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YOST 5291: Phenomenological Inquiry

Final Paper

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Civic Youth Work in a Nonprofit Setting: ACES Youth Advisory Council

ABSTRACT: This paper uses a phenomenological ethnographic approach to reflect upon and analyze the adaptation of a civic youth work model for use within a private nonprofit organization. Examples from a case study on the ACES Youth Advisory Council show that principles of civic youth work can be used to empower youth as citizen-participants in a youth-serving organization just as traditional civic youth work empowers youth as citizens in the public sphere.

I. Introduction: ACES Youth Advisory Council Program

About ACES

Athletes Committed to Education Students, or ACES, is a Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization that runs programs focused on math and social-emotional skill building with the goal of reducing the academic achievement or opportunity gap between both students of color and their white peers as well as lower-income students and their wealthier peers. ACES has been operating in Minneapolis and Saint Paul for approximately twenty years, and has a strong track record of positive impacts and outcomes for the 4th-8th grade students who participate in the

program. ACES programs are held before and after school and use a unique sports-based math and social-emotional skill building curriculum.

ACES is staffed by a small full-time leadership team, three full-time program coordinators called Site Leaders, and a larger team of part-time Academic Coaches, who provide direct service through curriculum delivery. Volunteers support Academic Coaches in ACES classrooms. ACES' Board of Directors is made up of community leaders and sports management professionals in the Twin Cities. ACES also has an Associate Board made up of young professionals. All ACES full-time staff, volunteers, and board members are adults. Many Academic Coaches and volunteers are current college students so by some definitions can be considered youth. For the purposes of this research, however, I will refer to all ACES staff and volunteers as adults due to the power and control they hold in program development and delivery.

I was approached during fall of 2016 to research, develop, and facilitate a new youth leadership initiative at ACES. The leadership initiative would be a youth advisory program designed to increase youth voice in ACES leadership and programming. Staff motivation for creating a youth advisory body at ACES was multi-faceted. The primary rationale was to include and elevate youth voice and leadership in the organization as a step toward increasingly equitable practice. ACES work by nature is centered around racial and economic equity, but ACES has not emphasized age equity in previous work. Secondary benefits to the organization included new opportunities for funding specifically for youth leadership initiatives and the opportunity for adult staff and board members to view youth program participants as partners rather than clients. Ross VeLure Roholt and Michael Baizerman note the various benefits of youth advisory

programs to organizations in these ways: “Involving young people in the work of the governing boards of community organizations led adults to change their perceptions of young people, increasing both adults’ and young people’s commitment to the organization” (2013, p. 45). To this end, I joined ACES to take the lead in developing and facilitating its new Youth Advisory Council (YAC), a group of current ACES 8th grade students, ACES program alumni in high school, and other high school students not previously involved with ACES.

Program Structure and Logistics

In structuring the YAC program, I drew upon Roger Hart’s “Ladder of Youth Engagement” (1992). Based on Sherry Arnstein’s “Ladder of Citizen Participation” (1969) created to empower citizens in urban planning processes, Hart’s ladder focuses specifically on youth in youth programming. Hart’s model encourages democratic participation by youth in programs for youth by ranking levels of engagement starting at “manipulation” and ending with “child initiated, shared decisions with adults” (Hart, 1992, p. 8).

Before creation of the YAC, ACES’ programming ranged from Hart’s level three to level four (see fig. 1). As an academic and social-emotional skill-building program with set curriculum and strong focus on quantitative impact reporting, there was not a lot of room for youth agency in programming. Furthermore, much of ACES’ curriculum is delivered by part-time after-school leaders with little experience in youth development. While some ACES’ staff have the experience and teaching knowledge to adapt curriculum to increase opportunities for youth voice without sacrificing educational impact, many do not and thus deliver the curriculum as it is written.

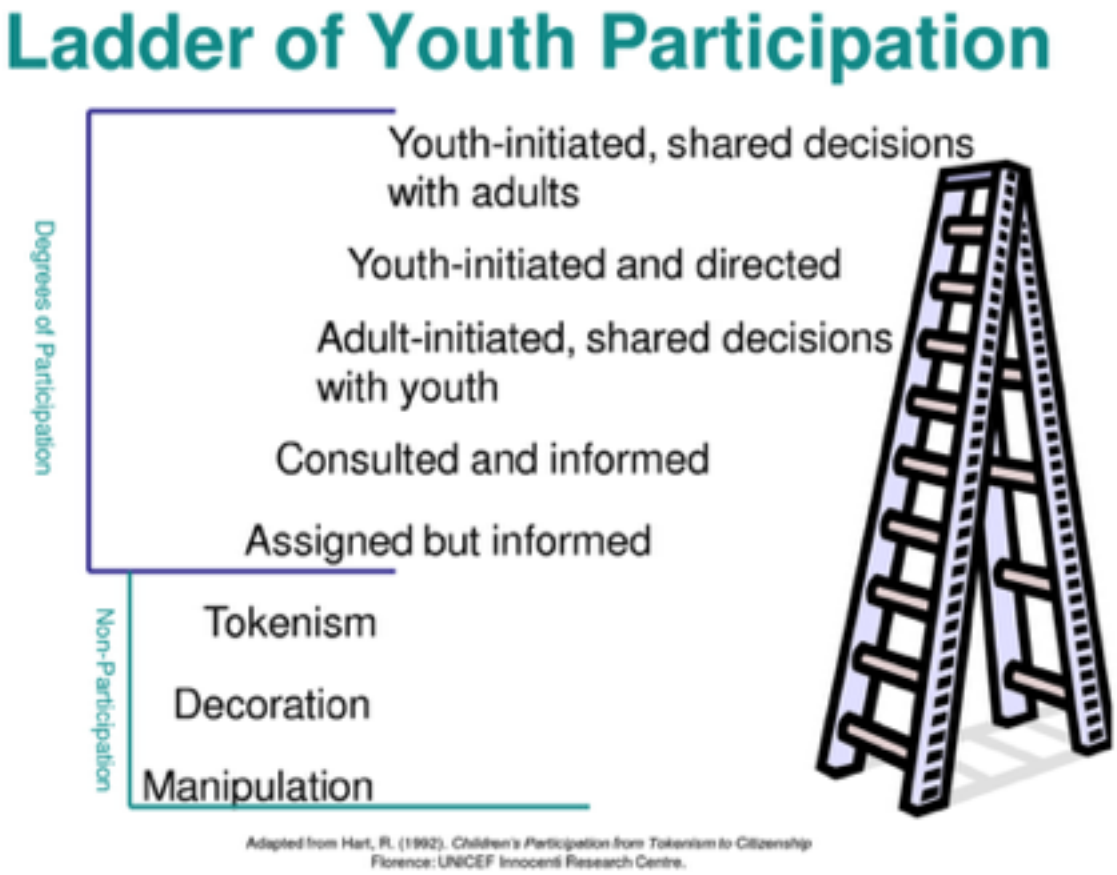

Figure 1: Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation

Given this situation, the YAC was conceptualized as a means to engage youth in program leadership and development.

The structure of the YAC was based on existing youth participation models at other nonprofit organizations, school districts, and government systems. I developed a strategic plan and program logic model (see fig. 2) defining program goals, inputs, objectives, and long- and short-term impacts. The anticipated outcomes were the completion of a youth-designed and youth-led project that would improve ACES programming, engagement of youth in decision-

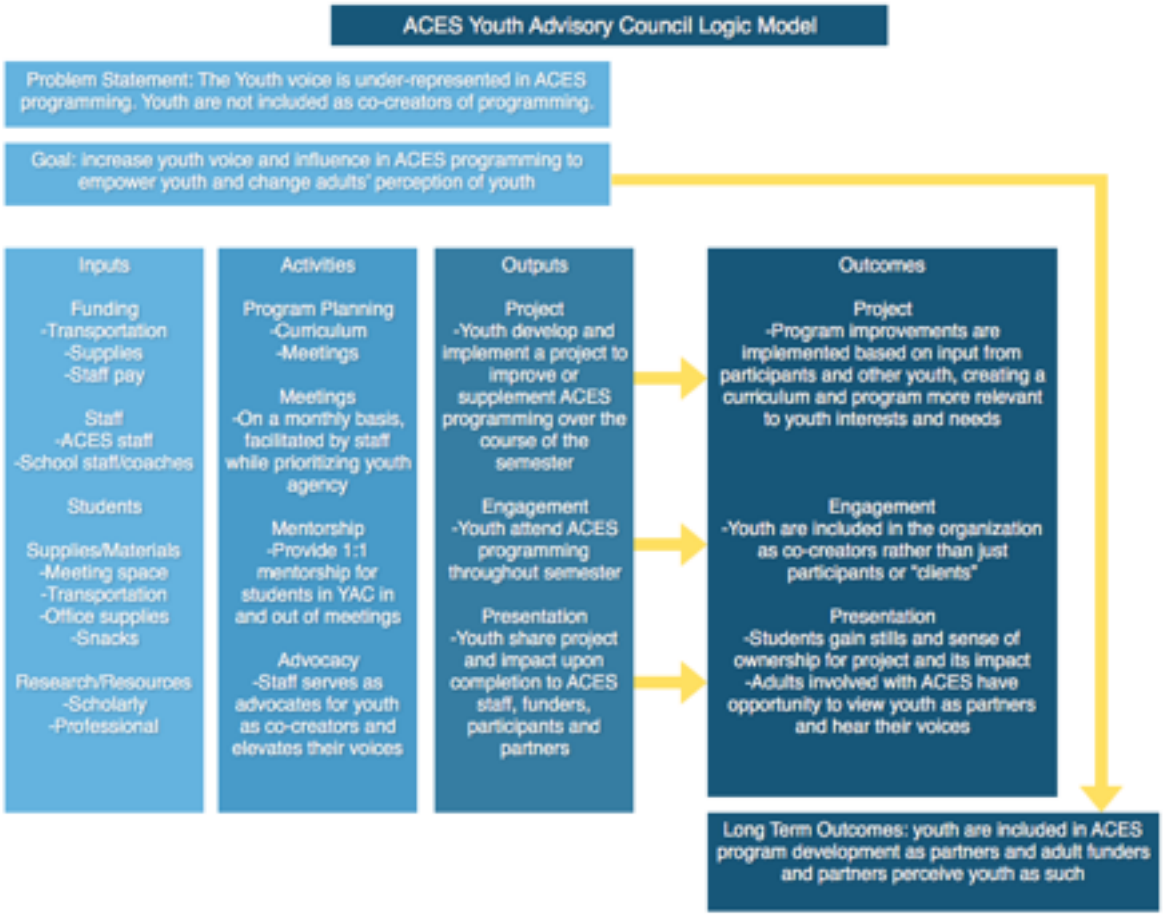

Figure 2: ACES YAC Logic Model

making within the organization, and the opportunity for youth to share their work with adults involved with ACES. In the long term, youth would be included in ACES program development as partners rather than participants or clients.

I recruited 8th grade students currently participating in ACES programming as well as high school students at schools that ACES program schools feed into. We included non-ACES high school students as a means to increase the age range and leadership experience of students on the council. Youth went through an application process, but in order to ensure strong numbers for the pilot program year and under the assumption that not all applicants would continue

through the entire process, we accepted all applicants. Meetings were scheduled on a monthly basis from January through May. Council members would receive a stipend of $200 upon successful completion of the program. Along with the ACES leadership team, I drafted a position description for council membership to outline expectations and goals for the program with the understanding that youth members would be given the opportunity to make changes as desired.

Program Facilitation: Civic Youth Work

As facilitator of the YAC, I drew on principles from *Civic Youth Work* by Ross VeLure Roholt and Michael Baizerman (2013). While not explicitly political or activist in nature, I hypothesized that the YAC could be approach as a form of civic youth work adapted for a private nonprofit organization. In this sense, I viewed the organization as the community, society, or nation where civic youth work would take place. Organization staff were equivalent to empowered citizens or civic leaders. Youth and students were equivalent to marginalized citizens. I based my facilitation on civic youth work practice outlined by VeLure Roholt and Baizerman to inform my own view and practice in facilitating the program.

Overall, I wanted to operate on the principle that "youth have the right to participate in the policies that affect them" (Ginwright, Cammarote, and Noguera, 2005, p. 33; in VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, 2013, p. 55). ACES programs are designed for youth participants but are primarily created and led by adults. I viewed my role as a facilitator and coach. In civic youth work, "adults help young people do what they want at a higher level" (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, 2013, p. 59) by providing resources and knowledge from past experience.

Civic youth work challenges youth workers to define how they perceive youth citizenship in their work. The biophysiological developmental approach to youth development views young people as future adults or future citizens rather than current citizens (ibid, 2013, p. 22). Conversely, the social-constructivist approach views young people as current citizens (ibid, p. 24). This approach recognizes that "social institutions, generational structures, and policies and practices promoted within communities have real consequences for particular youthhoods over ways of doing and being youth" (ibid, p. 26). Although youth don't often have voice in these systems, the systems exercise control over them and thus they are citizens, albeit marginalized ones. In my work, I opted to use the social-constructivist approach. I view youth as current citizens that are marginalized due to ageism in programs, organizations, and our society. However, in approaching youth as current citizens, I also recognized that many young people have not had prior opportunities to live or be recognized as citizens, and thus must be supported by and partnered with people who have had opportunities to live and be recognized as citizens—in this case, adult ACES staff such as myself. This approach allowed me to "support young people as citizens now (not citizens-becoming or future citizens), so that they can join (if they want) in working to sustain democracy and engage their and/or our collective issues and problems" (ibid, p. 16). In adapting this approach for use in a nonprofit setting, I viewed youth as marginalized "citizens" of an organization which exercises control over them but does not include them in the decision-making process.

II. Methods: Phenomenological Auto-Ethnography

I took a phenomenological auto-ethnography approach to research throughout the course of the YAC program. After each meeting or YAC interaction, I took detailed field notes as a means of reflection and to document my own actions and lived experience. This reflection served as an action research tool as well: by conducting ongoing evaluation of my practice throughout the course of the program, I was able to identify areas for ongoing improvement in my facilitation. Fieldwork and lived experience was complemented with a comprehensive literature review to inform my methods and analysis.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an ethnographic perspective that "attends to the everyday experiences of others, and uses these to make choices, in this way moving to more deeply understand people and what they are capable of doing" (ibid, 2013, p. 90). From a phenomenological perspective, "philosophies and theories, like political opinions, should be regarded as part and parcel of the world in which we live rather than transcendent views that somehow escape the impress of our social interests, cultural habits, and personal persuasions" (Jackson, 1996, p. 1). For the purposes of this paper, I examined my work with the YAC through a phenomenological lens as a means to understand myself as a youth worker and civic youth work in the unique context of my organization.

In phenomenology, "the focus is on...the lifeworld—that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretical knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual

understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend" (ibid, 1996, p. 7). In other words, the "lifeworld" is that which encapsulates our experiences and the contexts in which the experiences take place. We make meaning from experiences that take place within our unique lifeworld; thus our meaning-making process is not something to be interpreted by theory developed in a different lifeworld. Rather, our meaning-making process should be interpreted by and within our lifeworld. In the context of this research, my lifeworld included ACES, the Twin Cities communities where ACES runs programming, my own personal lived experience, and the personal lived experiences of the youth and adults involved in the YAC program.

Rationale

My rationale for using the phenomenological approach is that it aligns with my values as a youth worker and the values behind the project: I want to make my professional world and the programming I run more accessible to youth by including their voices. Jackson remarks that "for the most part human beings live their lives independently of the intellectual schemes dreamed up in academe, and that the domain of knowledge is inseparable from the world in which people actually live and act" (Jackson, 1996, p. 4). In that vein, I conducted my own research on the program in a way that recognizes the reality of all the participants' lives. I wanted to ensure that my research and learning was not inaccessible to them despite the fact that they are not anthropologists or educational theorists. Instead, if I aimed to understand my work in the context and reality in which it took place, I would be able to authentically do the work and authentically report on the process of doing the work.

Furthermore, this research was a reflection on my own practice. A focus on theory rather than my authentic lived experience would ignore the reality and conditions within which I work. The purpose of this research was to examine a program and my own practice. Following that purpose, any conclusions drawn must come directly from the program, practice, and experiences. Using a theory conceived in one lifeworld or context as a means to explain programming or practice conducted in another lifeworld would be ineffective.

Use of phenomenology also connects to my pedagogical approach as a youth worker. In *The Tact of Teaching*, Max van Manen explains that there are two parts to one's pedagogy: "(1) actively living through pedagogical experiences, and (2) reflectively talking or writing about these experiences" (van Manen, 1991, p. 41). In other words, one's pedagogy is both how one lives, exists, or works with youth and how one thinks about the ways in which they live, exist, or work with youth. Youth workers must "reflect-in-practice and reflect-on-practice" (Schon, 1983; in VeLure Roholt and Baizerman 2013, p. 6). This allows youth workers to reflect both upon intentional pedagogic actions as well as tacit actions. The phenomenological approach allowed me to authentically reflect upon my own lived experience as a pedagogue engaged in civic youth work and reflect on my experiences in order to improve my practice.

Literature Review

To complement fieldwork, I read works by a variety of theorists in civic youth work, phenomenology, and social theory. As mentioned above, *Civic Youth Work* by VeLure Roholt and Baizerman presented a framework for civic youth work that I used as a foundation for my own

practice. *Civic Youth Work* defines this work, discusses how youth workers practice civic work, and outlines the course a civic youth work project may take.

Michael Jackson's works on phenomenological anthropology informed my approach to this method. *Things As They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology* provided me with a foundational understanding of phenomenology as a practice as well as rationale for using this approach in my research. Essays in *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* provided models for how phenomenological anthropology can be presented.

My pedagogy throughout the process was informed by works from John Dewey and Max van Manen. Dewey's *Experience and Education* informed my incorporation of principles from experiential learning into the civic youth work of the YAC, particularly his emphasis on negotiating a balance between traditional education and progressive education as it relates to social control and youth agency (Dewey, 1938, p. 54). Van Manen's *Pedagogical Tact: Knowing What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do* and *The Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness* also contributed to the formation of my own pedagogical approach to civic youth work and an understanding of the "pedagogical moment" (van Manen, 1991, p. 40). In my fieldnotes, I identified pedagogical moments, evaluated the choices I made in those moments, and made intentional changes over the course of the program based on the success or failure of my actions.

III. Analysis

There are various frameworks through which one can view the steps or stages of a civic youth work project. For this paper, I analyze field notes and experiences throughout the course of

the program using the ten stop model presented by VeLure Roholt and Baizerman in *Civic Youth Work* (2013, p. 76). Each of the following ten sections discusses one of the steps and the related activities of the YAC. Analysis focuses on my own practice and the ways in which the YAC demonstrated each step.

1. "Something Needs to Change"

From the start, there were two perspectives through which to view the "something" that needed to change. The first perspective is adult-centered: initially, adults identified a problem, which was the lack of youth voice in ACES programming. The second perspective is youth-centered: once the YAC was created, youth identified separate problems they saw in ACES and in their communities and selected one to address through their work. Thus, the creation of the YAC group itself was instigated by adults to solve an adult-identified problem. Once created, however, the YAC members were able to identify a problem they saw in their community and solve it in their own way.

VeLure Roholt and Baizerman maintain that there are a variety of situations that give rise to civic youth work: "sometimes it was as ordinary as someone saying that some people want to form a group to do something about a problem and want to know who wants to join. And sometimes, a youth worker intentionally brings together a group of young people and tells them what he hears individuals talking about, and asks them if that is important to them. And sometimes a youth worker tells them that this is an issue, and that they should do something

about it, and that the youth worker will help" (2013, p. 97). The YAC was a blend of the latter two: a youth worker (myself) brought a group together intentionally based on their involvement in ACES and told them about a problem ACES staff had identified. However, ACES staff viewed creating the board as a solution to the problem and encouraged the YAC members to identify a new problem to solve. Addressing this second problem as a group would be their task over the course of the program. While the initial problem was adult-identified, that problem was essentially solved with the creation of the YAC. In order to maintain the contribution of youth voice in ACES, however, the YAC members had to identify their own problem(s) and continue using their voices to bring attention to and work to make change as a group.

During the application process, prospective members were had been asked to identify problems they noticed in their communities. At the first YAC meeting, the group discussed these issues and created a comprehensive list as a brainstorm for the work the group would do over the course of the semester. Through this work, the YAC members were addressing both the adult-identified problem of the lack of youth voice in ACES programming as well as identifying their own problems in their communities. By working to create their own project and engaging ACES students in the work, they were already beginning to use their voices in the organization.

2. "Let's do something about it, together"

In guiding the YAC members through the project development stage of their work, I aimed to "[embody] an invitation to participate, and whenever possible, [do] so democratically, not coercively, allowing individual young people to decide and to choose whether or not to

join" (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, 2013, p. 80). To that end, I was intentional in my language and actions to return any power I held to the youth:

> I found that the members frequently looked to me for approval, and was intentional about always turning approval and decision making back over to them. This took the form of things as little as reminding them they didn't have to raise their hand to answering the question "Can we do X" by saying things like "You guys decide, and we will provide the resources you ask for." (Field Note Excerpt, 1/13/2017)

At this stage, I viewed my role as a unifier charged with creating a sense of cohesion among the members. This took various forms: establishing group norms to build a community where all members felt safe and respected, consulting the group on the YAC member position description created by ACES staff and editing it together, and agreeing upon how we would define success both in terms of members receiving their monetary stipend and in terms of personal individual growth.

> I also noticed the youth taking more control and getting energized about the project. We discussed a lot of different forms the project could take, from planning curriculum, hosting focus groups, and doing field trips or service learning to engaging ACES students in anti-violence work in their communities or even trying to pass legislation….
> After our brainstorm, it sounds like they will head in the direction of engaging ACES students in a service project of some sort that may involve a field trip or work in their school communities. This was exciting to me because while I had thought of figuring out ways to bring the youth-led approach to other ACEs students over the long-term, I didn't bring up that idea to the YAC members. They came up with the idea of partnering with ACES students themselves. (Field Note Excerpt, 1/13/2017)

3. Understanding What Needs to Change

Through the group's brainstorm of community problems they could address, a space and vision for group action began to emerge. During the conversation, I encouraged them to think big and ignore perceived barriers or challenges. With this freedom, they had the opportunity to

envision the wide range of impacts they could have as a group. At the second YAC meeting, members selected one problem to address from the list they had created: the lack of outdoor and active opportunities for students, both within ACES programming and more broadly in their schools and communities.

> We did a vote and decided to address the issue of young people not having enough active/ outdoor opportunities. We began our conversation by talking about and brainstorming reasons why this is an issue. They came up with everything from too many electronics to a lack of spaces and equipment for safe/fun outdoor recreation. From there, we began to discuss solutions. (Field Note Excerpt, 2/18/2017)

The members created their own collective definition and understanding of the problem through dialogue during the meeting. As a facilitator, I focused on using guiding questions that would encourage reflection, critical thinking, and creative ideas for addressing their chosen problem.

4. Deciding What To Do

Once the students selected their problem, a potential solution arose easily. Our conversation about the problem and why it was a problem evolved organically into a brainstorm of ways to solve it. After listing a variety of approaches including both direct and indirect service projects, the YAC members settled on engaging ACES students in gardening during program time.

> Initially, I had reservations about attempting to start a community garden with ACES students since timing would probably not work and we wouldn't have enough feasible spaces and gardeners. However, I wanted to let the YAC members explore the topic and determine feasibility themselves. We assigned various research topics around community gardening and budgeting to conclude the meeting. (Field Note Excerpt, 2/18/2017)

5. Figuring out how to do it and rehearsing

Once the group had identified a problem and set a plan for how they would address it, I envisioned an easy path forward where the members would do independent work, connect with one another, and complete our "To Do List" tasks set at the conclusion of each meeting. However, it was at this step that the process became far more challenging.

Despite intentionally incorporating activities to build a cohesive community around our shared goal, the YAC members continued to lack accountability toward one another and the project. Only two students were available to attend the third meeting due to rescheduling and various conflicts. Two of the original members left the group around this time in order to focus on other commitments. Members were not responsive to emails and texts and were not engaged in completing their tasks from the group's "To Do" list.

In my own practice, these challenges forced me to reflect upon and re-evaluate the original goals for the group, our activities thus far, and the initial vision set forth for the YAC. In order to "[cocreate] spaces for their discovery of, practice at, and mastery of citizen" (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman 2013, p. 85) in which they could practice the work for their project, I realized I first had to ensure that I had created a space in which YAC members were empowered as citizens, but also supported as they stepped into their citizenship.

The third YAC meeting, despite only having two youth attendees, turned out to be a turning point for my practice and the process overall. During the first part of the meeting, we spent time preparing for an upcoming YAC field trip to visit the Minnesota State Capitol. One of ACES' Associate Board members, a former political staffer who would be helping to facilitate the field trip, came to speak with the students about what to expect and how to prepare for conversations with elected officials. The two students had the opportunity to discuss issues that

they noticed in their own communities and to prepare to share these issues, along with information about the work they were doing with ACES, with their state representatives. With such a small group, the students had more opportunity to use their voices and the traditional adult/youth and teacher/student lines were blurred.

This conversation set the stage for what I viewed as a strengthening of youth voice within the YAC:

> When [the Associate Board member] left, I gave the students a few options on what we could work on with our remaining hour. Since neither of them had been there for the initial community garden project conversation, I told them I could go over what we had discussed and they could add their ideas. As another option, I said that since we are halfway through the year, I'm starting to think about what the advisory council will look like over the summer and next year and wanted their input. I suggested that we could collaboratively talk about what's going well, and what changes we could make for next year…
>
> They were far more interested in the second topic so we jumped in. I asked them what they felt were some of the best parts of YAC so far, and they both went right to their site visit. They said they wanted to try to spend more time at ACES sites with students so that they could 1) serve as volunteers who were closer in age to students and could be more of a buddy to students and 2) gather feedback and ideas about ACES programming to bring back to the YAC…I asked lots of guiding questions during this conversation, but the students really directed the trajectory of the conversation. I felt that they were very much in the lead and that we were doing civic youth work in this moment. (Field Note Excerpt, 3/23/2017)

There are multiple factors that changed the trajectory and paved the way for civic work. First, the students had citizenship in mind having previously been discussing their citizenship in literal political terms. Thinking of themselves as empowered political beings capable of sparking change by presenting problems to elected officials may have enabled them to think of themselves as empowered citizens within the smaller context of ACES.

Second, and I would argue more importantly, I shifted the power roles in the room by asking the students for help. While in previous meetings I had shared power with the students, engaged them in decision-making, and guided them to direct their own work, this was the first time I had completely overturned the traditional power structures in youth programming. Despite sharing power and co-creating the community gardening project with them, the youth were always looking to me as a teacher or leader, most likely due to their conditioning through traditional education to look to the adult in the room for answers. In this instance, I was looking to the students for answers and earnestly asking for their feedback and input. While organizations do frequently ask youth for feedback through surveys or focus groups, these methods are often highly structured and not very transparent. When I asked for feedback, I specifically said that I wanted to know how we could change the structure of the YAC for summer and the following school year to work better for members, explaining my motivation for requesting the feedback and sharing how it would be used in the future.

Not only did this conversation greatly increase the engagement of the students involved —and, I would argue, other students indirectly through these students' influence on their peers— it also helped shape a vision for the future of the YAC that aligned almost perfectly with a vision ACES staff had come up with independently:

> After the meeting, I was really energized and excited about the conversations we had. In a conversation with a colleague earlier, we had been talking about visions for the YAC in the future and how we'd like it to be structured. I was amazed that the students had come up with a nearly identical model without me mentioning any of the ideas we had as staff. I am glad that the students came up with a model that staff will also buy into, and I am glad that the ideas came completely from them. This seems to be truly what a YAC should be and I am excited to move forward with this. (Field Note Excerpt, 3/23/2017)

From this meeting on, I personally felt re-energized and re-centered with the work and I got the sense that the students did as well.

6. Doing it!

The first opportunity the YAC members had to engage in their work outside the "rehearsal space" (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, 2013, p. 85) of the ACES meeting room was the group's field trip to the Minnesota State Capitol. While not explicitly connected to ACES' mission or the YAC's project, the opportunity arose from an Associate Board member and I felt that it would be an opportunity for the group to work together in a new space, practice using their voices as a tool for change, and spend time together to continue bonding as a team. I wanted them to feel empowered to share their thoughts and to see that adults can be receptive to their ideas.

The students had the opportunity to meet with state senators and representatives from their respective districts and to talk about the YAC, ACES, and problems they have observed in their communities. To prepare, I role played with the YAC members to give them a chance to practice voicing their concerns and talking about their work. I asked questions I anticipated their representatives might ask and challenged them to create "elevator pitches" about ACES.

Over the course of the field trip, I continued to see the YAC members take on the role of citizen and use their voices. At the start, the Associate Board member, Misha, and I found ourselves stepping in to model and guide conversations. After speaking with two or three representatives, the students gained confidence and their voices got stronger. They took the lead in steering conversations and bringing up issues they cared about. This was the first opportunity

the YAC was called upon to talk about the work they are doing outside of the ACES office, and their first time talking with other adults in the community about their work. They were doing "public work" (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, 2013, p. 86) as youth citizens. While it was not directly connected to the completion of their community gardening project, I could see them developing and practicing skills they would need to use to complete the gardening project.

At the fourth YAC meeting, the youth continued to step into their citizenship. I used my notes and reflections on the previous instances where I noticed the members getting engaged in the work to re-structure my facilitation approach. At this meeting, rather than following a meeting agenda and spending time on discussion rather than action, I presented our entire time together as "work time." I guided an initial conversation to help them figure out what they would need to do to continue making progress on their project. Instead of assigning tasks for them to complete outside of the meeting as we had previously done, we jumped into completing the tasks as a group during the meeting itself.

> After discussing only 2 or 3 of the brainstorming questions, the conversation began naturally flowing. I asked them to make a few goals for things they wanted to complete before the end of the meeting. We decided to ask local businesses for seed donations.
>
> Some students started by looking up types of vegetables or flowers they could grow. A few others looked up stores that might donate seeds. As a group, they decided to write up a letter or email draft that they could use to solicit seed donations. I had William write the letter on poster paper and asked them guiding questions.
>
> They seemed at a loss for what to write in the letter initially, so I said, "Pretend I work for Home Depot. What would you tell me to make me want to donate seeds to you?" Saying it out loud and role playing helped them get the words flowing, and after about 20 minutes they had a pretty solid solicitation letter written out...
>
> Writing the letter also acted as a good reflection piece. I asked them questions like: What is the YAC? What is ACES? Why is ACES important? How does gardening fit into ACES? (Field Note Excerpt, 4/13/2017)

The YAC as a group wrote a full donation solicitation letter over the course of the meeting. They conducted research on logistics of gardening and discussed how they might incorporate learning about gardening into ACES classrooms at one of the program sites. The YAC members were growing into their roles as active and empowered citizens of ACES.

Reflection coupled with the action of doing the work—rather than talking about doing the work—resonated with the YAC members. Our conversation about the reason to do this work and the YAC's purpose led us back to a discussion about youth voice:

> I also talked about how powerful it was that they were creating programming for their peers. It seemed like that hadn't really occurred to them—they were simply reacting to a problem [the lack of outdoor activities for kids] they had identified and wanted to solve it. The fact that they were solving a problem for peers [the lack of youth voice in ACES programming] was new to them…. We also went back to talking about the achievement gap, and how when programs or curriculums are created for someone not with someone, they are problematic. That helped them understand why we as ACES staff felt it was important for youth to be involved in creation of program. (Field Note Excerpt, 4/13/2017)

At the end of that meeting, I asked the YAC members what they needed from me to continue the energy from the meeting and keep making progress. I wanted to create a sense of accountability for all of us as a team. I agreed to start coming to the before-school ACES program many of them attend as students so we would have extra time to work on the project. I also agreed to shift the majority of our communication from text and email to Snapchat, as that was the form of communication they preferred to use.

Over the following weeks, I was able to stay in touch with the entire group through a Snapchat group message and to spend more time with students in small groups and 1:1 during

the before-school program. They were independently engaged in developing ideas for lesson plans tied to gardening, soliciting donations of seeds to plant, and learning about resources within the school that they could use for the project.

At the group's final official meeting, I followed the same model as the previous one, allotting "work time" to create their curriculum for the bulk of the two hours. I created structure by planning an intentional warm-up activity that got them engaged in teaching their fellow YAC members and used reflection on that to segue into conversations about leadership and challenges they may face when teaching their curriculum to their peers.

> I felt like some members were still looking to me for guidance while others were taking on stronger leadership roles within the group. For most of the time I was still coaching and guiding the students through most tasks, but always through intentional question-asking and sharing a wide range of ideas than through providing solutions. I found that much of my role was making sure their ideas would be feasible in the limited time left in the school year and challenging them to really think about what they were committing to do: Would they really want to teach their peers for an hour every day? What kind of preparation would that take? Can you commit to being at program that many days? What if we chose a few specific days to do this curriculum? (Field Note Excerpt, 5/11/2017)

During the meeting the members read over existing school gardening curriculum, adapted it to their timeline, and wrote or made plans to write a few lessons of their own. I coached them through the process of developing a calendar and identifying tasks for each member to do, whether or not they would be able to be in the classroom. They created a plan for the last four weeks of the school year with lessons on gardening once each week and time dedicated to watering and measuring the plants students would grow each program day. Members will have a variety of roles: teaching peers lessons on gardening, leading team-building activities, providing behavior support, and writing lesson plans.

To close, I proposed that we do a quick reflection on the semester thus far but that we hold a celebration at the end of the year once the project was completed. I asked the students what they had found most challenging or surprising about the process and what they were most looking forward to:

> Most of the students said they were surprised that we actually made progress and were going to complete a project. They were proud of how far the group had come since the first meeting trying to come up with a topic to address. One student said the field trip to the capitol stood out to him as a learning experience. One said that she was most looking forward to teaching their curriculum. A lot of them mentioned that while it had been hard to come to all of the meetings, they wished there had been more because we didn't have the chance to work together as much as they would have liked. It seemed that they were still processing their progress and the impact of their work, as reflections were relatively surface-level and didn't touch on personal skills or development; rather, they focused on tangible tasks they had completed and group experiences. I will use this to inform the 1:1 conversations I have with students to hopefully push them to reflect more deeply after the process concludes.
> (Field Note Excerpt, 5/11/2017)

7. Celebrating, reflecting on, evaluating, and improving on what was done

The YAC project is an ongoing one, and thus celebration, reflection, and evaluation are ongoing as well. As an experiential educator, I included opportunities for reflection in as many activities as I could. Celebration was incorporated for small victories, like having a good meeting turnout, and larger ones, like completing a donation request letter as a team. All YAC members will have a 1:1 meeting with me after the end of the school year to do a self-reflection and evaluate their participation in the group as well.

Formal reflection and evaluation will take place over the summer, as YAC members who opt to continue involvement will take on leadership roles and continue the work the students

started during the third YAC meeting toward restructuring the YAC to be increasingly youth-created and youth-led.

As a facilitator, I evaluated my practice after every meeting or interaction to reflect upon what worked and what fell flat. Over the course of the program, I adjusted my pedagogy and facilitation style to adapt to the group.

8. What to do next?

The question, "What to do next?" is one that the members have started to think about and discuss informally and more formally through guided reflection. Staff are also spending time thinking about how to further involve YAC members in leadership, from hiring decisions to helping create and deliver curriculum. Over the course of the summer, I will work with returning YAC members to further define what their goals are for the group and as individuals engaged in civic youth work and continue to shift decision-making power to the young people.

9. Working on the issue

There are various ways members can continue involvement in a civic youth work group: "Individuals can 'buy-in' again by staying on and staying in the group. The group can continue as the same group, or the group as an issue group can continue and some or all of the current members leave, thus keeping open a space for working on that same issue. Or both the group and the members can be new—even when the issue space seems to be the same" (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, 2013, p. 88). It is likely that the YAC will continue with some returning members

taking leadership roles. Additional ACES 8th grade students will be recruited to join as well. While it is unlikely that the group will continue its focus on community gardening, the group will continue building space for youth voice in ACES programming in new youth-led ways.

10. Spreading the word

Similarly, there are various ways to make civic youth work known: "whether by photographs, news stories, videos or voice, face-to-face, and electronically transmitted, produced by the group and/or by others, the civic youth worker has a responsibility to the youth in the group, to their work on the issue, to a larger public, to a democratic culture, and to the issue as such" (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, 2013, p. 88). Sharing the YAC's work was incremental over time: initially, I reported on their progress internally to other ACES staff. Word spread further when they visited the capitol and engaged both with an ACES board member and with elected officials. As an organization, ACES shared information about the YAC and its work with donors and partners through social media and blog posts. As the community gardening project took shape, I brought in other ACES program staff to work more closely with the YAC members.

As in many other facets of the program, "spreading the word" is twofold: we share the story of the YAC as a group working to increase youth voice in ACES programming as well as the story of a group working to address the lack of outdoor opportunities for students through community gardening.

IV. Conclusions

Through pairing field notes, examples, and reflections from facilitation of the YAC over the course of the spring semester with the ten step model provided in *Civic Youth Work* (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, 2013), this paper demonstrates that civic youth work, while traditionally conducted in a public and political space, can be adapted to be conducted within a private nonprofit organization to empower program participants. Rather than youth citizens of a city or state "doing citizenship" by engaging in civic work publicly, YAC members were engaged as participant citizens of their organization by engaging in civic-inspired work within the private organization.

In my own practice, I refined my approach to civic youth work and my personal pedagogy. Over the course of the program, I drew from VeLure Roholt and Baizerman, van Manen, Dewey, and Jackson to inform my practice as a youth worker and as a civic youth worker specifically. Navigating the balance between envisioning YAC members as current citizens rather than "citizens-in-training" (ibid, 2013, p. 26) while recognizing that many YAC members had not had the opportunity to exercise their citizenship was especially challenging. In many instances, my efforts to give the YAC members agency were not initially successful because I did not couple that freedom with sufficient support and structure. Expecting the youth to complete tasks independently outside of meetings, form a cohesive team while gathering together only once per month, and engage in civic action without having done so before did not set the program up for success. In my initial desire to give the YAC members full agency, I essentially prevented them from enacting their citizenship effectively because I did not provide enough support. Over the course of the program, through reflection on my own practice, I identified ways to balance providing input and guidance as an experienced citizen with giving

YAC members freedom to make decisions and step into their leadership as they gained confidence.

In its current state, the YAC has created avenues for young people within ACES to use their voices to create change in the organization. However, I do not argue that the YAC has fully succeeded in empowering young people as citizens within ACES. The work is not complete. While significant progress was made, there is even more significant work yet to be done. As a pilot program, the YAC achieved goals set forth by ACES staff and goals set forth by the members themselves. My practice aligned with the values and vision set forth at its inception. The group identified a problem, created a project to solve it, and did the project. More importantly, however, the YAC began to establish a space in ACES for youth "citizenship" within the organization that will continue to be built over future program sessions. The YAC members got a taste of citizen/participant empowerment in a youth program and began to explore the role of the empowered citizen/participant, but have yet to fully step into that empowerment. The pilot session of the YAC, through its successes, failures, and challenges, set members up to continue the work in the future to further engage with ACES as empowered participants in the program.

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