YOUTH VOICES: ENGAGING YOUTH IN HEALTH PROMOTION USING MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

ABSTRACT

Although youth participation is recognized as beneficial for youth and their communities alike, a major challenge is how to ensure that this participation is authentic and relevant. In 2000, the Youth Voices initiative was establish by the TeenNet Research Program, University of Toronto, to develop models and processes for engaging youth in health promotion in their communities. Since it inception, over 100 youth and 11 community organizations in urban, small town and rural locations have participated in 13 Youth Voices groups. Currently, the work is being applied internationally in a global health initiative called Global Youth Voices. This article outlines our Youth Voices six phase EIPARS model and processes used to engage youth.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure
It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us
And we ask ourselves 'Who am I to be brilliant, talented, fabulous, gorgeous?'
And actually who are you not to be…"

Marianna Williamson, *A Return to Love*

Tiffany, 19 years, records herself singing Marianna Williamson's words. Quickly, her hand moves to the computer; she adjusts the levels of the base beat. This is her song. She created the melody, she created the beat, and the song is ready to record.

Between May and April 2004, over 700 young people, adults, service providers, service users and policy makers heard Tiffany and her youth group Peace Power rap, sing and converse about the challenges of being street-involved and strategies for making their community stronger. Tiffany and her group developed and performed their songs as part of an innovative initiative called *Youth Voices*. Based in the Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Toronto, *Youth Voices* is a project of the TeenNet research program (www.TeenNetProject.org) led by Dr. Harvey Skinner.[1] *Youth Voices* was established to develop processes and models for engaging youth in their communities. This article outlines *Youth Voices*' six phase EIPARS (Engage, Identify, Plan, Research/Reflect/Reward, Sustain) model and process used to engage youth, and examples are given to demonstrate the impact of the initiative locally and internationally.

Beginnings

The *Youth Voices* project evolved from TeenNet's research on using both low level (e.g. photography) and high level (e.g. Internet) technology to engage youth in health promotion.[2] An effective approach for engaging youth in issue identification is Photovoice. Developed by Wang et al,[3] Photovoice is a participatory approach where community members use photographs to communicate issues of concern to the broader community and policy makers. In 2000, TeenNet conducted an initial test of the Photovoice approach with 21 youth at two community health centers in Toronto. From these beginnings, TeenNet identified the potential to expand the Photovoice component to include a range of media technology.

At the same time, TeenNet identified the need to study and disseminate approaches for effective youth engagement. It has been recognized that to build healthy communities the involvement of youth in both identifying community issues and finding solutions to community concerns is vital.[4] The challenge is how to ensure youth involvement that is authentic and sustainable. Through its work with youth and youth-serving agencies, the *Youth Voices* initiative has created a method called EIPARS that facilitates youth-driven processes and ownership using innovative multimedia approaches. This work is grounded in the literature and practice of Participatory Action Research (PAR),[5] and inspired by youth media.[6]

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PAR has a long tradition of research that values the experience of individuals to determine their own goals, objectives and indicators of success. PAR has proven to be an effective catalyst for social change because of its ability to achieve results that are more relevant, engaging, accessible and culturally acceptable to the participating community. *Youth Voices* EIPARS is a modified PAR process where participants identify the strengths and weaknesses of their community and take action.

Central to the *Youth Voices* EIPARS process is media technology. *Youth Voices* recognizes the tremendous importance of and opportunities gained from using technology with youth. For an entire generation technology has been a part of the world in which they live. Using cell phones, text messaging, e-mails and on-line chats, technology has become essential to the way youth connect and communicate. For many youth, media technology is also their chosen method of self-expression, be it personal websites and blogs or using design programs to publish their own 'zines. According to the manager of a youth centre: "Youth [are] really attracted to technology, and music is the one constant in their lives." Examples of the technologies used by *Youth Voices* participants include the Internet, photography, video, and software for music production, desktop publishing, and web authoring.

Youth Voices Six-Phase EIPARS Model

EIPARS outlines the phases by which each *Youth Voices* group progresses: Engage, Identify, Plan, Research/Reflect/Reward, Sustain. With the support of a facilitator, media technologies are used to **E**ngage youth in the project, and allow them to express themselves through creative approaches such as art, video, music and photography. Through this work, youth **I**dentify issues of importance to them. The group then creates a **P**lan for addressing one or more of the issues they have identified, and mobilizes to **A**ct. Central to this process is a need to continually **R**eflect and do **R**esearch on how the project is doing, **R**eward the participants and finds ways to **S**ustain the group's work.

Figure 1 depicts the EIPARS process as a step-by-step cycle. Often there can be a lot of movement back and forth between stages as the group matures, becomes comfortable

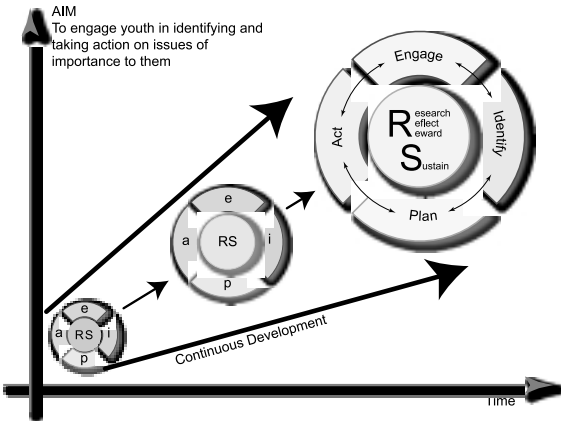

Figure 1. Illustration of how the six-phase EIPARS model can be linked in successive rapid cycle change initiatives for continuous improvement.

with one other, and gains experience in identifying and discussing issues and potential actions. Over the life of any one group, the youth may complete multiple cycles of the EIPARS process. And as Figure I shows, the impact of each successive cycle deepens as the youths' skills and confidence grow and develop as they learn from each other and the group as a whole.

Youth Voices in Action

Each *Youth Voices* project was completed by 5-10 youth (average age 12-15 years). Action projects (www.globalyouthvoices.org/youth_action.html) have included: a slide-show presentation on violence and "toughness"; an article series with Young People's Press and a 'zine on stereotypes towards street-involved youth; a Popular Theatre play on tobacco and decision making; a workshop and website about globalization and the tobacco industry (www.smokefreeworld.org); and a website for young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender newcomers to Canada (www.RocktheBoat.ca). One *Youth Voices* participant captured the impact of our approach to youth engagement:

> *"I really liked it when we took the pictures & put in our own words beside the pictures and went through them all and got to discuss them. It really opened up big discussions. It kind of made us all realize that everyone had their own opinions, but yet, we were still all on the same track…"*

The power of *Youth Voices* is exemplified in two projects conducted in partnership with Beat the Street. Beat the Street is a learning centre in downtown Toronto for youth who are at-risk, street involved or homeless. The centre has a long history of using creative arts to engage and work with youth. In the first project, participating youth were given cameras to document the strengths and concerns of their community. The group also decided to widen their perspective by surveying non-youth on perceptions of street-involved young people. They targeted pedestrians in downtown Toronto. The *Youth Voices* participants were surprised at the responses they received. For example, they found many community members thought "education and training" or "employment" to be the main street-youth issues. The youth disagreed, feeling that "affordable housing" is the most pressing issue because it is difficult to stay in school or get a job without a place to live. The youth were also surprised at many of the negative words respondents associated with street youth such as "drugs," "petty crime" and "dirty".

Primarily because of this feedback, the youth decided to focus on challenging the negative stereotypes towards street youth by telling their stories. In particular, they focused on the impact of discrimination, housing, and society's views of street youth. Their photography and written pieces were published, on-line, by Young People's Press and combined into a 'zine for distribution. The 'zine is posted on *Youth Voices*' website (www.globalyouthvoices.org), and distributed to places where youth hang out and to youth serving agencies in Ontario.

In the second year of the *Youth Voices* collaboration with Beat the Street, a new group of young people participated

in a dynamic and challenging project. The group, named Peace Power, used music production software to create songs and music about topics they identified as important to them. The participants quickly identified they wanted to do "outreach" to other street involved youth and adults who work with them, as their main action. Outreach consisted of creating a multimedia performance of their ideas, opinions and inspirations. The group viewed their performances as not only having their voices heard but also as a learning exchange for them. Using forum theatre techniques[7] they posed questions to their audiences around the themes of personal choice, community and self respect, while communicating a three-fold positive message of *Chase your dreams, Develop yourself, and Widen your perspective.* The Peace Power group completed 15 performances, presenting to over 700 youth and adults in a variety of settings, culminating in the 6th Blue Metropolis Montreal International Literary Festival in April 2004.

What We've Found

Research was conducted throughout each *Youth Voices* project. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were used to evaluate the EIPARS process, and the role and effectiveness of technology in promoting youth engagement and ownership and how it contributes to social action and community health promotion. Audience feedback forms were also created to measure the impact of several of the youth action projects.

The EIPARS process has shown to be a very powerful tool in engaging and working with youth. In particular, on an individual and group level, the EIPARS process supported participants in exploring who they are and who they want to be, and in believing that their thoughts and opinions matter. One participant stated this succinctly: "*Kids need to hear what others kids have been through.*"

Our analyses indicate that the EIPARS process facilitates feelings of authentic participation in the youth group and a sense of ownership of its projects. The youth developed new understandings about their place and potential power within their communities. They had the desire to educate and assist others to understand their issues, not just for their personal gain or the strength of the group, but also for the gain of their communities. The impact on personal growth and confidence from presenting a project to an audience is exemplified by the feedback from one youth:

> "*… feeling like make a difference going out there and talking to people. Makes me feel good because something people listen, take in what I'm saying. Trying to make a difference makes me feel good.*"

The use of media technology was found to stimulate and motivate youth to take part in the *Youth Voices* process. In particular, the youth identified the type of technology being used was a primary draw for them joining the project. The use of technology also facilitated a sense of ownership. Once the youth learned the technology, they had a sense of control over how it would be used in the projects. For the Peace Power group this meant controlling how their music would be produced (created, mixed, and recorded).

The participating youth also felt the media technology they used was an effective means for self-expression and communication with their identified audiences. For the Peace Power group, using the medium of music was very important to them for this meant that they could communicate their thoughts and feelings in a way that they felt would be heard. The music and technology also allowed them to disseminate in spaces where street-involved *Youth Voices* are not often heard. The participants stated that using media technology also helped them build their skills using computers and computer software.

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Challenges

Through the experience of the different projects, TeenNet has captured a number of key learnings about the challenges of linking youth engagement and action projects with media technology:

a) Context & transparency: Youth engagement happens within a context of funder and organizational requirements, the skills and interest of the participating youth and the skills and abilities of the group facilitators. Each of these factors impacts on the ability of an organization and the participating youth and adults to create a project that is completely youth driven. Critical to ensuring authentic youth participation within these contexts is a commitment to open and transparent dialogue.

b) Sustainability: An important goal of many youth engagement projects is for the youth participation and projects to be sustainable. However, groups will follow their own natural course. For some projects, the youth will continue to participate and grow within the process for extended periods of time. TeenNet has run one youth group for three years with the same 7 youth. Other youth groups, like Peace Power, run their course in a matter of months. We suggest reframing sustainability to also focus on the ability of agencies to create and maintain authentic opportunities for youth.

c) Media Technology: There is inherent in media technology projects a tension between what is affordable and what is available. Being able to create a balance often depends on knowing a particular technology: knowing

how to select the best options and develop creative approaches with limited budgets. This requirement would seem to require *Youth Voices*' facilitators that can both work with youth and the chosen media technology. In fact, most of youth stated that having a supportive facilitator was most important, as long the facilitator was open to learning from the youth and/or getting outside assistance regarding the technology.

Learnings from the 13 *Youth Voices* projects have been used by TeenNet to develop a Youth Voices Guide. The Guide is targeted at agencies and groups that want to develop strong youth involvement in community action projects and who want to work more effectively with technology. It is meant to be a stand-alone resource that will be both helpful and open enough to be tailored to an organization's specific context and resources. In addition, to further support agencies in youth involvement, TeenNet has developed an Organizational Change Guide for staff, volunteers and Board Members of Youth Centres who want to make structural changes to better support youth initiated projects.[8] Both guides will be available on the TeenNet website:

www.TeenNetProject.org.

Going Global: The Future of Youth Voices

Recently, TeenNet has begun developing international partnerships to explore use of the *Youth Voices* EIPARS model in a global context termed *Global Youth Voices.* One such project in the Middle East is engaging Bedouin youth in community health promotion, conducted in collaboration with the Canada International Scientific Exchange Program, *CEISPO* (www.cisepo.ca).

In March-May 2004, 20 grade nine Bedouin youth (half boys, half girls) were part of *Youth Voices* groups in two communities: 1) Tuba, northern Israel 2) Segev Shalom in the Negev, southern Israel. These youth completed the Engage and Identify phases of the EIPARS process, where youth in each setting identified personal and community health issues. Their photo-essays were then uploaded to the *Youth Voices* website: http://www.globalyouthvoices.org/middle-east/greetings-en.html.

A key finding was that similar issues were identified in each community, such as: smoking, violence, sports, and animal abuse. In addition, unique issues were identified for each community: suicide at Tuba and industrial pollution at Segev Shalom. Youth from each community were then brought to Tel Aviv University for a joint session discussing issues and action steps. For example, the youth at Segev Shalom want to carry out a smoking prevention/education program at their high school in the fall of 2004. Building on this initial work, future cross-border studies will be carried out with Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian youth.

It is clear, wherever they are in the world, youth embrace opportunities to be authentically involved in the decisions that affect them and their communities. TeenNet believes the work of *Youth Voices* will stimulate participatory community development, and in particular, enable agencies to foster more active involvement of youth. The rewards for youth at a personal level are clearly expressed by one TeenNet youth participant:

"It makes me as a teen feel good that people care about what teens think and what they have to say. Most of the time we are overlooked. Not many teens get the chance to actually be heard… thank you."

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