Youth Work Matters: Online Professional Development for Youth Workers

Kari Robideau
University of Minnesota Extension, Center for Youth Development
robideau@umn.edu

Karyn Santl
University of Minnesota Extension, Center for Youth Development
santl001@umn.edu

Abstract

As the field of youth development becomes more recognized as a profession, it is imperative that youth workers are trained in foundational youth development research and practice. However, accessibility and cost can limit participation in face-to-face workshops and conferences. Online, cohort-based courses are a viable method to offer professional development for youth workers. This program article provides an overview of the online course, Youth Work Matters, *which has provided training to youth workers for over 10 years. The authors demonstrate that professional development for youth workers in an online setting will increase access to learning opportunities. This article also describes key components for an online, non-credit course for participants to gain knowledge, apply new concepts and participate in learning communities.*

Key words: *cohort-based learning, youth workers, professional development, positive youth development, non-credit adult learners*

Introduction

Youth Workers are individuals who work with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social, and educational development (Pittman, 2004). The field of Youth Development is becoming more recognized as a profession, which gives the field the dilemma of how to effectively train and support all youth workers, regardless of location (Brion-Meisels, Savitz-Romer & Vasudevan, 2016). Therefore, youth workers need access to professional development

grounded in theory and empirical research to ensure they effectively promote the positive development of youth in programs (Vance, 2012).

Youth workers participating in professional development are a foundational element of high-quality youth organizations (Borden, Craig, & Villarruel, 2004). When youth workers gain knowledge and skills rooted in youth development practice, they are better able to offer high-quality programming (Mahoney & Warner, 2014). However, when youth workers have limited exposure to theory and research, implementing evidence-based practices is difficult (Garst, Weston, Bowers, & Quinn, 2019).

When developing educational opportunities for youth workers, the course must be grounded in theory, practice, and formal opportunities to reflect on their experience (Denissen Cunnien, 2017). Positive youth development theory is foundational across the field of youth work and provides a set of competencies that guide effective practice (Brion-Meisels et al., 2016). Foundational topics youth workers should learn, practice and have skills in include the following:
- young people in their socio-environmental context;
- the field of youth work philosophy, current best practices and evaluation;
- intentional program design; and
- how to apply positive youth development practice (Baizerman & VeLure Roholt, 2016).

Online Professional Development

Opportunities for youth workers to increase their knowledge and skills are often delivered in person at workshops and conferences. However, the use of technology in education is influencing new learning preferences for all professionals due to the expanded growth of the internet and increase in accessibility (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Online professional development provides an ideal platform for limiting barriers to participation, developing knowledge and skills, and fostering a learning community (Baizerman & VeLure Roholt, 2016).

Conferences and workshops often disrupt personal and work commitments when travel is involved. Although learning in an online environment may be unfamiliar for some, the benefits of minimizing disruptions to schedules, incurring no travel costs, and gaining a virtual community to share best practices are quickly realized (Borden et al., 2004). Online courses provide the ability to learn at any time and place and with limited financial costs (Briegel, 2017).

Teaching practices grounded in adult learning theory provide opportunities for self-direction and integration of personal experience, while incorporating discussion and sharing with others (Knowles, 1980). As adults seek professional training online, the development and teaching methods of adult learning theory must be adapted to meet the online environment. This includes the learners' motivation to complete the course (Vu, Cao, Vu, & Cepero, 2014), giving learners control of their interactions with technology tools, and prompting reflection of their learning with the other participants (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). A cohort-based model provides opportunities for the participants to learn content while sharing their expertise and applying concepts with other participants (Garst et al., 2019).

This program article provides an overview of the online course, *Youth Work Matters*, which has provided training to youth workers for over 10 years. In 2009, for-credit courses in formal education were common; however, a non-credit online professional development course was unique and innovative, and scholarship in this area continues to be limited (Vu et al., 2014). This article demonstrates that professional development for youth workers in an online setting will increase learners' access to learning opportunities so they can gain knowledge, apply new concepts, and participate in online learning communities.

Program Overview

Course Description

The University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development provides research-based education, training, and professional development for youth workers. The *Youth Work Matters* curriculum has a long history of providing foundational research and theory on positive youth development practice.[1] The content focuses on three key areas of working with youth from pre-teen through the teenage years: (a) the field of youth development, (b) the young people, and (c) the youth worker role. Using the experiential learning model, the participants have opportunities to learn, think critically about their work, and apply concepts to youth programs (Kolb, 1984).

The *Youth Work Matters* face-to-face curriculum was transitioned into an online course in 2010, with the intention of increasing access to youth workers who need to build core competency

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[1] Youth Work Matters ©2000 is a revised and adapted version of *Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Youth Workers* by the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research and the Academy for Educational Development (AED). Activities from the *Moving Ahead Together* Curriculum are also incorporated.

knowledge in youth development. Since the first offering, nearly 300 youth workers from 19 states in the United States and 21 African countries have participated in the course. Several organizations, both in the United States and in Africa, are now requiring this course as part of their staff development plan. The reach and demand demonstrate the value of online professional development that builds learning communities of youth workers.

This online course is designed and delivered as a non-credit, cohort-based, professional development opportunity in which the participants learn, apply, and share the information together with the guidance of facilitators. Over a 4-week course, participants spend 4 to 6 hours per week engaging in both synchronous (live) webinar presentations and asynchronous (self-directed) pre-recorded interactive videos and discussion-board contributions. There is an expectation of completing the designated modules while interacting with the coinciding discussion boards and activities as outlined by the course schedule on a weekly basis.

The content takes an in-depth exploration into the foundational research and theories of positive youth development and provides an opportunity to apply the concepts. The course includes a series of five modules that cover the foundations of youth development work, including the following topics:

- foundational youth development research,
- connections youth have to families and communities,
- supporting youth needs through quality programs,
- intentional program design, and
- professionalism of youth work.

Components of Online Course

The online *Youth Work Matters* course uses engagement strategies that promote adult learning and meet the goal of increasing youth workers' knowledge in positive youth development theory and practices. Participant evaluations and current research have informed changes and adaptations through regular course review and edits. The course components that drive learner success include the following:

- **Facilitators as guides.** Course facilitators are introduced as "guides," not teachers. This communicates to the adult learners that their wealth of knowledge and experience will add value to the course (Knowles, 1980). Participants are encouraged to share their experiences with others and apply new information directly to their work. Course

facilitators also provide support to learners who are new to an online learning experience to eliminate technology-related barriers to participation.

- **Preparing the adult learner.** Non-credit adult learners need to commit to the time needed to fully participate and gain knowledge in this learning platform (Vu et al., 2014) Participants are advised to designate specific time in their schedule to devote to course work, just as they would if leaving the office for a face-to-face conference or workshop. The importance of this time commitment is communicated through promotional materials, the email confirming a learner's registration, and introductory notes at the start of the course. A sample calendar that demonstrates specific time blocked off on various days of the week is provided. The facilitators also guide a discussion during the first webinar to discuss the importance of setting aside time for coursework.

- **Interactive and collaborative learning tools.** Technology tools are utilized to engage the participants in convenient, active learning with the online global learning community (Baizerman & VeLure Roholt, 2016). During the first week, participants introduce themselves and set their own goals for learning in the course discussion board. After reading the posts of others, participants are encouraged to interact with comments and questions, which develops a sense of community. Then, as new content is introduced, opportunities for interaction continue in live, interactive, web-based presentations and additional content-based discussion boards.

- **Application to work.** Participants will be more likely to apply the foundational theories to their practice if given the opportunity to intentionally apply what they learn (Garst et al., 2019). Opportunities for participants to apply positive youth development practices are woven throughout the course. This includes reflection questions in pre-recorded presentations, sharing ideas and receiving feedback in discussion boards, and access to additional online tools and handouts that support programs.

Impact of Online Course

Facilitators utilize two evaluations for the course: an evaluation following each module and an overall evaluation at the completion of the course. Module evaluations assess the participant satisfaction with the design and the amount of time they spent learning activities. Participants complete the overall course evaluation as they reach the end of course material. Those

evaluations provide evidence that support online professional development for youth workers and are used to demonstrate impact in this article.

The data in Figure 1 demonstrate course impact in the areas of participants' increased knowledge, application to their work, and feeling a part of a learning community. Between 2010 and 2019 there were 291 youth workers who completed this course and there has been a 52.6% (n = 153) return rate in the overall course evaluation.

Figure 1: 2010-2019 Overall Course Evaluation (n = 153 respondents)
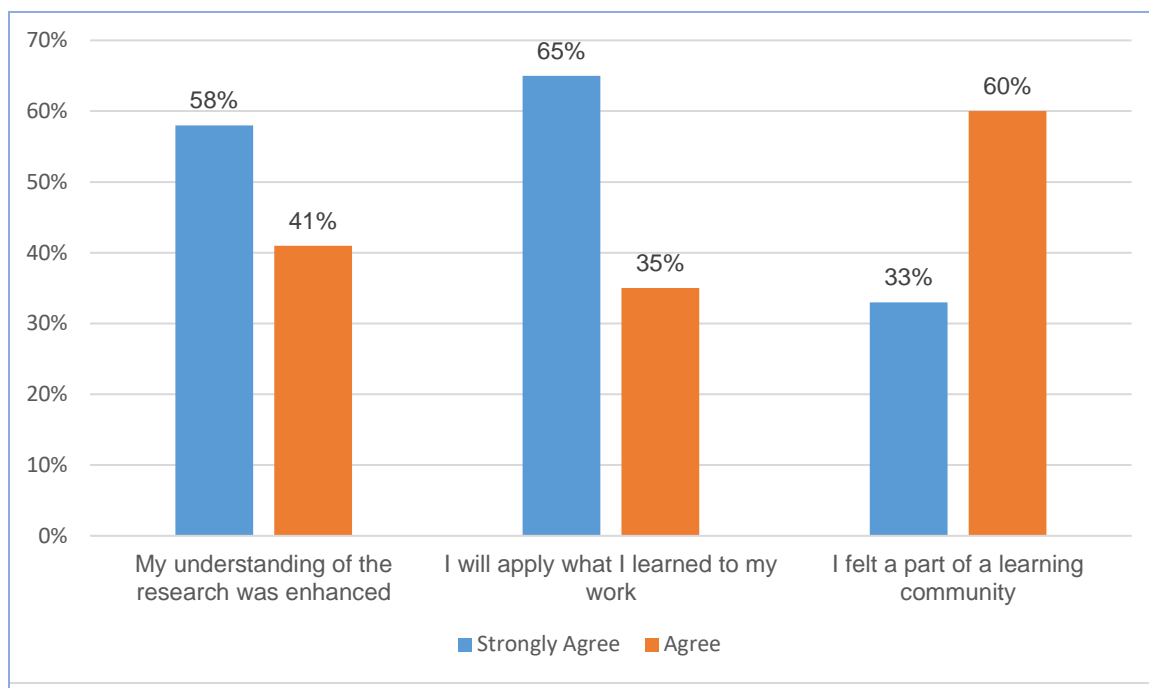
Increased Knowledge

Nearly all (99%) participants completing the evaluation agreed that their understanding of positive youth development research increased after participating in this course.

> *This online course has enabled me to look at the fundamentals of positive youth development and the critical role I have as a youth worker, especially in the way I think about and work with young people.* (2017 participant)

> *I have identified what it means to engage youth as partners in their development. Positive youth development versus focusing on the problem.*
> (2018 participant)

Application to Work

All respondents agreed that they will apply what they have learned to their work.

> *It has given me the theory, as well as how to apply it to my daily youth work.*
> (2018 participant)

> *Will definitely be more intentional in my youth work . . . I will be making changes to one program immediately thanks to the charting exercise.* (2019 participant)

Learning Community

Almost all respondents (93%) felt they were a part of a learning community.

> *Youth Work Matters has been an excellent course for me. It has enriched my understanding of youth work practice. The most valuable aspect of the training was knowledge exchanged through interactions in webinars and chats in the online platform.* (2019 participant)

> *It was fun to learn from other colleagues from diverse backgrounds.*
> (2019 participant)

Discussion

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that adult youth workers can learn positive youth development principles, reflect on their work, and apply concepts to their youth programs through online, professional development, non-credit courses. *Youth Work Matters* online course has been successful in engaging participants and increasing their knowledge for over 10 years.

The unique aspect of the online *Youth Work Matters* course is that it is a non-credit professional development opportunity for all youth workers. The authors suggest additional online courses for youth workers could replicate this format. Content covered in a module of *Youth Work*

Matters that would provide deeper learning in a topic-focused course include quality programs, program design, and youth–adult partnerships.

While the evaluation data on this course demonstrates that learning online is beneficial for youth workers, the authors suggest two challenges to consider for replication. First, adult learners and their supervisors often underestimate the time needed to engage in a professional development online course. Participants tend to become frustrated and fall behind when the allotted time to complete the course has not been set aside. Because learners are not leaving their place of work to attend a traditional face-to-face conference or workshop, completing online course activities poses a challenge when other work presents itself. To address this challenge, communicate clear time expectations, provide a sample calendar with suggested time blocked to fully engage in course content, and gain supervisor support.

The second consideration is facilitating comfort in an online educational setting. Some adult learners find the online course challenging and report a preference for face-to-face training in the final course evaluation. However, as trends move towards technology-focused education, online professional development is a platform youth workers need to feel comfortable with to stay current with trends and research while networking with others who work with youth (Baizerman & VeLure Roholt, 2016). In order to move youth workers towards higher comfort in online professional development, facilitators must offer technology support, provide space for synchronous interaction among participants, and give clear course directions.

Conclusion

Online, cohort-based courses are a viable method to offer professional development. Youth workers appreciate the convenience as well as the interactions with other professionals from a variety of organizations and locations. While *Youth Work Matters* focuses on positive youth development theory, other content may be offered online to expand professional development opportunities for youth workers.

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