

Curriculum Design in a Youth Program

The Building Project

By Sara Hill, © 1998

While many community-based organizations serving youth programs have leadership as a program goal, there are few guideposts that describe how this can be accomplished. In addition, while after school programs are free to develop innovative and non-traditional curriculum, there are few examples describing this process. The following article illustrates how a project-based curriculum for an after school program came into being. In this curriculum, young people engaged in activities that were personally meaningful to them. In addition, the curriculum was designed to enhance young people's leadership capacities by participating in a project which had an immediate and concrete impact on their agency and local community.

Background of the project

I had been observing an after school program as part of a graduate course in education, and had been a tutor there for eight months. At one point, Fen, the program director, asked if I would like to help him with the intensive all-day, five-day-a-week summer program. He told me that in the past he'd attempted such incentives as buying pizza for children who'd read the most books by the end of the summer, but he was dissatisfied. He wanted something for the older kids to give them an extra boost academically to prepare them for the following school year. I agreed, but asked that he be involved in the planning of the project and co-teach it with me. In addition, I asked that two of his junior staff be included so that they could have a direct experience to carry over into their work with young people in the Fall.

Coming up with a topic

I had learned in earlier discussions with Fen that he had been fund-raising for a new building, as the Center had out-grown its space and had very few or inadequate facilities for young people. Fen had raised several hundred thousand dollars in a capital campaign, and had bought a plot of land across the street from the mayor of the city for \$1.00. He was in the final stages of fund-raising, was talking to an architect, and had blueprints and a floor plan. In addition, the central office of his organization currently had a proposal submitted to a private foundation that was deliberating whether or not to fund the program. This piece of funding would send them over the top -- if they got the funding they could build the new youth center.

I thought the process of fund-raising for the acquisition of land and a new building would be a good topic for the summer curriculum. When I shared my idea with Fen he enthusiastically agreed. We called it "The Building Project." I began planning the curriculum by having long, in-depth conversations with Fen about his program. He told me that while the Center had begun with a recreational focus, it had shifted toward addressing educational needs, and they were struggling to make this transition. In addition, Fen was conscious of the need for the program to "be different than school," while still engaging youth in educational endeavors. He saw the need to draw from the young people as resources and to provide them with experiences which would place them in positions of responsibility in order to tackle a project with real consequences and benefits. Finally, Fen saw the involvement of young people as a key piece in his fund-

raising strategy. He believed that they could not only inform his own ideas and help with his planning, but could 'sell' the program to funders better than any one.

All of the youth at the Center were quite conscious of and concerned with being able to work and earn a living. This, more than the academic benefit, drove their recruitment in the project and fired their interest and enthusiasm. When I talked about this with Fen, he told me that this group of young people recognized that the road from high school to college and beyond was tenuous, and, given the local H.S. graduation rate and draw of the lucrative drug trade, quite difficult to achieve. However, this knowledge did not lower our expectations, in fact, it was our belief that the project could successfully address participant's career goals and at the same time hone their abilities for academic achievement.

Planning lessons and activities

Fen and I began meeting on a regular basis to plan the curriculum. We decided that rather than construct lessons that mimicked or were simulations of what Fen had accomplished so far, participants were to engage in activities that would have real application. Our intention was that the participants in the "Building Project" would follow most of Fen's steps, with the added dimension of being able, if at all possible, to modify the current plans if their suggestions made sense. A key feature of our project was that participants would, at the end, demonstrate their progress by writing a proposal that they would then present to a real audience of funders. Skills such as reading, writing, oral presentations and math, rather than being taught separately, would to be subsumed by or folded in to all of the activities.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Articulating a vision

Most of the project activities, as mentioned above, matched the actual steps Fen had taken to get funding for the new Center. This began with articulating a vision. In the first project session with students, Fen described his vision of an all-inclusive Center which would provide opportunities not only for the youth of the community, but for the larger community as well. After he shared this, we had the members of the group (eight mixed-gender participants ranging in age from 14 to 20) each write their own visions of the Center. We had them go into detail, explicating what the problems of the current Center were, and the facilities and programs they envisioned would make the new Center better. Participants read their pieces aloud to the group and received comments and feedback. Afterward, I wrote long letters to each participant suggesting revisions to be incorporated into a final version.

Researching the topic & making a case

In the next session, Fen told the group how when he was first trying to interest the central office, city officials and funders, he had needed to make a good case. He explained he did so by coming up with data and statistics from his monthly program reports. In addition, he talked about going to the housing authority and city government to gather information about the needs of youth in the community. We talked about other ways to collect information, and I described two in detail: interviews and surveys. Two groups were then formed. One designed an open-ended interview and in the intervening week interviewed youth, parents, and community members such as the local barber and police. The other group designed a questionnaire that was distributed to everyone at the Center. When it was collected, the participants analyzed the data, and converted aggregate numbers into

percentages. We had each group write up their analysis into a narrative and present it to the group.

Proposal writing

We then wrote a group proposal. I connected a computer to an overhead projector and typed as the group discussed what should be included. Participants were able to see on screen how their suggestions, comments, and revisions were worked into cohesive text. Through this experience participants saw how to incorporate a variety of ideas and voices into one document. We had participants go back to their initial vision statements and to the data they had collected and draw upon this information as the basis for the proposal. Again, we mentioned how this document would be read by a real audience, the central administrative office and outside funders, and that they needed to make their case as strong and articulate as possible.

Measuring & math

We asked participants to project ahead and imagine that they had received funding and had acquired land. We did this because the presentations to the central office and funders were scheduled further in the summer, and we wanted to continue with project activities. Fen had already acquired a piece of land across the street, and this land was to be where the new Center was to be built. Fen borrowed a tape measure from a general contractor, and participants went outside to measure the land. Once they had done so and were back on site, Fen had them work in groups to figure out the area dimensions. They then were asked to figure the area based on a two-story structure.

Drawing floor plans & collaborative problem solving

Next, we had participants work together in groups and draw a floor plan for the building. To provide a model, Fen showed them one he had received from the architect, but mentioned it was outdated so that they would feel free to design their own. We told them that they should include all of the features they had written about in their vision pieces, but scaled to fit the dimensions they had just measured. It was wonderful to observe the extent of the negotiations. Participants at times hotly disputed the crucial aspects of the Center, what and where rooms should be, what the dimensions should be, etc. We asked the groups to share their floor plans with each other and to discuss the relative merits. Fen talked about how, for the most part, participants had included everything he had originally put in the design – with one additional feature &nd ash; a teen room or lounge. This was a suggestion that Fen intended to take seriously, and he and participants talked about how older youth left the Center because there was no special place teens could call their own. They discussed how having a teen lounge in addition to teen-specific programs might be one way address what they saw as critical neighborhood issues: youth crime, violence and teen pregnancy. The ideas that emerged from this discussion were then incorporated into the group proposal.

Oral presentations

We had participants practice making presentations to an imaginary funder in preparation for the actual presentations. We initially discussed all of the relevant information – culled from their research, individual vision statements and group proposal. All participants were able to make an initial presentation to the rest of the group, who assumed the roles of funders and pitched key and pithy questions regarding the presenter's reasons for requesting funds. The group assessed each presenter, but presenters first assessed their own performance and then had a second chance to perform, incorporating the feedback.

Students, with Fen making the final decision, selected two out of the group to make the formal presentations. The two went to the administrative office to present to the Executive and Associate Directors of the agency. This was a good opportunity for the young people to address an audience who was not their peers, and to be in a new environment. The directors were clearly impressed by the work of the young people. They asked them difficult questions, but also coached them on what to expect when they presented to the funders. As a final development, the directors informed us that the funders were making a site visit to the program in the near future, and that there would be time scheduled for youth to make their presentations at that point.

Assessment

We asked participants to write in response to the question, "What have you learned in the building project and how and in what ways have you changed?" After writing, participants shared their assessments with the group. All of them wrote that they had learned a great deal, ranging from the processes involved in fund-raising, planning, design, measurement, and writing. Fen and I shared our perceptions as teachers: How all of the students had very quickly assumed responsibility, had been diligent and serious, had shown up regularly, and had worked together beautifully. Fen later told me that he was delighted with the improvement of many of the participants' writing and public speaking abilities and had noticed participants mature as a result of working on the project.

Future applications & extensions

Fen was sold on this program-based approach to curriculum and youth leadership. After the last session he said he wanted to think through other ways to incorporate it into his program, and we discussed how it might be applied throughout the school year. Given his experience with the Building Project, it was an easy task for Fen to think up extensions and innovations. For example, youth at the Center often go on field trips to youth conferences and sports and recreation events. Fen's idea was that the youth should be in charge of all of the planning and travel arrangements. We inventoried the skills this would involve, including reading brochures, maps, writing travel directions, filling out forms, designing posters, writing memos to youth and parents, calling travel agencies and bus companies, and collecting money and paying bills. In addition, participants would have to deal with a wide variety of people, an invaluable, and necessary, social skill.