

Engaging Youth in Research:

**A Facilitation Guide for
Youth Workers, Program Staff
& Community Leaders**



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In conducting community-based research focused on responding to community issues and bringing about positive change, it is critical that efforts are made to mobilize youth assets and involve young people in all stages of the research process.

Why Engage Youth In Research?

When examining problems facing certain communities, young people are often affected the most. Thus in conducting community-based research focused on responding to community issues and bringing about positive change, it is critical that efforts are made to mobilize youth assets and involve young people in all stages of the research process.

Youth as partners in research

When young people are viewed as partners in research and evaluation, and are involved in defining the focus and implementation of research, we not only build their capacity to take a leadership role in addressing pressing issues in their communities and lives, it also allows for enriched methodology informed by young people's knowledge and lived understanding of community issues.

The engagement and inclusion of youth as partners in research efforts (rather than just consumers of knowledge) brings about endless possibilities – for both youth and the quality of research itself. This has been extensively documented by many community-based research initiatives – one such project is the Assets Coming Together for Youth (ACT for youth) project based at York University.

What follows is a case study of a youth's experiences in participating in the ACT for youth Research Internship program.

YOUTH IN RESEARCH – AN INTERNSHIP STORY FROM THE ASSETS COMING TOGETHER FOR YOUTH²

Jennifer's story Rounding Off

Jennifer was in grade 12 when she started the internship, squarely focused on her upcoming transition to university in September. She had been living in the Jane and Finch community for about three years while attending high school in the area, but a large part of her social circle was situated outside of the Jane and Finch area. Despite her very busy extracurricular schedule that included volunteering at the local library and many after-school clubs where she participated on the fundraising and planning committees, she had been told by friends and even her mother said that she was "book smart, but lacked in life skills."

² Enzo Verrilli, "My Internship Story: An Evaluation of the Assets Coming Together For Youth Research Internship Program", 2011

She learned of the youth internship opportunity through the Youth at Yorkwoods Program, and was attracted to the potential of earning \$2,500 while acquiring research skills. Although she thought the idea of the internship was “very cool,” she almost didn’t apply because she thought it would be a very competitive application process and feared not being chosen. She says, “I was really, really, really afraid. I had high expectations...I just thought that York University is a step-up, or 5-6 steps up from where I was at...research intern at York sounds so different compared to New York Fries or CNE, right?” She also was anxious that she lacked experience compared to others living in Jane and Finch because her mother doesn’t allow her to hang out much.

After a few months of the internship experience, Jennifer valued meeting a lot of interesting people and learning “that people in university are not that different from people in high school, just more mature... When you are in high school, you think ‘Oh God, people in university are so different’...like a different species.” She feels her internship experience has made her “open her eyes” and makes her feel ready to go to university. Before the internship, she never thought that she’d be engaging in casual conversation with university graduates, professors and administrators. She also mentions broadening her realm of possibilities by hearing the stories of older graduate research assistants. She says of their stories, “Their experiences are so interesting...it makes me feel like possibilities are kind of endless. I wanna try new things like travel the world, take a year off...it just seems so cool.” When asked the reason why she wasn’t aware of those possibilities, Jennifer responds, “I don’t know anyone older than me.” What she means is that the only older people she knows are parents or relatives. She’s the eldest of the siblings in her family, and the first in her family to go to university. Consequently, she’s never had the chance to speak openly with people about the nonacademic aspects of the university experience. About teachers, she says, “it’s weird talking to them (on a personal level)...I will just talk to them about (getting accepted into) university.”

Jennifer’s social and professional network expanded beyond the people she met at university. When asked what aspect of the internship she liked most, she responded, “the regular work days... days with no meetings, when I can come in, complete a task and I get to interact with people.” She felt a sense of accomplishment when she completed a task, and she learned a lot from casual interaction with the interns, research assistants and PhD students. Related to expanding her social network, she says she met a lot of people through the Photo Voice Project, and at Westview who she wouldn’t have met “in real life.” She felt empowered because she was part of a diverse York University Research group.

Youth involvement in research efforts provides positive developmental opportunities for young people. By participating in research, youth also provide critical input in all aspects of the research process including “the development of instruments to ensure that tools are youth friendly, using understandable and accessible language.”³ Youth make important and essential contributions to research efforts.

³ Jane Powers et al, “Engaging Youth in Participatory Research & Evaluation,” *Journal of Public Health Management & Practice* 12, S79-S87.

About This Handbook

What is the purpose of this handbook?

The aim of this handbook is to provide youth workers and other program leaders with assistance in creating their vision to train and support young people to conduct community-based research. To do this, we have developed five units (or sessions) on a variety of research topics focused on equipping youth with research skills and concepts to enable them to take leadership roles in community-based research projects.

What are the units about?

Using interactive exercises, group discussions and roleplaying, each unit explores research concepts and various stages of qualitative research. The content of each unit is designed to build on the previous section. However, we encourage you to modify and customize the content of the units in accordance to your vision for the workshop, age of participants and their prior experience/ knowledge.

Organization of units:

The first unit 'sets the stage'. It aims to encourage youth to think about research critically by introducing the idea of doing research to bring about social change. The unit is intended to gradually introduce youth to community-based research by first exploring what research is, why it matters and what role the community (and youth) could play in *doing research*.

The second unit delves further into community-based research and explores the key tenants of community-engaged research.

The subsequent units explore each stage of conducting a community-based research project, from the 'planning stage' to the 'acting stage'. The last unit examines the concept of research ethics.

Each unit begins with a warm-up exercise in order to prep participants. We recommend that after the first unit, facilitators should ask for volunteers to lead (or co-lead) the warm-up exercises. This provides an opportunity for youth to play some role in the facilitation of the workshop.

What principles guided the development of this handbook?

The development of the exercises and overall content of this toolkit was guided by the following pedagogical principles:

1. Engagement: the units explore research concepts and activities such as research ethics, data collection methods, analyzing data, developing recommendations etc. Some of these concepts might be unfamiliar to youth, thus to demystify the research process conscious efforts were taken to make the exercises and content fun, engaging and relatable to the life experiences of youth.

2. Accessible: we were also mindful of making the content accessible in a way that shifts away from the thinking of research as something “done by a privileged few to something that can be done by everyone to document and create critical knowledge for catalyzing progressive change.”⁴

3. Capacity: in trying to make the content fun, engaging and accessible, we were also mindful of building youth’s knowledge and skills in research so they can take on leadership roles in research efforts.

⁴ Access Alliance, “[Community-Based Research Toolkit: Resources & Tools for Doing Research with Community for Social Change](#)”, 2012.



Research is Knowledge - Knowledge is Power

OBJECTIVE

For youth to understand the power of research in making change happen in their communities.

MATERIAL CHECKLIST

- Flip chart paper
- Markers
- Tape
- Appendix 1.1 & 1.2 handouts
- Ball (or round object i.e orange)
- Laptop, projector & speakers

Facilitation Tip

We engage in different forms of research everyday, often times without knowing that we are doing so. This unit positions youth to think broadly about ways they engage, or have engaged, in research activities, for example visiting the library to gather information for a school project, searching for info online, participating in a survey or even searching for someone on social media. Youth will brainstorm what research means to them, ways they have done research and why research matters.

A Suggestion

To encourage participants to take an active role in the workshop, allow a few minutes in each session for them to express thoughts through whatever means they want. One popular platform is via social media like Twitter. Suggest this to the group. If they are open to the idea, ask for a volunteer to create a Twitter hashtag that they can use to express their thoughts. The idea is to give a different individual the responsibility of creating a hashtag for each unit. In each session, the youth will have some time to tweet their thoughts using the hashtag created.

I. WARM-UP EXERCISE ⁵

To get the ball rolling, a possible warm-up exercise is to have the youth stand in a circle and throw a ball (this could be a tennis ball, or even an orange) to each other. When the person catches the ball, this person gives his or her name in the form of a rhyme. For example 'Jumping Jack.' 'Jumping Jack.' This person first mentions the name of the person who threw the ball and adds his or her own alliteration.

This continues until the circle is complete. This exercise is good for remembering each other's names, lightens the mood and creates some laughter!

Finalize by writing the alliterations on the blackboard or flipchart and leave it there for the rest of the day.

II. WHAT IS RESEARCH?

- Write the words '**research**', '**youth**', '**community**' and '**academics**' on four separate sheets of flip chart paper. Tape the sheets on the wall in different areas of the room
- Ask the youth (in pairs or groups) to walk around to each flip chart paper, read the word that is written on the paper and write whatever comes to mind.
- As a group, review the responses written on the four sheets of flip chart paper. Have the youth discuss what they wrote.
- Using the words the youth have brainstormed, have them create a definition of research. Possible discussion questions to explore with the youth: *What role can youth play in research? Why do they think it's important to have young people involved in research? What role can community play in research? What about academics?*
- Ask the youth if they can think of examples of doing research? Maybe a school project?

III. WHY RESEARCH MATTERS

- To explore why doing research matters, show Chimamanda Adichie's: "**The Danger of a Single Story**" (see appendix 1.1 for video link).
- **Debrief:** Do the youth see any examples of a 'single story' in their communities? How does it affect them? How does it make them feel? How can they challenge this single story about their communities? Allow 5-10 minutes for the youth to discuss this with the person next to them, or tweet using the hashtag created for the unit.

IV. KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

- Split participants into two groups. Each group will plan a skit using scenarios in which research is used to make an argument (scenarios can be found in appendix 1.2 – Knowledge is Power Role Play Scenarios)⁶
- **The youth will have 10 min to work on their skit. Each skit has to answer the following:**
 - What is the problem being addressed?
 - What is the solution?
 - How is research used to advocate for a solution?
- After working on their skits, the youth will present to the group.
- **Debrief questions:** Why do you think these groups used research in their campaigns for changing their community?

V. CLOSING

- Open the floor for the youth to pose questions, comments and share thoughts. Ask the group if someone wants to lead the closing.
- Next steps: community based research

⁵ Miranda Van Reeuwijk, "[Explore: Toolkit for involving young people as researchers in sexual and reproductive health programmes](#)", 2013.

⁶ John W. Gardner Center for Youth & Their Communities, "[YELL: A Handbook for Program Staff, Teachers & Community Leaders](#)", 2007, pg 152.

2

Community-Based Research as a Revolutionary Tool

OBJECTIVE

To explore Community Based Research (CBR), key principles, challenges & benefits of CBR.

MATERIAL CHECKLIST

- Flip chart paper
- Markers
- Appendix 2.1
- Laptop, projector & speakers

Facilitation Tip

In this unit, youth will explore community more closely by brainstorming definitions of what community means to them and mapping issues, resources & needs they see in their communities. The youth will then look at ways research can respond to some of those issues, which will segue to a discussion on community-based research.

Hashtag Reminder

As with unit 1, ask who in the group would like to take on the responsibility of creating a new hashtag for unit 2 (or the group can create one together). Halfway through the session, allow a few minutes for youth to tweet their thoughts on what they are learning using the hashtag created.

I. WARM-UP EXERCISE:

- Allow a few minutes for the youth to brainstorm definitions of '**community**' in pairs or groups. Return back to the larger group and share the definitions the youth brainstormed. Ask for a volunteer to co-lead this discussion.

II. IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY ISSUES

- Have the youth divide into small groups, or pairs.
- Distribute sheets of flip chart paper and markers. Have them create two columns on the flip chart paper, and label the columns with the name of their school and neighbourhood (workshop facilitators should do the exercise as well!).

- Ask participants to brainstorm as many issues or concerns they can think of that exist in these places. Encourage youth to think about what really bothers them, or if they could change something, what would they change?
- After brainstorming, come back to the full group and record all of the issues on the chart paper.
- Compare participants' responses and recall the importance of different perspectives in understanding their community.

III. IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

- Remind the group about the concept of assets: positive things or strengths. An asset can be a skill, a quality or a resource (like money, a building, or a program). Ask youth for examples.
- Have the youth work in small groups. Ask them to turn their paper over and label the same columns: school, and neighbourhood or city/town. Under each heading, have youth write assets (e.g., people, places, programs) that are supportive and important for them and for youth in general, and that make their community a better place to live.
- Share back as a full group: invite the participants to share their lists of assets, and write them all up on a chart paper above or next to the chart of problems or issues.

IV. COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

- Use the issues and assets youth identified to open a discussion about community-based research. (Refer to appendix 2.1 for a definition & key principles of CBR). Discussion questions: Why do community-based research?
- **South Side Community perspectives** video (link in appendix 2.1). Debrief questions: What are the benefits of doing research with communities? What are the challenges?
- **SexPress: Toronto Teen Survey Movie:** (link in appendix 2.1). After showing this video, break into small groups. Ask youth to list some of the benefits & challenges of doing CBR with the youth discussed in the video, as well as other issues that come to mind. Allow them a few minutes to tweet thoughts using the hashtag created for unit 2.

V. CLOSING

- Open the floor for the youth to pose questions, comments and share thoughts. Ask for a volunteer to co-lead this discussion.
- Next steps: stages of doing a research project.

3

Anatomy of a Research Project Part I: The Planning & Doing

OBJECTIVE

To introduce youth to key activities related to planning & implementing a research project.

MATERIAL CHECKLIST

- White board
- Markers
- Handouts 3.1 - 3.3
- Projector, laptop, speakers

Facilitation Tip

In this unit, the youth will work on various activities of the planning & doing stages of a research project, such as formulating research questions. They will also learn about different methods of collecting data. The youth will then have opportunities to practice their interviewing skills through role-plays as well as critically reflect and interpret findings from mock interviews.

Hashtag Reminder

Don't forget to create a new hashtag for this unit!

I. WARM-UP EXERCISE:

- Ask for a volunteer to lead the warm-up exercise.
(Tip: For a list of various warm-up exercises, see resource list in appendix).

II. THE PLANNING STAGE

- Ask the youth to think back to a time they had to do a research project for a school assignment. What was the project on? Did they have to create a research question? Ask for an example of a research question, and write these on a white board.
- Use the youths' examples as a springboard to introduce the 'planning stage' of a research

project – the planning stage involves deciding what issue to research, creating research questions, identifying sources of information (refer to 3.1 handout – **Anatomy of a Research Project – The Planning Stage**)⁷

- Remind the youth of the community issues they identified in Unit 2, have the group pretend they have been put in charge of a community-based research project. They are all lead researchers on this project. Using the community issues they brainstormed, what would be a topic they would research?
- Review handout 3.1 – Anatomy of a Research Project (how to write a research question).

⁷ Assets Coming Together for Youth, CBR Summer Institute Resources, 2011.

- As a group, decide on a topic. Divide the youth in two groups. One group will be tasked with developing research questions for the selected research topic using the guidelines in handout 3.1 - **Anatomy of a Research Project** (how to write a research question). The other half will be oversee the following tasks:
 - What role will the community play in this research project?
 - How will youth be involved?
 - How will information be collected (key informant interviews, environmental scan etc). If key informant interviews will be used, then who will be targeted for an interview?
- Ask each group to share what they worked on.

***Reminder: allow a few minutes for the youth to tweet their thoughts!**

III. THE DOING STAGE

- After identifying what area to research and developing research questions to guide the development of the research project, the next stage is to collect data. What are some of the ways the youth have collected information for school projects?
- Have the youth ever interviewed someone for a school project or for something else? Have they ever been interviewed? Can the youth think of different types of interviews? (List these on a flip chart paper).
- Use this as a springboard to open a conversation about interviewing. Ask the youth to name elements of good interviews and elements of bad interviews.
- Show the following video clip - **Michelle Obama & Will Ferrell focus groups with kids** (refer to appendix 3.2 for video link).
- Review 3.2 handout - **Elements of A Good Focus Group**. (To make this more interactive, ask for volunteers to read the bolded points e.g. "Be your own facilitator," "pay attention to your personal presentation").
- Refer back to the research projects the youth are in charge of conducting. Have them brainstorm possible questions they would ask in a focus group to gather information for the research topic. Write these down on a white board.
- Have the youth do some role-playing! You will need:
 - A few volunteers to be the facilitators. The facilitators should pretend they are running a real focus group, using the questions the group developed they will administer these to the participants.
 - Focus group participants - who will answer the questions asked.
 - A few note takers to take detailed notes of the responses.
- Debrief: what did the youth think of the experience? What was the most difficult thing about facilitating a focus group?

V. ANALYZING DATA

- Explain to the youth that after a focus group, the next step is to transcribe the audio recordings. Explain that this is usually done verbatim (word for word). After this, researchers then take the notes and analyze them for themes and patterns.
- Have the youth pretend to be researchers. Using the notes taken from the role-play focus group interviews, have them work in groups to analyze the notes, uncover themes and interpret the interview data. Depending on the number of youth in the group, you can divide the youth into groups of two and give each group a copy of

the notes that were taken during the role-play interviews.

- The youth will highlight key themes or interesting quotes from the responses recorded. Explain to the youth that a theme is identified when it appears in at least two different points.
- After identifying the themes, they will then summarize the main points (in bullet form) on a sheet of paper. Refer to 3.3 handout – **Identifying Themes.**⁸
- When the youth reconvene back to the larger group, write the main points they identified on the whiteboard. Discuss the importance of analyzing data and identifying themes.

VI. CLOSING

- Open the floor for youth to pose questions, comments and share thoughts. Ask for a volunteer to co-lead this discussion.
- Next steps: The acting & sharing stages

⁸ John W. Gardner Center for Youth & Their Communities, "[YELL: A Handbook for Program Staff, Teachers & Community Leaders](#)", 2007, pg 188.

4

Anatomy of a Research Project Part II: The Planning & Doing

OBJECTIVE

To introduce youth to using research findings to make positive change.

MATERIAL CHECKLIST

- White board
- Markers
- Handouts 4-1 & 4.2
- Sticky notes

Facilitation Tip

In this unit, youth will take the themes that came out of their mock interviews and develop recommendations. They will explore the purpose of a recommendation and also explore ways they can put these recommendations into action.

Hashtag Reminder

Don't forget to create a new hashtag for this unit!

I. WARM-UP EXERCISE:

- Ask for a volunteer to lead the warm-up exercise. (Tip: For a list of various warm-up exercises, see resource list in appendix).

II. DEVELOPING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Explain to the group that after the planning & doing stages comes the sharing & acting stages. (For activities relating to the doing & sharing stages refer to handout 3.1 – **Anatomy of a Research Project**).
- The sharing & acting stages involve using what is found throughout the research process in order to bring about some form of change. To do this, researchers typically develop several recommendations using the information from their research.
- Together with the youth, brainstorm the meaning of a recommendation. A recommendation is a specific solution or action that outlines how change will happen.⁹ Brainstorm why a recommendation matters. Have the youth ever made recommendations before?
- Discuss the power of a recommendation based on research findings. Ask the youth: What is the difference between a recommendation based on opinion and one based on research findings?
- Using the themes they identified from their role-play interviews, have the youth discuss among themselves what recommendations they would recommend. What is the main thing they want to see happen or change based on the themes they identified? Ask them to select someone to write these recommendations on the whiteboard.

⁹ Ibid., pg 192

IV. TAKING ACTION

- Open up a discussion about the difference between a recommendation and an action. An action is a stepping-stone or strategy to make a recommendation happen. There are many different approaches to action. Brainstorm different approaches with the group.
- Mention to the youth that many of these approaches can fit into the categories of advocacy, activism, and education (write these as column headings on a whiteboard). Give the youth a bunch of sticky notes and ask them to define each approach and list some of the things that a person who takes that approach does or says. Ask them to post the sticky notes under the appropriate category. Review the sticky notes and discuss.
- Divide youth into 2-3 groups and give each group an **Action Strategy Identification Chart** – 4.1 handout.¹⁰ Ask the youth to take turns picking an action strategy out of the bag or box you prepared. Explain that once they pick an action, they should return to their group, read the slip of

paper, and then **lead a discussion on that action using the following pointers:**

- Is the action education, activism or advocacy?
- What are the benefits and challenges of using this action?
- Can this action be used for the research project you worked on today?
- Have the youth present and share their ideas.

***Reminder: allow a few minutes for the youth to tweet their thoughts!**

V. CLOSING

- Open the floor for the youth to pose questions, comments and share thoughts. Ask for a volunteer to co-lead this discussion.
- Next steps: research ethics

¹⁰ John W. Gardner Center for Youth & Their Communities, "[YELL: A Handbook for Program Staff, Teachers & Community Leaders](#)", 2007, pg 188.

5

Research Ethics

OBJECTIVE

To foster understanding and recognition among youth in conducting ethical research.

MATERIAL CHECKLIST

- White board
- Markers
- Handouts 5.1 – 5.3

Facilitation Tip

In this unit, youth will critically reflect on what is meant by “research ethics”. Using scenarios, the youth will explore potential dilemmas that are often faced in research and discuss ways to deal with them. Youth will also reflect on their own influence and responsibilities as a researcher.

Hashtag Reminder

Don’t forget to create a new hashtag for this unit!

I. WARM-UP EXERCISE

- Ask for a volunteer to lead the warm-up exercise. (Tip: For a list of various warm-up exercises, see resource list in appendix).

II. RESEARCH GUIDELINES

- Have the youth brainstorm in small groups, what is meant by the term ‘research ethics’. In the larger group, ask the youth to share what emerged from their brainstorm. Explain to the youth that to do sound research, you need a good reason and you need to do it in ethical way. So before researchers begin a research project, they often put together an application for ethical review, which involves writing a research protocol & submitting it to a review board.
- Review handout 5.1 – **Tri-Council Ethical Principles**. Ask for volunteers to read out each principle. Open a discussion about the principles. What do they mean to the youth? Have them give examples.

- Have the youth divide in small groups and assign each group an ethics scenario (5.2 – **Ethical Scenarios**). Ask them to discuss how the ethical issues could be handled and have them share their ideas with the larger group.

***Reminder: allow a few minutes for the youth to tweet their thoughts!**

III. ETHICS PLEDGE

- To wrap-up the session, distribute handout 5.3 – **Sample of Ethics Guidelines for We Belong Evaluation** and review this with the group. Explain to them that this is what an ethics guideline for a research project would look like.

IV. CLOSING

- Open the floor for the youth to pose questions, comments and share thoughts. Ask for a volunteer to co-lead this discussion.

