

Using Trained Observer Rating to Evaluate Youth Leadership Development

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Situation Statement

Youth organizations play an important role for youth participants to become engaged adult members of society by providing meaningful development opportunities. If youth leadership skills are not nurtured, communities run the risk of not having competent members who are familiar with the local culture to step into important roles for prosperity. Youth programs intend to stand in this gap to educate their youth about leadership and transferrable skills while helping them gain knowledge of professional and social opportunities.

Initially, an evaluation instrument was designed for Polk Vision's Youth Leadership Polk Program. This particular program did not have the capacity for enough trained volunteers to observe the students' progress. Furthermore, the program did not have a consistent approach to developing these youth leadership skills. Therefore, the evaluation instrument could not be utilized for their program. Since this instrument can be implemented in a variety of prepared programs, the 4-H Club in Hardee County adopted the evaluation instrument as a part of their programming for 2019 school year.

The Hardee County 4-H Special Interest Club (SPIN Club) is a recruitment effort in local schools to create awareness and interest in the youth program at their community extension office. In a pilot study, Jose Zayas, the Hardee County 4-H Agent, implemented the tool with this small group of students to see if they increased in the five skills while testing the relevancy of the tool in youth programs.

The essential skills to be measured in the project are creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and conflict management. Mastering these competencies develops employability and increases leadership capacity. The details of the curriculum or

activities within a youth program are not necessary to developing these skills. Any program can seek to foster an environment for growth in these areas no matter their curriculum focus.

Definition of Terms

The definitions of the five skills that will be observed have been developed based on Junior Achievement curriculum. However, the programs utilizing the tool are not required to implement this curriculum. These definitions are important to understand the administration of the evaluation tools and comprehending the overall goals of the curriculum.

1. **Creativity** – student shares their original or unique ideas that are implemented to effectively meet the goals of the activity.
2. **Critical Thinking** – student demonstrates understanding and deeper thought by asking reflective questions and evaluating ideas of their teammates.
3. **Collaboration** – student cooperates with their teammates while encouraging participation from all teammates to meet the goals of the activity.
4. **Communication** – student effectively shares their thoughts, questions, and ideas with teammates.
5. **Conflict Management** – student handles conflict fairly, positively, and calmly that involves themselves and/or teammates.

Literature Review

According to research, community-based organizations (CBO) can have a significant impact on youth development of skills and positive attitudes (McLaughlin, 2000). These organizations provide their constituents with meaningful experiences in order to understand their interests and how to better contribute to their community with those interests (McLaughlin,

2000). Students who participated in these CBOs were more likely to express hopefulness, personal value, and self-initiative (McLaughlin, 2000).

In a follow-up to this original study, majority of students involved in the CBOs observed were on positive pathways as a professional, parent, and community member (McLaughlin, 2000). Murphy and Johnson take it a step further saying that if there is an understanding of the skills and features of identity in youth leadership, the needs for adult leadership development are also better understood (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Students in programs with a priority of youth development have the accessibility to this growth and achievement. The purpose of this evaluation is to ensure that youth programs are implementing the most appropriate tools to support leadership capacity. If there are fitting evaluation tools, then programs are better positioned to improve their effectiveness.

Theoretical Framework

A Carnegie Foundation study that examined 120 youth-based organizations throughout the United States over a ten-year period. The results of this examination determined that there was a weighty disconnect between the youth leadership educational efforts and the actual experiences and needs of youth (Klau, 2006). From this lack of clarity, the Heifetz Framework was developed (Klau, 2006). The model of adaptive leadership clarifies the definition of leadership and creates relevancy to youth education (Klau, 2006).

A priority distinction in the Heifetz model of adaptive leadership is between authority and leadership as youth can have access to these leadership skills without the access to authority (Klau, 2006). The three pedagogies in Heifetz leadership education methodology are related to aspects of Junior Achievement curriculum. The first pedagogy is *Case-in-point Learning* to encourage students to discuss dynamics of the group in which the students are involved (Klau,

2006). The second pedagogy is *Below-the-neck* learning which provides students the opportunity to have hands-on experience leading in activity settings (Klau, 2006). *Reflective practice* is the final pedagogy in this model for which YLP would have the ability to do after each lesson (Klau, 2006).

Each of these pedagogies can be reflected in Junior Achievement curriculum and the observable leadership skills in this study. The behaviors listed in the evaluation tool can be used to measure the success of this framework for youth leadership education.

The pedagogies and related C skills:

- *Case-in-point Learning*: collaboration, communication, conflict management
- *Below-the-neck*: creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, communication
- *Reflective practice*: creativity, collaboration, critical thinking

The evaluation tool that employs direct observation was selected since this program will be focusing on youth subjects. Self-reporting in youth can be vulnerable to discrepancies (Razavi, 2001). If the independent and dependent variables are based on self-report, the validity of the experiment becomes susceptible to potential systematic response distortions, method variance, and the psychometric properties of questionnaire scales (Razavi, 2001). The organizations in the scope of this project were either using self-reporting surveys or no evaluation program at all.

This is believed to be a trend in many youth organizations due to the lack of research of effective practices or recommendations for evaluation tools. If youth programs are not implementing appropriate evaluation programs, they are missing their potential to improve their programs and to effectively impact their participants. Particularly with leadership development, longitudinal research beginning with youth would provide a deeper understanding of the

dynamic nature as a whole (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). The intention of this project is to fill this gap with an observational evaluation tool to support youth organizations to strengthen their programming and their participants. Furthermore, it is anticipated that these participants become more effective leaders and more active community members.

Instrument

The Five Cs of Youth Leadership

	1. Poor	2. Needs Improvement	3. Developing	4. Advanced	Students	Notes
CREATIVITY	Resists creating an original idea.	Willingly shares original ideas, but does not initiate the execution of those ideas.	Willingly executes original ideas whether they prove to be effective or not.	Share original ideas that effectively meet the goals of the activity.	A B C D E	
CRITICAL THINKING	Struggles to understand the complexities of the activity.	Asks relevant, clarifying questions, but does not understand the concept enough to evaluate or execute any ideas.	Evaluates ideas from their teammates and understands the activity, but does not reflect on ideas to improve.	Asks reflective questions, evaluates ideas of their teammates, and expresses clear understanding of the activity.	A B C D E	
COLLABORATION	Does not engage in the activity or show any interest in supporting their teammates.	Engages only some of their teammates, but leaves out teammates.	Participates in the activity, but does not actively encourage full participation from all teammates.	Cooperates with their teammates while encouraging participation from all teammates to meet the goals of the activity.	A B C D E	
COMMUNICATION	Isolates themselves from team discussions.	Rarely shares thoughts, questions, and ideas with teammates.	Shares thoughts, questions, and ideas with teammates with little clarity.	Effectively and clearly shares thoughts, questions, and ideas with teammates.	A B C D E	
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT	Avoids all conflict.	Handles conflict unfairly, negatively, and loudly between themselves and teammates or other teammates.	Referees conflict fairly, positively, and calmly, but avoids conflict when involves themselves.	Handles conflict fairly, positively, and calmly that involves themselves and/or teammates.	A B C D E	

Instrument Utilization

Based on observed behavior, a student will be scored with a 1, 2, 3, or 4. The number scores are associated with the definitions that are “poor,” “needs improvement,” “developing,” and “advanced” respectively. The scores for each student from the beginning and ending of the program will be compared to measure change.

Each evaluator expected to utilize the instrument will need to participate in a tool orientation. It is assumed that the evaluators to have experience with youth through education

background or previous volunteer activities. The definitions of the skills will be explained and discussed to ensure each evaluator is on the same page in regards to what behaviors warrant which score. It is imperative for program leadership to create a culture that values evaluation so the volunteers and staff take their role in it seriously.

Beyond familiarity with youth development, the purpose of the training is for evaluators to have a clear understanding of the skills the students are expected to develop over the course of the program. They will implement the pre- and post-tests by observing the students in group settings using consistent expectations of how each skill is defined. The scores provided by the evaluator will not be shown to students to ensure the evaluators the freedom to record honestly and fairly.

As aforementioned, the tool can be used within any curriculum. However, in order to observe the students appropriately there needs to be a group activity observed by the evaluators at the beginning and ending of the period of learning. The instrument is not designed for individualized work as most of the skills the skills require peer interaction. There is minimal restriction on what the group activity needs to be as long as they evaluator can observe interaction of the 5 Cs.

Pilot Test

The population consisted of the eight student participants in the Hardee County 4-H SPIN Club. The sample was five randomly selected learners. The students participated in the curriculum once a week for six weeks. In week one, the students participated in a group activity during which the 5 Cs can be observed. In week six, the same students were observed doing another group activity. These activities were relevant to the the content the students were learning and included interaction with their peers through discussion and applying the content as

a team. Specifically, they employed discussion and an experiential learning activity that reinforced their content while creating observable behaviors.

The purpose of the instrument is to see if the students improved their leadership skills in the duration of the program. The pilot test was to test whether or not the tool can be relevant and useful in youth programs even if they are not focused on leadership. Through social interactions and consequences, these skills can be nurtured.

The results from week one were compared to the results from week six. It was observed that each student participant improved their overall score in the cumulative 5Cs of Youth Leadership (Table 1). Each student was given initials only known by the observer. If their score was already the highest possible, they remained the same. According to the evaluation, students improved the most in Creativity (Table 2). Collaboration did not increase as all the participants began the program with advanced collaboration skills (Table 2).

Table 1

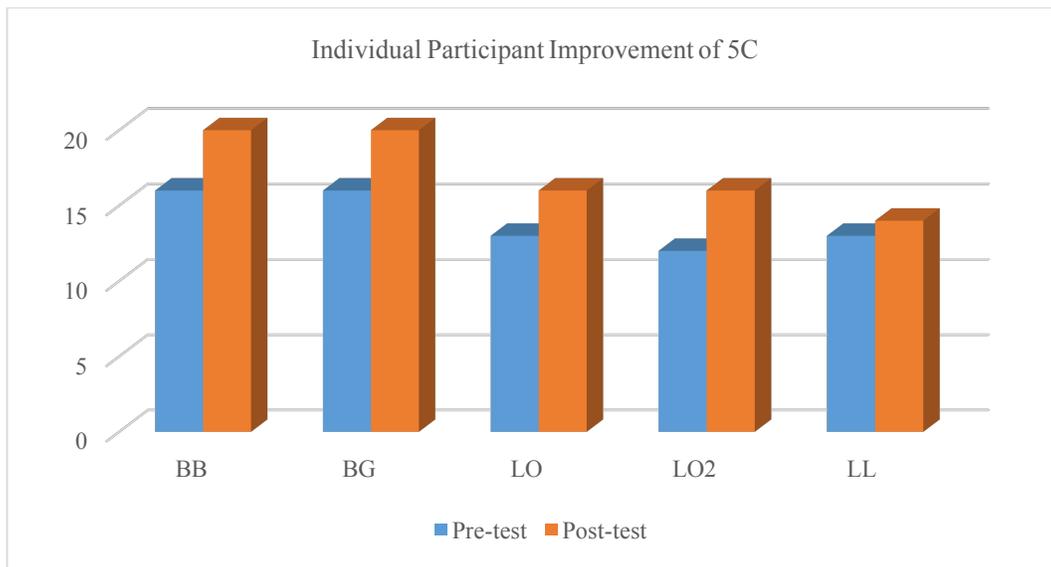
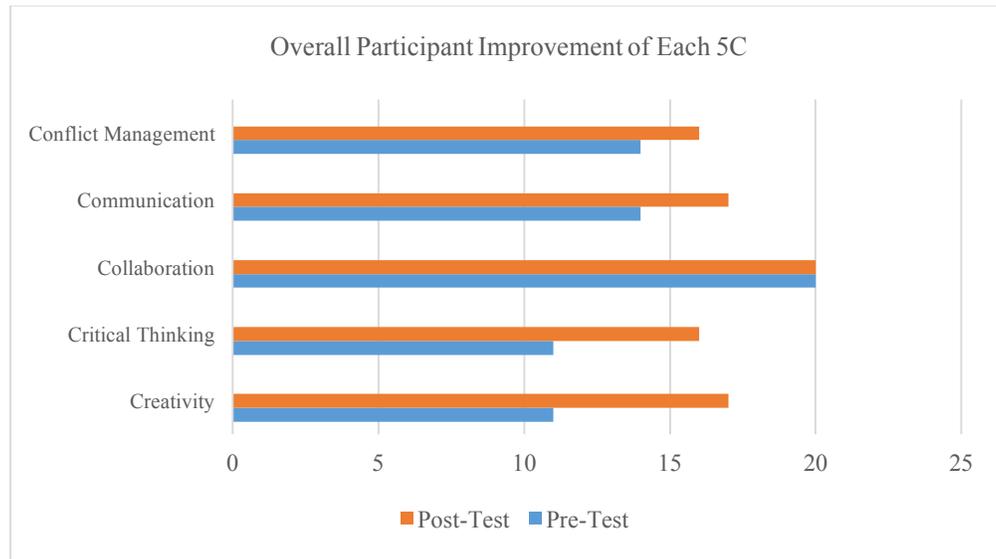


Table 2



The intention of the pilot test was to establish a baseline of performance for students and to gauge the appropriateness of this tool for youth programs. After the results of the evaluation were analyzed, a survey was given to the administrator of the evaluation instrument. According to their experience with the tool, it was very easy to understand and execute. The tool did not disrupt student participation or core content implementation. Furthermore, based on their experience with youth organizations, they believe this tool can be implemented in a variety of programs as the skills were relevant to youth leadership. The tool administrator intends to recommend use to their counterparts in their 4H programs, other 4H programs, and other youth-related organizations.

Recommendations for Utilization

If a community-based youth program wishes to utilize this instrument, there a few factors they must take into consideration based on lessons learned in this project. The interested program must determine they have the capacity to utilize the tool. This capacity includes enough

people to observe the students while the programming is being implemented in addition to prior training of the observers to ensure consistent ratings. The program should have a clearly established vision that defines their goals in a way that these tool's results will help determine effectiveness.

The first program that the instrument was intended for did not have a clear direction or vision for their youth program. Due to their inconsistency, they did not have a testable approach. Therefore, it was necessary to find a different program that had the established program that was ready to be evaluated. If a program does not have defined goals or established program, they may not be ready for a quantitative evaluation.

Due to the instability of an evaluation program in the first attempt, the pilot test was used to work out kinks of the instrument in a manageable setting before introducing to a larger group of students. The instrument has gained traction in a smaller group and is ready to be introduced to larger groups.

One of the most important aspect of The Five Cs of Youth Leadership Tool is its adaptability. Based on a program's goals, administrators can determine how this instrument can be useful to them. They can look back on how this tool has been used and adjust the tool if necessary. For example, if one of the Cs is not fitting to their program they can remove it from the evaluation.

Furthermore, evaluation needs to be a priority for the program. Leadership within the organization must foster a culture that values accountability for the long-term success of the program. It is understood these organizations are often spread thin and have pressing priorities for implementation. However, evaluation is a worthwhile investment to secure funds and keep an organization on track.

For the purposes of training evaluators to use this tool, it would be advantageous to video record the Cs in action. That way more evaluators have the ability to see what each skill looks like in a group activity. Videos would allow for capacity building as the training can be spread to many organizations. It is important to empower the program administrators with this instrument so they feel comfortable to implement it. If they are confident in their abilities to use it, they might be more likely to encourage their organization to adopt it and potentially pass it along to similar organizations.

Conclusion

Youth organizations are uniquely positioned to improve the quality of life for their participants and improve community development. If they nurture leadership skills in youth effectively, they make a positive investment in the future of their community. Youth who are meaningfully engaged in community programs have the opportunity to improve self-esteem, skills, and leadership capacity. Furthermore, youth who were invested in by community based organizations tend to set on more positive trajectories and become active leaders in their community.

Due to the lasting impact of these organizations, it is imperative to support them to do their job well. Which is why this project focused on developing an evaluation instrument to be utilized in organizations who serve youth participants. The Five Cs of Youth Leadership Tool was designed to be adaptable for a variety of programs to measure their ability to develop these skills in their participants not dependent on their priorities of curriculum. No matter the content a program is delivering, the 5Cs are essential to develop for leadership development and future employability.

The instrument proved to be effective to measure changes in behavior through observation. The implementation did not disrupt the learning environment and could be relevant to any youth programs. In order to utilize this tool, evaluation should be a priority of the program administration to ensure there is capacity for trained evaluators. Furthermore, a program must have a consistent and measurable direction. With these factors, the evaluation instrument is suitable for youth programs that want to make a lasting impact.

Youth leadership development is crucial for continued community improvement. Youth programs have the ability to propel communities in the right direction. Through observational evaluation, these programs can inspect their strengths and weaknesses. The better they know how to improve the more they can continue to effectively support youth leadership development and their community's prosperity.

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