What Young People Can Teach Themselves

BY JULIA SOMMER

In this section...

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SOME YEARS AGO several elite schools in New Delhi added a community service component to their graduation requirements. The deal went like this: If a high school student taught one illiterate Indian to read and write by springtime of the final year, he or she could graduate and go on to college. This forced act of good Samaritanism was supposed to prove that the student was a socially responsible young adult.

In April, throughout the city, herds of 17-year-olds appeared at school with street children or their domestic help in tow, each of whom would sit down to a rudimentary reading and writing exam. With heavy irony, the students' fates lay in the hands of their newly literate servants. Supposedly newly literate: Many students prided themselves on having beaten the system by bringing in servants who had long been literate, even if only barely. Among themselves, these wealthy teenagers sneered at the minority of goody-goodys who actually bothered to educate someone less fortunate than themselves.

Community service, internships, service learning, school to work, moral science – all jargon born in the idea that youth should develop a social conscience and act on it. The importance of cultivating social awareness (look at every major religion!) has bounced around from continent to continent at least since the Golden Rule. But only recently has the concept caught fever in the institutions where most youth spend the single largest chunk of time: schools. Nurturing values and providing opportunities for youth to "do good," once the domain of the family or spiritual institution, have now entered secular institutions of learning, although not always successfully, as students in New Delhi could smugly confirm.

A Clearer Path to Understanding

On the other hand, in the same city, an organization called Pravah advertises its activities in the same sort of prestigious private schools, and droves of high school and college

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students voluntarily give up their Saturdays and holidays to attend leadership and sensitivity-building workshops, eager to discuss and act on their nascent social awareness. Confused by the injustice and prejudice they see pervading society, these adolescents first work with Pravah – which means "flow" – to clarify their own values, then move on to internships where they offer their skills to rural nonprofit organizations. Two-thirds of the high school students in this program say they gain the skills to bring change in their society.

Why, with the same population of affluent urban teens, does one program fail and another one pass with flying colors? This section explores social entrepreneurs and institutions that develop in youth the habit of understanding and responding to social needs. The three entrepreneurs profiled here have built unique alliances with schools, governments and the various stakeholders within these institutions.

The very fact that organizations in their countries – Poland, Bangladesh and India – can turn young people into active civic participants, is new. In post-Communist Poland and in Bangladesh (where democracy is only seven years old), the political systems have only recently allowed people from all sectors the chance to change society. Class no longer dictates one's every waking moment (especially true in South Asia), and using idealism to defeat cynicism has become possible.

Raising awareness of social needs is not only possible, but imperative. As the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" widens, many privileged youth see less reason and opportunity to engage in their societies' worrying problems. Moreover, the bombardment of conflicting messages, each carrying some sort of value-ridden undertone, leaves youth all over the world more unclear than ever about which values they believe in and which are worth believing in. Without a moral compass to guide their own lives, youth can hardly be expected to act responsibly for the good of their societies.

Catalysts Bred in Schools

In helping adolescents develop social responsibility, the three entrepreneurs act as catalysts. Students learn valuable social and academic skills; communities, schools and non-profit organizations come together in partnerships, and teachers gain the opportunity to teach in new ways and bring basic reforms into the schools.

Most notably, these three programs work directly with schools, a concept less obvious than one might guess. In Bangladesh, India and Poland, as in many countries, schools have traditionally been bastions of conservatism. Students, of course, have traditionally cried out for change; such student activism in Bangladesh is described well by Mostafa Shiblee. But government-run schools – especially in unstable societies – have always defended the predictable, orderly way of things, probably out of fear of revolt. In the process, these schools have backed further and further away from encouraging involvement in political or value-laden activities.

The result is often a curriculum lacking relevance to the passion of adolescence. Education is sterilized to such an extent that it is mass-produced in the government bureaucracy, and even teachers – the direct link to the students – lose control over what they teach and how they teach it. As this centralized education spreads throughout the country, schools do not merely discourage activism, but they fail to encourage students to make connections between learning and values. This is why the programs highlighted here, all of which work directly with schools, are particularly exciting.

Different Societies, Common Problems

Only in the past five to ten years have changes in the political climate made it possible for schools to serve as a conduit for cultivating social responsibility. In Poland public schools are at last controlled by local rather than central government, which makes change more likely. In South Asia, less privileged students are attending school in greater numbers than ever before, forcing governments to come up with new models of education that respond to the needs of the poor.

Humphrey Tonkin, president of the University of Hartford in Connecticut, found the same phenomenon in 1960's America: "The assumptions and methods of elite education were out of place in the new environment of mass education. The new breed of students had not been given the script, not been socialized into this traditional education in which a narrow band of experiences was judged relevant to formal programs and a great deal of life was simply left out."

As long as governments already recognize the need for school reform, they are receptive to the idea of adopting curricula and extracurricular programs that social entrepreneurs present. In the United States, learning through community service has caught the imagination of school reformers throughout the country.

While the social entrepreneurs profiled here achieve their social goals by working through schools, they also help schools change themselves on a nationwide scale by altering the roles of teachers. Now that teachers are expected to help teach civic education (in Poland), or run debates (in Bangladesh) or sensitize students to social issues (in India), they are learning skills that may influence their techniques in all subjects. And teachers are gaining the autonomy and self-confidence to deal more aggressively with school administrators and ministries of education. Educational reform suddenly has less to do with changes in policy than with empowerment of teachers. As the social entrepreneurs alter the roles of teachers, the relationships between teachers, schools and governments must be recalibrated.

Forcing Governments to Take the Long View

Some tensions are inherent in this process. For example, Jacek Strzemieczny insists that his Center for Citizenship Education cannot successfully interact with the Polish government. How can Jacek teach youth about the importance of being active citizens if even he cannot find a way to work with the central government? Clarifying one's values is highly personal; how can a program with this agenda ever go large-scale? The tension for Ashraf Patel lies in asking donors to help affluent Indian youth develop leadership skills and social awareness. Why should backers support a program that works with private elite schools and which cannot guarantee that the teen-agers will act on their newfound sense of social responsibility?

Though there is no recipe to ensure that youth will make the connection between social consciousness and action, the entrepreneurs use some common tactics:

- Bringing students physically out of the classroom and into the community.
- Using debates and discussion to clarify values.
- Reducing the competitive air that students normally encounter in school.
- Emphasizing the emotional power of personal convictions.
- Helping young people see that their influence is much broader than they may think. When one shows teenagers how closely their actions are connected to the world outside them, they tend to take themselves more seriously and act responsibly.
- Taking advantage of peer pressure, so that youth "on the fence" work in groups where the initiative of their friends compels them to join in the activities.
- Taking advantage of the leadership position that teachers in schools already enjoy.
- Stressing the importance of facilitators. Though teachers play active roles in each program, they inspire and motivate rather than merely transmit knowledge.
- Paying close attention to smoothing the many transitions in adolescents' lives. The programs here help teenagers make the leap from taking responsibility for oneself to taking responsibility for one's society, moving from high school to college, graduating from college and becoming a professional, or visiting a rural site and seeing how it relates to one's urban environment.

These three organizations have not yet stood the test of time; none is more than five years old. More important, the young people who have passed through the programs are still, indeed, young. Will they contribute to a workforce that recognizes the social needs of all citizens and prizes the act of giving to society through community service or civic participation?

With teachers as allies and institutional backing, these three social entrepreneurs and others like them can expect greater and greater returns. All of us – even the smug teenagers in New Delhi and their literate servants – will be lucky enough to share in the profits. ■

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Y O U T H

What Young People Can Teach Society

BY JOANNA DAVIDSON

LUKASZ KRAWETKOWSKI IS AN extraordinarily articulate and self-possessed seventeen-year-old. His blond ponytail and wispy chin hair hint at his artistic aspirations. He can recite several Shakespeare sonnets, in Polish. Last year, Lukasz introduced a series of student-instructed art classes in his secondary school, challenging both teachers and students to re-negotiate their roles in the learning process.

Lukasz is one of a growing number of Polish young people connected with PAM (*Powsechnej Akademii Mlodziezy*, or Universal Youth Academy), a Polish youth organization whose mission is to spark creativity and effective civic engagement among its members. And PAM is one of a growing number of youth groups around the globe which are charting new territory in the field of youth development. Rather than inserting youth into a pre-determined set of venues and leadership-building activities, these organizations distinguish themselves as catalysts for youth initiative. Their animating purpose is to enable youth to be independent thinkers and entrepreneurial actors in whichever arenas they enter.

The following articles introduce three organizations that elucidate this new approach to youth development: the *Casa de la Juventud* (Youth House) in Paraguay, PAM in Poland, and Youth Venture in the U.S.A. Each has emerged from within its country's own set of historical and social circumstances and, on the surface, each appears to be engaged in activities relevant only to their own contexts. But a bird's-eye view of these efforts and others like them reveals a pattern that cuts across their obvious differences.

The founders of these youth programs have independently and intuitively arrived at two key insights: that youth are, in fact, capable of coming up with their own ideas, defining the problems they want to address, and determining how they want to do so; and that creating the appropriate infrastructure to enable this process not only leads to imaginative, insightful, and skilled individual young people, but also contributes to a basic shift in attitudes and practices that govern the way societies relate to youth.

The central challenge confronted by these organizations – preparing youth to become responsible, healthy and engaged adults – is certainly not new. But conditions in societies at the end of the twentieth century have created at least three new factors that complicate adequate fulfillment of this age-old objective.

Most significant, there is a growing chasm between young people and adults. Within

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one generation there has been a 40 percent decline in the average amount of time American children spend with their parents. Increasingly, youth groups have taken on the role, traditionally played by the family, of building young people's confidence, teaching values, and nurturing leadership skills. Educational researchers have shown that successful youth organizations "share many of the same features that in earlier eras characterized family life." *(Heath and McLaughlin, p. 625).*

THE RAPID RATE of social change is another salient factor in how we address young people's development. "Whether we like it or not, the world is changing faster than ever," says Jacek Jakubowski, PAM's founder. "It is pointless for me to teach young people *what* to do – it will be outdated before I get the words out of my mouth. What I can do is encourage them to be flexible and help them adapt to the unpredictable future."

Finally, today's youth are caught in a dilemma: Even while many cultures recognize that thirteen and fourteen-year-olds can clearly take on adult responsibilities, we have constructed secular societies that keep youth in passive roles far beyond their early teen years. Youth are disenfranchised and do not have a means to directly influence policy, even when it directly affects them. There are scarce opportunities for young people to hold leadership positions, even in their own institutions (like youth groups and schools). Social structures tell youth that they are unable and unwilling contributors to society.

The organizations profiled in this section represent a radical departure from this tacit acceptance of youths' place in society, and their efforts illuminate how some of the challenges unique to our times might be surmounted.

Three Case Studies

William Drayton founded Youth Venture on his belief that youth are capable of extraordinary contributions to their families and communities and that young people can spearhead significant social endeavors. This not-for-profit organization provides seed grants and mentoring partnerships which allow young people to develop and implement their own "ventures," be they tutoring programs, small shops, or radio stations.

Jacek Jakubowski and PAM have a similar agenda, or lack thereof. PAM members are invited to invent their own projects, while PAM as an institution takes a modest back seat, facilitating creativity workshops and, through its expansive network, connecting young people with one another and with other useful resources. This has resulted in a wide array of youth-driven projects, including music festivals, art shows, and environmental education endeavors.

Camilo Soares of Paraguay and *Casa de la Juventud* go even further. Soares, only 22 years old himself, has been instrumental in galvanizing Paraguay's youth to shape their country's agenda on many levels – whether by writing conscientious objection into the national constitution, by gaining an authoritative voice in education policy, or by taking the initiative to prevent a potential coup d'etat. Soares rejects the oft-repeated slogan that youth are the future of society. "Youth," Soares insists, "are the present."

EACH OF THESE organizations is responding in a carefully tailored way to its home country's unique constellation of challenges and opportunities. In Poland, Jakubowski is coming head-to-head with forty years of communist-mandated "trained helplessness" and a tenacious cultural belief that government officials – not NGOs, and certainly not young people – are supposed to fix society's problems. In Paraguay, Soares is working in a "land-locked island," a relatively isolated and ignored South American country with an almost uninterrupted 120-year history of military dictatorship. Moreover, 70 percent of Paraguayans are under 30 years old, making Soares' adage that youth are Paraguay's present, particularly poignant. In the USA, there is an all-too-familiar list of problems that characterize youth malaise, with drug abuse, gang activity, and crime ranking high among them. These problems are exacerbated, in Youth Venture's case, by a historical lack of collaboration among institutions (schools, community organizations, youth groups) working toward common goals. As Youth Venture's approach depends on partnerships among several existing community entities, Drayton and his small team have had to forge a new brand of inter-institutional cooperation.

The Parallels

But as different as these obstacles may be from one another, Soares, Jakubowski and Drayton have built their organizations on strikingly similar sets of assumptions. All three adhere to a strong belief that youth must be partners in their own development, not resources to be exploited or passive recipients of adult wisdom and experience. Each insists that young people must learn to work collaboratively, and that this is perhaps the single most important skill for the next millenium. And all three organizations are characterized by a commitment to helping others to engage actively in solving social problems.

Kirk Astroth, a North American youth development expert, has promulgated the notion of "vibrancy" which may help to distinguish the culture of these youth programs from the approaches of more traditional and familiar ones. Vibrant youth groups are "founded on and practice a set of philosophical beliefs that value young people and their ability to be actors in building their own futures." *(Astroth, p. 7).*

How do such lofty ideals get translated into concrete action and stable, effective institutions? Boiled down, these institutions have the following essential ingredients:

- A loose, perhaps even ephemeral, institutional structure in which youth determine and develop their own projects. As Jakubowski insists, "PAM itself does not do anything."
- A mechanism – creativity workshops, seed grants, or gender-bending games – through which to tap into young people's innate curiosity and their ability to think beyond established and rigid categories, to invent new ways of addressing old problems.
- A connection between youth and adults in which adults are brought in as mentors and skill builders, but not as authorities who determine what youth will and will not do.
- A non-partisan space for youth to explore ideas outside the often oppressive strictures (such as political parties, religious groups, and schools) that dominate their societies.
- A strategic approach that sets challenging but realistic goals, so that young people can build from their successes, rather than being consumed and deflated by their failures.
- A culture of mutual support and risk-taking, in which "mistakes can be viewed as opportunities to learn, not as catastrophes that must be 'fixed' by adults coming to the rescue." *(Astroth, p. 7).*

Measuring Success

How can we judge whether these programs are on the right track? How do we even begin to assess their impact? Measuring social impact is a thorny challenge for most organizations that are trying to reach often unquantifiable, sometimes quite amorphous objectives. Documented results tend to be suggestive and short-term. Most of these groups have formally existed for only a few years, and attainment of their overarching goal – to create a cadre of civically responsible adults – is still a long way off.

We can, perhaps, outline two overlapping dimensions of projected impact: outcomes for the individuals and changes in the social fabric. Drayton discusses the former facet in terms of engaging in a Youth Venture-type experience. First, the process of establishing his or her own organization has profound impact on the venturer. "Every young person who... creates an ongoing organization knows deeply that (s)he is competent and powerful." This impact spills over into the immediate peer group – the other young people drawn into the organization – who benefit by learning to work together and who gain valuable experience in formulating and managing an original venture. Additionally, as all "youth ventures" have a community service element, there is a direct impact on the "clients" or beneficiaries of the endeavor. Unmet needs are filled as a result of young peoples' initiative.

How does this sense of ability and achievement change society? How will a new generation of creative, confident, competent, and collaborative adults shape its culture? What broader, deeper scratches on history will such efforts in youth development make?

The founders of these organizations believe that investing in the formation of involved young people can profoundly affect the role of youth in society, as well as alter conventional (and often constricting) views about who can engage in social change and how such change can be accomplished. In Youth Venture's case, Drayton employs a "tipping" strategy: reaching a critical mass of ventures in a given school or community will tip the local culture from one of accepting youth as passive recipients to one of understanding that youth are able do-ers.

Jakubowski's metaphor is that of an "epidemic" – members of PAM will infect their peers with their positive, can-do attitudes, thereby changing the pervasive negative stereotypes and mistrust of youth and making strides in Poland's struggle to emerge from its cocoon of civic complacency. Soares' efforts have already resulted in significant social gains, including a much-needed discount in public transportation for students and a constitutional law protecting conscientious objectors. Yet, even by his own assessment, these are but strategic steps in a much larger scheme. In Soares' strategy, an accumulation of such victories will, over time, not only engender a new cultural view of youths' capacity to affect change, but provide powerful lessons in how to build a truly democratic society.

While organizations like those described here are still few and far between in the burgeoning field of youth programs, it is worth keeping an eye on these endeavors. The principles and practices employed by these institutions herald a change in the traditional landscape of youth development. At the very least, practitioners trying to foster vibrant youth groups may want to experiment with the lessons and insights provided by these models.

Lukasz Krawetkowski's future is wide open and unpredictable. But as he explores his options, he will no doubt be buoyed up by the skills he gained through participation in PAM. "PAM has broadened my point of view," explains Lukasz, "which has enabled me to do things on a larger, better scale." Quite an accomplishment for an organization that purports to do nothing at all. ■

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