Youth Perspectives on Youth Voice

“The importance of youth voice lies in one simple idea: engagement. With the power of engagement, you can accomplish anything.” — Siddharth Damania

“It’s hard to raise your voice sometimes. Whether it’s about something that you close inside or a worldwide concern, speaking out can be hard. In CTT, we understand that in order to have peace and acceptance, we must first have understanding.” — Tegan Carr, CTT student actor*

“In order for a learning process to be effective, adults should recognize what appeals to different youth. This can be done by listening to the new ideas they bring to the table.” — Farnaaz Farzanehkia

“Youth voice benefits both youth and adults. It gives adults a youth perspective and allows youth a chance to present their ideas.” — Matthew Amys

“CTT…gives me a chance to get my voice heard. It also give me the chance to hopefully change some young people’s lives.” — Mari Anderson-Mann, CTT student actor

“We create new and innovative ideas. You give to the youth, and the youth will give back to you.” — Geoffrey Gill

*Central Touring Theater

Youth Voice: Indicators Checklist

As the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice emphasize, an exemplary program infuses youth voice into every aspect of the service-learning experience. Each of the standards is supported by accompanying “indicators.” The following ideas build off the five indicators for youth voice, listed below.

Youth Voice Standard

Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.

Quality service-learning ...

☐ Engages youth in generating ideas during the planning, implementation, and evaluation process.
  — Brainstorming
  — Picture prompts
  — Written prompts
  — Circle process
  — Wall of words
  — Imaging the future
  — Role-playing
  — KWL Charts (What do we know? What do we want to know? What have we learned?)
  — Pair/share
  — Youth-led reality-checks

☐ Involves youth and adults in creating an environment that supports trust and open expression of ideas.
  — Team-building activities
  — Idea or question box
  — Collectively established ground rules
  — Regular reflection (individually, in pairs, or groups)

☐ Promotes acquisition of knowledge and skills to enhance youth leadership and decision-making.
  — Pre-service training
  — Community asset-mapping
  — Role-playing
  — Youth passions lists
  — Leadership role rotations
  — Feedback interviews

☐ Involves youth in the decision-making process throughout the service-learning experiences.
  — Agenda-setting
  — Action-planning
  — Meeting-facilitation
  — Dot-voting
  — Fist-to-Five
  — Circle Process

☐ Involves youth in evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the service-learning experiences.
  — Evaluation design
  — Essential questions development
  — Rubric development
  — SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)
  — Survey creation
  — Checklist development
  — Self-evaluation
  — Pre- and post-testing
  — Data collection, analysis, and presentation

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## Youth Voice and Consensus-Building

Incorporating youth voice throughout the service-learning cycle can be simplified with the following consensus-building technologies. Remember that consensus-building doesn’t mean universal agreement. Instead, it relies on all participants contributing their perspectives so that individual concerns are addressed, and participants become more comfortable with a decision. The following tools, offered by NYLC staff members, can foster democratic expression of youth voice in consensus-building.

### Fist-to-Five
Whenever a group is approaching a decision, “Fist-to-Five” can help poll the group to determine peoples’ opinions. To use this technique, the facilitator states a decision the group may make and asks the members of the group to show their level of support by showing a fist or a number of fingers that corresponds to their agreement with the decision.

The more fingers shown, the stronger they support the proposal at-hand, from a single finger indicating a desire to continue discussion, to five fingers indicating full endorsement of the idea. Anyone showing fewer than three fingers has the opportunity to express their concerns, and the group should work to address them. A fist signifies a block or no vote, signifying that the person needs to talk more about the proposal and requires changes for it to pass.

Groups can continue to use the Fist-to-Five process until they achieve consensus (a minimum of three fingers or higher) or determine they cannot reach consensus and move on to the next issue.

### Dot-Voting or Dotocracy
In dot-voting, participants express their preference for one or more ideas among a number of choices. Ideas are drafted and posted, and every member is given the same number of dots. Generally, the number of dots per person should be fewer than the total number of ideas to vote on, but the precise number can vary considerably. Each person then allocates dots as they choose among the various ideas. They can award an idea any number of dots from zero to all of their dots. More dots indicates more support, so an idea that someone feels very strongly about might receive all of their dots.

Dot-voting can be used to make a final decision or merely to direct a group’s discussion to focus only on ideas that have widespread support. This process helps minority viewpoints be seen and heard, and offers a clear visual way to determine which ideas have the most support within a group. Also, it requires participants to get up, move around, and look at all the ideas, which helps engage kinesthetic learners.

While this exercise is typically done using colored, adhesive dots, alternative “dots” can be used, including marbles, candy, post-its, etc. Different colors can also be used to signify the preferences of different groups (i.e., one color for youths and one color for adults to see whether the two groups value different ideas).

### Circle Process
In the circle process, participants seated in a circle are able to foster a respectful, egalitarian climate for sharing with and listening to others. It is a way for everyone involved to be both a teacher and a learner, a giver and a receiver. The act of speaking using the circle can be a very empowering process for participants as well as a healing activity because of the experience of being listened to, and of being heard.

The circle leader (often called a circle “keeper” – as in “housekeeper”) holds a physical object called a “talking piece.” Only when holding the talking piece does one talk; otherwise circle participants listen. The circle-keeper poses the question, and passes the talking piece to the person on his or her left, who addresses the question and when finished, passes it on to the next person. This simple process provides a logical way to take turns.

The circle-keeper helps set the tone of respectful listening and may start off the circle with a few ground rules such as: No talking unless holding the talking piece; everyone has a right to feel comfortable and can decide to pass on the talking piece without talking; anyone who is uncomfortable may choose to leave the circle. Sometimes, after the participants have become an effective group, the talking piece may be simply placed in the middle of the circle.

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All Lift materials are based in the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, available at www.nylc.org/standards.