

Learning to Lead

Building on Young People's Desire to "Do Something"

New Designs For Youth Development

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“Do Something” is an organization that seeks to provide youth and young adults with skills and resources needed to improve their communities and promote social justice. In observing the program, the authors focused on three areas: how the Do Something participants developed attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed for civic empowerment and action; whether the model is effective; and the challenge of maintaining a focus on social justice.

PRESERVING and promoting democracy is an increasingly common concern for those focusing on community youth development. Rationales for educating young people to be involved in improving society stem from several related indicators of a troubling trend. First, U.S. census data show that voting—what some see as a baseline measure of civic participation—has declined by as much as 14 percent in the past ten years. In presidential elections, just half of registered voters actually vote. These figures drop dramatically for local elections. School Board elections, for example, often draw no more than five percent of eligible voters to the voting booths. Young adults have the lowest participation rates. Only 33 percent of those between 18 and 25 voted in the last presidential election!¹

Second, apathy and alienation among youth and young adults have contributed to a new cynicism about the potential for change. The sense of powerlessness—that little can be done to address the social and economic problems of their communities—is pervasive. The loss of faith in the political process as a means for change among the entire population has hit youth particularly hard.

Third, sociologists and political scientists are quick to point out the shift that results from a sense of powerlessness: a shift from an outward focus on societal engagement and commitment to an inward focus on individualism and commercialism. Rather than working together to solve social problems, solutions are sought that attempt instead to contain them. Thus, for example, prison construction has become one of the leading growth industries in the nation. Youth forming their own beliefs about and commitments to political participation do so within a climate dominated by these trends towards indifference.

Educating Against Indifference: The Do Something Model For Developing Leadership Skills, Compassion, and Commitments to Social Justice

If apathy and a sense of powerlessness are obstacles facing those who would like to see youth take part in bettering society and promoting social justice, then the kind of education that promotes both a vision for change and knowledge of how to pursue that vision is a possible remedy. To better understand this possibility, we spent the past two years studying a community youth development and civic leadership curriculum implemented in Newark, New Jersey. The curriculum we observed was developed by “Do Something,” an organization that seeks to empower youth and young adults with the skills and resources they need to improve their communities². The program focuses directly on young people's ability to envision change and their capacity to lead. Do Something has been running these courses in several cities for five years as part of a broader effort to promote youth leadership and activism in both school and community settings in Newark, New Jersey, Boston, Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, Illinois.

We observed the program on over 40 occasions and conducted more than 25 interviews with staff and students at both the beginning and end of their course. We examined the ways this community-based youth development and leadership education program served to foster democratic participation. Three questions focused our inquiry:

- How does the Do Something model structure opportunities to develop the attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed for civic empowerment and action?
- Is this model effective?
- What obstacles and challenges threaten efforts to teach youth to promote social justice?

The Do Something leadership curriculum, designed for teenagers and young adults, aims to "train young leaders...with the skills, community knowledge, inspiration, and access to other leaders and resources so that they can effectively take a long-term, comprehensive approach to improve the community." The course provides youth with opportunities to learn while engaging them in actions that enrich the surrounding community. Participants work with their peers and established community leaders.

Core I, the introductory level course, meets weekly in two and a half hour class periods over a ten to twelve week term. It focuses primarily on developing participants' *attitudes* (their motivation to be community leaders), on helping participants develop a repertoire of basic *skills* (including strategic planning, public speaking, and computer proficiency), and on expanding course members' *knowledge* (such as how to distinguish between the root causes and the symptoms of problems or how to balance commitments to compassion and justice). Participants study principles of effective management and practice leadership skills. Course topics include the following:

- The power of youth to effect change

- Balancing compassion and justice
- Public speaking
- Constructive criticism
- Fundraising
- Computer skills
- Community history

After successfully completing the first course, participants may enroll in higher level courses focused on education, government, spirit, health, and business. Participants who attend the requisite number of course meetings, contribute office supplies to the DS office, and provide dinner for one evening's class, graduate in a festive ceremony. They are awarded a graduation certificate and applauded by their families and friends.

The Do Something model is unique. Most community-based youth development programs whose aim is to develop civic commitments and capacities emphasize community service experiences rather than developing young people's capacities as community leaders. These other models assume that commitments to community change and abilities to foster change will develop naturally, through involvement in particular community service efforts. From what we have seen, this is not necessarily the case.³ Skill development often requires systematic and sustained attention. In addition, in order to leverage the full power of community service experiences, these experiences must be connected to analysis and reflection so that they can inform participants' broad understandings of community development priorities and practices.

Through our study of the design and impact of Do Something's model, we highlight the potential benefits of their alternative strategy for developing effective and committed citizens while also considering some of the challenges those adopting this approach may confront.

Attitudes Towards Collective Work and Community Action

A simple stroll from the Newark train station through downtown to the Do Something Newark "House" provides ample evidence of the struggles this historic city faces. Near the modern office development designed to rejuvenate the city, a two-story high sign proclaims "Welcome to Newark—The Renaissance City." Only a few blocks away, however, one encounters the kind of urban blight that plagues so many failed efforts at change. Signs on abandoned, boarded-up buildings read "No More Promises," "Save Our Hood," and "We Want Action."

Arriving at the Newark Do Something headquarters—an old and beautiful, slightly dilapidated, three-story brownstone on James Street—those who want action may be given some hope: "Take Initiative All Ye Who Enter" reads the placard on the door. The door is answered by a 15 year old volunteer who is also on the telephone taking a message. Behind him are rows and rows of mailboxes with names of course participants, volunteers, staff, and other community members. Upstairs one can hear some of the children of course participants playing while their parents get ready for the beginning of class. Through the foyer, in the kitchen, in a frenzy of activity, laughs, and chatter, several leadership course members are preparing dinner for themselves and their cohort on this Wednesday night, Core I, Do Something leadership class.

Do Something Newark's Core I course focuses first and foremost on developing participants' commitment to community development and to doing it collectively. As a starting point, the curriculum and the class activities help participants to learn about themselves and one another. As one instructor noted, "half of social justice is 'social,' so the group must get to know one another well." The classroom and house environment is shaped by both the formal curriculum and the purposeful structuring of informal space and interactions to encourage self-reflection and build community. For example, the leadership course described earlier began with an explanation of course members' responsibilities.

"Come on time," one instructor implored; "class time is sacred—once a class session has begun, you will have to wait for a break to be admitted." "When the doorbell rings," a second instructor explained, "whoever is closest to the door answers it. If the phone rings, answer it...There are signs giving you an idea of what to say...It's more a family atmosphere that we try to create than an office atmosphere. We want you to be comfortable, but with being comfortable comes responsibility. There are no paid staff here."

Students in this Core I class—excitement palpable in the packed, relatively small room—learn that each of them now has a mailbox in the house, that they can receive faxes and phone calls in the house, that they can make phone calls (not long distance) and that with these privileges come the shared responsibility of making sure the house runs smoothly. The tradition of group dinners and the students' shared obligations for providing these meals and caring for the house illustrate how these informal aspects of the curriculum help establish social relationships and bonds among participants.

Formal pedagogical activities also aim at building connections among the students. For example, in an autobiography exercise, the instructor asks the group to draw pictures with markers on huge sheets of paper to represent their life story. Without using words, they are to start from birth and go through what brought them to the leadership course. After half an hour of drawing, participants present their stories to the group. Similarly, in a popular name game, students make up an adjective (which must start with the same letter as their name) to describe themselves. For all the remaining sessions of the course, the room becomes populated by people named in couplets: Gabby Greta, Loud Latifah, Gregarious Greg, Liberated Larry, and so on.

Like many youth groups, Do Something seeks to shape participants' attitudes towards each other and to create a sense of belonging. The aim for the leadership courses, however, is bigger: the sense of belonging and commitment that comes from working together is directed towards changing society. As one participant observed, "I feel more hopeful about being able to build community because of the community I feel I've become a part of here." The curriculum readies students to take action by helping them to develop the attitudes and identities of community leaders. One young woman reported, for example, that "the leadership course [gave us] a reminder that, in order for your community to improve, you have to take some lead, you can't sit back and wait for somebody else to do it." In this regard, the moniker "Do Something" provides a provocative and compelling hook. Another student noted that "the title alone is a very positive influence, it's a wake-up call. And the other side of it is that everybody can do something. A lot of times we get so caught up in what we can't do, that we lose sight of what we can do. And I think just that statement alone, that says we can all do something."

Almost all of the students we interviewed expressed similar sentiments: "'Do Something affirms people's inclination to all come together and not just keep talking about it. [To] put action to it.'" The program places a premium on participants' "sincere desire to be a part of the solution as opposed to just sitting back and complaining." It moves people to act: "I was doing nothing and I saw the caption 'Do Something' and I said, I need to do something and I called."

Skills Needed for Community Change

"Good attitude," as any experienced community organizer will point out, is not enough. Community development requires more than motivation—a desire to "do something"—it also requires skills. The Core I course introduces students to a range of skills intended to facilitate their involvement in serious community change. Since the Do Something course curriculum is tied directly to community action, these skills are concrete and immediately applied. Participants in the courses noted that "people want change, but they don't know what to do about it" and "a lot of people have visions for the future, but...they don't know [how to] help." Participants learn about fundraising and strategic planning, for instance; they practice computer skills, public speaking, petitioning, and constructive criticism.

The way they study public speaking nicely illustrates their learning process. For practice in public speaking, each student chooses a story from the book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*⁴ or from their own repertoire to tell to the class and a video camera. Everyone views the videos together, offering constructive criticism of each speaker's performance. One gentleman memorized a passage from *As You Like It*. Someone else used a short story as a starting place for a speech about how important it is to live and act from the heart. The lessons of the stories and the styles in which participants choose to tell them vary immensely, but each constitutes an important opportunity to speak in front of a group of peers about something that matters to them.

Students also gain skills in preparing speeches. They discuss eye contact, enunciation, holding attention, and voice control, for example. Significantly, the public speaking assignment seems to have contributed to students' sense of community as much as it built particular presentation skills. As participants made themselves vulnerable, standing and speaking in front of the rest of the group, they appeared to enhance their feelings of trust and mutual obligation.

Students Examine Root Causes

As students catch up on the week's events since they last met, the instructor draws a dandelion on the board. With unrefined but effective artistry, the instructor draws the dandelion's face to the sun and its roots in the ground. Turning to the class, she says,

Those of you who have gardened know that if dandelions aren't pulled out by the roots, they tend to grow back even more prolifically. This is the problem we face

in trying to change things. We can see the symptoms of problems, like we see the dandelion flower itself, but we don't always see the bigger, root causes. What we need to make society better is the ability to work at both the symptom and the root level of the problem. And we need knowledge of the entire issue at hand to be able to tell the difference.

Attitude and skills, while important elements of effective leadership education, are rendered useless and potentially detrimental to community change, unless they are accompanied by a thorough knowledge of the issues facing the community, their history, their causes, and strategies for addressing them. Highlighting the need for knowledge, one student noted that, "if you don't know [the issues], you're not going to be able to understand how to change things...Lack of knowledge, or, for a better term, ignorance, is a disease in this country."

The Do Something leadership curriculum includes attention to knowledge of community history and affairs as well as issue identification and analysis. Students learn, for example, about important historical events in their community, about prior attempts to address difficult problems, and—as the gardening metaphor depicts—about the difference between focusing on the root causes of problems and focusing on their symptoms.

This last concern receives extensive attention during the Core I course and was frequently mentioned by participants when we asked them about ways the program altered their thinking about community change. In the Do Something curriculum, acts of compassion (which may help individuals cope with problems, but do not address their causes) are distinguished from service toward justice (which addresses the root causes of problems). In response to the problem of hunger, for example, core members focused on compassion might suggest a food drive while those oriented towards justice might work to promote "Living Wage" legislation, which would raise the minimum wage to a level consistent with the cost of supporting a family.

To deepen their understanding of community issues, students examine their root causes. These discussions are often accompanied by stories and metaphors that distinguish between compassion and justice, as one instructor illustrates in this story:

The people of a village are bathing in the river one day when they find a baby floating in a basket. One of the villagers takes the baby out and someone cares for it. The next day two babies are found in the river. Two villagers rescue the two babies and care for them. The next day there are three babies and so on until the whole village is taking babies out of the river and caring for them one by one. Finally someone says "why don't we look up the river to see why so many babies need saving?" Many villagers are against this idea. "Who will care for them while we're going up the river?" they ask.

This story illustrates the need for both compassion and justice. "It's like a rowboat," the instructor explains; "one oar is compassion and the other is justice. If you don't keep both going, you move in a circle."

While broad knowledge about community issues and affairs are crucial components to the Do Something model for leadership training, the attention to root causes of problems

distinguishes Do Something from many similar programs.⁵ Fearing a strong stance on social policy that might frighten away funders and even participants, many programs seek "neutral" projects that almost always serve the oar of compassion. The instructors of the Do Something courses did not hesitate to take on potentially controversial issues. As one instructor explained, "the etymology of 'radical' gives us 'root': one who gets to the root of a problem." Both the degree to which controversial issues are raised and the way they are discussed, however, is more a result of individual instructors' political leanings than a foundational piece of the program. Do Something (as the name implies) emphasizes action over apathy, but does not specify a direction for activism. As we explain below, this commitment to neutrality has costs as well as benefits.

The Challenge of Maintaining a Focus on Social Justice

The magic of the Do Something name is, in part, that it conveys the importance of activism over apathy without explicit mention of prespecified goals. Do Something literature, for example, notes that,

We're not telling you which side to pick, but we are telling you that if you don't act, someone else will. And you'll suffer the consequences. Are you angry about welfare 'reform'? Pro-life? Pro-choice? Do you want better housing or schools in your community? Are you concerned about the environment? Figure out your agenda. There are people out there like you; find them.

At the same time, as we mentioned earlier, Do Something's "content neutral" character also presents a problem. Young people will need help developing a meaningful vision for community development. Do Something and other groups that emphasize action rather than a particular set of priorities, or a clear vision for change, risk orienting participants towards providing random and often superficial actions. As a course instructor noted, having a clear vision is what separates those who successfully effect change from those who maintain the status quo. "It's like jumping into a moving river," he explained in a class session on compassion and justice, "If you have no direction, you will move only in the direction that society goes."

It is also important to note that, while the Do Something curriculum appeared effective, participants rarely achieved mastery. Students, for example, spent two or three sessions working on computer skills or public speaking or learning about fundraising or about their community's history; our study found that the Do Something curriculum provided a valuable introduction to leadership issues rather than systematic development of leadership abilities. The challenge facing community youth development organizations is finding ways to keep young people involved for more than brief episodes. Developing young people's skills and knowledge will require their sustained involvement.

The name Do Something begs the question, "Do what?"; programs that seek to teach young people to pursue social justice will, ultimately, need to answer that question. For example, when we asked course participants what they would do to improve their community, we heard pat answers that would draw few objections from any citizens: "Clean up the garbage in the streets," "Stop the gangs," "Improve the schools." While these are laudable goals, participants were rarely able to identify root causes of problems or strategies that might bring substantive change (they had few ideas regarding ways to pursue the justice side of the equation).

Community development requires careful thinking about goals, strategically chosen agendas, and sustained commitment. If supporting youths' ability to pursue social justice is an important goal, program directors must provide youth with opportunities to think carefully about specific strategies for achieving their goals and pushing for progress.

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Notes:

¹ For a more detailed look at voting statistics, and young people's declining involvement in civic affairs over the last few decades, see Kahne, Honig, and McLaughlin (1998), "The Civic Components of Community Youth Development," *New Designs for Youth Development*, 14 (3), 9-11.

² Do Something also runs a nationwide Kindness and Justice Challenge, a school-based character education and service learning program. They honor and provide financial support to recipients of the Brick Awards for Community Leadership: young leaders who are successfully working to build better communities. They also support Do Something Leagues through which teachers use curriculum and a year-round calendar of community-building activities to develop students' leadership capacities. For more information on these and other aspects of the organization visit their web site at www.dosomething.org.

³ Kahne, J. & McLaughlin, M.W. (1998). "Framing Issues for Policy and Practice Through Theory-Driven Evaluation." *New Designs for Youth Development*, 14 (1), 17-22.

⁴ *Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit*, compiled by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1993.

⁵ Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (1998). "Education for Action: Preparing Youth for Participatory Democracy." In Ayers, W., Hunt, J.A., & Quinn, T., eds. *Teaching for Social Justice*, New York: The New Press.