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## The Youth Writers: Developing Curriculum for Their Peers

Michelle Krehbiel

*University of Nebraska- Lincoln*, mkrehbiel2@unl.edu

Melissa S. Fenton

*University of Nebraska- Lincoln*, mfenton919@gmail.com

Patricia J. Fairchild

*University of Nebraska- Lincoln*, pfairchild2@unl.edu



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## The Youth Writers: Developing Curriculum for Their Peers

### Abstract

Curricula designed for youth are often lacking a young person's influence and perspective. In order to provide engaging, "fresh" materials for youth, 4-H professionals can recruit youth as curriculum writers. Youth are given an opportunity to form positive partnerships with adults, produce engaging and creative materials for their peers, and develop leadership skills. Positive youth development is promoted through youth-adult partnerships, involvement in decision making, and contributing to projects. A model for implementing a youth writers program is described in this article.

**Michelle Krehbiel**  
4-H Youth  
Development State  
Specialist  
[mkrehbiel2@unl.edu](mailto:mkrehbiel2@unl.edu)

**Melissa S. Fenton**  
Former 4-H  
Curriculum Assistant  
[mfenton2@unl.edu](mailto:mfenton2@unl.edu)

**Patricia J. Fairchild**  
4-H Curriculum  
Design and Youth  
Entrepreneur  
Specialist  
[pfairchild2@unl.edu](mailto:pfairchild2@unl.edu)

University of Nebraska  
—Lincoln  
Lincoln, Nebraska

### Introduction

Historically, 4-H curriculum was developed by Extension faculty, often lacking youth involvement and input. Nebraska 4-H Youth Development implemented a model allowing teens to actively contribute to the curriculum writing process, share creative ideas, and engage in youth-adult partnerships. According to Mitra (2004), youth engaged in positive youth development (PYD) through their involvement in curriculum writing and pedagogy. Additional research indicates that confidence and agency were fostered through youth's active participation in decision making and recognized voice (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). This research informed Nebraska 4-H Youth Development's youth writers program, engaging over 20 teens as writers since 2007. This article describes the program design, a case study for including youth in curriculum writing, and recommendations for replicating this program.

### Program Design

The youth writers were members of the Nebraska 4-H Youth Curriculum Committee (YCC). The YCC was initiated in 2007 to include a youth perspective in the writing of educational materials developed by Nebraska 4-H Youth Development (Garwood & Fairchild, 2010). The YCC is funded by curriculum sales and Extension administration support. The committee consists of 10 to 15 4-H enrolled youth between the ages of 14-19 from across the state. The 4-H Curriculum Specialist, YCC Coordinator, and YCC Assistant Coordinator encourage youth to voice their opinions and perspectives on 4-H curriculum. Youth are specifically asked to share their true opinions about 4-H

curriculum in a safe, comfortable space. The YCC is responsible for: developing curricula; evaluating graphic design and layout; and brainstorming new educational activities and improvements to existing activities. Youth also hold workshops to pilot activities from curricula in development with support from county extension faculty.

Youth are selected for the committee through an application process that emphasizes 4-H experience and achievement, community involvement, leadership abilities, and ideas for future directions in curricula. Youth identify the content areas they are the most interested in and are committed to that project for one year.

Biannual, in-person YCC retreats lasting 1 to 2 days provide opportunities for youth to focus on curriculum development. Youth are encouraged to attend each retreat, as future committee selection depends upon retreat attendance and committee involvement. At these in-person retreats, youth learn the curriculum development process, participate in teambuilding and leadership activities, and meet curriculum writers and content specialists. Throughout the year, youth complete committee projects and communicate through the use of online meeting software, social media, text messaging, conference calls, and email. In the case study explored in this article, youth presented their activity ideas at in-person retreats and emailed copies of their written activities to the YCC Coordinator.

## **Youth Writers: A Case Study**

As part of their committee responsibilities, YCC members reviewed a newly written curriculum series. In their review, youth noted an absence of engaging, hands-on activities. YCC members wrote new activities using a lesson planning template, project goals, and learning objectives for their selected curriculum series. Youth also implemented the experiential learning model and used existing knowledge of age-appropriate activities to support their writing. Each activity included an introduction, instructions, cited sources, and listed supplies or materials needed. The YCC Coordinator provided feedback and support to youth during the writing process following Anderson and Sandmann's (2009) recommendations.

The researchers recommended providing resources and training, but allowing for self-determination and autonomy to empower youth. Youth were empowered to use their creativity to develop activities, communicate their ideas, and engage with a supportive adult resulting in PYD and strong youth-adult partnerships. PYD theory supports youth-adult partnerships that enable youth to make contributions to their communities (Lerner et al., 2005). Camino (2000) described youth-adult partnerships as mutual teaching, learning, and action between youth and adults for a common purpose.

This partnership allowed YCC members to become advocates for their own writing and ideas, recommending that their activities be included in each manual. The activities were reviewed by the content specialist and integrated into the curriculum series. Youth were credited as writers of the activities, which served as a strong motivator to complete their writing. As a result of this involvement, the YCC Coordinator observed an increase in youth members' leadership skills and confidence, consistent with youth-adult partnership theory.

## Recommendations for Implementation

Building youth adult partnerships is essential for PYD (Zeldin, 2004). Based on the last 7 years of successfully using the Youth Curriculum Committee to improve the quality and relevance of curriculum products, here are recommendations for implementing youth in the curriculum writing process:

1. Select youth whose interests, experience, and expertise align with the curriculum subject during the application process.
2. Youth should select chapters, concepts, or manuals that interest them to focus their writing efforts. At an inaugural meeting, present youth with current projects and allow them to choose their focus.
3. Provide instruction to youth on childhood developmental stages, the experiential or inquiry-based learning models, and lesson planning templates to develop their writing and planning skills.
4. Adults should provide support and mentoring during the writing process. Allow youth to drive the creative writing process and complete a majority of the writing.
5. Give youth the opportunity to present their writing to their peers for feedback and engage them in conducting pilots of the curriculum.
6. Reward and recognize youth for their specific contributions to show that their time and effort is valuable. For example, provide a scholarship or stipend for their efforts.
7. Provide writing deadlines, but allow extra time for the work to take place in consideration of youth's hectic schedules.

## Conclusion

Engaging youth in the curriculum writing model is an innovative process to create positive youth adult partnerships. The YCC model provides youth new opportunities in 4-H, develops youth leadership and career skills, and keeps curriculum "fresh" and appealing to youth. Youth also produce engaging and creative materials for their peers, benefitting the entire 4-H organization. One youth commented that "the YCC gives you the opportunity to contribute to something important." Youth are given a voice in the future of 4-H, empowering them to be the leaders of tomorrow.

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