TEACHING QUALITY STANDARDS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Youth Voice

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have noted that a fundamental characteristic to successful youth-adult relationships is the quality of interaction between youth and adults. A positive relationship that exists between youth and adults is the cornerstone to quality programming. Allowing youth voice within our programs allows the young person to develop 21st century skills needed for tomorrow’s workforce and leaders. According to Adam Fletcher from the Free Choice Project: Youth Voice is the perspectives, ideas, experiences, knowledge, and actions of young people. Youth voice doesn't mean talking loudly or shouting to be heard, and it is not about drowning out the voices of peers and adults. Youth voice is about considering the perspectives and ideas of young people, respecting what everyone has to say, taking risks, listening, sharing, and working together" (http://www.freekid.org/youthvoice.htm).

One of the key standards for quality service-learning is youth voice. Service-learning must provide youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing and evaluating service-learning experiences with adult guidance. Adult’s perception of youth voice and youth perception do not always correspond. Youth empowerment is about shared voice and power between youth and adults.

Getting Ready

Arrange room with tables and chairs. Mix youth and adult participants in groups of three or four. Gather materials. Prepare following:

1) Sticky notes and writing utensils on each table
2) 8 pieces of easel paper placed around room with the following headings (one heading per sheet): Manipulation, Decoration; Tokenism; Assigned But Informed; Consulted and
Opening Questions

Engaging young people in service-learning requires adults to become facilitators of learning. This environment of learning becomes a catalyst to empower young people to learn as they use their voice. Do young people and adults understand what it means to implement youth voice?

Let’s Do It!

Step 1 (2 minutes): Participants should be sitting around tables in mix of three to four youth and adults per table. Each table should have easel paper, markers, and sticky notes. Say, “Take out Figure A. This Ladder of Youth Voice was developed by Roger Hart and is utilized around the world to help people understand the different ways that youth voice can be involved. Many times when we say that young people have a voice in our project that might not be true because everyone understands youth voice as something different. This ladder helps us to understand youth voice and see where we fit along the spectrum. Follow along from the bottom rung of the ladder starting from “Manipulation” to the top rung of the ladder ending with “Youth Initiated Shared Decisions”. It is at the top rungs of the ladder that youth engagement begins to happen. Rung 1 through Rung 3 represent “non-participation” of youth voice. Rung 3 through Rung 8 represents “participation” of youth voice.

Step 2 (5 minutes): Have participants choose a recorder for their table. On the easel paper, have recorder make a large ladder (to be seen across room) as per “Figure A”. Mark each rung of ladder with corresponding words. While recorder is drawing the ladder, ask participants at each table to read aloud the definition of each rung. Participants should brainstorm one example for each rung of the ladder.

Step 3 (3 minutes): As you begin to have participants evaluate their own youth voice agenda, ask participants to spend about three minutes writing down on sticky notes any planning of service-learning (or community service) activities that they participated in the past year or two. Ask participants to use one sticky note per activity (no more than four or five.)

Step 4 (5 minutes): Now ask participants to look at Figure A. Ask participants to write on their sticky note the participation of youth voice that was reflected in their activity. Use the appropriate rung of Hart’s Ladder that youth voice corresponds with. Ask each participant to place their sticky note on the rung that most represents their experience with youth voice.

Step 5 (5 minutes): Ask each participant to look at the group easel paper with sticky notes. Ask a few people in small group to share what they wrote down and why.
Step 6: (2 minutes) Place easel papers around the room. Ask participants to look at each group’s easel paper on the walls. They should be able to see the placement of sticky notes from their seat.

**TALK IT OVER**

(10 minutes)

**Share**

Spend a moment looking at the easel papers on the wall. Where do you see the most sticky notes on the ladder?

Do you see any sticky notes that fell into the “non-participation” area?

Do you see sticky notes that are in the “participation” area?

Without judgment of anyone’s particular program, ask if any participant would want to share.

**Reflect**

How did you feel during this activity?

Was it hard to assess where you see yourself within Hart’s Ladder?

Why does a positive relationship between adults and young people make a difference when using youth voice?

What did you learn about yourself?

**Generalize**

What lessons can be learned from identifying youth voice?

Why is it important to understand how you understand youth voice before you engage youth in service-learning programming?

What advice would you give to someone who wants to learn about youth voice?

**Apply**

What did this activity mean to you for your own program or club setting?

Do you think that it is important to move any age program from adult-driven to youth-adult driven programs?

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**Learn More**

Research associated with the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) has been a driving force on quality non-formal programming experiences for youth. Quality programs strive to get to the top of the pyramid, to Engagement.
REFERENCES


AUTHOR

ROGER HART’S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION

**RUNG 8 - Youth initiated shared decisions with adults:** Youth-led activities, in which decision making is shared between youth and adults working as equal partners.

**RUNG 7 - Youth initiated and directed:** Youth-led activities with little input from adults.

**RUNG 6 - Adult initiated shared decisions with youth:** Adult-led activities, in which decision making is shared with youth.

**RUNG 5 - Consulted and informed:** Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions.

**RUNG 4 - Assigned, but informed:** Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, decision-making process, and have a role.

**RUNG 3 - Tokenism:** Adult-led activities, in which youth may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback.

**RUNG 2 - Decoration:** Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, but have no input in how they are planned.

**RUNG 1 - Manipulation:** Adult-led activities, in which youth do as directed without understanding of the purpose for the activities.