Positive Youth Development in the 21st Century: Exploring Online Environments

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Abstract: The manner that young people and adults are communicating with each other is rapidly changing in society that is, in part, driven by the latest technology. As a youth-driven program, we must engage in new strategies and methods by which we communicate with youth members, volunteers, families, and the community at large. Social and mobile media are a growing and popular venue for much of our target audience and youth development practitioners must learn how to leverage these networks to create positive youth development in online environments.

If we ignore and don't engage in the opportunity to be connected to youth online, then youth are left to make their own paths online and set the online norms. As youth organizations, we also must seize the opportunity to be online mentors and use the resources that are available and being used by our target populations.

Introduction

Need for an Online Presence

Currently youth are on a "self-guided" tour of the Internet. They are surfing websites, joining social networks, and helping to chart the course of the power of the ever evolving Internet. According the Pew Internet, 93% of youth ages 12-17 are using the Internet and 73% are spending time on social networks. For adults only 78% are using the Internet with 65% of them spending time on social networking sites (Pew Research Center, 2011). This gap in activity between youth and adults shows an opportunity for digitally engaged adults to help guide and mentor youth in these online environments versus only peer to peer. There is also an opportunity for youth development professionals to step forward and lead this effort by translating youth development practices to online delivery. As youth development professionals, we need to be the leaders in positive youth development (PYD) online. A change

in focus must be made to help youth have a positive impact on the online global community just as youth organizations do offline.

What is Positive Youth Development?

The longitudinal 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (Lerner, 2008) by Tufts University is demonstrating that Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a valid, measurable construct that is composed of five key aspects: Competence, Confidence, Character, Caring and Connection. Further, when these five C's are present, young people display a six "C", which is Contribution (Lerner, 2008).

The environments, in which youth live, learn, and play, each have resources to promote positive youth development and become the "social nutrients" young people need for healthy development. Online environments hold tremendous potential to impact PYD.

Hypothesis: *The five key PYD aspects practiced in an online environment by youth and adults should also lead to Contribution.*

1) Competence

"Positive view of one's actions in domain specific areas including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational. Social competence pertains to interpersonal skills (e.g., conflict resolution). Cognitive competence pertains to cognitive abilities (e.g., decision making). School grades, attendance, and test scores are part of academic competence. Vocational competence involves work habits and career choice explorations" (Lerner, 2008).

Providing a learning community in a positive online environment provides a sandbox for developing competence in community. There are several advantages to this of learning and mastery. Luísa Miranda, Carlos Morais, and Paulo Dias describe the environment in this way: "the independent nature provided by computer-supported technology favors student-centered teaching, thus enabling reflexive construction of knowledge based on the student's skills and objectives. Creating a student-centered approach involves providing different students with different options" (Miranda, Morais, & Dias, 2008). An online environment is not limited by a specific time of the day and gives the student an expanded set of resources and available teachers. This gives the student learning that is not bound by the geographic boarders or local interest in the content. Greenhow also shows that digital learning has the potential to help youth attain valuable 21st century skills including competency in core subjects, decision-making, leadership, collaboration, responsibility, and an orientation towards lifelong learning (Greenhow, 2007).

4-H currently has a 100 year presence in delivering curriculum provided by America's 106 land-grant universities. Topics abound in variance and include subjects like livestock production, science, technology, health, arts, shooting sports, nutrition, and many more. Locally 4-H members depend on 4-H advisers and 4-H professionals to have the answers beyond the project book. If each adviser and professional could focus on being an expert in one project area, and share that in an online classroom, the learning becomes deeper and more meaningful to the youth. If the curriculum moves from paper to an online environment, now we have the ability to keep the content current and engaging. It also allows the learner to customize the activities to their own objectives, thus encouraging a stronger attachment to the project.

2) Confidence
"An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; one's global self-regard, as opposed to, domain specific beliefs" (Lerner, 2008).

As youth make the journey towards adulthood, they become more aware of who they are as individuals. They work hard at being responsible, being good, and doing the right thing, although this journey is filled with trials and risks. They form moral values, recognize cultural and individual differences. Teens are concerned with how he or she appears to others (Allen, & Marotz, 2000). In the offline world, youth are judged by their peer groups based on appearance first and then on their ability to contribute to a group. This can lead to a lack of confidence in a young person, even if surrounded by caring adults. Positive youth development organizations use competence in a skill or knowledge set to help foster confidence in youth.

Being in an online community allows youth to be valued outside their high school or local peer groups. Most teen aged youth are involved in online social networks because it levels the playing field. Here being judged only by what you reveal to others can increase self esteem. A perceived popularity can be achieved as youth find peers who have similar interests. There are more opportunities to find others with a niche interest in a global online community. Youth also find a voice to speak out and come together around an important issue whether locally or globally. While Facebook and MySpace offer these types of social tools, they also have the ability to crush confidence in youth because they have not been done in positive environments with appropriate mentorship. As youth development organizations, social networking should include intentional teen online mentors as part of the training we provide our youth.

3) Connections
"Positive bonds with people and institutions that are, reflected in bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school, and community in, which both parties contribute to the relationship" (Lerner, 2008).

Connection to others is what draw youth into organized youth development environments and create a sense of belonging. It is a desire to join an organization that matches the values of the individual. The Internet is built upon connections. It is through this interconnected web of information and people across the world that makes it powerful and compelling. For instance, by combining six million youth in 4-H with the power of these online connections, the organization becomes more of a connected force.

An online connection to others can lead to collaboration and a cooperation of learning (Malheiro, Morgado, & Quintas-Mendes, 2008). By connecting the local youth organizations together through online tools, we could see larger impact through the power of combining resources. Examples of online activities that increase youth connections through collaboration could be social networking, crowd computing, knowledge management, content management, discussion boards, blogs, and wikis. Hardware can also help to create these connections. Cell phones have become mobile computers, and while not every youth or adult has Internet access, cell phones are ubiquitous. By harnessing these connections beyond just the local level, a youth organization would have the ability to connect across geographic, age and time barriers.

4) Character
"Increased self-control, cultural development, spirituality, morality and a decrease in unhealthy behaviors" (Lerner, 2008).

Character development helps youth to be able to assess and respond to ethical dimensions of a situation. This is something that is needed more than ever in today's society. Youth have to be selective of the peers and adults that they select as respected role models. It is through close mentorship of peers and caring adults that youth are able to see the choices that lead to being a productive citizen. Tweens look up to teens, which in turn, look up to adults. Research shows that youth can have a positive impact on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of younger children as well as their same-age peers (Meyer, Nicholson, Danish, Fries & Polk, 2000). 4-H promotes empathy, respect for societal or cultural rules and standards, a sense of right or wrong, or a sense of moral or social justice (Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998).

There is a gap in the research related to character development in an online environment. Other than promoting online safety, there is little evidence of character development online. Character development, should be something that is integrated with other activities. Youth involved an online positive environment can encourage others to behave according to the new norm. This new norm is created by online mentors who create a community value system. It is believed that in a PYD online environment, 4-H values learned offline extrapolate to values and voices online. This can be viewed indirectly in the online groups that youth members are forming on their own in current social networks.

5) Caring
"Targets youths' ability to understand and identify with others" (Lerner, 2008).

Positive youth organizations provide the opportunity for youth to develop caring relationships with peers that include friendship (Zeldin, & Krauss, 1995). It is usually a friendship that draws youth into an organization and multiple friendships that keep youth persisting every year. Successful youth organizations also have the ability to recruit caring adults within the community, who may or may not be professional youth workers (Irby, Ferber, & Pittman, 2001). These caring adults provide assurance that the caring environment persists and that all members of the group are respected. The organization encourages youth to understand their personal emotions and how they might affect the group (Pittman, & Cahill, 1992). It is this process that creates an open environment within the group in which each member feels safe.

In online environments, human beings tend to reveal more about themselves than they might in public. This digital world puts introverts and extroverts on the same level, where each person has the opportunity to share. The sharing is not bound by the time limits of a club meeting. It is this constant environment that can reinforce the caring environment in the online environment. By training both 4-H youth and caring adult mentors on a local level, a similar club environment can be reproduced with the same safety features as a face to face meeting. In a positive environment, where youth feel safe, they may share more with each other, which creates a deepening relationship with another individual. It is this environment that we are confident that we can provide that is not available in any other online social network currently. By valuing and supporting caring relationship, a safe, trusted environment is created.

6) Contribution
"Making a difference in the lives of others through service" (Lerner, 2008).

Lerner indicates that behaviors indicative of the Five C's lead to contributing positively to self, family, community, and, ultimately, a civil society (Lerner, & Steinberg, 2004). Such contributions are envisioned to have both a action component and an ideological component

(Dowling, 2004).   Through the development of competence, confidence, character, connections, and a caring environment a youth possesses an identity that leads to contributions. Mastery of these skills create opportunities to use these skills as both participants and as leaders in valued home, school and community activities beyond 4-H. The 4-H Study confirms that 4-H programs foster PYD and Contribution. In fact, over time, 4-H'ers are 2.5 times more likely to be in the highest levels of contribution and 1.7 times more likely to expect to go to college (Lerner, 2008).

Examples of contribution in an online environment include:
- By playing an online game, points are converted into free rice to developing countries. http://www.freerice.com/
- A Facebook group was created by the Junior Fairboard in Allen County, Ohio to mobilize a supporters to come together to save the Allen County 4-H program when funding by their local county commissioners was cut to zero. A total of $62,000 was pledged in less than 48 hours. http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=52939711189
- Youth and adults consoling each other after the sudden loss of a Junior Fair Board Advisor. Youth found out late at night and wanted to grieve together, so an online space was created. http://www.facebook.com/groups/160399727378471/
- Idea Lab lets teens use tech tools to create and share. http://www.Freshbrain.org
- Parents and kids establish healthy habits for playing video games, watching TV and browsing the Web. http://www.getgamesmart.com/
- Maximize the benefits and minimize the harm of media on the health and development of children and families. http://www.mediawise.org

What is Positive Youth Development in an Online World?

Fostering Positive Youth Development online is an emerging frontier in learning, and youth development. Imagine if we could build an online mentoring model around the young person in which there are: positive and sustained youth and adult interactions; vibrant opportunities to learn; and the capacity to participate and lead in valued, community-based activities. Ultimately, we seek to harness the power of online communities that foster PYD to produce citizens who are engaged, active, and globally connected.

"The challenge to those concerned about dwindling social capital is to embrace the technological and social changes that have brought so much good in recent years, while finding new ways to create social-capital-rich environments for young people in spite of, and ideally because of, these changes (Putnam, 2000)."

Currently content created online by youth is done without the guidance of an adult mentor. In fact, often it is the young person who is teaching the adults how to use the tool. Youth organizations can take the lead by creating safe online environments for youth and caring adults. The content that is created in an intentional positive youth development online environment should be:
   Co-designed by youth and adults
- Focused on mastering fundamental life skills using experiential learning
- Engaging youth in collaboration and mentoring across social and geographic boundaries
- Leading to real participation and leadership as citizens of the nation and the world

Research-based, dynamic content for "hands-on, minds-on" learning. Experiential learning is the hallmark of 4-H youth development. By harnessing the knowledge of youth professionals and volunteers, this presents opportunities for learning and mastering fundamental life skills online, where youth are under the guidance of a competent authority. Opportunities for youth and adults to learn and create together are inherent in the design and its implementation of these learning online environments.

Social learning networks with a purpose. Using the industry concept of cloud computing and applying it to the youth development organizations ("crowd computing"), we harness the wisdom of all youth, adults and the professionals to apply their learning to complex solutions across the globe.

Some of the exciting innovations could include:

Online Mentoring: Beyond Local Boundaries

Through the use of new technologies it is possible to truly promote and engage in "mentoring without physical boundaries" and foster an environment where "those that have can share with those that need." Almost without exception, mentoring takes place in a physical world that greatly limits its potential to create lasting impacts. Consider that, for the most part, clusters of companies with technology and healthy living expertise exist in communities well-served by their local educational systems — at least in comparison with school systems located in rural and urban areas. Online PYD can break down those barriers and help build mentoring opportunities from the Silicon Valley to youth in the Tennessee hills or hard-pressed Michigan inner cities.

Adult volunteers and staff have the opportunity to engage in online mentoring by utilizing learning management system tools, video and audio conferencing, collaboration and measurement to mentor in real time. These mentoring tools could be used via computer or cell phone and already exist on the web and mobile apps. Conversely, the same tools can be used to engage youth in mentoring adults who are learning new technology.

Using new and current technology to facilitate youth-adult partnerships will also enable us to pursue our goal of youth participation in program governance. 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, FFA, and other youth organizations have already established themselves as a source of mentoring opportunities. As those relationships grow into youth-adult partnerships, collaborative technologies will allow the work of those partnerships to take place across geographic, schedule, or age-related boundaries. As the technological and business world grows, young people are the ones developing new tools and strategies. It's only logical that they should be the ones to make us grow, too.

Tim Davies, a researcher in the United Kingdom, has linked PYD to social networking. His research involves trying to create specific applications for those who are under 19 to allow for safe and effective social networks. Rather than shutting down these powerful communication and collaboration tools, he suggests that we find a way to manage the risk (Davies, 2010). Most parents will send their children off to youth camps, without even thinking about the risks involved.   The reason is that they know that they will be surrounded by caring adults. We have learned to manage the risks at camp to allow for the growth forming experience it provides. We must do the same thing online.

If we provide a secure environment where online mentorship is practiced, then we can duplicate cross-age teaching. The University of Arizona defines cross-age teaching as "engaging teens as teachers for pre-teens or younger children, typically in non formal educational settings. In many communities, cross-age teaching has been a useful strategy to influence and educate younger youth (Russell, Polen, & Tepper, 2002)." This is already taking place offline in the local club programming.   When implemented online, you now have an exponential group of caring adults and teen online mentors insuring the community works.

Serving Online—Hands and Minds to Larger Service

An important aspect of identifying what is service online is communicating and gaining buy-in to the value of this service to a community, whether its local or serving the greater 4-H community by contributing on the website Engaging youth in post-service refection and allowing it to be a service-learning opportunity is a significant need in the development of online service opportunities.

- Encourage tiered online mentoring systems:
    - Adults mentor teens
    - Teens mentor tweens
- Engage youth and adults in service projects that can be completed online
    - Knowledge-Sharing
    - Tool Development
    - provide opportunities for online service at any location, any time, for anyone of any skill

Google and Amazon pioneered the concept of "cloud computing" where applications exist in cyber-space and are linked to the user through increasingly higher speed Internet connections. Fundamental to its function, cloud computing is based on thousands and thousands of individual computer processors sharing a computing assignment.

Still in its infancy as a concept, "Crowd Computing," sometimes referred to as "Crowd-Sourcing," (Russell, Polen, & Tepper, 2002) combines the distributed processing precepts of "Cloud Computing" with the hands-on impact of community organizing. "We all work together to solve our community's problems."

With Crowd Computing, the development of a breakthrough solution for a specific problem is distributed to dozens or hundreds of individuals connected through the Internet. In a viral manner, individuals interact with each other or in groups to brainstorm, research, propose solutions and identify likely outcomes. A fundamental principle is: "no one person has a monopoly on insight, but as a group, all solutions are within the collective vision." We propose taking Crowd Computing to a global level with millions of youth and adults involved in identifying major solutions and seeking a breakthrough solution set.

For example, online service project examples: developing a wiki of icebreakers, collaborating on ideas and planning an online leadership session for younger members. Through Crowd Computing, youth, adults with an idea, and experts from companies, and our educational system can interact and distribute the problem solving across political and geographic

boundaries. The image of a girl or boy sitting under a tree using a cell phone to participate with youth and adults around the world to solve global problems with local impacts is powerful.

Collaborative Personalized Learning

Learning and socializing seem to be separated in current online environments. A youth who wants to socialize with friends might sign on to Facebook to see what her friends are doing. To research a project, a student would most likely jump on Google to start searching. How can we bring social and learning environment are in one pedagogical place? Youth and adults can use the crowd-sourcing approach to solving problems, contributing to project content, and developing the latest online tools. What this may mean is that we bring learning to youth from within Facebook or YouTube. Some examples of this "accidental" learning might be:

- Local youth activities to could complement online learning environments.
- Online experience will be coupled with an in-person club experience to create blended learning. (Blended learning is the most effective delivery method according to research.)
- Educators will have the opportunity to create exciting learner-centered online experiences for their local youth that enhance their experiences using various collaborative social media technologies.
- Curriculum can be re-envisioned to allow youth and volunteers to engage in the development process with youth development staff through wikis and Google Docs. Curriculum will be more learner-centered and allow the learner to control and guide their own learning process. Adults will serve in coach roles instead of facilitators.
- It will become more possible than ever before to engage youth in youth-adult partnerships as the curriculum teams can work asynchronously, which work with youth's schedules, like leadership or counselor training.
- Expressions of a youth's accomplishments within their projects will extend beyond local exhibits and poster designs.
- Mobile-learning opportunities will be abundant. Youth will have the opportunity to explore small tidbits of learning through quick mobile-learning offerings that develop them into lifelong learners.

The Challenge

The Internet has gained a significant place in children's daily lives. Social network sites, online games, video-sharing sites, and gadgets such as iPads and mobile phones are now fixtures of youth culture. Today's youth may be coming of age and struggling for autonomy and identity as did their predecessors, but they are doing so amid new worlds for communication, friendship, play and self-expression.

Significant discussion has centered on the potential risks associated with youth and online environments. Yes, there are risks associated with this communication strategy, but we must not let potential risk alone determine if it is a viable option for our program for the future. We know that simply offering programs for youth, there is a degree of risk that we must accept and manage. In 4-H we have been successful in managing our higher risk programs, such as camping, equine projects, shooting sports, overnight trips, etc. If we simply listed the potential risks involved in a pro/con format, we would not conduct many of these programs as the risk would outweigh the positive impact. However, we have taken steps to appropriately analyze and manage the risks associated with each of them. We know that camping with youth is one

of the biggest risks we have in 4-H youth development, yet we continue to camp because we feel that the benefits to youth are significant and we have managed the risks.

There is an opportunity for engaging today's youth through this new world of technologies and in the process, foster positive youth development. How might we use online and media technologies to not only promote, but transform, positive youth development?

The Opportunity

Today's young people continue to care passionately about their communities, the people they connect with, and their world. They create and communicate online in such a way that others see the benefit from their contributions and say "*yes.*"

As youth driven programs, we must engage in new strategies and methods by which we communicate with members, volunteers, families, and the community at large. Social networks and online learning are a growing and popular venue for much of our target audience and we must learn how to leverage those networks to enhance our programmatic efforts. The result is not only youth reaching their fullest potential but the potential for creating a positive youth development online environment, led by our youth.

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