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Guided Participation in Three Youth Activism Organizations: Facilitation, Apprenticeship, and Joint Work

Ben Kirshner
School of Education, University of Colorado

Multiracial youth activism groups, based in working class and poor neighborhoods, seek to improve social conditions by organizing grassroots campaigns. Campaigns such as these, which require sophisticated planning, organizing, and advocacy skills, are noteworthy not just for their political impact, but also because of the insights they provide about learning environments outside of school. In this study I adopted Rogoff’s (2003) theory of guided participation as a lens through which to analyze adult approaches to working with youth and how these approaches relate to opportunities for youth to participate in social action. Drawing on 2 years of ethnographic fieldwork in 3 multiracial activism groups, I found that adults managed tensions between youth empowerment principles and the task demands of campaigns in 3 distinct ways: facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work. This analysis is relevant to educators who wish to support youth participation in mature social practices and researchers interested in elective learning environments.

Civic engagement, characterized by affection for the polity, knowledge of civic processes, and skills for participation, represents a central developmental task in adolescence (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Researchers express concern, however, that youth of color from low-income neighborhoods have few opportunities to participate in activities that foster their civic development (Hart & Atkins, 2002). One exception to this trend is the burgeoning phenomenon of youth activism (Ginwright & James, 2002; Youniss & Hart, 2005). Groups composed of high school students and adult supporters have successfully carried out campaigns to shape
policies affecting young people. For example, they have won subsidized bus passes for low-income students, exposed environmental polluters, and persuaded policymakers to stop the building of “super jails” for juvenile offenders (Kwon, 2006; Sherman, 2002). Such campaigns exemplify a progressive educational tradition in which young people tackle meaningful social problems through project-based, collaborative work (Dewey, 1902/1990; Perlstein, 2002).

Although researchers have begun to document the political accomplishments of youth activism groups, as well as developmental outcomes associated with participation, few have systematically studied their teaching practices. Scholars know little, for example, about the ways that adults help young people organize their campaigns or foster critical thinking about the causes of public problems. How do adults, who often have experience planning complex campaigns, manage their expertise in ways that enable youth to participate meaningfully in public action?

In this article, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in three multiracial activism groups, I examine how adults guide high school students’ participation in social action. This focus on adult guidance strategies in activism is relevant to educators who wish to support youth participation in adult domains from which they are often restricted. It is also relevant to theories of learning in nonschool settings. Whereas prior research has tended to emphasize consistencies across settings outside of school—with terms such as informal, apprenticeship, or everyday—this study focused instead on variations in guidance strategies and how these relate to youths’ opportunities to participate.

CONCEPTUAL LENS: GUIDED PARTICIPATION

An analysis of teaching practices outside of school must deal with a basic problem: One rarely encounters “teachers” there, at least in the conventional sense of authority figures who develop curricula, implement lesson plans, and assess student knowledge (Heath, 1991). Even in apprenticeships, in which there is often a designated expert, it can be challenging to discern what the master does to instruct or teach novices (Hori, 1994). After reviewing five studies of apprenticeship learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) concluded, “In all five cases … there is very little observable teaching; the more basic phenomenon is learning … Learning itself is an improvised practice: A learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice” (p. 93). Lave and Wenger’s description of legitimate peripheral participation emphasizes the active ways that novices make use of available resources to become part of a social practice. Similarly, a recent synthesis of research on parent–child interaction concluded that “children propel their own development” and are not passively socialized by adults (Bransford et al., 2006, p. 24). Even at young ages, children actively seek out knowledge from (sometimes reluctant) elders and mentors (Paradise, 1998). As Rogoff (2003) wrote, in describing
how Navajo children learn to weave, “Mothers do not teach their daughters to weave, but one day a girl may say, ‘I am ready. Let me weave’” (p. 324).

Nevertheless, although acknowledging children’s agency in the learning process, studies of learning outside of school have also documented the educative roles played by more experienced others, whether adults or peers (Basso, 1996; Halpern, 2005; Heath, 1999). Central to these studies is the notion that experienced members of a community support the participation of novices through what Rogoff (2003) called “guided participation.” Guided participation has a dual meaning: It emphasizes how adults help to structure children’s developmental trajectories and also the active participation by children in these processes.

Studies of guided participation outside of school have suggested that teachers—with a small t—provide coaching and advice as part of ongoing, goal-oriented activity, such as playing dominoes, selling Girl Scout cookies, or fixing a house, rather than during occasions set aside for instruction (Nasir, 2005; Rogoff, 1995; Rose, 2004). For example, Rose described the case of a master plumber who helped teenage apprentices manage complex tasks by breaking them into manageable parts and focusing attention on the most pressing ones. Observers often describe this process as a form of scaffolding, which implies temporary assistance that will be withdrawn gradually as the learner assumes greater mastery (in contrast to distributed intelligence, in which collaboration among actors and tools is an ongoing feature of an activity; Pea, 2003). A recent literature review described four ways that experts scaffold the participation of novices in settings outside of school: by fostering a sense of safety and belonging, making the domain visible, embodying trajectories of competence, and providing timely and flexible feedback (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006).

The first of these—safety and belonging—is a common finding in studies of high-quality urban youth organizations (Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000). Talented adults in these settings, who often have a deep awareness of the local social context, are particularly skilled at forming trusting, supportive relationships with young people (Strobel, Kirshner, McLaughlin, & O’Donoghue, in press). This is in part because they are attuned to where youth are developmentally—they know when to provide coaching and support and when to back off (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). Also, they view their role as temporary, “fading” over time to enable youth to take progressively more responsibility for activities (Heath, 1999).

Amidst the range of roles played by more experienced members of a practice, the role of providing access is a common theme across multiple studies. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning is best supported when experts give newcomers access to the whole practice—in part by visibly embodying what it means to be a veteran participant, but also by making resources, information, and opportunities for participation available to newcomers. For example, Lave (1990) describes how novice tailors assisted with the final stages of garment production; this role al-
lowed them to see how different parts fit together in a larger whole. In another example, described by Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, and Angelillo (2003), adults in some indigenous American communities guide children by inviting them to participate, even in peripheral ways, in their daily activities. These children learn by listening in, observing, and taking initiative in shared endeavors with adults. According to Rogoff (2003), this opportunity to gain access to adult practices rarely occurs in conventional Western schooling, where, “instead of routinely helping adults, children are often involved in specialized child-focused exercises to assemble skills for later entry in mature activities” (p. 181). Given the prevalence of age segregation in the United States, youth organizations represent an important venue for minors to gain access to adult domains, whether through informal relationships with adults or project-based activities that link youth to professional or artistic communities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Heath, 1999; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005).


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GUIDED PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH ACTIVISM

Youth activism can also be understood in terms of this theme of access. Adolescents who wish to participate in public policymaking face a stark contradiction. On one hand, they are developmentally sophisticated enough to understand and negotiate complex public systems (Larson & Hansen, 2005), they are capable of sustained commitment to taking on public problems (Kwon, 2006), and they have insights to share about their experiences (Cook-Sather, 2002). On the other hand, they lack access to the venues where policy decisions are made and are rarely taken seriously as legitimate participants in decision making (Chawla et al., 2005; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Youth of color, in particular, are often positioned by policymakers as vulnerable or dangerous, rather than resilient and resourceful (Noguera & Cannella, 2006).

Youth activism represents one response to this contradiction. In activism, young people, often with the support of adults, identify a public problem and try to solve it through advocacy or community organizing. In contrast to community service programs in which youth clean parks, tutor children, or serve food to the homeless, youth activism groups seek to influence public policy or change institutional practices, often with a social justice focus (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Through interaction with public officials and community members, such groups challenge social constructions of youth of color as apathetic or uninvolved (Youniss & Hart, 2005).

Youth activism groups embody many features of learning environments observed in youth programs and inquiry-oriented classrooms. For example, activities have high use value rather than exchange value, in the sense that young people learn skills that they put to use to solve meaningful problems, rather than problems
alien to ordinary experience (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Also, the campaigns represent authentic, open-ended tasks in which students tackle problems that emerge in the course of the investigation rather than problems that are preassigned (Stevens, 2000). Finally, similar to recent efforts to promote interactions between disciplinary experts and students (Hall & Jurow, 2006), youth activists culminate their projects by interacting with policymakers and elected officials (Ginwright, 2006). Public events, such as press conferences, rallies, and presentations to school boards, allow students to organize and exhibit what they have learned.

One unique aspect of youth activism groups, however, has to do with an empowerment discourse that assigns political significance to the distinction between youth and adults. Youth indexes a group of people, typically under age 18, who are deprived of basic rights to participate in decisions that influence their lives. James and McGillicuddy (2001) referred to youth participation as the next civil rights movement. HoSang (2003) argued that in the 1990s, the category “youth” gained symbolic meaning “as a political identity, a shared worldview that provided the basis for collective action” (p. 5, italics in the original).

In a youth empowerment context, adults are frequently viewed as obstacles to access rather than exemplars to emulate, for example by making decisions without the input of youth (Hogan, 2002), creating only token opportunities for youth participation (O’Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002), or promoting punitive policies toward minors (Males, 1996). Many groups strive to address power inequalities between adults and youth by placing constraints on adult roles or creating structures for youth to assume leadership responsibilities (Camino, 2005; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2006). Unlike accounts of out-of-school learning whereby newcomers begin by participating in a peripheral manner, in activism groups youth are often expected to lead the way.

This discourse of youth empowerment can create dilemmas for adults who are responsible for directing programs or raising money, especially those who may have expertise in civic participation and social action. For example, some groups aspire to be youth-led, whereby youth exercise control over decision making and adults are primarily advisors or facilitators (Larson et al., 2005). But there may be times when the complex demands of campaigns merit some participation or guidance by adults—by advising youth on campaign strategy; instructing them in certain skills; or completing mundane, but necessary, tasks, such as making sure buses are available to transport people to a rally (Larson & Hansen, 2005).

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1The term youth-led has been defined in varied ways. Whereas some programs describe college students or people in their early 20s as youths, others describe them as adults. In this article, consistent with the terminology used in the programs I studied, I define youth as younger than 18 years of age. I do not, therefore, describe programs supervised by college students or people in their early 20s as youth-led, even though an argument could be made for such a description.
Adults may also struggle with how to share their sociopolitical views with youth. On one hand, a principled commitment to youth voice could lead adults to adopt a neutral, detached stance, whereby they encourage students to develop their own ideas about the origins of and solutions to societal problems. Such an approach would be consistent with some strains of constructivism that emphasize peer interaction and student-centered inquiry (Duckworth, 1996; Perlstein, 2002; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). On the other hand, activist educators such as Paolo Freire or Myles Horton would question the notion that teachers should withhold their sociopolitical beliefs (Freire, 1970/2002; Horton, 1990; Kilgore, 1999). Many argue, for example, that youths’ participation in social change requires them to understand systemic legacies of inequality and racism in the United States, which might require some form of educational intervention by adults (Ginwright & James, 2002; Tejeda, Espinoza, & Gutierrez, 2003).

These examples draw attention to the challenges faced by adults who wish to help high school students participate in political action. Although some adult support may be necessary for youth to achieve political goals, too much involvement might undermine their initiative or lead to a slippery slope where adults end up co-opting youths’ roles. The purpose of this article is to show different ways that adults have managed these tensions in their efforts to guide youth. My aim is not to provide systematic evidence of learning outcomes associated with each style, but instead to describe how different approaches to working with youth influence their opportunities to participate in public action.2

BACKGROUND ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Neighborhood and School Contexts

Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL), Youth Rising, and Teens Restoring the Urban Environment (TRUE) were located in different working class and poor neighborhoods in a major metropolitan region in the western United States.3 Problems in these neighborhoods, such as high rates of unemployment and violence, mirrored problems in cities nationwide that faced dramatic losses in stable employment, cuts to social services, and disinvestment in the public sphere (Noguera, 2003; Wilson, 1996). As shown in Table 1, academic achievement at participants’ schools, as measured by standardized test scores, was low compared

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2This focus on adult guidance is not intended to imply that peer interactions are insignificant or that adults are the only resources that influence youths’ participation. On the contrary, youths’ participation is also shaped by factors that include their prior experiences, their levels of interest in group goals, and the extent to which they get along with peers in the group. Nevertheless, I focus on adult roles in this article in order to gain an in-depth understanding of one piece of a complex activity system.

3Youth Rising and TRUE are pseudonyms.
to state and national standards, particularly in schools attended by YELL and Youth Rising participants, where more than 50% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Organizational Profiles

**YELL**

YELL, which met at an urban high school, was funded and staffed by a research center at a nearby university that sought to build partnerships with neighboring communities to promote positive youth development. YELL’s specific purpose was to help high school students develop leadership and research skills so that they could gather evidence about conditions in their school or neighborhood and advocate for change based on their findings. (Organizational profiles for each group are provided in Table 2.) Because of YELL’s university affiliation, research and documentation were central to its mission.

YELL was composed of 17 youth ranging from 9th to 12th grade who received monthly stipends of $100 contingent on regular participation. The adult staff included one director, Michelle, and two AmeriCorps members, Beth and Korina.4 (See Table 3 for specific demographic information about adults and youth in each group.)

In the program’s second year, which I focus on in this paper, YELL participants developed a campaign called Don’t Believe the Hype to challenge media portrayals that perpetuated stereotypes about violence and academic underachievement among youth of color in their neighborhood. Participants created alternative me-

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4All personal names are pseudonyms.

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**TABLE 1**
Social Context Indicators for Participants in Each Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Neighborhoods</th>
<th>Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residents at or Above 185% Poverty Line</td>
<td>Adult Residents Without High School Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YELL</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Risinga</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUE</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* All numbers are percentages. YELL = Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning; TRUE = Teens Restoring the Urban Environment.

*a*School indicators apply to the two high schools that the majority of Youth Rising participants attended.
### TABLE 2
Group Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>YELL</th>
<th>Youth Rising</th>
<th>TRUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Host agency</td>
<td>University research center focused on youth development founded in 2000</td>
<td>Nonprofit advocacy organization founded in 1995</td>
<td>Nonprofit environmental justice organization founded in 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social action campaign</td>
<td>Don’t Believe the Hype: Reduce negative portraits of youth of color through advocacy, presentations, and creation of alternative media</td>
<td>Student Power: Persuade high schools to increase student input in school governance and improve counseling for students</td>
<td>Youth Conference: Inform youth about effects of war and persuade politicians to limit military recruitment in public schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign products</td>
<td>Web site, video, and ‘zine Presentations to community members and journalists</td>
<td>Student voice resolution and report Rallies, press conference, and presentation to school board</td>
<td>Conference for more than 200 students and political officials Resolution to limit military recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of campaign</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of meetings</td>
<td>2–3 per week</td>
<td>2 per week</td>
<td>2–3 per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade levels of youth</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>10–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of veteran to novice youth</td>
<td>6:11</td>
<td>3:9</td>
<td>5:2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Veterans were those in their second or third year in the group; novices were in their first year.

### TABLE 3
Number of Participants in Each Group by Age and Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>YELL Youth</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Youth Rising Youth</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>TRUE Youth</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Total Youth</th>
<th>Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian and Pacific Islander</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
dia, such as a Web site, video documentary, and magazine, to communicate a richer picture of their lives. They also conducted focus groups with students and teachers about the origins and consequences of stereotypes. The campaign culminated in a community forum where youth presented their work to an audience that included the school board president, journalists, students, and community residents. Also, youth met with editors from a local newspaper to discuss ways to improve media coverage and presented their work to younger children in the neighborhood.

Youth Rising

Unlike YELL, Youth Rising was housed in a grassroots advocacy organization, not affiliated with any university, whose purpose was to advocate for children and youth. Six years earlier the advocacy organization had led a successful ballot measure that had allocated a percentage of the city’s budget to youth programs. Funding for Youth Rising was provided by a combination of foundations, membership dues, and the city (called here Marshall).

Youth Rising described itself as a multiracial youth organizing group that created opportunities for “youth to become visionary leaders capable of transforming their schools and communities” (Youth Rising website). Participants were called youth organizers because they were expected to build power among youth by organizing their peers based on shared interests. They met 2 days per week after school and received stipends of roughly $100 per month. Two part-time staff members, Alonzo and Elsa, both in their early 20s, coordinated the group’s activities with the support of a full-time executive director, Vanessa.

In its second year, Youth Rising developed a campaign to reduce the high school dropout rate in Marshall by promoting greater student voice in school governance. As part of this effort, youth organizers asked their peers to fill out “report cards” that evaluated their schools. They also enlisted their fellow students in the campaign by inviting them to monthly “membership meetings,” at which visitors learned about the campaign goals, talked about their experiences in Marshall schools, and socialized with students from across the city. Over the course of 2 months youth organizers collected more than 950 report cards. Organizers presented the results at a rally and press conference in front of school district headquarters. Two weeks later, Youth Rising submitted a formal resolution to the school board to strengthen student councils “to do more than just plan proms” (Youth Rising resolution). Although the school board publicly expressed its support for the resolution, it later lost its decision-making authority to a state administrator who had been installed to rectify the district’s ailing finances.

TRUE

TRUE’s mission was “to foster an understanding of the principles of environmental justice and urban sustainability in our young people in order to promote the
long-term health of their communities” (TRUE website). TRUE ran multiple programs that included park restoration and efforts to improve the availability of healthy food in the neighborhood. Some years it organized special events to raise the profile of a particular issue in the community. In 2002–2003, during the lead-up to the United States’s invasion of Iraq, a group of youth and adults decided to plan a 1-day conference for students about the consequences of war for the local environment. I observed the conference planning process for this study.

Youth participants in the conference planning lived in neighborhoods from throughout the city and attended a variety of private, public, and charter high schools. Unlike the other groups, there was no hiring process for youth who wanted to join; anyone could participate who showed interest. The number of youth who attended meetings varied. At some meetings there were as many as 10 youth, and at others as few as 4, but there were 7 youth who were part of the group for at least 2 months. Of these, 5 were veterans of other TRUE programs and 2 were new members who had been recruited to participate by a TRUE veteran. As in YELL and Youth Rising, youth received stipends for their participation.

The purpose of the conference was to raise awareness among local youth about the impact of the U.S. military on their neighborhood and also to promote interaction between political figures and youth. The conference had three main parts: (a) In the morning, neighborhood groups led workshops about issues ranging from juvenile justice to food security; (b) at lunch a DJ performed and there were opportunities to learn graffiti art; (c) after lunch there was an “accountability session,” whose purpose was for local politicians and their proxies to answer questions from youth. During this time, TRUE asked for political support for a resolution to limit military recruitment in public schools, which members feared contributed to disproportionate enlistment by low-income students of color.

Unlike YELL and Youth Rising, the conference planning group was an ad hoc offshoot of TRUE rather than a program with stable funding and dedicated staff. It was funded primarily by a small grant of approximately $3,000 from a local foundation that supported youth-initiated community action projects. Adult staff members who were involved participated in addition to their regular job responsibilities in TRUE. Two AmeriCorps members, Earl and Dave, were the most consistent adult representatives at the meetings. The executive director of TRUE, Lauren, came to several meetings, as did Beatrice, a program manager.

METHODS

Data Collection

This study relied on four sources of data: observations of program activities; observations of special events; semistructured interviews with youth and adults; and
program artifacts, such as newsletters written by youth or handouts prepared by adults. (See Table 4 for amounts and types of data collected from each program.) I observed more program meetings of YELL because I began my research earlier in the year and because YELL met more frequently. Differences in numbers of interviews with youth reflect the different sizes of the groups. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. All field notes and interview transcripts were subsequently entered into N6, a software program for qualitative, text-based data analysis.

My observations and interviews were informed by interpretive, ethnographic approaches (Becker, 1998; Spradley, 1979). My role in each group varied. For example, in YELL I contributed to the design of the program, routinely sat in on meetings among adult staff members, and co-led a conference presentation about YELL with two youth participants. In Youth Rising I participated in group team-builder activities, helped small groups with tasks when solicited, and contributed my ideas to an evaluation plan for the program. Unlike in YELL or Youth Rising, in TRUE adults and youth treated me as a regular participant in the conference planning process—I was expected to offer opinions, vote on decisions, and implement necessary tasks.

Performing these different roles informed my comparison of the groups in two important ways. First, by being part of planning meetings in YELL I gained an insider view of adults’ goals and decision making. I compensated for this unique access by finding opportunistic moments in Youth Rising and TRUE to ask adults about their goals and decision making. Second, how I was positioned by members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>YELL</th>
<th>Youth Rising</th>
<th>TRUE</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duration of fieldwork</td>
<td>10 months</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations of program</td>
<td>57 (&gt;95 hr)</td>
<td>27 (&gt;60 hr)</td>
<td>18 (&gt;40 hr)</td>
<td>102 (&gt;195 hr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations of special events</td>
<td>9 (&gt;25 hr)</td>
<td>6 (&gt;12 hr)</td>
<td>4 (&gt;14 hr)</td>
<td>19 (&gt;51 hr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taped interviews</td>
<td>17 youth</td>
<td>8 youth and 1 adult</td>
<td>4 youth and 2 adults</td>
<td>29 youth and 3 adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts (similar across</td>
<td>Program brochures and grant applications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groups)</td>
<td>Flyers</td>
<td>Newspaper articles</td>
<td>Youth-authored documents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: YELL = Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning; TRUE = Teens Restoring the Urban Environment.
of each group amounted to an additional kind of data relevant to my analysis. For example, the fact that people in TRUE expected me to contribute along with everyone else to planning the conference gave me insight into the shared division of labor among adults and youth there.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began while I conducted fieldwork. During this time I drafted analytic memos that noted similarities and differences across programs. After I completed my fieldwork I developed a set of descriptive codes with three colleagues who were engaged in qualitative research in another youth program. We developed a shared set of low-inference codes intended to capture types of activities, leadership roles, and kinds of talk that could apply across multiple types of programs (see Appendix).

Initially I set out to identify the strategies that adults used to turn responsibility for the group over to youth so that it would become youth-led. It quickly became apparent, however, that Youth Rising and TRUE did not share this goal with YELL. Therefore, instead of approaching my study as a technical question about how adults support youth-led activities, I sought to document the variety of approaches to working with youth that I observed and how these related to broader group goals and contexts.

Two codes were especially relevant to understanding different adult–youth interaction patterns across groups: activity leader and activity purpose. Activity leader referred to the person who initiated the activity, facilitated it, and called it to a close. Sometimes youth played this role, sometimes adults, sometimes a youth and an adult, and sometimes there was not a clearly designated activity leader. Activity purpose referred to the kind of activity taking place, such as a workshop, team-building, campaign-related tasks, announcements, or hanging out. Beginnings and ends of activities were defined according to the agendas that groups used to organize their meetings. Typically there were three to five activities during a given meeting. The following excerpts from two of the youth groups provide examples of how I coded activity leader and activity purpose.

It is 3:35, and young people are entering the room to begin the meeting. I hear Dolores, a youth participant, greet people by saying, “Hello, I’ll be your facilitator today.” After a few minutes, Dolores starts the meeting by asking people to be quiet. She asks a volunteer to read the agenda and then asks if anyone has any questions. There are no questions, so she proceeds to explain the opening team-builder activity, called “Sound Track,” in which we are supposed to write down the five songs that represent a sound track to our lives. (YELL, December 17, 2002)

5Because field notes were used to record discussions, most attributions in these excerpts represent my effort to paraphrase what was said. Direct quotations are signaled by the use of quotation marks.
This example illustrates two codes of relevance to this analysis. First, it is an example of an activity that was youth-led, because Dolores, a youth participant, initiated the meeting and explained instructions for the activity. Second, it is an example of an activity whose purpose was team-building, because the goal was to help members of the group get to know one another.

I coded this second example, from Youth Rising, differently:

It is 4:30 and the meeting is getting started. Alonzo, an adult staff member, hands out a piece of paper titled “Liberation, Healing, Resistance.” Alonzo asks someone to read the quote at the top of the page: “Be grateful for blessings. Don’t ever change—keep your essence. The power is in the people and the politics we address. Always do your best, don’t let the pressure make you panic.—Tupac Shakur”

After Christopher, a youth organizer, reads the quote, Alonzo reads it again in a hip-hop cadence. He then asks other youth to read the rest of the page, which discusses strategies for overcoming “internalized oppression.” [This is one of the goals outlined in Youth Rising’s evaluation plan—to build students’ understanding of oppression and responses to it.] When the quotes have been read, Alonzo asks, What does this all mean? A discussion ensues among participants. (Youth Rising, February 13, 2003)

This excerpt is an example of an adult-led activity, because Alonzo, an adult staff member, facilitated it. (Note that adult-led strictly means that an adult initiated and facilitated the activity—it does not imply a particular method, whether that method is didactic or inquiry based.) The excerpt is also an example of a workshop, because the activity’s purpose was to introduce a new concept to youth (internalized oppression) and give them opportunities to discuss its meaning.

Although these two codes provided useful baseline comparisons across groups, they did not capture participants’ own interpretations of their roles, responsibilities, and goals. I therefore also analyzed interviews and group conversations to understand how participants made sense of what they were doing. Also, I examined the broader organizational context of each group, such as its history and mission. These analyses contributed to two broad dimensions upon which to compare the groups: the level of adult participation in campaigns and the extent to which the learning environment was designed to respond to youths’ skill levels and interests (what I call a youth-centered learning environment). After I had generated coherent descriptions of forms of guided participation I met with adults and some youth participants in each setting to get their feedback about the credibility of my analysis (Becker, 1996).

RESULTS

The purpose of this article is to describe patterns of adult–youth interaction in three activism groups and what these patterns mean for youths’ opportunities to partici-
pate in public action. I begin by identifying shared tensions experienced by adults across the three groups and provide an overview of the three strategies I observed, which I call facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work. In the subsequent section, I describe each approach to guided participation—and the corresponding opportunities for youth participation—in greater depth.

Overview: Tensions Between Adult Guidance and Youth Ownership

The terms youth and adults took on similar symbolic meanings across the three groups. Youth were those who were of high school age. Adults were those who were older than 18 and worked as staff members for the organization. With the exception of executive directors, most adults were younger than 24.

Adults across the groups expressed their desire for youth to take ownership of the campaigns, in the sense that youth would care about the campaign goals and take initiative to carry them out, rather than just follow the leadership and guidance of adults. At the same time, the campaigns included complex tasks, such as strategizing a campaign or speaking persuasively to policymakers, which were new to most youth. This tension fueled questions and reflections by adults about what roles they should play.

In YELL, adults raised questions about their roles throughout the year. For example, after the first YELL meeting, Korina, a new AmeriCorps member, sought clarification about “the definition of a teacher in YELL”—she feared that adults were not offering enough guidance to youth. Michelle, the program director, explained that she saw her role as supporting youth in making decisions but not making decisions for them. Two months later adults continued to struggle with questions about adult roles: One conversation revolved around the shared observation that youth deferred too much to the adult facilitators in small groups. Adults decided they should “pull back more and leave the small groups to facilitate themselves” so that youth would take more ownership. Adults in Youth Rising and TRUE also deliberated about how to foster youths’ sense of ownership. Alonzo, the Youth Rising coordinator, told me that he wanted organizing to be an attitude that youth brought to their peer interactions outside of the program and not just something they did when they were at Youth Rising. Vanessa, the executive director of Youth Rising, said that she felt pressure for groups like hers to appear “youth-led,” but that this was sometimes unproductive because youth need support to develop certain skills necessary for political action. Both of the adult coordinators in TRUE, Dave and Earl, told me that they found it challenging to balance the need to organize a successful youth conference with their wish for youth to be involved in meaningful ways.

Adults managed these tensions by guiding youths’ participation in different ways: facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work. These approaches can be understood along two dimensions: (a) the extent to which adults participated in the cam-
ampaign and (b) the extent to which activities were structured for youths’ interest and skill levels. Figure 1 provides a conceptual illustration of these distinctions. An overview of key differences between these forms of guided participation is presented in Table 5.

![Figure 1](image-url) Differences between facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work.

<p>| TABLE 5 | Guided Participation in Three Youth Activism Groups |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Facilitation</th>
<th>Apprenticeship</th>
<th>Joint work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most prominent in …</td>
<td>YELL</td>
<td>Youth Rising</td>
<td>TRUE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative importance</td>
<td>Emphasis on youth leadership</td>
<td>Roughly equal emphasis on youth leadership and campaign success</td>
<td>Emphasis on campaign success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>granted to youth leadership versus campaign success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult role</td>
<td>Neutral facilitator</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Senior colleague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of labor</td>
<td>Youth select and implement projects; adults support through facilitation</td>
<td>Youth implement projects with some adult participation; adults support through coaching and feedback</td>
<td>Youth and adults make decisions and implement projects together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundary between youth and adult</td>
<td>Well demarcated</td>
<td>Quasi</td>
<td>Not demarcated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinds of youth participation</td>
<td>Facilitate meetings and implement projects with limited adult assistance</td>
<td>Implement projects with guidance of adults, recruit other youth to join campaign</td>
<td>Plan conference collaboratively with adults</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* YELL = Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning; TRUE = Teens Restoring the Urban Environment.
In terms of the first dimension, in the facilitation approach adults sought to be neutral facilitators of a youth-led process. This goal corresponded to the indirect kinds of guidance that adults provided: They facilitated youths’ conversations; introduced routines to help groups work productively; and provided resources, such as computers or video cameras. In contrast, in apprenticeship and joint work adults demonstrated a vested interest in the sophistication and success of the campaigns. This interest corresponded to the kinds of roles that adults performed, which included indirect support at some times but also more direct participation in decision making and work.

A second dimension that distinguished facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work was the extent to which program activities were youth-centered. Here, youth-centered refers to learning environments that are designed to engage youth by being responsive to their skill level and interests (McLaughlin, 2000). Youth-centered activities include team-builders designed to foster group belonging; workshops designed to improve youths’ skills or understanding; and participant structures, such as small-group activities, designed to foster participation from all members. Activities in facilitation and apprenticeship were typically youth-centered, unlike those in joint work.

I observed these different approaches, to varying extents, in all three programs. For example, in situations in which youth were preparing for prominent roles in a public action, the apprenticeship pattern was common—adults tended to become more involved by providing coaching and feedback. Presumably adults wanted to exercise greater influence over the quality of presentations, especially when the public image of the organization was at stake. Also, within each organization there were sometimes discussions that resembled facilitation, in which adults refrained from offering their own views and instead solicited the opinions and perspectives of youth participants. In one group (TRUE), the modal pattern of interaction shifted from facilitation to joint work after a turning point in the planning process.

Despite these examples of internal variation, each group practiced a form of guided participation that was most prominent. In YELL this was facilitation, in Youth Rising it was apprenticeship, and in TRUE it was joint work. In the next section I describe modal guidance approaches in each program as well as internal variations. In the Discussion I explain salient factors that influenced the formation of each type of guided participation.

Patterns of Guided Participation in Each Group

**YELL**

*Guidance through facilitation.* In YELL adults sought to help youth develop and assume leadership of the project. As self-described “outsiders” to the high-poverty community where YELL was located, adults believed that youth par-
participants had greater insight into the nature of the problems there and how to approach them. They argued that the project would be more authentic if it represented the interests and desires of youth. As one adult said, to a chorus of agreement from others, in a debrief meeting, “I’d prefer for us to be like referees, help youth come to their own beliefs, rather than prod them towards ours.”

Adult guidance, therefore, followed a developmental arc: Early in the year adults helped set up a process for youth to work together and over time, with some exceptions, faded from active supervision. One of the first decisions about process had to do with group ground rules about behavior. Youth defined unexcused absences, spelled out how many warnings students should receive for absences, specified the consequences of disrespecting others, and differentiated acceptable curses (directed toward oneself) from unacceptable curses (directed toward others). The deliberations, which the program director facilitated without giving input, took several afternoons. Some students found the whole exercise foreign. During a conversation at the beginning of the first year, one student said, in frustration at the slow pace, “I think ya’ll [the adults] should make the rules.” Over time, however, the group agreements became a resource that allowed adults to deflect authority from themselves to a more impartial set of rules. As one youth participant, Marlene, said in an interview, “If we break the rules, we couldn’t get mad because we were the ones that put them in force …” Marlene viewed the rules as a product of youths’ labor rather than as something imposed upon them arbitrarily.

Adult neutrality extended to decisions about the content of the project. Adults refrained from directly teaching a particular political stance or from voting on the choice of campaign topic. Instead, they facilitated discussions in which youth were expected to initiate and evaluate one another’s ideas with limited input from adults. Consider the following example from the program’s third week, when youth worked in small groups to generate possible campaign topics:

Small-group discussion about possible campaign topics (YELL)

Beth, an adult staff member, starts the discussion by saying this is a continuation of the lunch meeting yesterday when they talked about the Black Panthers. Beth says, just like the Black Panthers did, we are going to identify issues you care about. She asks, what are some issues that you care about?

Malcolm: Thievery, reduce thievery.
Beth: Say more?
Malcolm: Students are stealing from each other.
Cedric: Don’t just reduce it, eliminate it.
Beth: What are some solutions?
Guillermo: Don’t bring stuff to school.
Brian: Keep an eye on your stuff.
Cedric: People steal books, everything. Not just nice stuff, it could be a used book or a mouse wheel that they can’t even use.
Beth then tries to redirect the conversation towards possible solutions. What are some solutions to this problem?

Cedric: They need they butt beat.
Beth: YELL won’t really be able to do that. Are there other kinds of solutions?
Jocelyn: Guidance counselors. We should increase guidance counselors or let people know they are available.
The discussion continued.

Beth’s approach to facilitating the discussion was common in YELL. She asked questions, tried to generate conversation, and redirected the conversation to keep it on task. She did not offer problems or solutions of her own, nor did she define what it would mean to develop an effective solution. Instead, youth generated the ideas. Beth’s assumption appeared to be that youth would generate solutions to problems they cared about through discussion with one another.

As it turned out, the issue of theft did not come up again in group discussions. Instead, after a series of deliberations, the group decided, based on a majority vote, to design a campaign to combat “stereotypes about youth.” Youth also chose the strategies to address this problem, which involved producing a video, magazine, and Web site to share with the public and also conducting focus groups with students and teachers. A few weeks after splitting into four groups to work on these projects, youth decided, also in a vote, that adults should be available to answer questions or assist on an “as-needed” basis, but not be present to supervise routine small-group work. Dolores, a YELL veteran, described her perceptions of this division of labor in an interview at the end of the year:

Interviewer: Now that the year is over how do you feel about how it went?
Dolores: This year I think it was harder, because last year [year one] the adults were more involved with the groups ... And this year it was more like, “We’re gonna let them do everything and we’re just gonna sit back and watch and if they need help we’ll be there but we’re not really gonna take charge of the situation.” And I think that’s good though, ‘cause that’s what YELL’s about: you making your own choices, you getting your things done.

Dolores observed that adults made room for youth input and ownership by detaching themselves from the project and letting youth make key decisions. This effort was socially reinforced among adults, who told one another in debrief sessions if they felt that one of them was interfering too much. Adults reinforced this division of labor by youth participants by saying things such as, “This project is up to you,” “You chose the topic,” or “It’s supposed to be the youth making the decisions.” Youth also contributed by placing constraints on adult roles, such as in their collective decision that adults should not supervise the different small groups.
Although facilitation was the prominent pattern in YELL, there were also occasions when adult–youth interactions resembled apprenticeship and some when they resembled joint work. When interactions with adult policymakers neared, the program director played a more active role sharing feedback and advice, more typical of apprenticeship. For example, a few days prior to the community forum, Michelle organized a rehearsal. She gave direct feedback, made suggestions, and even offered a direct instruction by saying “I need someone to give an overview.”

There were also times when youth and adults settled into a more collegial mode, characterized by joint participation in solving a problem facing both parties, with minimal scaffolding by adults. For example, sometimes these joint work interactions took place during “prep” meetings to prepare for the day’s session or “debrief” meetings to evaluate how it went. Unlike regular YELL activities, in these meetings adults participated with youth in the task, such as planning an agenda for the day’s meeting or discussing a problem that had occurred during session. Joint work interactions also took place when YELL was invited to make presentations at practitioner conferences, which happened periodically. During these presentations, one of which I helped lead, adults and youth worked together to plan and present relevant information about the program.

**Opportunities for youth participation in social action.** The facilitation approach created opportunities for youth to participate in a variety of leadership tasks. Youth participants routinely initiated the meetings, explained the agenda, and helped keep the group on task. I asked Ellie, a youth participant, if there were any ways in which YELL differed from the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps, in which she also participated. She said, “Well, ROTC has a teacher. And the first sergeant always tells us what to do, but in here … they don’t tell us what to do—we know what we should do.”

Relative to the other two groups, youth participants in YELL had more opportunities to facilitate large-group activities (see Table 6). Everyone facilitated at least once; five youth volunteered to do so multiple times. In addition to facilitating group meetings, youth in YELL routinely worked in small teams with limited guidance from adults. In end of the year interviews with 12 YELL participants, when I asked, “Is there anything you feel you learned over the course of the year?,” 11 youth reported that they had learned how to work collaboratively with others and 7 said that they had learned how to facilitate meetings and discussions. The following episode, taken from a meeting 5 months into the year, provides an example of youth working collaboratively with limited supervision from adults.

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6I calculated these percentages by dividing the number of activities facilitated by youth (either alone or jointly with an adult) by the total number of activities for which there was a designated facilitator in the notes. Activities without a designated facilitator were not counted in the analysis. Percentages are based on coding a random subsample of 114 activities in YELL, 41 activities in Youth Rising, and 30 activities in TRUE. (YELL had a higher number of discrete activities than Youth Rising or TRUE.)
Working on small-group projects (YELL)

The meeting starts with Ellie (a 10th grader in her second year) reviewing the agenda and facilitating a brief game that uses role plays to reinforce the group ground rules. When the game is over, Ellie announces, “Now we’re working in research groups. Remember to pick a facilitator and note taker. You guys have to do that every single time.”

After Ellie’s instructions, youth assemble in their four groups: magazine, video, Web site, and research. Adults pursue other tasks: The program director is fixing the Internet connection on a computer; another is working in the office. I go with the magazine group, which is composed of four youth.

The first thing the magazine group does is pick a facilitator (Arun) and a note taker (Marlene). Arun asks, “What are our goals today?” They refer back to the timeline they had completed last week to identify their goal, which is to decide on the magazine’s purpose and content. Members begin brainstorming ideas for stories to include. At one point Marlene starts asking questions to the group and Arun says, “You’re trying to take my job away.” Another youth adds, “Arun’s the facilitator.” Marlene smiles and says, “I’m sorry, I’ll stop,” and the group resumes its work.

In the above excerpt, Ellie, a youth participant, initiated the large-group meeting, facilitated an opening team-builder, and then directed people to their small groups. She reminded each group to designate a “facilitator” and a “note taker.” In keeping with the decision about adult roles, adults worked on tasks separately from youth. The magazine group went to a corner of the room and, after allocating roles, proceeded with its task. When one member, Marlene, overstepped her role, others reminded her that it was Arun who was facilitator on that day.

The magazine group distinguished itself for its ability to work collaboratively and stay on task. The other small groups, particularly those working on the video and Web site, struggled to organize themselves to stay on task. For example, there were several meetings in which members of the video group did not complete steps they had planned, such as interviewing teachers and students at their school, which left little time for editing the footage. Similarly, the Web site group left much of its work until the last few meetings prior to the culminating event. Adults anticipated that this would become a problem but did not intervene because they feared that it...
would undermine youths’ feelings of ownership. One adult defended this decision by arguing that youth would learn best if allowed to make mistakes.

This tendency to step back and encourage youth to learn through trial and error contributed to certain political limitations of the Don’t Believe the Hype campaign. For example, although the campaign to reduce stereotypes about neighborhood youth included several interactions with the public—through a community forum, outreach to young children, and a meeting with a local paper—there were no tangible policy “victories” after these different events. Instead, campaign strategies, such as producing a video and magazine, emphasized self-expression and voice. The magazine, for example, which included a wide array of genres, including poems, fictional stories, and expository reports, cohered around the theme of stereotypes but did not culminate in a specific policy proposal. Moreover, in preparing for meetings with journalists, YELL participants reviewed a small sample of local papers to evaluate the stories published about youth, but they did not engage in a systematic content analysis, which, according to one of the editors in attendance, would have made their criticisms more persuasive. These examples suggest that in the facilitation approach youth had the opportunity to exercise leadership, be creative, work together, and carry out goals they cared about. What they missed, however, was the opportunity to work alongside seasoned activists or pursue a campaign with clear policy objectives.

**Youth Rising**

**Guidance through apprenticeship.** In contrast to YELL, adults in Youth Rising did not attempt to act as neutral facilitators for a youth-led project. Instead, adults shared political views with youth, pitched in to complete campaign tasks at key points, and participated in most decisions. I describe this form of guidance as apprenticeship: Adults were veteran activists who participated in the same endeavor as novices, while nevertheless structuring activities in ways that were sensitive to youths’ skill levels.

In the following example, Alonzo, one of the adult coordinators, coached youth organizers as they developed talking points about their campaign. Youth organizers were preparing to mobilize support among fellow students for their effort to increase student leadership in school governance.

**Practicing for student club meetings (Youth Rising)**

The youth organizers are preparing their talking points in pairs. Alonzo checks in with each pair to see how they are doing. He role-plays the part of a potential recruit and then gives feedback afterward. Following his cue, I play the part of an indifferent student with another pair of youth organizers and then give feedback. After 15 min, Alonzo asks everyone to come together and practice again in front of the whole group.
Erik, a new member of Youth Rising, is reluctant to speak in front of everyone. Alonzo reassures him by letting him know he isn’t expected to know all of the details about the campaign. Alonzo says, “You’re new, we ain’t trippin’ … You’re around family.”

After everyone practices their talking points Alonzo asks one of the veteran organizers, Ahmad, “to facilitate a check-in” about how people feel about the upcoming student club meetings.

Ahmad: What d’you mean, like just go around and say one thing?
Alonzo: Yeah, just go around like that.

Each organizer says how they are feeling about the upcoming meetings. Alonzo concludes the check-in by offering some words of support and guidance: “I got faith in ya’ll … you guys are ready. At Franklin, I’ll be right there with you, so anything you forget I can say. Also, I don’t want you to think that having hella [a lot of] people is the goal. We just wanted to be sharing our energy, wanting to resist. Even two people will be successful if they keep coming back.”

The above example reflects similarities and differences from the facilitation approach in YELL. Similar to the facilitative approach, the activity above reflected a youth-centered learning environment, in the sense that the activity was designed by Alonzo to respond to youths’ skill level. The activity gave youth a chance to practice their presentation skills in a sheltered environment prior to doing so in public. Training opportunities like this were routine in Youth Rising. For example, prior to public events I observed adults model effective speeches and then make their thinking visible by collectively discussing what was effective or not effective about the speech. Adults also designed role plays in which they performed the part of unsympathetic school board members by asking tough questions and misrepresenting what youth said. In this sense they coached youth to be prepared to do more than just read a script, but also to respond to unexpected questions or criticisms from adults.

Youth Rising was also youth-centered in the sense that adults organized activities intended to cultivate a sense of belonging and trusting relationships among the youth organizers. Similar to YELL, Youth Rising accomplished this through a combination of activities, including team-builders at the beginning of meetings, discussions about behavior ground rules, and role-play scenarios in which they acted out how to resolve interpersonal conflicts.

The principal difference between apprenticeship and facilitation pertains to adult participation. Unlike facilitation, whereby adults adopt a neutral, detached pose, adults in Youth Rising, especially Alonzo and Vanessa, conveyed that they were also participants in the campaign. In this sense, like Lave and Wenger’s (1991) description of experts who “embody practice at its fullest” (p. 85), adults...
embodied what it meant to commit oneself to a social justice movement, in ways both explicit and subtle.

For example, in the talking points excerpt above, Alonzo signaled his membership in the group and commitment to the campaign by saying “We’re all family here” and “I’ll be right there with you” to pitch in if youth struggled in their recruitment efforts at one of the schools. Later, in an interview, Alonzo, who is African American, justified his involvement based on his similar background to most of the youth organizers. He said that he was “from the community they’re from and from the schools they went to.” He went on:

When I think of youth in Marshall I think of my partners that died. They [adults from outside of Marshall] just see the kids on the corner as they drive down Franklin … It’s why I can outreach to Black youth. I feel them and they feel me.

Adult participation extended to discussions about sociopolitical issues. Adults communicated a specific political analysis to youth, which they felt was necessary in order to combat internalized racism and sexism that many youth experienced. As Alonzo told me when we first met in July, “There is a war on youth going on in this state.” According to Alonzo and Elsa, inviting youth to express themselves without some form of political education could be counterproductive for youth whose minds have already been “colonized” by rampant racism and sexism. Rather than fault their fellow students as lazy, unmotivated, or irresponsible, youth were invited to consider other factors that might influence the dropout rate, such as inequities in school funding or lack of access to guidance counseling. In the words of one youth organizer, comparing Youth Rising to school: “The school is going to teach you the good side of everything, but up in here, they going to show you the good side, the bad side. They going to show you all four corners of everything.”

Adults planned activities, such as interactive skits, board games, discussions, and even didactic lectures, that were intended to educate youth about the broader sociopolitical context for the dropout rate. I observed one meeting when Vanessa, the executive director, asked the youth to get out “their binders” and “something to write with.” After youth had opened their binders she commenced a 15-min lecture, interspersed with questions and comments from youth, about school finance policies that contributed to schools in a neighboring town having better facilities than those in Marshall.

Adults also participated by pitching in with key campaign tasks. For example, after a meeting at which youth developed a set of criteria for measuring school quality, Elsa, an adult staff member, used her graphic design skills to create a survey that resembled a report card, which she then brought back to the youth for feedback and comment. Alonzo took responsibility for distributing report cards when youth were not available. Although youth were the main speakers at rallies or public presentations, at two such events Alonzo and Vanessa also spoke. This
visibly positioned them as being part of the group, rather than standing on the side-
lines.

Adults justified their participation in the campaign by referring to a principle ar-
ticulated in Youth Rising materials: “It’s about the work, not the worker.” In other
words, the group’s social change objectives meant that everyone had to pitch in.
Describing their strategy as an “empowerment approach,” these materials ex-
plained that “youth and adults partner in the struggle with clear roles and responsi-
bilities.” Vanessa, the executive director, criticized youth-led approaches if they
did not provide adequate supports to ensure a successful campaign.

**Opportunities for youth participation in social action.** Opportunities for par-
ticipation were similar and different from those available through facilitation. Simi-
lar to the facilitation approach, adults sought to hand over progressively more re-
sponsibilities to youth organizers. Although adults did not fade from active moni-
toring to the same extent as those in YELL, they did invite youth to help shape the
direction of the campaign and play a variety of leadership roles. For example,
youth organizers held monthly membership meetings for nonaffiliated students
who were curious about the campaign or wanted to get involved. Unlike regular
meetings, which were typically facilitated by adults, the membership meetings
were planned and facilitated by youth organizers. In addition to recruiting peers
and organizing membership meetings, youth played prominent roles in public ac-
tions. In all I observed the youth organizers speak or perform at five different polit-
cical events: a rally against the state exit exam, a youth organizing conference, a
school board hearing, a press conference, and a transportation board hearing about
bus passes. Youth organizers, including the shyest ones, spoke during these events.

Conversations with youth indicated that they saw themselves as active partici-
pants in the group. Raymond described Youth Rising as a place where “You get to
say how you feel about everything. Instead of just having everybody else tell you
what they going to do and how they going to do it, you get to do it … how you want
something to be done.” Monique told me how she described Youth Rising to her
friends:

> I tell them I am a youth organizer and then they ask what that is and I tell them that I
organize like campaigns and I work to make Marshall better for the youth and I tell
them about the past campaigns we did so they are familiar with it.

Monique’s comments reflect a strong sense of identification with the work; she sit-
uates herself squarely in the narrative of the campaign by saying “I work to make
Marshall better for the youth.”

Although youth played leadership roles in Youth Rising, they had compara-
tively fewer opportunities than those in YELL to plan and facilitate meetings. With
the exception of membership meetings, Youth Rising activities were generally ini-
tiated and ended by adult staff members. Also, youth did not have the same degree of independence in formulating campaign strategy or carrying out their work. Whereas YELL participants chose small-group projects and worked with limited guidance from adults for roughly 4 months, Youth Rising participants received guidance and coaching throughout the campaign. For example, early in the year Elsa provided a 6-month timeline for the campaign, and, as the campaign came to its final weeks, adults briefed youth organizers on the purpose and agenda of upcoming activities.

From a youth-led standpoint, these opportunities may appear more limited than those afforded to YELL participants. But the benefit for Youth Rising organizers was that they gained more extensive practice developing and implementing a campaign with clear policy objectives. The student power resolution, for example, which called for stronger student councils, leadership training, and student forums to discuss school-wide problems, was designed to improve Marshall high schools through legislative channels. It was a policy proposal that school board members could officially endorse.

The manner in which youth communicated their proposal also reflected sophistication. Youth organizers cited statistical data from the report cards, which showed that they spoke for a broader constituency. The data were compiled in a published report that had professional features—it had a glossy cover, it had been edited for grammar and punctuation, it presented evidence in support of the resolution, and each section included policy recommendations. For example, one page discussing student leadership included pie charts showing student support for greater leadership and also included specific recommendations, such as training students to be able to sit on school decision-making bodies. I am not arguing that youth participants mastered all of the skills necessary to produce the report—it was coproduced with adults, and it reflected adult expertise. But by participating in the report’s production they gained access to a communication strategy used by seasoned advocacy organizations.

**TRUE**

**Transitions in guidance between facilitation and joint work.** The pattern of guided participation changed over the course of the TRUE project: In the pre-planning phase, which spanned three meetings, it resembled the facilitation pattern: Adults acted primarily as advisors for youth, who prepared a grant proposal to an agency that funded youth-led projects. Then, in the longer planning phase, youth–adult relations shifted toward joint work, such that adults and youth participated collaboratively with few concessions made to youths’ interests or skill levels.

When I was introduced to the project a staff member described it to me as a “youth-initiated” project that was different from regular program offerings. When
I attended my first meeting, the adult staff person told me that she would be “just facilitating” and that I should tell her if she was “dominating the conversation.” Dave, another staff member who facilitated the next two meetings, adopted a similar posture. He told the group that he would help give advice but that he did not feel it appropriate to be part of the funding pitch because he was not a “youth” (although, because he was younger than 24, he did qualify as a youth in the eyes of the grant giver). During the discussions Dave helped focus the group on its task and stepped in when there was confusion, but otherwise he did not contribute his own suggestions about the presentation. Afterwards, similar to Linda, he asked me if he had “dominated the conversation.” Adults continued in this facilitative role during the grant presentation, in which youth pitched their proposal to a panel of decision makers while adults, including me, sat on the floor.

The division of labor in TRUE shifted toward joint work, however, during the 4 months of planning that took place after the proposal was accepted. I define joint work as a form of collaboration whereby adults participate alongside youth, like apprenticeship. But, unlike apprenticeship or facilitation, in joint work the environment is not youth-centered. During this phase of the project there appeared to be little effort to position youth as leaders of the project, distance adults from the project, or operate as if one group or another were supposed to be in charge. (Pea’s, 2003, distinction between scaffolding, which is temporary, and distributed intelligence, which is ongoing, is useful here; whereas apprenticeship reflects the former, joint work reflects the latter.)

The following excerpt, from a planning meeting 2 months prior to the conference, reflects salient qualities of the joint work approach. Three adults and four youth were present.

“Next steps” discussion (TRUE)

We are close to the end of the meeting. The adult facilitator, Beatrice, suggests we figure out what to work on next. She asks everyone to recommend an item that is most pressing. Soon we have a list of eight tasks written on poster paper:

1. The logo.
2. Basic information flyer.
3. T-shirt design.
5. Push to get teachers to turn the event into a fieldtrip.
6. Workshop specifics.
7. Identify target participants.
8. Contact politicians.

Beatrice says, “I want to challenge us, who would be willing to do what before the next meeting?” To get us started she volunteers to work on “outreach” to teachers. She then asks for other people who are “willing to take on” something. Anthony, a youth participant, says he will work on “workshop specifics.” Dave, an
adult staff member who has already prepared some ideas about workshops, offers to share these with Anthony. Then Sam, a youth participant, volunteers to work on the logo, saying, “I know some artists.” Beatrice says to Dave, “We can do the flyer together.”

She then says, “Octavio and Marvin? What about you?” Marvin responds by volunteering to type up information for the flyer, adding, “I’ve got some nice fonts on my computer.” Octavio says that he will talk to some teachers at his school about bringing their classes to the conferences.

Beatrice then adds, “Ben, don’t think I don’t see you over there.” I volunteer to work with Anthony to brainstorm ideas for the workshops, because I think that is most pressing. Anthony and I agree to communicate by e-mail.

In the above excerpt Beatrice, an adult staff member, facilitated a discussion about next steps. Both youth and adults suggested tasks to be completed, ranging from designing a logo to inviting politicians to attend the accountability session. They made decisions together about how to prioritize tasks. Then Beatrice asked everyone to volunteer for a task. Unlike at YELL and Youth Rising, adult participation extended to me, as I was expected to contribute my labor alongside the other members of the group. No instruction was offered in how to do a particular task; it was assumed that people would volunteer for what they knew how to do.

This example illustrates several features of joint work. First, similar to adults in Youth Rising, adult staff members participated in the project—although to a greater extent than those in Youth Rising. For example, adults designed the agendas for meetings, sent out reminder e-mails, and kept track of the tasks that needed to be completed. Over the course of the year adults facilitated 90% of the activities for which there was a designated facilitator (see Table 6). Also, adults tended to complete tasks that were more time consuming or that required access to certain social networks. For example, Beatrice secured permits from the opera house where the event was held. Dave recruited several of the workshop presenters from other nonprofit agencies in the city. Earl negotiated with a local hip-hop artist that he knew to speak at the event. In these ways they embodied the practice by providing a model (although not one that was discussed or analyzed) of what it meant to plan a conference.

Second, unlike either facilitation or apprenticeship, joint work rarely included elements of a youth-centered environment, such as skill-building workshops or efforts to foster group belonging. Aside from periodic check-ins at the beginning of meetings, there were no team-building activities. The TRUE project resembled what one might expect a planning process to look like in a workplace or community group, in which the primary goal is to complete the project successfully rather than to teach, mentor, or counsel certain members. One youth participant, Marvin, conveyed this task-oriented atmosphere when I asked him to tell me about ways it felt different from school:
Marvin: It was an all-work environment.
Interviewer: “All-work environment”? What does that mean?
Marvin: It was just all work, no playing.

Marvin saw this project as *more* work than he faced in school, because of the predominance of time devoted to planning and preparing, with few breaks or opportunities to socialize.

Similarly, adults rarely organized workshops for youth or set aside time to coach them. I observed only one activity whose explicit purpose was to train participants in a particular piece of information or skill: Youth and adults watched a video documentary that critiqued the military’s effort to target high school students of color for recruitment. By contrast, adults in YELL and Youth Rising offered workshops in a variety of topics, including public speaking, how to facilitate, and how to do research (YELL); and conflict resolution, racial justice, and the political economy of public education (Youth Rising).

Adults attributed their high levels of involvement to the complex demands of the conference, which not only required expertise in planning but also multiple tasks that needed to be completed during the day, such as placing phone calls and dealing with permits. Dave, one of the adult staff members, told me that initially he had hoped that it would be a “youth-led process,” but that he came to realize “it didn’t seem feasible for how much of a huge vision that we were trying to bite off.” Earl, another adult staff member, made a similar point: “The adults didn’t want the young people to mess up, so they definitely took an active role and shaped everything with a skeleton, with an outline.” Both Dave and Earl made a pragmatic decision to prioritize the success of the conference over a youth-led process.

The absence of a youth-centered environment may have been partly due to the higher ratio of adults to youth in TRUE. As shown in Table 7, on average there were roughly 4 adults and 5 to 6 youth at planning meetings. In YELL and Youth Rising there was a greater proportion of youth.

Some observers might describe TRUE as adult-led, rather than joint work, because of the extent to which adults participated in the planning. I find joint work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Average Ratio of Youth to Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YELL</td>
<td>13–14</td>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>4.0:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YR</td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>3.0:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUE</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.3:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* YELL = Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning; TRUE = Teens Restoring the Urban Environment.
more descriptive, however, because it signals the lack of salience attributed to categories of youth and adult during the planning process. Members did not appeal to one’s status as youth or adult to determine who could participate or the kinds of roles that participants were expected to play. Instead, the more salient divisions were between full-timers and part-timers and between veterans and newcomers. Some adults, including me, were peripheral in ways similar to some of the youth because we had limited hours to give to the project. Some youth, such as Leon and Marcus, were more active than some of the adults because they had more experience organizing major events.

**Opportunities for youth participation in social action.** Youth participation varied based on level of experience in TRUE. Veterans played leadership roles and were active in decision making. Leon, for example, was a high school senior who had been part of several grassroots activism groups. He was familiar with practices common in nonprofit organizations, such as making budgets, applying for grants, and doing strategic planning. During a conversation about the budget, Beatrice suggested that they could change it without notifying the funder but Leon corrected her, saying, “If you read the contract, it says you should do it.” Leon was proven correct when Beatrice consulted the grant guidelines. Another young person, Marcus, who served on the city’s youth commission, taught adults and youth in the group about how to write a legislative resolution. He also acted as the emcee at the conference itself. For youth such as Leon and Marcus, joint work gave them opportunities to engage in collegial interactions with adults that are unusual in the United States (Heath, 1999).

Other youth who were unfamiliar with discourse practices common in TRUE or were new to the group participated less frequently in discussions. After one meeting I asked Anthony, who had been very quiet, how he felt it had gone. He told me that people at the meeting used a vocabulary that he was not used to. Another youth, Octavio, rarely participated unless the facilitator explicitly asked for everyone to give their input. Leon, who was a veteran of TRUE activities, told me in an interview that he did not think this pattern was because adults intended to limit youth from participating. Instead, he said the following:

I think that at times if an adult staff is talking about a certain issue and they kind of just assume that everyone understands what they are talking about, that can kind of alienate a young person. I think a lot of the times at the meetings some of the young people who are there don’t even know what is going on, what is being talked about, why it is being talked about—so that kind of thing. It is kind of just an assumption that is made that people know what is going on.

In Leon’s view adults sometimes made incorrect assumptions about youths’ level of understanding; they talked with one another in a manner that unintentionally excluded some of the youth.
The principal limitation of joint work, therefore, is that youth with less experience or knowledge in the domain are given little support or assistance. Although adults modeled expert strategies for novices, this modeling was usually tacit. The result was that novices played more peripheral roles throughout the planning process. This contrasted with YELL and Youth Rising, where activities were designed to foster novices’ participation.

Even novice youth, however, had the opportunity to be participants in a fairly complex activity. Planning a successful conference required the group to set timelines, stick to its budget, create registration forms and permission forms for classroom teachers, recruit workshop leaders, ensure guests’ safety, and persuade policymakers to attend. Although novices did not have opportunities to master skills related to these activities, they did get to observe and help out in the process. Moreover, throughout they were viewed as full members in the group, publicly symbolized, for example, by the TRUE t-shirts they wore on the day of the conference.

DISCUSSION

This article has examined guided participation in three youth activism campaigns. Adults in each group sought to foster youth leadership and civic engagement. At the same time, most youth participants were new to organizing campaigns or engaging in political action. Adults managed the tension between youth empowerment goals and the complex demands of social action campaigns in varied ways, which I described as facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work. These approaches varied along two dimensions: the extent to which adults participated in campaigns alongside youth, and the extent to which they sought to create a youth-centered learning environment (see Figure 1). Although each of these forms of interaction could be observed across the groups, one pattern became predominant in each group. In the facilitation pattern, common in YELL, adults sought to be neutral toward youths’ decisions and be a resource for youth to plan and implement the campaign. In the apprenticeship pattern, common in Youth Rising, adults were more likely to coach youth in campaign strategy and participated in campaign tasks within the context of a youth-centered environment. The third form of guided participation, joint work, took shape in TRUE after the group received a small grant to organize a conference. Joint work was similar to apprenticeship in that adults participated alongside youth. It differed from both apprenticeship and facilitation because adults rarely set aside time for coaching or instruction and did not draw distinctions between adults and youth as a basis for delegating tasks or participating in decisions.

One caveat about these findings pertains to my differential level of access across sites. Because of greater time spent in YELL, as well as my affiliation with
the sponsoring university, I was more of an insider there than in Youth Rising or TRUE. This differential access posed challenges for an accurate and fair comparison across groups because of the potential to draw on data available in one group but not another or to bias my feelings toward a particular group. One way I compensated for this limitation was to ensure I met a threshold of sufficient data collection for each group: Despite different numbers of observations, in each group I observed the campaign through to completion, which gave me confidence that I gathered sufficient evidence to make valid comparisons. Also, I analyzed each group based on its own goals and situational context, rather than based on goals built into the YELL design.

Explaining Variations in Guided Participation

Variations in patterns of adult–youth interaction stemmed from multiple factors. The most important of these were project complexity, institutional contexts and goals, and youths’ prior skills.

Project Complexity

At one level, different adult guidance approaches reflected different levels of project complexity and ambition in each group. For example, planning a day-long conference for 200 middle school students called for some participation by adults, which contributed to the transition from facilitation to joint work in TRUE. But project complexity only provides a partial explanation because both the facilitation and apprenticeship approaches stemmed from intentional choices made by adults. For example, the task complexity of Yell’s Don’t Believe the Hype Campaign was a consequence of, not a contributor to, the facilitation approach.

Institutional Context and Goals

Variations in approach, therefore, also reflected distinct philosophies about working with youth, which stemmed from the institutional context of each group. Whereas Youth Rising and TRUE were both advocacy organizations based in the cities where they did their work, YELL was housed in a research university located elsewhere. Correspondingly, the outsider status discussed by YELL staff members was not a concern voiced by staff members in the other groups. For YELL to have credibility it was important that youth determine the choice of campaign and carry it out.

Institutional contexts also informed contrasting philosophies about youth empowerment. YELL practiced a student-centered, constructivist approach to working with young people that is common in schools of education in the United States (Bailey & Pransky, 2005; Cook-Sather, 2002). Fidelity to these principles was a
central criterion for its success. In contrast, Youth Rising’s philosophy, rooted in its commitment to political action, emphasized partnerships between adults and youth. Participants sought tangible political victories, such as reduced bus passes for youth or changes in policies toward school governance. Joint work, however, did not reflect an intentional or explicit philosophy, but instead emerged in response to pressures associated with planning a conference. This more spontaneous character of joint work reflected its ad hoc status within TRUE—it did not have explicitly defined youth development goals or a budget to support staff positions.

Youths’ Prior Experience and Skill

Of the three groups, TRUE had the highest proportion of veteran, older youth. Also, TRUE youth attended more academically rigorous high schools, and two were accepted to highly selective 4-year colleges. TRUE youths’ higher levels of experience and academic skill may help explain why adults adopted a more collegial approach to working with them. In contrast, the more youth-centered environments in YELL and Youth Rising may have been influenced by the younger age of participants there and the higher proportion of novice participants who needed support developing campaign-related skills.

Comparing Learning Opportunities Across Groups

Did facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work promote different kinds of learning? Although this analysis did not present evidence of learning trajectories for individual participants, some conjectures can be made about similarities and differences in learning opportunities. I treat these as conjectures because it is difficult to disentangle the influence of adult guidance from other variables, such as the kinds of campaign tasks and youths’ age and prior experiences.

Similarities

The principal similarity in learning opportunities stemmed from the fact that each of the groups organized long-term projects motivated by an authentic problem or task. Consistent with other studies of youth programs, projects began with topic selection, moved into an extended phase of planning and preparation, and culminated with public events for which youth received feedback from community members (Heath, 1999; McLaughlin, 2000). In doing so, youth confronted problems whose solutions were ill defined and subject to the constraints of the real world. For example, YELL’s decision to battle stereotypes identified a problem but did not dictate the solution; how does one take on such a diffuse topic? Youth Rising participants had to create a new strategy after its initial target—the school board—lost its decision-making authority. Members of TRUE sought to organize a conference with limited funds; their $3,000 budget constrained what they could do
and forced them to continually reevaluate their priorities. Experiences such as these that require youth to respond to contingencies and sustain their commitment over an extended period of time are said to contribute to the development of initiative and resourcefulness (Larson, 2000). They may also promote “adaptive expertise,” in which people learn how to adapt their knowledge and skill to new situations (Hatano & Oura, 2003, p. 28). Lastly, collaboration—whether between adults and youth or just among youth—was common across the groups. In end-of-year interviews, a majority of youth across the groups reported that they learned about making decisions and working with others.

**Differences**

Facilitation created opportunities for accelerated participation by novices; youth, even those with little prior experience, assumed responsibility for key decisions and tasks. For example, TRUE youth, prior to the switch to joint work, practiced group process skills, such as facilitating meetings, making group decisions through democratic procedures, and working with peers with limited scaffolding from adults. In YELL, where facilitation was the predominant pattern throughout the year, youth gained extensive practice developing these group process skills. In end-of-year interviews, in addition to peer collaboration, the majority of YELL participants reported learning how to facilitate meetings and speak in front of groups. I observed several youth become adept at managing group activities and facilitating decisions. Some of the lessons from such experiences, such as awareness of the pros and cons associated with group decision making, are not directly observable as skills but may prepare these youth for future educational or work environments where they are granted autonomy to plan and regulate their activities.

A unique element of Youth Rising’s apprenticeship approach was its focus on sophisticated skills related to civic participation, such as persuasive speech and campaign strategy. *Persuasive speech* refers to rhetorical strategies for persuading a skeptical audience of the merits of one’s cause. Youth Rising adults modeled effective strategies, performed role plays with youth, and coached them on how to stay “on message.” These practice sessions were routinely followed by actual events at which youth took center stage to advocate for their positions to policymakers. Through this mixture of sheltered practice and actual performance youth developed the ability not just to deliver a scripted speech, but also to respond to challenging or unanticipated questions. Youth also learned how to formulate sophisticated strategies for organizing and carrying out a campaign. These included learning how to analyze social problems to get at root causes and generate policy recommendations that would address the problem. Also, they developed skills for mobilizing youth to take action. In end-of-year interviews, in addition to describing group collaboration, a majority of youth described learning how to make an impact on social issues that they cared about.
Similar to the apprenticeship approach, in joint work youth were exposed to mature strategies used by more experienced practitioners. In this case, the focus was on planning and carrying out a conference. But because so much of the work was performed collaboratively with adults, youth had fewer opportunities to practice and master skills on their own, which makes it challenging to draw inferences about their learning. This does not, however, mean that they did not learn. Rogoff et al.’s (2003) description of “intent participation,” for example, suggests that the process of attentively observing an activity is a central part of the learning process. Opportunities to observe, listen to conversations, and engage in shared endeavors with adults may be meaningful even if they do not lead to independent performance. In interviews youth reported that they learned how to plan a conference and how to make an impact on social issues. Although changes in youths’ participation or skill levels were not evident to me during my fieldwork, it is plausible that such changes would become evident if the youth were observed over a more extended time period.

Design Principles for Supporting Youth Civic Participation

Drawing on findings from this study, I recommend four principles for program designers or educators who wish to promote youth civic participation. These recommendations are stated as principles so that they might apply in a variety of contexts, although I acknowledge that they may be more suited to community organizations or after-school programs, which do not face constraints that are experienced by schools, such as compulsory attendance or standardized curricula.

Start With an Authentic Civic Problem

Authentic problems immerse novices in meaningful activities tied to practical goals (Dewey, 1902/1990). In the civic arena an authentic problem is one whose solution requires interaction with a broader public. Such problems often bring youth into contact with civic institutions, such as school boards, media outlets, or city councils. For example, members of YELL, Youth Rising, and TRUE took positions on local political or neighborhood issues and pursued them in face-to-face interactions with decision makers and policymakers.

When engaged in the process of identifying a meaningful problem with youth, I recommend drawing on the notion of interests that is common in community organizing (Boyte, 2004). Interests refer to needs or goals held by a particular group that can motivate people to participate. According to this idea, people enter the democratic fray in order to solve a problem that affects their lives or the lives of community members. In contrast, when social action is framed as charity or service, it is often apolitical and can reinforce a deficit view of the community because residents are viewed as “clients needing services, not fellow actors and col-
laborators” (Schutz, 2006, p. 714). Groups such as Public Achievement have developed curricula that employs an interest-based approach (Boyte, 2004). The ability to organize others and advocate for shared interests may be especially relevant in social contexts where youth lack resources that more privileged youth take for granted, such as access to guidance counselors, subsidized transportation, or safe spaces to hang out (Ginwright, 2006).

**Provide Access to Mature Civic Participation Practices**

A common finding in studies of out-of-school learning is that children gain access to mature expert practices; unlike the design of many schools, they are not segregated from adult activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003). But this study revealed variations in the kinds of access that novices gained. The facilitation approach, which limited adult participation, meant that youth gained less exposure to civic expertise. This is a problem that confronts many youth activism groups; the desire to be youth-led risks reproducing a new form of age segregation between adults and youth.

In contrast, in apprenticeship and joint work adults participated in shared endeavors with youth, which gave youth access to mature civic practices. This represents a more conservative interpretation of empowerment because it emphasizes adaptation to and participation in adult norms and practices. But it is justified to the extent that people need certain kinds of skills or knowledge in order to be effective in the civic arena. For example, to be persuasive with policymakers, young people may need to support their opinions with empirical evidence. Or when speaking with legislators, they may need to frame their proposals in terms of bipartisan goals, such as reduced dropout rates or improved student test scores. Adults can also help by modeling how to communicate with local policymakers. As shown in research with cultural and linguistic minority youth, adults play an important role when they help make discourse practices of a professional or academic domain visible to youth (Nasir et al., 2006). Moreover, through interaction with veterans, newcomers not only learn the cognitive dimensions of a task, but also can begin to envision their future participation (Packer & Goicochea, 2000).

Access to veterans is also important when it comes to the process of problem framing in civic action. Calls for “youth voice” sometimes reflect a naïve assumption that youth speak with one voice or can develop political insight based purely on experience (Fielding, 2002). Some youth, even those attending severely under-resourced schools, blame low achievement on student laziness and ignore contextual variables that might be relevant to the problem (MacLeod, 1987; Way, 1998). In such situations, adult mentors can play an educative role by asking critical questions or sharing sociopolitical analyses that depart from dominant cultural narratives about individualism and meritocracy. Adults in Youth Rising, for example, said that they needed to explicitly combat internalized racism and sexism among
youth organizers. From their perspective, youth voice was an empty promise if not accompanied by efforts to promote healing and sociopolitical awareness in those giving voice.

There are many ways that youth can gain access to expertise, even those following a youth-led model. Groups might dedicate part of their planning process to interviewing civic experts, recruit an advisory board of experienced activists, or read about examples of past political movements to discern strategies. This latter approach might be more realistic in a classroom context, where the teacher may not have expertise in political action or access to local figures. Internships also offer structured ways to learn about civic practices. The key principle, therefore, is for designers to build in opportunities for access, not that it must resemble apprenticeship or joint work.

**Be Responsive to Specific Skill Levels and Interests of Youth**

Access to mature practices is most effective when youth also have structured opportunities to reflect on their interests and develop necessary skills. In TRUE, for example, novices would have benefited from training that was responsive to their skill levels or participation structures that encouraged everyone to participate. Also, if adults are not intentional about developing a project based on youths’ interests and experiences, they might end up co-opting youths’ ideas or alienating them from the process. Several observers have described youth participation initiatives that went off track because adult leaders made decisions on behalf of youth without consulting them or adopted paternalistic rather than collaborative roles (Hogan, 2002; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2006).

**Plan in Terms of Timescales That Exceed One or Two Semesters**

Consistent with the recommendation to start with an authentic problem, designers should also recognize that meaningful public work rarely conforms to the academic calendar. It might take a group 6 months to gain expertise in an issue, another 6 months to build public support, and then more time to see a policy victory come to fruition. For example, Kwon (2006) described a campaign to stop the expansion of a juvenile jail that took 2 years. As of 2006, Youth Rising continued to work with school principals and district officials to improve counseling systems and reduce the dropout rate. Such time frames do not, by necessity, exclude schools as sites for participation. Boyte (2004) described a project carried out by middle school students in which “generations of [middle school] teams” (p. 80) persisted over 4 years to persuade the community of the need for a playground, negotiate zoning laws, and raise the necessary funds to build it.
Certain implications follow from this design principle. If adults plan for a longer time frame, then they will need to recognize their own participation in the campaign—they may be the only participants who provide continuity from year to year. Also, they will need to create explicit opportunities for newcomers to identify with the campaign and take responsibility for it. One tradeoff is that earlier generations may not witness the outcome of their work and later generations will not learn what it means to design a project from the beginning. But these drawbacks are compensated for by the fact that youth have opportunities to be part of a project with real consequences.

Future Directions for Research on Learning Outside of School

The past two decades have witnessed a growing number of studies on learning outside of school; these studies provide a convincing standpoint from which to critically evaluate classroom practices and generate new lenses for studying teaching and learning (Bransford et al., 2006; Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nasir et al., 2006). If this literature is to continue to develop in ways that are generative for theory and practice, it needs to acknowledge a greater degree of heterogeneity across nonschool contexts. Dichotomous contrasts between apprenticeship and classroom, informal and formal, or everyday versus academic overstate the consistency found in elective learning environments. For example, as others have pointed out, the identification of informal learning with outside of school may have outlived its usefulness. This is in part because many reform-oriented classrooms reflect qualities of informal learning environments (Bransford et al., 2006). But it is also because nonschool settings often include elements typically associated with formal environments, including rigor, standards, and highly orchestrated forms of social interaction (Heath, 2005). With regard to youth activism, one would be hard pressed to describe youths’ high-stakes encounters with policymakers as informal.

Portraits of outside of school learning also are at risk for overstating the high levels of motivation and engagement among youth (Paradise, 1998). As mentioned, youth sometimes were reluctant to take ownership of a project or participate in discussions. Adults experimented with different ways to foster youths’ engagement. Patterns of adult–youth interaction did not conform to a uniform set of processes across the groups. My point is not to dispute claims about the rich learning opportunities available outside of school, but instead to suggest that new insights can be generated from attending to variations across these settings.

Careful attention to how people learn outside of school is especially important in light of calls to integrate community centers, after-school programs, and workplaces more substantively into K–12 schooling (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003; Sawyer, 2006). The effort to bridge school-based and community-based learning will be helped by future studies that examine how variations across nonschool learning environments influence youths’ learning and development. This study addressed
this issue by describing the varied ways that adults guide youth toward greater civic participation. Such opportunities are particularly critical for young people who have been otherwise marginalized from robust political participation. Attention to these strategies contributes to researchers’ understanding of learning environments that develop youths’ capacity for agency directed toward public ends.

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APPENDIX

Descriptive Codes for Field Notes and Interview Transcripts

Explanation of Coding Procedures

Codes 1 and 2 below were coded at the level of whole activities in field notes. Be-

ginnings and ends of activities were defined according to the agendas that groups

used to organize their meetings. Codes 3 and 4 were applied to text units that could

be as small as one paragraph and as large as multiple paragraphs, depending on the

relevance of the content of the text unit to the code in question. Aside from Leader-

ship Subcode 1c, codes were not mutually exclusive.

1. Leadership of Activity
   a. Adult as designated leader of entire activity
   b. Youth as designated leader of entire activity
   c. No designated leader. This code could not be double-coded with 1a or 1b.

2. Purpose of Activity
   a. Announcements. Activities where speakers provide information to the group about upcoming events or opportunities.
   b. Team-building. Planned activities whose goal is to build trusting relationships among members and/or have fun. These include activities such as giving “props” (accolades), ice-breakers, and check-in questions.
c. Explicit training or workshop. Activities whose explicit intention is to train youth in how to do something, such as how to conduct interviews or how to speak at a school board meeting. These are distinct from activities in which youth learn through practice.

d. Group process. When group is deciding on rules related to how to work together, such as creating ground rules or policies for how decisions will be made.

e. Evaluation/reflection about program or recent event. When purpose of activity is for participants to reflect on prior experiences, including evaluating their experience in the program or evaluating how a presentation went.

f. Choosing and specifying campaign topic. Activities where group is identifying the topic of the campaign, such as creating more student input in student governance.

g. Working on campaign/research topic. Activities where group is completing tasks related to the campaign. Examples include working in small groups on magazine, video, and Web site (YELL); preparing for presentations to school board (Youth Rising); or making decisions about the conference (TRUE).

h. Hanging out. Social time during breaks or before or after session.

3. Other Settings (observations outside of a program session)

a. Field trips and presentations.

b. School day interactions. Planned or unplanned interactions with research participants during school day (common in YELL but not others).

c. Home visits/phone calls/rides home.

4. Talk

a. Sociopolitical issues. These refer to statements or conversations about topics that are politically significant or index neighborhood, community, or school city issues that affect youth. Typically these codes will apply to discussions about group campaigns, but they can also apply to statements about other sociopolitical issues that youth or adults bring up. Examples include, but are not limited to, school finance, media portraits of youth, the war in Iraq, military recruitment, violence, unemployment, police brutality, food security.

b. Social change strategies. These refer to statements or conversations about how to solve a sociopolitical problem or organize a campaign.

c. Descriptions and evaluations of program.

i. Program purpose/mission.

ii. Comparison between program and school.

iii. Youth–adult relationships in the program.

iv. Relationships with peers in the program.

d. Self-descriptions. These refer to statements, typically in interviews, in which participant describes what he or she learned, why he or she joined the group, or how he or she has changed over time.