ENGAGING YOUTH

by Sonikile Tembo
Indigenous Planning Studio
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Summary

This fact sheet discusses what youth engagement is, what the common issues are, and how to improve youth engagement in your community planning process. Engaging youth is important for your Indigenous community planning process because it makes sure all members of the community are aware and involved in your process.

Keywords: community engagement, collecting data, youth, planning team

Who are Classified as Youth?

Youth are generally the age group between childhood and adulthood. This usually refers to children within the mid teenage years to the mid-twenties. This definition can be used as a guide but should not restrict you if you want to include people a bit older or younger.

What is Youth Engagement?

Youth engagement is the meaningful participation and long term involvement of young people in an activity.[1] Appropriate and meaningful youth engagement supports the personal development of youth and can encourage community contribution and change. There is no single method of engaging youth. Engagement tools should always be changed to suit your community's current situation.

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Why Engage Youth?

The general purpose of engagement is to make sure that the Indigenous community planning process reflects the needs of the community. Specifically, youth engagement is important because general engagement tools may not be effective enough to reach youth since they have their own specific interests and circumstances that are different from the community at large. Having community engagement tools that are specifically for youth will increase chances of successful youth engagement. The youth bring a unique point of view to the community planning process, and their involvement makes sure that the different needs of the community are being considered. Youth should be heavily involved throughout the planning process. The youth of today will be the leaders of tomorrow so it is important that they are engaged at a young age and gain a sense of ownership of the planning process and outcomes.

How Involved are Your Youth in the Planning Process?

Figure 1 uses a ladder[2] to show different levels of youth engagement.

Level 8: *Youth & adults share decision-making*

Level 7: *Youth lead & initiate action*

Level 6: *Adults initiate and share decisions with youth*

Level 5: *Adults make decisions, youth are consulted and informed*

Level 4: *Youth are assigned tasks and told why they are involved*

Level 3: *Youth participate just for show*

Level 2: *Youth help implement adults' plans*

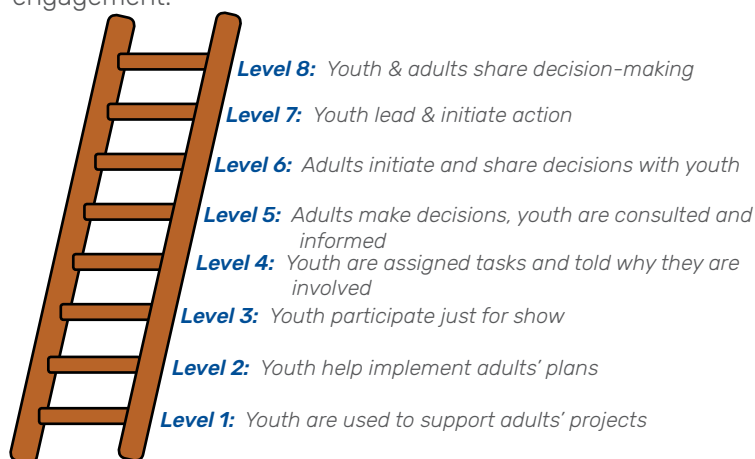**Level 1:** *Youth are used to support adults' projects*

Figure 1 | Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation. *Adapted from* (Hart, Roger. "Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship." Innocenti Essay no. 4, UNICEF International Child Development Centre, Florence. 1992. Accessed January 20, 2018. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf. p. 8.) *Used with permission.*

Levels 1 to 3 describe when youth are not engaged. Level 4 has minimal engagement and level 8 has full youth engagement. To find where your community is on this ladder, see step 1 in the next section. This will help you figure out how to engage your youth. An example of level 8 is when the youth are aware and involved in the planning process and feel they can come to meetings and participate in making decisions about the community.

How Can Youth Get More Involved?

The following 6 steps will guide you in planning for and carrying out youth engagement.

1 Assess Your Level of Engagement

It is important to have an idea of your level of youth engagement before figuring out ways to increase it. You can use the ladder of engagement referred to in the previous section to measure your level of engagement.

There are many other ways to do this assessment, including creative questionnaires, activities, games, community meetings for youth only, home visits and social media.[3] It is important that right from the beginning, the person or group of people involved in this process has some form of relationship with the youth. One way is to meet separately with youth that are in leadership roles, perhaps in their schools, and provide them resources to help conduct the necessary initial assessment. If this is not possible then a community member that has a good relationship with the youth can work with them during this assessment process.

Once your questions are answered and you know which level of the ladder you are, the next step is to create relationships and partnerships with the youth to help get to the next level of the ladder.

2 Establish Partnerships Between Youth and Adults

Partnerships are a source of Indigenous cultural teachings, they increase youth engagement as trust is built, and youth are empowered within these partnerships.[4] Adults must be willing to form meaningful connections with youth to establish trust relationships. These connections will encourage youth not only to get involved but stay involved.[5] Empowerment through partnerships can help create a sense of ownership for the youth and therefore make them more likely to receive responsibilities associated with the community planning process.[6] If they understand that they have the power to make significant changes in the planning process, they will step up and get involved in the process.

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Building trust in partnerships takes time. A communication plan[7] can strengthen communication and help build strong partnerships.

3 Develop Goals, Objectives and Strategies

Once you know what level of the ladder you are on and begin the work of developing relationships, you will need to come up with some objectives to increase youth engagement (see *Setting Goals and Objectives* fact sheet). Good objectives will usually include what you want to do, how you will do it, how long it will take, who the leader of that role is and what you expect out of it.[8] Without objectives that show the specific ways you will engage youth, it will be difficult to make and track necessary progress. Table 1 shows an example of an objective to improve youth engagement. Your objectives can also include specific outreach and training for the youth. For example, Figure 2 shows tradition learning styles from an Indigenous community in Australia, but you could use your community's own traditions around teaching youth.
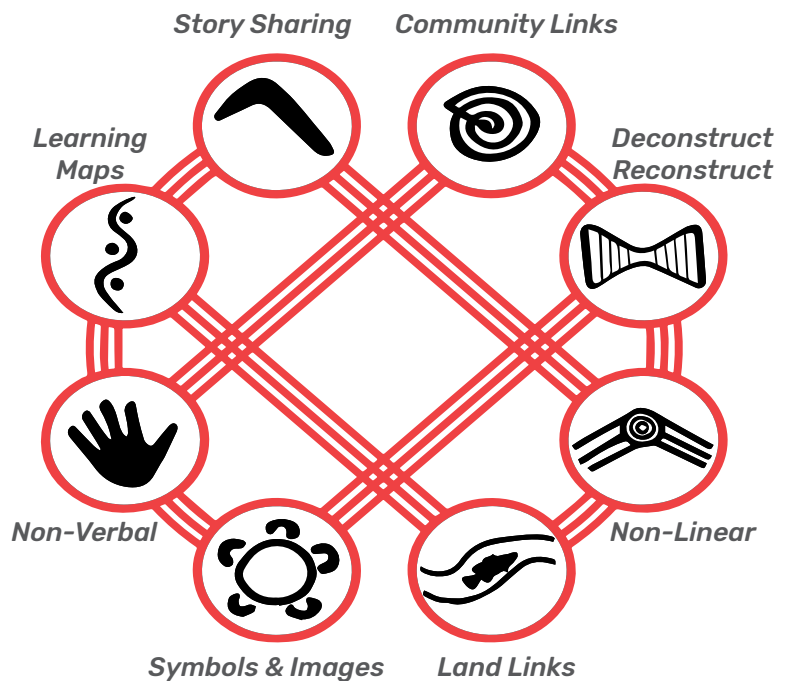

Story Sharing   Community Links
Learning Maps
Deconstruct Reconstruct
Non-Verbal
Non-Linear
Symbols & Images   Land Links

Figure 2 | *Eight Indigenous Ways of Learning.*
Adapted from (New Learning. "Eight Aboriginal Ways of Learning." New Learning - Transformational Designs for Pedagogy and Assessment. . Accessed January 20 2018. http://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-1/eight-aboriginal-ways-of-learning.) *Used with permission.*

4 Implementation of Engagement

The implementation stage is when the youth are engaged. It is the "Activities" column of Table 1. Common methods of engagement are community meetings, workshops, newsletters, questionnaires, home visits and small group meetings.[9] Youth typically respond to creative engagement methods involving social media, engagement with arts, games and activities. For more examples see *Youth Engagement Activity Ideas* on page 4. Having activities that involve them being mobile or vocal will engage them more effectively than having meetings where only one or two people talk. Be open to working with their ideas and interests. This is another opportunity to use your community's culture and traditions in the planning process!

Table 1 | *Develop Objectives.*
Adapted from (Crooks, Claire V. "Action Plan Template – Engaging and Empowering Aboriginal Youth: A Toolkit for Service Providers." Youth Relationships. 2010. Accessed January 20, 2018. https://youthrelationships.org/uploads/toolkit_text_-_english.pdf. p. 22.) *Used with permission.*

Objectives	Activities	Timeline	Lead Responsibility	Dates and Outcomes
Increase youth engagement with cultural traditions	Invite Elder to offer traditional teaching specifically for youth	Invite youth by April and have session in June	Program coordinator	Elder to attend program and teach youth once by the end of June
[Objective 2, etc.]				

5 Evaluation

Evaluation of the engagement methods and tools used is a good way to begin the planning process for the next youth engagement event. It is important to ask open questions (see Table 2), recognize any mistakes made, and learn from them. Consider drafting a questionnaire with questions that ask whether your objectives were achieved, if there were any concerns, and how concerns can be addressed to improve the engagement event. Consider the attendance of your event and the level of engagement and compare that with your method of engagement and whether a different method could encourage more participation. It is important to report the outcomes of the engagement to the youth.[10] Evaluation can be done by interviews, telephone, face to face, questionnaires or small group sessions to discuss "what we learned". See Further Reading for evaluation tools.

Table 2 | *Evaluating your youth engagement.*
Adapted from (Crooks, Claire V. "Types of Questions to Consider – Engaging and Empowering Aboriginal Youth: A Toolkit for Service Providers." Youth Relationships. 2010. Accessed January 20, 2018. https://youthrelationships.org/uploads/toolkit_text_-_english.pdf. p. 122.) *Used with permission.*

Closed Questions result in yes or no answers	Open Questions result in detailed answers
Did you find the program useful?	In what ways has the program helped you?
Has the program had an influence on your life?	What was the best part of the program?
Was the influence good?	What has changed in your life because of the program?

6 Celebrate!

Why should we celebrate all success, small or big? We celebrate because it provides us with encouragement and motivates us to continue with the work. As well, it increases the confidence of the youth to move on to bigger tasks and helps everyone focus on the results. The most common way to do this is a community feast. Alternatively, a smaller feast can be held as well with the youth only to celebrate their achievements, if they were involved in a specific project as part of the Indigenous community planning process.

What are Some Common Issues?

There can be many barriers and challenges to effectively engaging youth. These often prevent youth from being participants and leaders in the community engagement process. Some of these are listed below.

Other interests and demands

The youth may not be able to participate because of other commitments like school, recreational activities or employment. Consider these factors when planning for engagement to increase participation.

No trust

Youth will not participate in planning processes if they do not have trusting relationships with the adults conducting the processes. If the youth feel they are generally not prioritized as fellow decision makers, they will not participate. Unless they are safe and respected they may not care about the process because they feel their opinion doesn't matter.

Transportation

If they are not able to get to the meetings or activities, they will likely not make the effort to engage in the process. Making engagement events close to home, perhaps in a community center or school, will increase participation.

Role of adults

The role of adults in youth engagement must be restricted to guidance, setting up, advocating and mentorship.[11] The youth should have a sense of ownership of the planning process and outcomes.

Youth Engagement Activity Ideas

Drawing on maps: Youth can draw on maps of the community and talk about what they like and what they don't like. Drawing is a creative way to understand peoples desires.[12]

Dotmocracy: Show the youth ideas or designs and get them to vote on their favourite with sticky dots. This is a good option for groups that may not want to talk a lot.[13]

Birthday ice-breaker: Arrange people in groups according to their birthdays. Once these groups are formed, talk with them about what they like and not like about their community.

Storytelling: Have informal storytelling sessions where youth talk about what they like and remember about their community. You can use these to inform the planning process.

Social media: Use Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram to create contests, games and treasure hunts with themes from the planning process to encourage youth to participate.[14]

Other

Youth may have individual relationship or social issues that prevent them from participating in community engagement. It is important to conduct an assessment (Step 1) to understand the challenges and barriers facing the youth in your community.

Final Thoughts

Engaging youth is a great way to build support and gather creative ideas for your Community Plan. Doing so helps make sure many different perspectives are reflected in your final plan. Engaging youth can be a fun way for all ages to interact, learn, and plan together!

Further Reading

Engaging and Empowering Aboriginal Youth by Claire V. Crooks

This resource provides various tools for engagement including a detailed Self-Assessment Guide. https://youthrelationships.org/engaging-aboriginal-youth-toolkit

Moving Toward a Stronger Future: An Aboriginal Resource Guide for Community Development by Public Safety Canada

This is a resource guide for community development. It provides a guide to establishing positive relationships and partnerships in section 4. https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/mvng-twrd-strngr-ftr/index-en.aspx#a19

Youth Engagement Toolkit Evaluation Tool by Province of British Columbia

This resource provides evaluation techniques. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/data-monitoring-quality-assurance/information-for-service-providers/youth_engagement_toolkit_evaluation_tool.pdf

Endnotes

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2   Roger Hart, "Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship," *UNICEF*, 1992, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf.
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