



Picture This!

Engaging “at risk” youth in educational programs can often be challenging. Students must be motivated to stay with a program and they must have the right teacher or leader to create innovative ways of learning. Such is the case at the *Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell* in Lowell, MA where a success story lies behind the Club’s innovative arts program. This story is about a photography program called *Imagemakers* undertaken by the Boys & Girls Club.

Imagemakers is a year-round program and an annual contest, both sponsored by Circuit City Foundation, that encourage girls and boys ages 6-18 to learn and practice black and white, color and digital process photography. The *ImageMakers* National Photography Contest provides local, regional and national recognition. Select photographs are exhibited at B&GCA’s National Conference, National Education Summit and Youth Development Conferences.

The *Boys & Girls Club* of Greater Lowell recently was honored by having one of their teen participants win the regional contest and advance to the national competition in San Diego, CA. The youth member is a female participant, age 15, who prior to participating in the program had no experience with photography. In fact, the *Boys & Girls Club* of Greater Lowell’s Arts Coordinator, Erica Vitorino, states that most of the members in her program had no prior experience in photography before the program and most had never even owned or used a camera. When I spoke with Ms. Vitorino during an interview, she attributed the success of the program to her ability to innovate and prepare by researching best practices. The following are questions that were asked and may be helpful to anyone who is attempting to develop new, innovative programs for reaching at-risk youth.



Can research inform practice?

2003 was the club’s second year of attempting to implement the *Imagemakers* Photography Program. According to Ms. Vitorino, the first year was not successful in keeping youth interest because she was not fully prepared for it. “The first year I really went into the program without any knowledge of what other Clubs were doing.” As a Massachusetts College of Art student, during the second year she relied heavily on research from teachers,

other Club success stories, and research that described how to attract and maintain youth interest by researching innovative ways of teaching. Part of her research came from resources at the *Boys & Girls Club* headquarters in Atlanta, GA. "The website also provided good research because it showed what other Clubs were doing and even displayed the works of contest winners," said Vitorino. The national website is www.bgca.org and this web site provided most of the program research she needed. As for attracting youth, establishing creative ways to recruit "at risk" youth had its challenges. "Without prior research, I don't think our program would have been so successful. The biggest reason why our teen member won the contest was because she was determined throughout the program to learn how to take good photos. If the effort isn't there, then it is difficult to teach someone." So how do you insure determination and motivation from "at risk" youth?



How do you overcome barriers and learn to innovate?

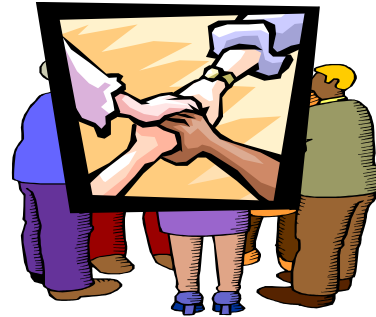
Students are automatically going to be interested in taking picture, right? Wrong! During the first year of the *Imagemakers* program, maintaining youth interest turned out to be a tremendous barrier to success. According to Ms. Vitorino, youth were dropping out of the program before completion and most would skip out on lessons for two to three weeks and only then return. Often when they returned, having missed some of the lessons, they became easily frustrated with their work. So, there were problems to be solved to make this important program successful.

The second year was different. It was at this time that she realized that the program's success would be determined by the amount of research she was able to do on innovative methods of teaching. "Instead of the traditional teaching I was doing the first year, I did research and collaborated with partners to create projects each session for the second year", she stated. Some of the projects she mentioned during the interview were hands on projects she learned from teachers such as: pinhole photography-alternative process, collages, scavenger hunts and interviews with staff members. "I wanted to instill in their minds that photography isn't just about taking pictures, instead it is about individual perceptions of things. Once, I was able to create this image I believe they took control of the program and their work. I saw the most creative pieces from these kids then I had ever seen before."

Ms. Vitorino mentioned that in order for her to be innovative in her mission it was necessary to form relationships with others. Often time , we are looking to find out who is in charge of a project or who is running a program. Partnerships can allow us to collectively form the best method or procedure for running a program. According to a local community artist, "To work collaboratively on a project, you have to learn to give up a little bit of yourself in order to open yourself up to new possibilities (Gonzalez and Mamary, p. 31). Ms. Vitorino is fully aware of this theory since many of projects consisted of collaborating with community leaders.

What purposes do partnerships serve?

Many of Ms. Vitorino's hands on projects were established with the help of members of the community. "I knew that Lowell High School had a successful photography program because I was a part of it and so I decided to work with their teacher in coming up with creative projects for my classes." This collaboration was especially helpful since the greatest barrier for her to overcome was to retain youth interest. Ms. Vitorino met with the photography teacher two or three times prior to the start of her program to gather ideas and practices that would work best for her student population. She also turned to her partnership with the national headquarters and contacted the Arts Director for additional ideas. "I figured that this women had been doing it for years and knew what would work and what wouldn't. Also, she was more experienced with the program and its outcomes. Speaking with her was especially helpful throughout the program", stated Vitorino.

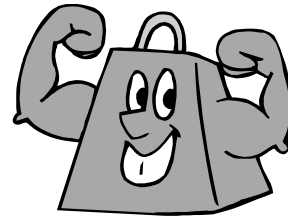


Once her innovative ideas were set, Ms. Vitorino began the process of recruiting youth for the program. She did this by setting up a booth in the Club's main lobby for two weeks to get the word out. She created a camera made out of cardboard and displayed photos from the first year's program to explain what *Imagemakers* was all about. This too, she says, was a step up from the prior year where she just made flyers to advertise the program. "I got a better response from youth this time around. Maybe it is because they are more visual learners and it attracted their attention". Whatever it was, it worked. She was able to fill the program slots with 15 members. Youth ages ranged from 6- 15 years and she was ready to begin, however, she only had one camera. The first year she only had 6 members and having one camera was not an issue. Ms. Vitorino decided that she would turn to her partnerships again to overcome the barrier.

“I decided to turn to our board of directors for help with the cameras. I knew that one of our members had been a professional photographer and I asked for his help. He not only provided our program with five more cameras but he referred me to another community leader who helped fund our dark room. Without their help, my mission would not have been a successful one”.

Creating partnerships with community leaders, board of directors, and volunteers is especially important from these examples but how do you insure sustainability of the program after funds cease or someone leaves an organization?

How can programs learn to sustain themselves?



The “key to sustainability is to remain innovative”, says Vitorino. For example, for this year’s *Imagemakers* program Ms. Vitorino is planning more hands on projects and as an extension of that is planning field trips to museums, art galleries, and photo labs to help youth understand the art of photography. Another way to sustain a program, in her opinion, is to keep it active throughout the year in some way. “Although my program is typically an 8-week program, I am learning that I need to keep its name in front of the community throughout the year. I am currently doing this by entering photo contests in the community with the works of *Imagemakers* students. This way our name is out there and people are aware of the program throughout the year”.

Another thing to keep in mind when trying to sustain programs is to have a plan in mind. “Coming up with a strategy before you implement a program is important,” says Vitorino. “It is important to work with your supervisor or partners in developing and mapping a plan or timeline for the duration of the program.” The following is an example that Ms. Vitorino provided:

Task	Time
• Research best practices and evaluate prior program	2 mos. prior to start
• Establish partnerships and/or communicate with existing ones	2 mos. prior to start
• Get materials together and set curriculum	1 mon.prior to start
• Coordinate field trips and/or special events	1 mon. prior to start
• Recruit youth members in a creative way	2-weeks prior to start
• Start first class	after sign ups

• Evaluation of program (pre/post tests)	ongoing
• Preparation for contest	ongoing
• Coordinate gallery for contest	ongoing until end date

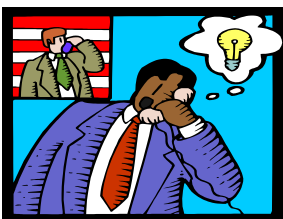
Sounds like this program will have continued success under Ms. Vitorino's leadership; however, what if she was to leave the organization I asked.

What happens to programs when leaders leave an organization?



This is a question that community leaders continue to ask and often do not have an answer. The issue is not what was done with a program; rather where is all of the information? Ms. Vitorino states, "It is a reality that the same person conducting a program will not be there forever. It is important, therefore, to provide information in anticipation of someone else taking your place". Ms. Vitorino continues to do this by adding to a curriculum book where she inserts every class session that she conducts. "This also helps me because if I don't know what I should do one week, I can always look back at my book for ideas that worked." She also keeps a binder of photos- ones taken by students and ones taken of events and contests that students have entered. This is for community leaders and guests so they can understand the program a little better.

These ideas have created an *Imagemakers* repository within the *Boys & Girls Club* of Greater Lowell, but how can someone make community members aware of a program without having to seek contacts within the organization first?



What are some ways to share best practices with the community?

Ms. Vitorino's internal repository is a great start and she wants the community to be aware of the impact of her program. In addition to newspaper articles, mailings to community leaders, and media coverage Ms. Vitorino thinks it's a good idea to speak with the students who are involved directly. She told me to speak with the young teen that won the contest to get a better idea of what *Imagemakers* is all about.

When I sat down with Stephanie she was very excited to tell me about her experiences with the program. She was energetic when describing what she had learned, how she was able to perceive things in a different way, and why she was determined to stick with the program. "Erica made things really fun and I know that she is a good photographer so I wanted to see what she sees," the 15 year old told me. When describing her experience with the national contest in San Diego, CA she pulled out a photo album to guide me through the process. "Even though we spent so much time with photography, I used up so much film because I see things so differently now", she said. When I asked her if she feels that the *Imagemakers* program is successful she bluntly stated, "Well, yeah that's why I am talking to you right"?

Stephanie's honesty introduces a great way to share best practices- talk about them. As Ms. Vitorino prepares for her next session she always encourages people to visit the dark room as well as the arts & crafts room because in it you will find all of the answers you need. "It's too bad that people aren't aware of what's out there because if we could share stories about our programs we will all be able to provide better services for our kids".

And that is what makes programs such as *Imagemakers* a success story!

Additional Resources

For more information on programs for "at risk" youth please visit the Boys & Girls Clubs of America website at www.bgca.org

For more information regarding the Imagemakers Program you may contact:

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ANNOTATIONS

Gonzalez, G., Mamary, A. (1999). *Cultural Activisms, Poetic Voices, Political Voices*. New York: State University of New York Press

Boys & Girls Clubs of America: www.bgca.org/program/arts.asp