
Participatory Evaluation with Youth: Building Skills for Community Action

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Abstract: This article describes an innovative training program that combines youth-adult partnerships, social inquiry, and community action as a method for effective youth engagement. Elements of the training are outlined, and program evaluation results are presented. In addition, several strategies for successful program replication are presented.

Introduction

Providing opportunities for youth engagement is a critical element of positive youth development programs (Gambone & Connell, 2004). At the same time, a lack of understanding of how to engage youth effectively persists. O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin (2006) outlined four common errors in understanding effective youth engagement:

- (1) placing youth on a board or committee is effective practice;
- (2) adults have to surrender all responsibility for guiding and mentoring youth;
- (3) adults are ready for active youth participation; and
- (4) youth are ready to participate.

While general consensus is that engaging youth is important, misconceptions of what youth engagement means, and a lack of training in effective youth engagement practices still linger. *Participatory Evaluation with Youth: Building Skills for Youth Community Action* (CYA), however, provides a good example of a training program that prepares youth for community engagement. The program trains youth and their adult partners to plan and host community forums in order to identify a community need that can be addressed by an action project.

Research and Evaluation as a Method for Youth Engagement

The CYA program is organized around the cycle of social inquiry, thus participants also gain skills in research and evaluation. Recent work by the Kellogg Foundation (2005) outlines eight pathways for youth civic engagement, including youth research and evaluation. Involving youth in participatory evaluation as a method for youth empowerment and engagement has received considerable recent attention (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Delgado, 2006; Sabo Flores, 2008). The benefits to youth participating in evaluation include developing social and civic competencies and self-confidence. Such participation also allows youth opportunity for identity exploration and building social capital. The handful of existing models and materials available to train youth and adults in participatory evaluation still need to be augmented and strengthened (cf. Camino, Zeldin, Mook, & O'Conner, 2004; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006; The Innovation Center, 2005). Thus, the CYA program was developed specifically to help youth and adult teams gain research skills, and at the same time, provide a model for effective civic engagement.

Program Outline

The CYA training schedule and activities follow Arnold and Wells (2007) participatory evaluation with youth curriculum. Training activities are highly interactive, hands-on and match the cycle of social inquiry. An outline of the training is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Participatory Evaluation with Youth:
Building Skills for Youth Community Action Curriculum Outline

Topic	Purpose	Social Science Skills Developed
Youth-Adult Partnerships	To prepare youth and adults to work effectively as a team	Collaboration, Data collection, organization, analysis, and interpretation
Framing Community Issues	To determine a topic for a community forum	Develop research questions, Data collection and analysis
Community Forums	To prepare teams to plan and host a community forum	Data collection
Data Analysis	To develop skill in organizing, summarizing, and analyzing information	Data organization, analysis, and interpretation
Reporting and Action	To prepare youth to report results and plan an action project	Data interpretation, Reporting, Action planning

Youth-Adult Partnerships

Having youth work together in partnership with adults is a key strategy for building youth empowerment and engagement, but in order for these partnerships to be positive and productive it is necessary for youth and adult teams to receive training in how to work together

in a meaningful way. Research indicates that effective youth-adult partnerships have been shown to have a powerful affect on the youth and adults who enter into them; each party develops a deeper appreciation for the contribution the other can make (The Innovation Center, 2003; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). In addition, programs and communities uniquely benefit from the involvement of youth in projects designed to evaluate community needs and potential actions.

The CYA training begins with activities designed to help youth and adults work together as teams. Activities build on each other to help teams explore benefits and challenges of working together, assessing differences and similarities, and exposing potential problems (such as adultism). Each activity is debriefed before the next one is introduced. At the end of the session, participants are invited to reflect on their personal experience and learning and share their thoughts with the rest of the group. The session on youth-adult partnerships increases understanding between youth and adults and sets the stage for clear communication during the rest of the training and for future youth-adult interactions.

Preparing to Plan and Host a Community Forum

The majority of the training prepares teams to plan and host a community forum. To set the stage, the trainers host a "mock forum," where training staff are the hosts and moderators and training participants are the forum attendees. At the end of the mock forum, training staff highlight the various processes that contribute to the success of the forum, including moderator and recorder skills and techniques for facilitating audience participation. Following the mock forum, activities focus on helping participants identify appropriate forum topics, and each team brainstorms a potential topic for their forum. Later, the youth practice moderating and recording techniques during actual mini-forums held during the training. A debriefing session at the end of the mini-forums allows youth and adults opportunities to discuss possible solutions to problems that may arise during the forum.

Data Analysis, Reporting, & Action Planning

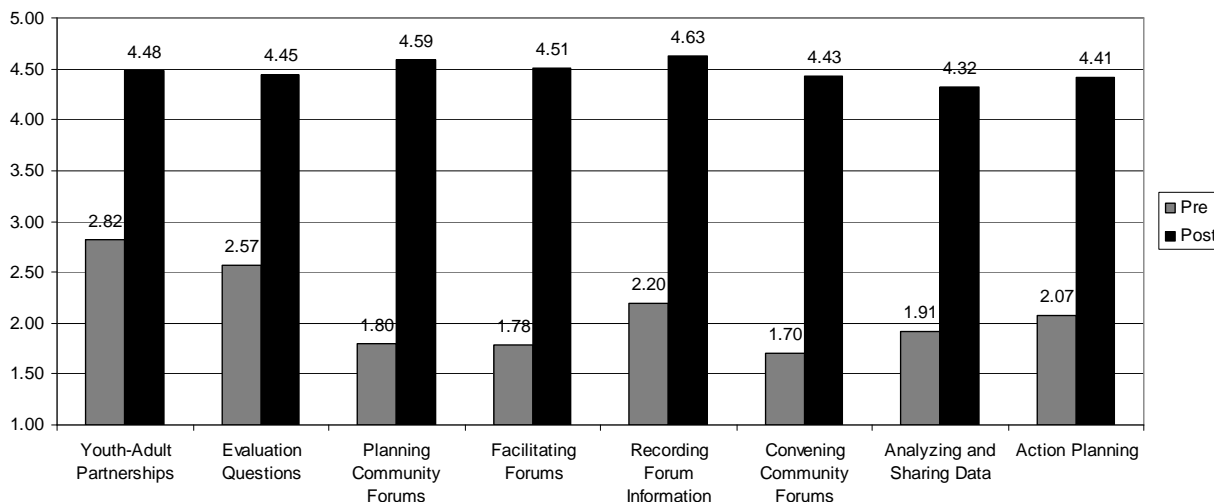
In addition to preparing for a community forum, a series of training activities teach youth how to organize and analyze the information gathered at a forum through a hands-on content analysis exercise. Each team completes a separate analysis of data gathered through a brainstorming exercise and shares their results with the larger group through a poster presentation, allowing an opportunity to practice reporting research findings. The training ends with a session on team action planning, providing participants with an understanding of the steps and strategies for effective action planning.

Program Evaluation and Impact

The CYA curriculum has been used to train 16 teams of youth and adults over the past two years. A formal evaluation conducted at the end of each session measured participant knowledge in each of the 8 topics covered in the training. As Figure 1 shows, there is a significant increase in participant learning for all topics as a result of the training ($p < .01$).

Figure 1

Change in participant knowledge of training topics pre to post (n = 56)



In addition, many of the teams have gone on to hold forums and complete action projects. These include refurbishing bleachers at a local high school, planning and hosting a series of community youth and family activity nights, and planting flowers to enhance a community in preparation for hosting the U. S. Olympic track and field trials.

Program Replication

The CYA curriculum outlines each of the training activities, including time, material, and space requirements, and is available for purchase from the authors. In addition to the curriculum, specific strategies are recommended for successful replication of the program in other areas:

1. Recruitment of youth-adult teams who are committed to the project is essential. We recommend at least 1 adult for every 5 to 7 youth. Adults need to be prepared to take an active role in supporting and mentoring the youth and share an enthusiasm to make the project happen. Adults need to attend every part of the training with the youth as a team, and not see themselves as just a chaperone.
2. Since activities build on each other, the training needs to take place in an intensive and extended format. We typically conduct the training over a weekend, beginning Friday evening before dinner and ending mid-day on Sunday. The training site needs to have adequate space with tables for team work and room for a semi-circle of chairs for a forum. There also needs to be ample wall space for each participant to have his or her own sheet of poster paper on which to write. In addition, it is helpful to train groups of teams together. Doing so allows for more interaction and sharing of ideas between teams as well as providing an overall more enthusiastic atmosphere.
3. Post-training support is essential; the most successful teams have been those who also have the participation and support of a paid staff person from a local youth-serving organization. In addition to supporting adult and youth members of a team, the paid staff person often has access to other resources for the project, such as meeting space, community connections, photocopying, and financial opportunities.
4. The weakest link in the program appears to be attendance at the community forum event. Despite widespread publicity, personal invitations, and promises to attend, it is

not uncommon that the forum audience is rather small. The most successful forums have been those held in conjunction with other events (like a school assembly). Even when the forum audience has been small, however, teams report the process of planning and hosting a forum to be valuable, with many indirect benefits, such as an increase in confidence and strengthened connections among team members.

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