
ORGANIZING KIDS FOR CHANGE

a brief introduction

to the Young Activists Network

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The Young Activists Network (YAN) is an initiative that aims at organizing youth from low-income areas to become agents of change in their neighborhood. Young people usually have the time, the energy, the will, the basic skills, and the right to participate and help improve the quality of life in the places where they live. What they lack is appropriate space, support and recognition. YAN addresses those issues by helping transform existing community technology centers into community empowering spaces that offer the basic technical and human resources necessary to foster sustainable youth-led social change.

By working in partnership with existing initiatives and by focusing on youth participation, concrete community challenges, and contextualized uses of technology, we believe that YAN can help youth and adults involved with local community centers to organize themselves better, become aware of new possibilities, share experiences, and build the synergy required for deep and positive social impact that is more akin to their needs and aspirations.

KEY ELEMENTS

The Young Activists Network helps develop projects that emphasize:

Youth participation. As part of YAN, youth should be actively involved in every step from framing the problem to be addressed to implementing the actual solution. Instead of using maps or other ready-made representations right from the beginning, we encourage young people to first externalize their own perceptions, identify variables that are meaningful to them, and only then seek for other sources of information. Adults may come up with themes and ideas, but those should always be presented as suggestions that could be chosen or not by the other participants of the team. The goal is to create an environment in which youth feel respected and encouraged to express their opinions.

Concrete neighborhood change. An ideal YAN project involves youth going out into the community, interviewing residents, visiting local organizations, taking pictures, building representations and, based on that, identifying personally relevant neighborhood challenges they would like to tackle. The emphasis is placed in a youth-generated plan to implement something concrete – the remodeling of a public space, the organization of a community event, the creation of a voluntary service – to address the issue. By focusing on the implementation of solutions to locally perceived challenges, YAN projects help participants go beyond discussion and information manipulation, deepen young people’s understanding of things that affect their lives, and open a space for youth to do something constructive about those issues.

Human connectivity. YAN projects provide direct opportunity for youth to internalize the values of teamwork. They also offer a meaningful context for youth and adults to work side-by-side with a common purpose. Moreover, by way of mentorship programs, visits to business and community organizations, presentations and other events, projects – and the network itself – may facilitate connections between the participants and people from different backgrounds,

expertise and social levels with whom they may otherwise not interact with in their daily lives.

Indeed, the local success of YAN depends directly on the interaction and collaboration of the people involved. Although challenges may be similar, sites differ in terms of structure, expertise and resource availability. The strength of the network comes from recognizing the value of diversity at all levels and providing a fertile soil in which both complementary and reinforcing connections can grow.

Contextualized use of technology. Even though projects are not technology-driven, they should provide an appropriate context for youth to learn about digital tools and explore how they can be combined with other materials and social support towards the creation of things that are important to their lives. In fact, through the development of their projects, young people may realize that they do not necessarily need digital tools to better their communities. However, they may also realize that the wise use of those tools may greatly enhance the development of their ideas.

Story-telling. In addition to enacting community change, a central tenet of YAN includes the production of a video (or some other compelling form of documentation) to reflect the motivation, the process, the outcomes and the lessons learned with their project. These videos and other media will be available at the YAN website to extend the reach of the ideas and promote discussion. Moreover, they will serve as personal souvenirs that kids can reference when talking about their accomplishments.

Recognition. The end of the project is signified with a community celebration party organized for kids to tell the stories of their projects and share the inspiration with youth and community members. That event also provides an opportunity to show the videos and recognize the efforts of everyone who contributed to the initiative.

Young Activists Network projects help promote...

Neighborhood and Self Awareness	Communication Skills	Social Activism Skills	Technical Skills	Constructive Attitudes Towards Self and Others
community maps, list of personal talents, personal social network	making presentations, organizing community events, participating in a team, phone solicitation	Identifying community needs, raising resources, interviewing, researching, leadership development, action planning, execution and documentation, accountability	recording and producing video, authoring text, designing graphics, communicating via email, digital photography	respect, collaboration, self-initiative, reflection, learning from one's own mistakes

WHERE WE ARE

At the end of 2002, as a first attempt to turn YAN's mission into reality, we organized a 5-week long workshop with kids from a Computer Clubhouse located in Charlestown (MA). Although that initiative produced some interesting outcomes – with kids talking about their neighborhood and contributing to a local community organization – a couple of structural issues prevented us from addressing some of the sustainability and participation elements that lie at the core of YAN.

In January 2003, instead of having a canned workshop to be replicated at other sites, we decided to follow a more decentralized and bottom-up approach. Beginning with a selected group of Computer Clubhouses, we started the development of a mutually supportive community technology center network based on the sharing of experiences and the collaborative construction of appropriate tools and practices.

To date, we have 10 different Clubhouses from 7 different countries (Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, India, Mexico, Philippines, US) developing locally relevant projects such as, among other things, planting trees along side a road, cleaning up polluted creeks, creating posters for sexual awareness, recording stories for children, and organizing a neighborhood campaign against violence.

Over the next couple of months our major goals are to strength the existing network and prepare for growth. More specifically, we are planning to foster more interaction among existing sites, implement new tools to make it easier for youth to document and share their projects, organize a group of volunteers to support YAN, and connect with organizations that are doing either similar or complementary work.