



# Engaging Youth



2014

# Engaging Youth (Summary Notes)

With a successful marketing plan in place, the next step to getting youth into our program is equally as important. If youth approach our program but feel intimidated by our services, or don't feel they are a good fit, we might only see them once, or maybe not at all.

## The First Connection

Because youth live in a technology driven world of instant information and communication, our chances of engaging youth increase when we can immediately respond to their inquiries. Some programs have found great success with using texting to establish contact with youth and to maintain contact. According to a project report that evaluates recent pilots of youth/literacy programs, "One place put an ad in the newspaper and on Facebook with a phone number youth could text their interest and register for the program. The class was full instantly."

If youth call an organization or attend in person, they'd prefer to talk to a person to find out more information about the program. It's important that this person make youth feel comfortable by using Plain Language in conversations. By speaking at the level of the target audience, programs make youth feel that they are welcomed and that they fit there.

Imagine yourself as the client using your services:

- Why did you come?
- Who did you meet first?
- How were you treated?
- What was expected of you?

Bridges Out of Poverty training tells us that the first impression about an agency is established quickly and the impression often remains with people. "Satisfaction studies show decisions are made about a place in the first 15 minutes. Even more interesting, the opinion that is formed in the first 15 minutes is the opinion they hold from then on. Thus, it's extremely important that the staff person most skilled at creating relationships be the first contact with the customer or client." If youth are to succeed in our programs, the first moment of engagement is critical.

## Programming Location

We'll increase the likelihood that youth will attend a program if we make it easy for them to find it and to get there. Programs will attract youth if they are accessible by bus. That said, youth are often aware of trouble areas for them, meaning areas where people who negatively influence them might be. Although these areas are often central and serviced by several bus routes, youth might avoid the area as they strive to achieve future success. Programs that offer bus tickets for attending may increase the amount of youth that can attend.

It's worth considering partnering with places that youth already attend. This could decrease their travel time and effort. It also provides an opportunity to offer programming in a place where youth feel comfortable. Ideas for partnering include:

Sharing a physical site; offering programming in conjunction with existing programming. For example, use the room after the partner agency has completed delivering its program.

Explore how to enhance existing youth programming. For example, if an agency is offering financial literacy programs, support the participants while they are in the program or co-facilitate the program.

Create a new program that incorporates the mandate of your agency and that of the partner site. This also allows for sharing of human and financial resources. For example, think of how a Public Health Unit program about nutrition and cooking can also be an opportunity to increase literacy skills.

Have a referral agreement in place. For example, develop an easy and effective process for a partner agency to send clients to your program if that agency is seeing under-skilled youth or those that can't succeed in their program.

It's important to analyze opportunities in the community and explore how we can work together to meet youth needs, instead of trying to make youth bend to meet our agendas.

## At the Agency

When youth arrive at an agency, a process begins. We often need to gather client data for funding purposes and information to determine client needs. During this time, in the spirit of good customer service, we need to be aware of what we are demanding of youth.

Youth offered the following precautions about asking other youth to fill out forms and applications:

- Make sure youth understand why it's needed
- Make sure questions are necessary
- Have one set of paperwork for all programs
- Have someone go through the paperwork with them

Beyond these ideas for good practice, we can consider less obtrusive and intimidating approaches to information gathering. For instance, ask youth to share their story of how they got to where they are today, why they came to your program, etc. While youth talk, you will hear some of the necessary information you require to complete intake forms and assessments. While you collect information, the client can feel the beginnings of a relationship with your program. Another way to gather information is the “Preferred Future” approach. Ask clients what they think their future and the corresponding journey should look like. This empowers youth to have control over their goals, and their choices along the way. As a program, look for ways to support that journey.

It's worth keeping in mind the effect of “Priming.” This is a term that's used to describe how words can have a subconscious effect on people. Studies show that perceptions and performance are directly related to the words or concepts that a person previously hears. This can influence a person negatively or positively. This is an interesting concept to consider especially during intake when we ask clients to reveal things about themselves that they perceive as negative (for example, convictions, Ontario Works support and lack of education). If information gathering can be delayed until the client has good experiences at your program, or if the client has an opportunity to speak equally about successes, the effects of negative priming might be lessened.

Bridges Out of Poverty training tells us that for clients from generational poverty, “(The) present is most important. Decisions made for the moment are based on feelings of survival.” When trying to engage youth in your program it's a good idea to be aware of and focus on their immediate needs. This is a challenge as programs are often designed to help youth achieve long-term goals. With this disconnect between client needs and agency design, we run a risk of turning off youth that might benefit from our programming. A report called *Engaging Youth Within Our Communities* (Boscoville 2000, Mobilization Project) states, “A youth agenda may not correspond with a community agenda and young people's

capacities and interests may not correspond with opportunities offered by the community.” Programs need to challenge themselves to find where their services can fit into the diverse, changing and immediate needs of youth, while continuing to achieve an organizational mandate.

## Program Design

When asked about paying a fee for programming youth consistently said they’d pay, if they could afford it and if it was worth the fee (example of worth - gets them a job or is a required certification). Some youth suggested that charging a fee can add value to a program and weed out people who are negative or unmotivated. Youth also suggested that if charging a fee, programs should make it clear that subsidies are available for those who can’t afford to pay the whole amount.

There doesn’t seem to be a consistent program time-of-day that works for youth. Some youth suggested that nighttime programming worked best for them as they are expected to look for work and attend appointments throughout the day. It’s best to check with the target population that your program is trying to attract to determine what program time-of-day would be most attractive to them.

To attract youth to programs, we’ve heard over and over that the program topic must be relevant to their current needs. Youth seek authentic experiences that will lead them directly to employment. The program must have clear end goals, and the answer to “Why do I need to take this program?” should always be clear. It’s a good idea to remind youth throughout the program of the connection between what they are learning and why they came.

Literature supports that youth are more likely to be fully engaged in programming if they have input into the design. According to London’s Child and Youth Network - Youth Framework (2014), “Youth engagement refers to incorporating participatory approaches to program development and implementation. Research demonstrates engaged participants are usually motivated and, as a result, enjoy programs and are more likely to continue. Elements to consider include providing choice, opportunities for capacity building and leadership, encouraging self-reflection, development of social awareness, and incorporation of art and technology.” This might mean that youth help design the overall program, or it could mean that youth have input into the design of their individual participation in the program. Create programs that are flexible to changing needs and changing goals. Add a variety of approaches to ensure you’re addressing various learning styles and capturing varied interests.

## Technology in the Program

What role could technology take in how you run your programs? Consider how texting could be incorporated into your daily programming. With a texting option, youth could make contact with your organization instantly and the anonymity may provide comfort during their initial outreach. Online tools can be used to maintain ongoing communication with the client and provide support for the client outside of program hours. For example, one community agency developed a youth portal on their website where clients could access their password protected account at any time. Here they would answer questions from the program instructor, post completed work or exchange “checking-in” messages back and forth. The agency noticed that many of their clients accessed the portal in the middle of the night, when of course, the program was not running. However, the program was able to maintain a connection to the client outside of program hours. This is customer service at its finest! Why not take it one step further? If your clients have difficulty reading information, you could record a message and post it online or send it by email. Advancing technology is making this kind of adaptability and responsiveness easily doable.

## Workshop Delivery

Youth were asked what they thought were important elements of a workshop. Overall they like a workshop where the facilitator is knowledgeable and prepared, and where a respectful atmosphere is maintained. Here are more workshop tips offered by the youth:

- Offer a variety of methods of presentation (example - slides, group activities, lecture)
- Offer workshops in small groups
- Include hands-on activities
- Create an experience that is structured and organized
- Encourage the whole group to participation (not just a few individuals)
- Make sure there is a clear purpose and outcome for the session

## Facilitators

Interestingly, youth often said they enjoy learning and, in fact, were excited by learning something new. In most cases it was school they didn't like. They attributed past negative school experiences to a single person – the teacher. When asked about why they now like certain programs and workshops, they attribute their positive experiences to facilitators or other staff at an agency. Results from a collection of pilot youth/literacy programs in 2014 also found, “There is recognition that youth-specific programming is important, but that it must be delivered effectively. Having a good instructor is key to engaging youth and promoting word-of-mouth.” A good facilitator is therefore one of the key components to engaging youth, and maintaining their interaction with our programs.

Youth told us that a good facilitator is someone who:

- Is personable, supportive and understanding
- Takes time to explain things; “treats you like an adult, not a child”
- Talks to you; hears you
- Cares for your well-being- example - calls when you don't show up for a meeting
- Doesn't take him/herself too seriously
- Recognizes they can learn from clients as well
- Doesn't make you feel bad for not knowing something
- Generates trust while maintaining professionalism
- Is able to stay in control of a room
- Allows time to hear personal opinions
- Allows students to get to know each other

This resource is one from a series:  
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