

Engagement before Education: Reaching Out to the Youth

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Abstract

This paper outlines the experiences gained in reaching out to the youth in a Sustainable Development (SD) program to reduce car-trips to school in Vancouver, Canada. The fundamental lesson learned is that the youth need to be engaged in a topic before they can be educated about it. Mentoring, training and support were the primary characteristics in building rapport with youth leaders. This non-coercive program provided the overall goals with which the youth were enabled to make decisions regarding the *look* and *feel* of the outreach to their peers. The youth leaders were empowered to select and adapt objectives to suit their character and community. The program co-ordinator's main role was as a mentor—eager to collaborate with other youth groups, resources and colleagues. Overall, the program was designed to include incentives that the youth were seeking: skill-building, environmental awareness, a social component and a broader understanding of SD issues.

Introduction

The youth are a valuable target for marketing and advertising initiatives: huge financial sums work to entice young people deeper into consumerism and popular culture. Sadly, that popular culture runs contrary to the aims of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): “to promote education as a basis for a more sustainable human society” (UNESCO, 2004). Something more creative than ‘marketing’ is needed in order for ESD to reach out to the youth and compete with *education for mass consumerism*. This paper outlines the approach I took in Vancouver, Canada to engage and empower the youth *before* educating them.

Reaching out to the youth is a non-coercive process of mentoring and relationship building. When a team of youth leaders is engaged in a topic they become advocates who reach out to other youth. They are the ones to craft the look and feel of SD initiatives while generating broad-visioning objectives. They make activities enticing and fun (because otherwise, the materials would be boring and an embarrassment to be associated with). When the youth become engaged in a topic, the educator becomes a mentor and a resource.

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In reaching out to the youth, the ‘educator’ trains and supports youth leaders and cultivates their skills as decision-makers. The educator models enthusiasm, environmental awareness and learning. Our Vancouver program aimed to reduce car-trips to secondary school, but the lessons learned in engaging, and reaching out to the youth might be applied to any topic on ESD.

Problem and need—engaging young people in SD

Education for sustainable development is a dynamic concept that utilizes all aspects of public awareness, education and training to create or enhance an understanding of the linkages among the issues of sustainable development and to develop the knowledge, skills, perspectives and values which will empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future. (UNESCO, 2004)

SD is largely concerned with what I see as the policies, programmes and practices of the ‘adult world’. Therefore, building the capacities (i.e. empowerment) of young people to “*assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future*” is an excellent goal. And although awareness-raising, education and training of the youth are excellent objectives with which to empower young people, these objectives need to be preceded with an enticing invitation: young people need to be engaged before they are ‘educated’.

By and large, SD runs counter to popular culture’s advertisements encouraging consumerism and brand identity. North Americans live within a space where advertising is the wallpaper: it is inescapable both where one looks (e.g. media, magazines, TV) and where one is (e.g. billboards, posters, clothing). On average, North American youth watch almost one full waking day’s worth of TV per week (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2004). And to use the auto industry as but one example, huge sums of money are spent on enticement: American auto manufacturers spend up to \$314 per vehicle on advertising (Hoover, 2004). This money is spent on marketing campaigns meant to grab attention and maintain brand loyalty.

So, without a big budget, engaging the youth in SD (i.e. to critically examine the status quo) cannot compete as a marketing campaign. Different tactics are needed to connect with the youth in order for them to *even consider* ‘being educated’ on a topic opposing popular culture.

Critical factors affecting the project

In my experience, successfully reaching out to youth has depended on my ability, and availability, as a mentor. I have come to recognize that *reaching out to youth* is comparable to ‘leading’ an interpretive walk. Regardless of the topic or neighbourhood, leading a walk requires an awareness of participants’ moods, energies, dynamics, interests and pacing. To be effective, it must be entirely non-coercive. Participants *must* be engaged when on an interpretive walk or else they will just physically (or emotionally) walk away. More so,

reaching out to youth is like ‘leading’ an interpretive walk *through the youths’ very own neighbourhood*. In many ways the youth are experts on many aspects of ‘the walk’ therefore can—*and should*—share the lead.

With this in mind, I believe that the basis of engaging the youth in SD programs requires a committed plan to train and support them to become the decision-makers. We, as ‘educators’, need to relinquish control and display the necessary trust that will give life to the ‘education’. In my case, the program goal—to change attitudes and circumstances so that youth increasingly walk, cycle, take public transport and carpool to school—was crafted over the first two years, and finally articulated by one of the youth leaders. Once verbalized, a reverent silence was interrupted by another youth saying; ‘...we should *definitely* write that down.’ If a program has straightforward overall goals, then the objectives to achieve those goals can be selected and adapted by trained youth leaders already familiar with local conditions.



Those local conditions will include the social character of advocating SD to other youth. And if your goal is to reach a wider audience, you had better let the youth leaders be the ones to craft the public look and feel of the program—*let them make it cool*. (An unofficial goal of our work was to ‘*lower the social risk of being seen on a bike*’!) Making it cool and reaching out to a wider audience requires a broad outlook. In the case of sustainable transportation, reducing car-trips to school is as much about social status and financial resources as it is about environmental health and SD. Our efforts to promote cycling expanded to include drama, theatre improvisation, cycling fashion shows and Chinese New Year fortune cookies.

But to build a healthy, active and empowered youth team, you need the most precious of resources: time. The real challenge is to demonstrate a commitment to empowerment through the first few meetings in order to retain committed and enthusiastic youth leaders. However for me, recruiting student leaders had begun by fitting in what I could within their busy schedules: a brief lunchtime meeting in a classroom. Not only was this too short to develop any rapport, but virtually no time was available to sufficiently explain what they were being asked to consider, and the empowerment that they would have in its implementation. Also, some recruits came in small groups with their friends, while other individuals were drawn in for environmental concerns. It was apparent that the individuals would not return to our meetings unless they felt included rather quickly.

The answer seemed contrary to the problem—if people were too busy for a short meeting that would waste their time, then we needed a longer initial meeting. The decision to not simplify or reduce the first meeting so as to fit it within a busy schedule served as a critical lesson: you cannot engage people until you have developed a relationship with them. It remains a priority for me that each youth leader feel welcome and included. Our ‘environmental tasks’ are not our sole reason for working together. It is important for us to get out to nature—to a park, beach or forest—to recognize what we are trying to protect. Sometimes we gathered for ‘social’ reasons such as to watch a relevant film, went on a group bike ride or held a meeting at an ice cream shop. Also, it was important to open-up the roles within the group so that each youth had an opportunity to gain leadership skills by managing a group task.

In retrospect, it was clear that my strongest youth groups nurtured a strength and vitality that came from an early emphasis on relationship-building. Instinctively I knew that I was taking on a mentoring role with these teenagers, but I denied its importance for some time because I had no idea how to document (or *quantify*) it for my funders. Developing healthy relationships with and among the youth-led groups had not been an objective in our funding proposal, but it had become the fundamental, *albeit somewhat secret*, goal.

In some ways, I became their independent study ‘teacher’. I was facilitating and mentoring efforts inspired by their deep and personal interests in the topic. What’s more, it was all based on intrinsic motivation. No academic grading, or course credit was associated with these efforts.

The quality of education is not to be measured by its length and breadth, but only by its depth. What counts in study is depth, not extent.
(Vinoba, 1996: 21)

Recognizing that shift in understanding re-focused how I reached out to the youth. The evaluation at the end of our *start-up* workshops had a strong emphasis on the students’ comfort level and ongoing interest in being a part of this group. The responses often cited it as being ‘fun’, ‘informative’ and ‘friendly’. It became a very easy and enjoyable workshop to facilitate because it established the key intention of developing a respectful relationship between, and among, ‘adult’ and ‘youth’.

This is all the more valuable because it is something that many teenagers have *not* come to expect.

Skills developed by youth leaders as a result of this project

Given the proper opportunities... youth can always make a significant contribution to the development of the communities in which they live.
(Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993: 29)

Reaching out to youth can also be regarded as providing opportunities. When 24 youth leaders from across the Vancouver and Victoria regions were asked what they expected to gain from participating in our program to reduce car-trips to school, their responses were categorized as follows;

- enhancing leadership skills 56%
- increased environmental awareness 33%
- making new friends 26%
- broader understanding of the issues and the program 26%

Enhancing Leadership Skills

Participants were interested in learning skills not covered in the classroom. Therefore, communication skills such as active listening, non-verbal communication, feedback, visual clues, and assumptions became a key element of our workshops. Other ‘tools’ covered were action and event planning, fundraising, poster making, drama, theatre improvisation, bicycle maintenance, and the construction of chopper bikes.



Chopper Bike for wo – photo: Arthur Orsini

Environmental Awareness

Reducing car-trips to school has an obvious environmental association. But our participants were eager to understand more about *why* they were doing what they were doing. They were especially interested in the subversive elements of critiquing the dominant car-culture. For many, these alternative worldviews offered a first look from outside, into the fishbowl that is our popular culture.

Making New Friends

Not only were participants able to make new friends from within their own community, they were also introduced to like-minded youth in nearby communities. Our regional workshops were valuable in bringing together youth from different parts of the region (city and suburbs) to share perspectives on local topics such as: average walking distance to school, transit frequency, bike theft, and ratio of car ownership in their communities. But of course, there was no mistaking the clear and deliberate intention to have a good time.

Broader Understanding of the Issues and the Program

The broader issues open for discussion included: road safety and traffic fatalities, loss of farmland, disproportionate allocation of public funds for road infrastructure, soaring rates of childhood asthma and obesity, loss of children’s independence within their communities, oil and warfare, oil tankers and spills, smog, climate change, the confinement of large mammal species within highway corridors and the loss of their

breeding range, the financial debt of car-owning youth, gender-bias in chauffeur-moms, and escalating public transit fares.

Roles and responsibilities of the program co-ordinator in reaching out to youth

My role in reaching out to youth was as the program co-ordinator. In addition to the above-mentioned *attributes* of my job, my *responsibilities* included: recruiting youth leaders, mentoring them in their training, supporting them in the program implementation at their school, and acting as a catalyst with and between other groups and initiatives across the Vancouver and Victoria regions.

Recruiting

As a recruiter, a program co-ordinator needs to understand the program's overall goals and intentions in order to introduce the topic to potential participants. I believe that it is equally important that he or she be prepared to take the lead at the initial youth meetings and workshops without trying to establish themselves as *the* decision-makers.

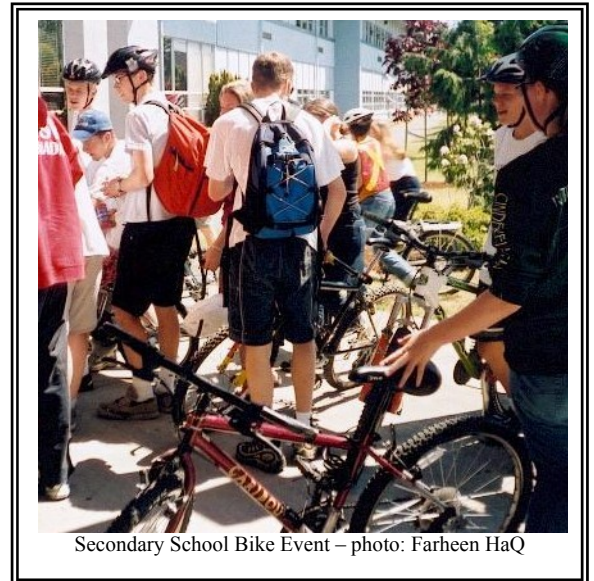
Although our overall goals had been established early in the program (i.e. in collaboration with our first youth groups), it was understood that locally-aimed program objectives could not be determined in advance. Each youth group was responsible for choosing and adapting program resources to suit the character of their group and community. It was critical that young people considering the program were made aware of the legitimate decision-making power they could gain in this initiative.

What's more, the program co-ordinator's role in recruiting begins to diminish early on. Once the program has begun, youth leaders themselves can play an important role in recruiting new youth both within their neighbourhood or school, and in expanding the program to other communities.

Mentoring and Support

“Be the change you seek in the world.”
Mahatma Gandhi

I believe that the program co-ordinator needs to be what she or he is asking the youth to be. First and foremost, this means demonstrating enthusiasm and support for the cause, and to the group. I believe that the most important characteristic here is sincerity: if you are making a commitment to become involved, it will take time and you can't fake 'putting in time'. My youth participants needed to know that 'I had the time' to return to meetings and events, and that I would follow through on the action items I had agreed to. My



Secondary School Bike Event – photo: Farheen HaQ

commitment was to regard them as *competent adults* whose ideas and decisions I could genuinely support and learn from.

My perspective on the mentoring *of* youth is that it facilitates mentoring *amongst* youth. Peer mentoring can reduce the ‘presence’ of a program co-ordinator by empowering the transfer of decision-making to within the youth group. I think that is a healthy evolution. Within the overall program goals, youth leaders need to be empowered to make creative adaptations and decisions to implement program objectives. There is really no other effective way. It has been said that an ‘adult’ who claims to understand the rapidly evolving essences of ‘cool’ with a youth audience, doesn’t.

That said, I personally don’t believe in treating youth like *adults*. My work-life with adults has shown me that meetings, workshops and presentations are allowed to be boring. Adults, it seems to me, are comfortable in the presence of a dull speaker, and will suppress (or at least *try* to suppress) their boredom and endure it. Often in fact, an enthusiastic speaker who invites participation and interaction can generate embarrassment among participants. The sentiment I often detect is: it is up to the listeners to rouse their own interest and engagement with the presentation. This is not so with youth. Here I detect: ‘why waste time listening to a boring (un-engaging) speaker?’ I believe the grown-up world would be better off to treat *adults* like youth: workshops and conferences with youth are a lot more fun and engaging!

Catalyst

One area where a program co-ordinator’s knowledge and experience are most valuable can be in surveying a broad perspective on issues. The youth may be experts in their local communities, but the program co-ordinator has expertise too. And bringing in that expertise—including resources, journals and colleagues—can enable the youth leaders to achieve much more than they could on their own.

A program co-ordinator can also act as a liaison between regional youth groups working on the same program. Email *could* serve this purpose, but social opportunities truly require a gathering. And gatherings not only offer an opportunity for the sharing of ideas, they also help each participant identify their place and identity within a movement. This is especially important in a program that runs contrary to popular culture. (i.e. There is little social risk in belonging to a ‘*cars are cool*’ club. The same cannot be said for a ‘*reducing car-trips to school is cool*’ club.)

By the same token, the catalyst role can work in the opposite direction. A youth program co-ordinator working in the ‘adult’ world can also invite youth leaders onto task forces and review committees at an organisational, or governmental level.

Conclusions and critical lessons learned in the process

In conclusion, the critical lesson learned here in reaching out to youth was not so much *to reach*, as it was *to invite*. By developing a program model without a prescribed curriculum,

this initiative was able to ‘educate’ youth on SD issues in a way different from the method of schooling that they were used to.

But the gains seemed substantial. When the youth leaders became engaged in the topic, they became advocates who generated a broad *invitation* to their peers. And they made it fun to watch, and even more fun to be a part of. My Vancouver program focused on sustainable transportation, but the model seems equally appropriate to broader ESD. I wish to close with Vinoba’s four principles of education. I was only introduced to it recently, but it may as well have been the mission statement of my work this past decade.

1. It is the task of education to make the student self-sufficient in the matter of acquiring knowledge. He (sic) must be made capable of gaining knowledge both by his own experiments and by using the experiments of others. ...
2. Education has therefore a social and national goal, as well as an individual goal. ...
3. The third principle of education, to my mind, is this: that work and knowledge must never be separated. ...
4. ... the more closely we can live in harmony with Nature, the greater our welfare and happiness will be ... True education is bound up with nature ...

(Vinoba, 1996: pp. 33 - 41)

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