



Using Action Research to Engage Youth in Improving OST Programming

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Youth are often portrayed as apathetic, uninvolved, and reluctant to participate in their communities (Baizerman, Hildreth, & Roholt, 2013). Ironically, however, communities offer few opportunities for youth to address issues that are compelling to their interests and that engage their commitment and action (Bradford & Cullen, 2012; Sabo-Flores, 2008). Youth are rarely invited into established decision-making structures or trained to participate in them (Baizerman et al., 2013).

In response to this gap, funders and policymakers have increasingly asked youth organizations to involve young people in decision-making processes (Williams, Ferguson, & Yohalem, 2013). Underlying this requirement is the belief that youth participation gives young people voice, builds social capital, and extends their citizenship

rights while simultaneously generating knowledge that organizations can use to improve services, programs, political structures, and environments (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Percy-Smith, 2007).

As an educator, I have seen the benefits of working with and alongside youth. I have attempted to build cultures of participation with young people and adults in a variety of settings—but I have not always been successful. So I started to wonder how youth participation can have an effect on young people's lives and on their communities.

A critical starting point is that youth organizations must establish policies, structures, and practices that invite and support youth to become involved, along with adults, in decision-making processes. A lack of such structures, or the presence of structures that are

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inflexible, can undermine viable and authentic participation. For example, young people can't attend meetings if organizations hold them during the school day or at other times when youth aren't typically available.

To build a culture of participation, out-of-school time (OST) providers, educators, planners, and advocacy groups need to partner with youth, engaging them in projects that are meaningful to them, to the adults who support them, and to their communities. One means of building such a culture is action-based research. Involving young people in action-based research builds their citizenship skills and their general social competence at school, at work, and in their communities (Paris & Winn, 2014; VeLure Roholt, Baizerman, & Hildreth, 2014).

The need to build a culture of participation was the impetus for an action-based research project I developed with youth ages 15–22 in the Conservation Corps in St. Paul, Minnesota. This work resulted in the creation of the Conservation Corps Youth Council.

Action-based research brings youth and adults together to work collaboratively, using analytical and critical thinking to solve problems (Bradford & Cullen, 2012). The action-based research in which Conservation Corps youth engaged was based on democratic principles and shared power. It drew on a type of informal education called civic youth work, which joins civic education to general democratic social work group practice (Baizerman et al., 2013). As a civic youth worker, my approach was to invite participation in everyday political and civic activities; the formation of the youth council was an example.

When the youth and I worked together to do action-based research, we produced data we could use to reflect on the work, on ourselves, and on our effectiveness. Action-based research facilitated program accountability and improvement. In keeping with the implicit commitment of action-based research to social and cultural justice through inquiry and writing (Paris & Winn, 2014), we used our findings to modify what we did and how we worked. Through this approach, youth generated solutions to common problems that affected our organization and the youths' communities. Such a process can be used for personal and professional development by youth and by adult program staff (Fusco, 2012). Joining the principles and practices of

civic youth work to principles of action-based research allows youth voice to be heard (VeLure Roholt et al., 2014).

After introducing the context of the Conservation Corps, this article describes two specific aspects of the action-based research approach: a participatory process and the co-production of necessary and useful knowledge. In the formation of the Conservation Corps Youth Council, action-based research based on these two principles created opportunities for youth and adults to establish authentic, respectful, and understanding relationships, which in turn provided a platform for crucial discussions and joint action. Lessons learned include the challenges of creating and sustaining a youth-adult partnership built on action-based research and recommendations for overcoming those challenges.

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Context

The Conservation Corps is a non-profit organization that provides hands-on environmental stewardship and service learning opportunities to youth and young adults while accomplishing energy conservation, natural resource management, and emergency response work. The organization has a strong history dating back

to the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s (Sommer, 2008). Youth participants in the Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa are 15–18-year-old paid employees who work on natural resource management projects in summer or afterschool programs. About 15 percent are deaf or hard of hearing. Conservation Corps youth programs in natural resource management operate throughout Minnesota and neighboring states.

Forming a Youth Council Using Action-Based Research

One organizational goal of the Conservation Corps was to build better collaboration with youth. One strategy toward that goal was to engage the Conservation Corps youth alumni in ongoing service-learning opportunities. To achieve those ends, in 2011 I helped to establish the Conservation Corps' first youth council.

The formation of the council started with a planning phase. First, I worked with three youth alumni and program staff to recruit current participants, program alumni, and AmeriCorps youth workers. Together we developed an

invitation and sent it by email, phone, and social media to more than 200 youth alumni and youth workers.

A total of nine youth alumni and three youth workers from various parts of Minnesota responded to this initial request and attended the first meeting in October 2011. In 2011 and 2012, the council consisted of these 12 active members. Two members were deaf, and three were English language learners. All members volunteered their time to serve on the council. Our meetings were conducted in person, by conference call, and online in order to involve those who could not attend the twice-monthly in-person meetings.

The youth council used a civic youth work approach and action-based research to determine its course, implement activities, and reflect on the work and on our effectiveness.

The Participatory Process

The Conservation Corps Youth Council is based on the principles of collaboration and cooperation. I worked together with council members, youth workers, and program staff to co-create pathways for decision making in the organization. We engaged Conservation Corps alumni in the everyday work of the council: They wrote newsletters, press releases, and articles; produced video, website, and social media content; conducted evaluation activities; engaged in planning and problem solving; and participated in environmental restoration projects to support the mission and values of the Conservation Corps.

In designing action-based research projects with the Conservation Corps Youth Council, our base value was youth voice. Therefore we invited youth council members to participate in all stages of research, planning, and decision making. We found that when research and evaluation were done this way, a basic citizen ethos with corresponding skills became a part of informed civic action. We created a council whose mission was to build better collaboration with youth alumni in ongoing service-learning opportunities. This process is especially important to imagine, design, and implement with young people because it can contribute not only to the organization's goals but also to young people's citizen skills and their general social competence. Inquiry and knowledge development became citizenship skills that formed the framework for our civic youth work.

An example of youth voice was the way we co-created the guidelines of the Conservation Corps Youth Council

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in three meetings. The group used these guidelines to promote democratic approaches to choosing projects, setting agendas, achieving group consensus, building and sustaining the council, planning strategies, and communicating with the Conservation Corps about what the group was doing. Though creation of guidelines with youth is not a new concept in OST (Jeffs & Smith, 2010), the civic youth work approach to co-creating guidelines looks to identify the fundamental skills, knowledge, and experiences needed by youth and adults working together to play meaningful and powerful roles in planning, design, and implementation (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004). The guidelines, constructed through a participatory process, focused on the co-production of necessary and useful knowledge.

Another example is when council members planned and implemented a trash cleanup in 2013 to benefit the Mississippi River watershed in St. Paul. Council members invited youth program alumni, friends, and family of the Conservation Corps to participate. Prior to the cleanup, council members surveyed neighborhoods to identify high-need areas near the watershed. During the event, council members took photographs of the areas before and after they were cleaned up. Afterward, a council member wrote a news article that was featured on the Conservation Corps website.

Co-Production of Knowledge

A common practice in OST is to have youth fill out questionnaires or surveys; adults then use the results to drive program development. Typically, youth are not invited to contribute once they have filled out the survey. They are not invited to be strategic partners with the adults, nor to engage in critical analysis of relevant issues.

In a more participatory model, youth and adults work together to produce knowledge, identify outcomes, design programs, and evaluate effectiveness. The Conservation Corps Youth Council used action-based research to involve youth and adults together in identifying issues. This approach values empowerment and the co-production of knowledge by youth and adults. Youth council members and Conservation Corps program staff worked together in intergenerational relationships as participant-researchers on topics of mutual concern.

For example, youth council members created an interview protocol to contribute to the evaluation of the Conservation Corps youth program. Council members interviewed program participants, youth workers, staff members, and members of the board of directors to explore their perceptions and experiences of the organization's youth programming. The findings of these interviews gave council members data on what various groups of stakeholders thought about specific programs and how these programs helped the Conservation Corps achieve its goals and objectives, in a process like that outlined by Sabo-Flores (2008). The data helped us evaluate each program: Did it work? For whom? With what results?

Typically the council worked together to identify some goals we hoped youth would achieve. Next, we matched those goals with youth quotes from interviews. When adults and youth worked together to link comments to goals, we identified best practices, issues or problems, and possible future goals.

Once data collection and analysis were completed, council members prepared the data for presentation to the Conservation Corps staff and board. These interviews and data presentations increased reflective dialogue among the youth, staff, and board of the Conservation Corps. Council members were invited to present their findings at Conservation Corp staff meetings, where youth workers listened and then asked questions to better understand the findings. Youth council members also published articles and videos about their findings on the Conservation Corps official website.

Council members talked about the value of action-based research projects. One council member explained:

By looking at the data together, we were able to see how the different groups, such as Conservation Corps youth participants, the board of directors, and youth workers, responded differently to our questions. The data showed us a difference in what people think the youth participants get out of the program, which is different from [the youths'] lived experience of the programs. Through our research and presenting the data, we were able to show that further training was needed.

Benefits and Challenges of Action-Based Research

The benefits of using action-based research to engage youth in program improvement are evident in what youth council members have gotten out of their use of the interview proto-

col they designed. As a result of this work, council members say they have improved their social competence at school, at work, in their communities, and at home. For example, one deaf council member participated in conducting the interviews with an American Sign Language interpreter and produced a video summarizing the data collected. Before making this video, this council member had no interviewing or video editing experience. The skills she acquired inspired her to pursue higher education in digital communications and media. A second council member entered the University of Minnesota's youth studies program to prepare for a youth work career. Before her council experience, she had not thought of youth work as a potential career and was not aware of the youth studies program.

The Conservation Corps Youth Council pushed beyond individual action-based research projects to begin to co-create a culture of participation. In the past, program staff made decisions about programming. The youth council's success in planning research, evaluating programs, and writing up its findings provided an opportunity to work together that wasn't present before.

To support youth involvement in the Conservation Corps Youth Council meetings, facilitators learned that they needed to work with program staff and council members before, during, and after meetings, using action-based research practices and an evaluation orientation. For example, before the meetings, each group needed to be prompted with questions to discuss at the meeting. During the meetings, facilitators helped the groups focus on the interview protocol and goals developed by council members. This work was the impetus for additional meetings to support future training for youth workers, the council, and the organization. The evaluative nature of this research increased collaboration between staff and youth council members.

One of the hardest parts of facilitating action-based research to engage youth in program improvement is the development of adults. I include myself in this assessment. We have a lot to learn: often-difficult lessons on how to be a good adult partner and facilitator when collaborating with young people to effect systematic changes in the organizations and institutions that affect our lives. The first step in this adult development process is explaining clearly to all stakeholders the reasons that youth participation in action-based research is valuable to the program. In addition, organizations that are serious about youth participation need to foster staff development that includes youth involvement and can help to support a council's

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growth. One strategy is to invite staff to participate regularly in youth-driven meetings, activities, and projects in all stages of development. Facilitators of a youth council should also be kept informed about opportunities to partner on projects that can benefit both the youth council and the organization.

In order to accomplish action-based research, youth are likely to need to develop their capacities to make decisions in many areas, including work interests and use of discretionary time (Konopka, 1973). They will need practical learning opportunities. The job of the facilitator is to issue continual invitations to examine ideas and projects the group is interested in pursuing. Rather than creating training sessions for youth members in advance, the facilitator must work with the group to decide if training is needed to ensure the success of the project. We learned that we cannot repeat past successes with past techniques—which means that adults can't organize educational events in advance. We can't organize the process until we are in it and all group members have brought their unique contributions (Dennison, 1999). Certainly we can prepare and plan in advance, but the meetings need to allow flexibility and spontaneity so collaboration between youth and adults can be fruitful.

The Conservation Corps Youth Council continues its work of planning specific projects and evaluating their effectiveness. It continues to engage Conservation Corps alumni in its everyday work. All this is done in processes that support the mission and values of the Conservation Corps and of civic youth work as described by VeLure Roholt and colleagues (2014). The importance of this work is highlighted by the fact that facilitation of the youth council has been written into a staff position description.

Action-based research has proven to be effective in facilitating inquiry, knowledge building, and use of the resulting data. When implemented by a civic youth worker in concert with young people, action-based research can provide data for program development and evaluation while, at the same time, teaching young people citizenship skills: thinking, analyzing, organizing, and acting on issues of importance and interest to them.

As the challenges facing our communities become more global and complex, we need to encourage and motivate young people to exercise real citizenship (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004). Action-based research can be a platform for democracy in action, engaging youth and adults in discussions that lead to collaborative work on common issues in order to improve their lives and the life of their communities. Such engagement is an important antidote to the image of youth as apathetic. Young people are allies in crucial discussions and joint action on problems that affect our communities. When we treat young people as part of the solution, we encourage positive behavior on the part of both youth and adults.

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