Engaging Focus Group Methodology: The 4-H Middle School-Aged Youth Learning and Leading Study

Abstract

With young people, discussing complex issues such as learning and leading in a focus group can be a challenge. To help prime youth for the discussion, we created a focus group approach that featured a fun, interactive activity. This article includes a description of the focus group activity, lessons learned, and suggestions for additional applications.

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Introduction

The Center for Youth Development at the University of Minnesota developed two program outcomes to guide 4-H work, focusing on youth learning and leadership. The 4-H Middle School-Aged Youth Learning and Leading Study was designed based on the programmatic logic model and investigated the outcomes of learning and leading from the perspective of youth currently in the 4-H program. We were interested in how youth experience learning and leading in their own lives and in the 4-H program.

Asking youth to share complex insights about abstract concepts can be a tall order. To help prime youth for this challenging discussion, we developed a fun and interactive method for engaging youth in dialogue through two main parts: a Poster Sticker Activity and a Focus Group discussion. From this, we gained a better understanding of youths' perspectives on learning and leading and how 4-H fit into their view of themselves as learners and leaders in their areas of interest. Below, we describe the method and offer suggestions for how this activity may be used and adapted in other youth program settings.

Method

The purpose of the Poster Sticker Activity was to get youth warmed up to think about learning and leading through an interactive and fun activity. Each youth received an 11 in x 17 in poster (see Figure 1) and a packet of stickers. The poster had four columns where youth listed their top areas of interest or passions. The stickers had icons of indicators of learning and leading (e.g., the thumbs up

icon represented "mastery"), and each packet included four of each type of sticker (enough for one sticker per area of interest). See Table 1 for a description of each indicator.

Figure 1.

Completed Poster from the Poster Activity

Table 1.

Description of Sticker Indicators of Learning and Leading

Learning	Indicator	Terms used in explanation of activity	Sticker icon
	Teamwork	collaboration, worked together, team player	
	Adults are involved in	an adult/adult who	

the process	cares about you supported your learning, an adult who knows your name, notices you, and wants you to do your best	
Mentorship	help another person learn how to do something; supported another youth to learn a skill or get better at something, gave advice	
Learned something	learned something, new ideas or new information, gain skills,	
Learn about difference	cultural groups, youth who have different beliefs, religions, races, ethnic backgrounds	
Mastery	get really good at something, improved your skills, something you do that you are proud of	
Be recognized	complimented on your work or told you're doing a good job, you stand out to others in this area, you get noticed for your abilities in this area	
Reflect	think back on and learn about	
College/career plans	what you want to do when you grow up, your dreams for your future, what might you	

		pursue in high school	
Leading	Problem solving	figuring something out, tackling a challenge	
	Public speaking	presented in front of other; demonstration, speaking in front of a group of other youth or adults	
	Positional leadership	had a formal leadership position (president, captain, group leader, etc.) where others looked to you to be the leader	
	Service learning/civic engagement activities	volunteered in the community, meaningful contribution, giving back to the community, doing something to make sure that your neighborhood is a good place to live	
	Connection to the community	felt like you were part of your community or got to know more about your community. Saw that youth were an important part of the community, how much you care that your neighborhood is a good place for others to live.	
	Building awareness/understanding the common good	helped others understand something that you knew a lot about, an issue or an idea, being more	

		aware of others' needs or the world around them	
	Taking a stand	stood up for something because you thought it was the right thing to do	
	Inspired someone	inspired someone (to do better, learn something, grow)	
Other	4-H	which activities are you able to do through 4-H?	

The facilitator welcomed the youth and gave a brief overview of the session. Then, the facilitator walked the youth through listing their interests at the top of each column and entering the frequency they usually participate in them at the bottom. Next, the facilitator led the group as they placed stickers in columns as appropriate by first describing the sticker icon and then allowing the youth time to determine in which area of interest column to place their stickers. For example, a youth may place the "teamwork" sticker under her interest areas of "softball" and "4-H" but not under "drawing" and "reading" if those are mostly solitary endeavors. This activity took around 20-30 minutes to complete and is intended to prepare youth to reflect in the large focus group. For study purposes, the youth also filled out demographic information at the bottom of the poster. Later, pictures were taken of the posters for data collection purposes, and the youth were allowed to keep their posters.

After completing the activity, youth participated in a focus group discussion led by one or two study team members where the following questions were asked:

1. How would you describe learning? What are some words that you think of when I say "learning"?

2. How do you know when you are learning in 4-H? What happens? What does it look like?

3. How would you describe leading? What are some words that you think of when I say "leading"?

4. How do you know when you are leading in 4-H? What happens? What does it look like?

5. How can 4-H do a better job at helping you learn more or be a better learner?

6. How can 4-H do a better job at helping you lead more or be a better leader?

The discussion lasted around 60 minutes. Wall charts were used to write down youths' responses and provided a focal point for the discussion.

Lessons Learned

Here are some tips for completing this activity.

Use small groups: This method works best with 6-10 youth in order to allow all youth to share their insights. Larger groups can be split into smaller groups with a facilitator for each group.

Let youth interpret their findings: Have discussion after each type of sticker is placed to better understand how youth are interpreting each indicator. Ask youth to clarify their comments during the focus group to ensure understanding (e.g., "Can you tell me a little more about that?")

Construct probes: Think of a variety of probes or follow-up questions to keep the discussion going.

Capture what happens: This can be done by recording the discussion with a tape recorder and taking good notes immediately after the discussion.

Develop action plan: After reflecting on the activity, decide what changes or next steps would be appropriate and carry through with them.

Consider facilitator placement: Consider positioning adult facilitators and staff members to help youth with poster activity.

Application

The method described and materials developed could be used in a variety of ways.

- **Needs assessment**: Youth can think about their experiences in after school programs and how programming can be improved to meet their needs. Program staff can use this information to plan activities that are better connected to youths' areas of interest. (See Gamon, 1992 for more information on needs assessments).

- **Incorporating youth perspectives**: This activity provides an opportunity to give youth authentic voice. Use this activity to encourage all youth to think about their learning and leadership opportunities.

- **Portfolio planning**: Help youth plan for their learning and leading portfolio while also creating an artifact to put in the portfolio.

From this activity, we learned that youth can think about abstract concepts like learning and leadership. The key to our success was using a hands-on activity that connected the topic directly to young people's lives to prepare youth to share and build on each other's ideas. If you have never conducted a focus group before or would like more tips or information, many sources are available (e.g., Archer, 1993; Allen, Grudens-Schuck, & Larson, 2004). To increase its applicability, this approach can be adapted for other topics (e.g., friendship, goal setting, family, relationships). With the help of this activity, your future focus groups can be more effective and engaging.

Follow-up questions or access to the posters or materials can be directed to Samantha Grant

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References

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