The Youth Factor

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A Framework for Programs that Affect Attitudes and Thinking

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A curriculum is a plan for a set of learning experiences. A curriculum allows a set of learning experiences to be replicable, to be disseminated widely, adapted and revised for various constituencies, and yet retain its essential elements. In developing programs to reach out-of-school youth, a curriculum may be an important element.

Five years ago, EDC was commissioned by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to design a curriculum for youth worldwide, with the central goal that youth develop a humanitarian perspective, and a sense of solidarity with people who are vulnerable. So far, the program, Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) is being received with an unexpected degree of interest and commitment. Over 70 countries are making plans to pilot test or implement it in secondary schools and non-formal education settings. To our surprise, features of the curriculum that we feared might be obstacles to its adoption turn out to be among the features most desired: participatory learning activities and exploration of ethics.

The EHL program, conflict resolution, and service learning programs suggest elements we believe can be applied in programs developed for out of school children, youth and young adults.

The elements are as follows:

Use of stories to gain interest. Use documentary stories about ordinary people and how they have become engaged [in humanitarian work], stories from literature and the media, and a research activity of seeking such stories from one's own community--*lead with the stories to engage the learner's interest in the program*.

Use of concepts that help students explore and learn from daily life. For example,
- Chain-of-consequences of an action or an event
- Obstacles (to connecting with work or society, to behaving according to one's ideals)
- Point-of-view (beyond your own , i.e. of others involved in important situations)
- *A special concept that is the heart of the program.*

    In EHL, a special concept is "human dignity", and learners build the meaning of that concept over time (examining what supports human dignity, what injures it, how it is vulnerable in war, etc.). For out of school youth, a special concept might be "connectedness," with the meaning similarly built over time.

Use of participatory learning activities that develop thinking skills. For example
- dilemma analysis
- perspective-taking and role-playing
- tracing a chain of consequences

➤ brainstorming alternative courses of action

For out of school young people, such activities might be built around the theme of connectedness:
➤ reaching within, to learn about and connect to one's own identity
➤ reaching out, to learn about and connect to others in the worlds of work, society, family
➤ work or volunteer experiences brought back and discussed with the group

The social environment of the learning. Create a supportive group climate
➤ for testing and developing one's ideas, skills
➤ for developing a "voice," a moral voice
➤ for learning to take a position, support it, disagree respectfully
➤ for cooperation, valuing of different abilities and contributions
➤ for developing engagement with others

Intrinsic interest. Draw on learners' experience and interests, family experience, events of community or worldwide interest as reported in the media.

An open structure. The substance—stories, sayings, images, dilemma examples, etc. used in the curriculum—can be adapted for locally relevant and appropriate content by missions and facilitators.

Support for Teachers and Facilitators. Offer workshops to provide experience in going through the learning activities