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Youth and Adults Learning Together: Setting Up for Success

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Abstract

Young people and adults learning together as peers is not common, despite research indicating that mutual learning would benefit both groups. A seemingly easy remedy would be to invite both groups to participate in professional conferences as equals. However, a case study using qualitative methods showed that there were differences between the two groups of learners that needed to be addressed. This article describes some of those differences and steps that were taken that made the next conference more beneficial for both groups.

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Introduction

There is a growing body of literature supporting the premise that youth-adult partnerships (Y/APs) help build strong communities and that adults' negative attitudes about youth are overcome when youth and adults work together. Critical to the success of Y/APs is mutuality in teaching and learning between youth and adults (Camino, 2000). Nonetheless, typical Y/APs focus on young people and adults working together on community-based projects. Less typical are instances of youth and adults learning together.

To better understand what is needed for adults and young people to successfully learn together, the Public Policy Institute (PPI) was studied in-depth. PPI is a 3-day intensive conference sponsored by University of California Extension at Davis and University of California Cooperative Extension. The 10-year-old conference uses National Issues Forum materials to teach the fundamentals of deliberative dialogue. It is held on the UC Davis campus and is typically attended by government employees, elected officials, community organizers, and staff of non-profit organizations. The intended outcomes of PPI are that participants learn the core concepts of civic engagement; acquire the tools to convene, moderate, and record public forums; and understand the value of deliberative dialogue.

Program and Evaluation Designs

In 1999, for the first time, young people and adults learned side-by-side. Fifteen inner-city, ethnically diverse young people, ages 16-22 participated. A second group of 10 young people, ages 14-18, from a semi-rural California town participated in the 2001 conference. At both conferences, faculty taught the young people exactly as they taught the adults, using lecture, discussion, and practice forums.

Qualitative methods were used to examine how adults and young people learned together. At the 1999 conference, extensive field notes were recorded, coded, and analyzed. Individual interviews were held with adults, young people, and faculty. As follow-up, the young people were observed conducting community forums and some were interviewed a second time.

What Was Learned

Learning style differences and varied adult-young people methods of interacting emerged. Some of these included the following:

- Young people consistently raised their hands and waited to be recognized before speaking. Adults did not. The young people's thoughts were often not expressed or recorded in the forums because adults spoke out freely while young people waited to be called upon.
- During discussions, the young people were more succinct than the adults, talking half the time that adults talked. They appeared to become bored with long discussions and usually stopped participating.
- Some forums and/or activities, such as improving government, required that participants have knowledge of a topic or life experiences the young people lacked. Their participation in these forums/activities was very limited.
- The adults did not know that the conference would be attended by young people. While most adults welcomed the participation of the young people, others were clearly not used to working with them and made comments, for example referring the young people as "kiddos," that the young people found offensive.

As the conference progressed, it also became apparent that the teaching methods used most extensively, i.e., lecture and discussion, did not address the learning styles of either the young people or the adults.

Response to Findings

Based on the findings from the 1999 case study, extensive changes were made to the 2000 and 2001 PPIs. These included the following:

- Experiential, small group activities replaced lectures and discussions of theoretical concepts.
- Forum topics were selected so that adults and young people had the requisite background to participate equally. Topics such as violent kids, public schools, and the Internet had high participation levels by both adults and young people.
- Faculty acted as "spotters" during large forums, pointing out young people with raised hands so the moderators could call upon them.
- Increased efforts were made to inform both adults and young people about the participation of one another and expectations of all participants.
- A young person from the 1999 conference served as faculty member in 2000 and 2001. She was assigned tasks equal to those of adult faculty.

Accomplishments

Despite some of the initial issues that arose when young people were integrated into a conference for professional adults, the young people have been very successful at staging forums in their communities. The 1999 contingent of young people wrote their own issue book on teen pregnancy and held forums throughout their community. The forums were attended by over 350 youth, and the information was used to shape community programs. The County Board of Supervisors now recognizes these young people as a source of reliable information and has asked them to stage forums and advise them on other topics related to youth.

The 2001 contingent of young people has held one practice forum for 40 youth. They have successfully framed a forum on hate crimes and intolerance that took place in the fall of 2001. They recognized that the forums would be richer with adult participation and are now making efforts to extend forums to the entire community.

Described in the literature as a Y/AP benefit is the high energy young people bring to the partnership. Most of the adults and faculty noted in evaluations that they appreciated the enthusiasm, energy, and youthful perspective the young people brought to activities, discussions, and practice forums. There were a few adults, however, who felt the conference should be limited to adult professionals and that the young people should be taught at "their own conference."

Conclusion

Adults and young people can successfully learn together. However, specific actions need to be taken to ensure that the experience is successful for both young people and adults. Actions include:

- Paying careful attention to the learning styles and needs of both groups;
- Selecting forum topics that are relevant to adults and young people;

- Letting each group know what is expected of them; and
- Engaging faculty who support mutual learning and will foster good working relationships between the two groups.

References

Camino, L. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4, 11-20.

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