Good youth programs help teens learn to think not just logically, but strategically

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Teens develop strategic thinking skills in youth activities that they rarely learn in the classroom, says a new University of Illinois study of 11 high-quality urban and rural arts and leadership programs.

"In school you learn how government is supposed to work. In youth leadership programs, youth learn how government actually works. They also learn how to influence it," said Reed Larson, a professor in the U of I's Department of Human and Community Development.

Strategic thinking involves more than logic; it involves learning to anticipate the disorderly ways that events unfold in the real world, he said.

Whether a teen is writing a computer program, planning an event, or creating an art production, their work rarely unfolds in a straight line. Youth working on these types of projects learn to brainstorm and plan for unexpected twists and turns, Larson said.

Larson followed the development of strategic thinking in 712 interviews with 108 ethnically diverse high-school-aged teens. Six of the organizations studied were leadership programs that involved planning community activities, lobbying government agencies, or other activities. Five were arts and media arts programs in which the teens' work was often presented to the community.

According to the research by Larson and his colleague Rachel Angus, "In

these programs, youth learn to navigate paradoxes, catch-22s, and the strange dynamics of human affairs."

They learned that it's good to have a plan, but they also learned they need to have backup plans. And they began to understand the thinking of the people they were trying to influence, he said.

"During adolescence, higher-order circuits of the brain are developing," Larson said. "Teens become able to think at more advanced levels about the peculiar dynamics of the real world. They become able to strategize. But they learn this only if they have the right experiences."

The research suggests that skills learned in youth programs transfer to other settings. Teens describe using their newfound strategic skills in school and elsewhere. They were better time managers, set goals, and made plans that took into account the things that could go wrong, he said.

Elena, now in college, looked back on her time with Youth Action. She said, "It definitely helped me be more critical and to understand my situation. Now I say, 'Well, this might work, this might not.'"

While conducting a fundraising campaign, the teen girls in Sisterhood said they had learned to anticipate and preempt their tendency to procrastinate. "We set a timeline for ourselves and consequences because we know how we are," one member said.

How did teens learn these strategic skills in youth programs? "Teens learn by thinking and talking through the demands in a situation," Larson said. "They often reported, 'I figured out that . . .,' 'I realized that . . .,' and 'I just thought about it and. . . .'

"In one program, a boy was working on an art project. Although

everyone around him was busy, he had stopped, prompting the others to ask him what he was doing. 'I'm thinking,' he told them. He had realized that thinking through scenarios would help him avoid dead ends," Larson said.

The best leaders of youth programs struck a balance between providing structure and assistance while allowing teens to strategize and maneuver through challenges on their own, he noted.

"The most effective leaders weren't charismatic types who pulled kids along with them, showing them what to do. They were more often self-effacing, leading from behind," he said.

These advisors were particularly good at redirecting youth without stifling them, a challenging task because teens have high expectations but little experience, he said.

"Leading from behind is an art. In some ways, it can be more difficult than classroom teaching," he said.

As the adolescent brain is developing, teens need to be given opportunities to develop their potential, he said.

"The best way for teens to acquire strategic thinking skills is to use them in working through real-life problems and situations," he said. "This study shows that good after-school programs provide a valuable context in which teens can learn to think strategically."

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