see Appendix) as practice for more intense meeting activities.

When young people have an opportunity to lead meetings and discussions, they often hone their skills in leadership, decision-making, teamwork, listening, and confidence. Of course simply leading meetings does not always mean that work is youth-driven. The content of the meetings must be youth-driven as well.

If it comes time to make a group decision and the group is having trouble making a decision, Harmony VISTA volunteers and their youth used the following techniques to make decision-making easier.

Percentage Voting—This type of voting is familiar to most young people. Some decisions may require a percentage of a community to vote in favor of something. You'll have to decide with your group whether the decision will be made by majority vote or by a consensus vote. The most important issues might require the greatest percentage of approval.

Selection by dots—(see Appendix for a full description of this exercise) This type of voting is ideal for identifying more than one outcome, and it helps to remove the peer-pressure that often occurs in voting. In selecting by dots, a group lists a variety of choices—for example, possible speakers for an upcoming event. Each member of the group is given three stickers (usually 1/2 inch circles) and is asked to place each dot by a choice—thus, each person is voting for his/her top three choices. The dots help to ensure that

An Example of Percentage Voting

You and your students have just put together a homophobia-awareness presentation and seek to travel to high schools in other cities to put on this presentation. You believe that the entire group should commit to a certain standard of personal responsibility while on the trip. You have the group suggest components of a trip contract—i.e. no drugs or alcohol, being on time. Because you and your group believe this contract to be crucial, you decide to seek a unanimous vote on the document. On the first go-round, two students vote down the contract, so you clarify what adjustments need to be made in order for them to vote yes. You vote again, and everyone in the group, including you, votes yes. The student-created, student-approved (and, of course, teacher approved) contract has been established and has just given your young people greater ownership of the trip.

each member of the group has voted no fewer than three times. This exercise also helps foster ownership because each participant is able to vote on more than one outcome. You can do this activity several times as you narrow down choices.

Youth Evaluation and Research—When youth do research or evaluation on a community issue, they discover information that can help them develop a project for community or school change. Whereas youth are evaluated all of the time, it is rare that youth get to evaluate the services or programs in which they participate.¹² Evaluation and research can take many forms—for example, evaluating program or project, interviewing community members on a specific issue, or creating and distributing a survey. Once youth do their evaluation or research project, they can analyze the results. Once they analyze their results, they can decide what to do next. In Indianapolis, a group of 50 youth (10 students from five high schools) conducted a research project that included surveying over 4000 students, presenting to teachers and administrators, and implementing discussion forums on school reform issues. Young people helped raise awareness of the reasons why many students were dropping out of high school and helped plan school reform to address the problem.

Youth Engaged in Service Learning—Service learning is a teaching strategy in which youth apply what they learn in class to a real-world problem in their community. It includes identifying community needs, forming partnerships, and creating a project to address those needs. Youth voice is a major component of service learning. This means that youth develop strategies for identifying community needs, initiate partnerships, and create and implement an action plan for change.

Simple Facilitation Strategies for Facilitating Meetings

- Appoint a note-taker.
- Appoint a time-monitor
- Keep a paper and pencil handy for jotting down lists of hands raised to speak.
- Call out for 'Last Hands' if a discussion seems to be repeating itself or if time is getting short.
- Use 'wait time'—don't always call on the first hand raised.
- Be sensitive to the balance of types of people called on (i.e. if one gender seems to have more to say, ask the other gender if they have anything to add).

A Story about Youth-Driven Service Learning and the Role of Adults

At Harmony School in Bloomington, Indiana, a group of fifteen freshmen and two teachers met on select Thursdays to do a service learning project. At the first meeting, youth brainstormed needs in their communities. Homelessness in Bloomington, substance abuse in Southern Indiana, and the lack of a good music room at their own school were three needs that the students felt passionate about. Some students knew homeless people and knew substance abusers, while others themselves were seeking to be able to practice music in school. They then brainstormed projects they could initiate that would serve those needs. While the students had difficulty thinking of a compelling project around the homeless, they created a project to combat substance abuse among teens, and a project to fund a music room at the school.

The outcomes of these projects are stories yet to be told. For now, looking at the role of adults in getting a group of fifteen freshmen excited about service learning in just one meeting. First the adults warmed up the group with fun icebreakers. Then, they simply directed students to break into trios, to brainstorm community needs, and to jot down their brainstorm. After about twenty minutes, the adults asked each of the five trios to select their two best ideas. The adults wrote those ten ideas on a flip chart and then had the students vote for their three favorite ideas using the dot-voting process. After narrowing down these ideas, the adults took a consensus vote—could each student see him or herself working on projects that related to one of those ideas? After reaching consensus, the entire group determined who was most interested in which topic, and then split into respective groups to brainstorm related projects.

¹²Checkoway, B., Richards-Schuster, K. Facilitator's Guide For Participatory Evaluation with Young People. University of Michigan School of Social Work.

A Story about Youth Voice and Youth-Initiated Programs

Two freshmen at Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis decided to write a grant to a local organization called Youth As Resources. After some brainstorming, they came up with a project entitled Students Come Alive in which they were going to start an art project with the community based special education students from all the high schools in the Indianapolis Public School district. They wanted to display the paintings as one large series and exhibit the paintings for a week in each school to show the students that the community based students can do the same things the other students can do. In addition, the two freshmen wanted to give the community based special education students the opportunity to express themselves.

After the grant was written, the two students decided they wanted to create their own organization where they could put into action the other ideas they came up with. The two students named their organization Students Come Alive and, through word of mouth, a very strong group of students began meeting weekly. They now implement service projects for local organizations.

The initial two students were able to create a very successful student-run organization because they took ownership of their ideas. They realized their power and voice and were given the opportunity to lead the way.

Youth Participation in Policy Making—This can take many forms such as a mayor's youth council, a youth committee that advises the city council on policies, youth serving on boards and committees, or youth forums.

Of course there are many other ways that youth can create and influence community change. The list above is not exhaustive. Find out how young people participate in your community. What opportunities are available to them? What opportunities can you help create?

Conclusion

This chapter focused on strategies for youth-centered, youth-organized, and youth-driven programs and projects. Youth have varying and inspirational talents and dreams that, when meaningfully utilized, can elevate school and community change to levels you may have never imagined. When youth are authentically engaged in taking action for change, they foster ownership and connection in their work. Adults can play several roles in youth driven work including helping youth fully realize their talent and power. The next chapter focuses on how to take visions for change into action for change. It provides a seven-step process to make big dreams a reality.