
LIFE LESSONS ON THE ROAD TOWARD A RENEWED PHILANTHROPY SECTOR TO SUPPORT YOUTH

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BACKGROUND

THE IDEA OF RENEWING OR REVISIONING PHILANTHROPY, SO THAT IT BETTER serves young people, is of great personal interest to me. I have spent most of my working life as an educator, counsellor, researcher, psychologist, and advocate trying to improve the lives of youth, particularly those pushed to the margins of Canadian society or experiencing overwhelming life challenges. I have worked as an advisor to government, youth-serving agencies, public and private foundations, and grant-making organizations. I have also been a founding board member of a number of organizations whose purpose was to teach youth leadership and create the social conditions that promote positive youth development.

I was fortunate to meet, early in my professional life, a number of young people involved with the then nascent National Youth in Care Network who inspired and taught me important lessons about the incredible knowledge and wisdom youth possess. I also had the opportunity to work alongside a number of other young people involved in improving the youth-serving system, their communities, and the lives of their peers. Lessons learned in those early years provided me with understanding about the power and importance of what is now referred to as youth- or civic-engagement. When I didn't have a *name* for the work I was involved in with these young people, I had a *feeling* or *perception* that the process of how we were working together was "as it should be." Eventually, I came to understand that when we create strategies to help or support youth, "the *process* of our strategy is the *message* of our strategy" to the young people involved.

Over the course of my professional life I have also had the privilege of working with funders of innovative youth programs. Some of the individuals I met worked within government and others for public or private grant-making organizations. I was often impressed with the way many of these persons were able to navigate through very constraining funding criteria to find a way to enable the development of imaginative and effective pilot programs to support and meet the needs of vulnerable youth. In equal measure, it also often left me wondering why these individuals had to take professional risks to do what was, to me, the obvious.

Somewhere along the road, between these two essential experiences of my professional life, I learned some lessons I believe could be applied to the process of transforming the philanthropic sector to make it more relevant to young people. I do not write as

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an expert on the subject of “philanthropy” but as someone whose life was transformed by listening to the stories of young people. I have also chosen to write this article in an informal, non-academic way to make it accessible to a wide readership.

CHALLENGING THE “IDEA” OF “YOUNG PEOPLE”

Though I use it often, I have never been completely comfortable with the term “young people.” My concern is that it can, and usually does, confer a lower social status to members of our society who are not considered “adults.” It creates a hierarchy that equates older age and later stages of human development with having superior knowledge and wisdom. Personally, I have met far too many so-called adults or older people to ever find agreement with that assumption.

As a society, we give privilege to the opinions and ideas of those who have lived longer. We equate longevity with having more “life experience,” and hence, opinions with greater value. What gets missed in this view is the fact that an elderly person may have lived a very sheltered life and thus possesses limited life experience. It is equally possible that an adolescent, through privilege or misfortune, may have had many more life experiences – both good and bad – than someone much older.

The point is, it does not matter how old you are or the number and types of experiences you’ve had. We all carry personal stories about our lives that, when shared, add to our collective knowledge as a community or society. The more of that combined knowledge we possess the better able we are to understand and solve problems that impede our ability to create communities that foster positive human development across the lifespan.

PHILANTHROPY AS “EVERYDAY LIFE”

If I have learned anything in the course of a 30-year career spent working with youth, it is that they have a low tolerance for insincere adult posturing. Ask any young person what they think of an adult that is trying to act young or cool and you will immediately get my point. The same goes for adults who over praise young people for minimal effort. It just feels false and insincere to the young person.

I was once told a story about a young person who was failing in school, aggressive towards his teachers and peers and often truant. Everyone had given up on him and he was about to be suspended. One afternoon, the school janitor asked for a student to volunteer to clean up some debris from a dead tree that had fallen on school property. The youth volunteered. Subsequently, he spent several days working with the janitor, talking with him, sharing stories and eating his lunch and taking breaks in the janitor’s office next to school’s boiler room. Every so often, the janitor would go into the boiler room and monitor various dials and gauges. The young person became interested in the boilers, so the janitor taught him how they operated. He became so interested that he ultimately settled down in school and went on to become a pipefitter. I often refer to this story as an example of “healing by boiler operating.”

Though the janitor was briefed on the student’s challenges, and given support to work with him, he never once had to deal with any inappropriate behaviour. All that this

young person needed was a sincere, caring, nonjudgmental adult whom he could trust and interact with in a genuine, mutually respectful manner. He was being supported but in a way that just felt like “real life” as opposed to the artificiality that can be created by being “labelled,” lectured to by teachers, and left to sit alone in an empty classroom after school.

It is this aspect of the “everyday experience” that I believe speaks to how we can transform philanthropy and make it more relevant to young people. The challenge is to take philanthropy out of the realm of being a special or separate activity in society and make it simply a part of daily life of a community. Teach children from a very young age that “helping” and “giving” to others is what constitutes being a member of a community. Create ways for children to participate in community life that match their personal interests or developmental abilities. The key is to have them involved *actively* in community building and in a manner they can see is valued by others. Pushing a broom in a community centre is not what I’m talking about. Instead, have young people identify a need or issue affecting youth in their community, then immerse them in the process of taking the concern from thought, to planning, to action, and ultimately to implementation, teaching them the skills they need to accomplish each step.

The education system would seem to me to be a natural and obvious partner in this process. “Learning philanthropy” should start right from the beginning in the early grades of school and continue through to graduation. Schools should develop partnerships not only with grant-makers, but also community organizations and service agencies. Through these connections the needs of the community may be continually monitored thereby providing opportunities for young people to find ways to contribute that match their own needs and interests.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT VS. “GENERATIONS”

I must confess I have mixed feelings about the term “youth engagement.” My problem with the term comes from the implication that young people must be “invited in” by adults to participate in governance, policy-making, community development, service planning, policy-making, or other projects or activities that have impact on their lives. I would prefer that we as a society – and here I would include government and the youth-serving and philanthropic sectors – adopt the concept of “generations.” A generations approach would render visible the power imbalance between adults and young people and serve as a safeguard against de-legitimizing the knowledge and experience younger members of society have to contribute to discussions about local concerns or solutions to social problems. A generations approach would place young people at the table as equal partners with adults, not by “invitation,” but by a normative and inclusive process that places value on what they can contribute to the business of “community-building.” I think it was Margaret Meade who once said something to the effect of, “if we want young people to grow up to be positive, contributing members of society, we must put responsibility on their shoulders.”

By including children and youth in any and all aspects of community building, we support their maturation and development and help them become active members of society. If young people are linked to a supportive older youth, adult or elder, they can be

coached and mentored into acquiring the confidence, knowledge, and skills they need to be conscious agents of change in their surroundings. A generations approach would be sensitive to the developmental needs of children and youth and adapt processes for debate, discussion, decision-making, and problem solving so that they are understandable to young people at different stages of development. However, learning to work together with young people is a two-way street.

LEARNING TO WORK – TOGETHER

I learned a powerful lesson many years ago when giving a keynote address at a conference in western Canada. The room was filled with over 300 youth-service professionals and – because the topic was controversial – lots of media. During a break to take questions from the audience, a young woman stood up and complained that “adults never listen to us.” Without thinking, I invited her on to the stage, handed her my microphone and said, “Okay, let’s fix that. What would you like the adults in this room to understand.” Unfortunately, this obviously bright young woman froze and was unable to articulate what was on her mind. I failed to realize that I possessed skills, knowledge, and experience about public speaking garnered from giving presentations at over 500 conferences all over the world; this young person did not.

Shortly after, I learned another important lesson. While attending a series of consultations sponsored by the federal government, I realized that youth invitees spent a great deal of their time silent, staring off into space, and disconnected from the process. In an instant, it became apparent to me that the process for soliciting ideas and stimulating conversation was very “dry” and geared toward an adult audience and that the facilitators were not trained or able to work with youth. For the first time, I realized the need to properly prepare both adults and young people to participate in common causes or forge effective, productive working alliances and relationships.

A RIPPLE EFFECT

When invited to speak to groups of adults about issues affecting the lives of young people, I often ask audience members to imagine that every second they are in the company of a child they are, through their words and actions directed toward that child, sending ripples out into our collective future history. I ask them to imagine how their words of support and encouragement or actions of unkindness, thoughtlessness, or even cruelty might impact that child and affect how she or he might, in turn, treat others now or in the future. The exercise always seems to make the room go *very* quiet!

Considering the positive impact even small gestures can have, it started me thinking about ways the philanthropy sector could, through simple day-to-day operations and activities, send more beneficial “ripples” out into the world and into young peoples’ lives. My guess is that there is much that could be done that would never show up in a formal impact or outcome evaluation, but could make philanthropy more relevant and appealing to young people.

I am certain these are not entirely original ideas, but they come to mind when I visualize a stone being thrown into a pond. For example, grant-makers that depend on generating

income from investments might make it a policy to invest more “socially.” By socially, I mean in businesses or other profit-making activities that are sustainable, “green” in their manufacturing or business operations, committed to social justice, and support young peoples’ health and well-being now and into the future.

As consumers of goods and services, grant-makers might consider using administrative and operational practices and occupying physical plant settings that respect the environment, eliminate or reduce waste and, where possible, leave a small or no carbon footprint. Such forward-thinking practices could also be factored into grant-making decisions, thereby encouraging grant recipients to begin or continue to adapt their own operations and practices. Grant-makers might also choose to add value to their grants by offering advice on helping recipients alter their service to become more environmentally aware without losing any precious human or fiscal resources.

Creating more “youth philanthropy programs” – grant-making initiatives run by and for young people – will provide valuable work experience and create a talent pool of young people who might apply their skills to all manner of social causes through volunteerism, seek out employment in philanthropic organizations, or become simply more socially aware and civically engaged adults.

MAKE ALL YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL WELCOME

Sometimes the simplest things can have significant impact. For example, grant-makers interested in communicating the message that they are youth-friendly and inclusive should start at the front door – literally! I cannot even count the number of waiting rooms of foundations or other grant-makers in which I’ve sat and found them to be sombre or even a little intimidating. One rarely sees any hint of fun or excitement. I can’t imagine how a young person would feel working in or visiting these settings. In fact, many grant-making organizations I have visited do not have a single young person on staff.

When grant-making organizations reflect the populations they serve in terms of who they hire, it sends a message about how in tune they are with the community and, in turn, may increase their appeal to donors. A diverse staff would almost certainly provide an organization with broader understanding of social issues and the solutions most likely to be effective. It just makes sense that grant-makers who hire young people in all their diversity or create student internships will improve their ability to understand and be responsive to the needs of youth, because they will have expertise based on lived experience “in-house.”

GRANT-MAKING WHERE THE ROADS END

I have spent a portion of my professional life working in remote and isolated communities in Canada’s far north. In all the time I was involved in this work, I rarely came across a youth program or activity that was funded by a non-governmental source. It was as if “giving” had a geographic boundary and stopped where the roads end.

Although this situation has improved slightly over the past ten years, there remains, in my opinion, a remarkable hesitation or reluctance for grant-makers to invest in resources

to benefit young people in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. It feels like we are living in some strange, inverted universe where the further away from urban centres young people live, and the greater their level of need, the less likely they are to receive support from grant-makers. Conversely, the closer young people live to better resourced urban centres, the more likely they are to be supported by philanthropic organizations. It's time to change course or we risk losing yet another generation of Indigenous young people.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

There is not a great deal of empiricism from which to draw to know with certainty how to transform philanthropy and make it more appealing or relevant to young people. I have used stories based on my own, colleagues', or young peoples' experiences to stimulate some discussion about this bold, brave, and necessary undertaking. I believe that we do not need to conduct exhaustive research studies in order to get mobilized and begin transforming philanthropy. Expertise in the form of young peoples' lived expertise abounds. We have but to do the simple thing – ask them what they need or wish to see!