

4-H's Challenge: Integrating Youth Development and Civic Development

Melissa Bass and Lucia Orcutt

I pledge my
head to clearer
thinking,
my heart to
greater loyalty,
my hands to
larger service,
and my health
to better living,
for my family,
my club,
my community,
my country,
and my world.

Members of 4-H clubs begin each meeting by reciting the 4-H pledge. The pledge acts as a guide for individual members and the goal for the entire 4-H program. The pledge reflects 4-H's commitment to developing young people for the benefit of all—what we call youth and civic development, or citizenship. The youth development focus is captured in the first half of the pledge, civic development is reflected in the second half.

Clearly, 4-H would not be 4-H if not for both—youth and civic—elements. However, as attention to public language and purpose has decreased over the past 50 years, so have they become less prominent within 4-H. Today, 4-H faces a challenge to live up to its pledge—a challenge reflected in the vocabulary we use and the principles we follow.

Defining Youth Development

Throughout its existence, 4-H has promoted the positive, healthy development of young people. An ongoing process, youth development engages young people in finding ways to meet their basic physical and social needs and build the competencies and connections they need for survival and success. 4-H youth development focuses on young people's strengths rather than their failings and offers young people a complement of services and opportunities, including opportunities to do important work. (Civic Practices Network, 1996).

Critical elements, or needs, essential for healthy development of youth have been identified by Gisela Konopka (1973) and Karen Pittman (1991):

- Feeling physically and emotionally safe
- Experiencing belonging and ownership
- Development of self-worth through meaningful contribution
- Discovery of self
- Development of quality relationships with peers and adults
- Discussion of conflicting values and forming their own
- Feeling the pride and accountability that comes with mastery
- Expanding their capacity to enjoy life and knowing success is possible.

These elements are the educational base for 4-H youth development programs. However, 4-H's focus on citizenship as part of youth development has waned over the years.

Defining Citizenship

Citizenship has multiple, contested meanings. First, citizenship is often defined in legal terms of who or what we are: people born or naturalized in the United States are American citizens. This definition conveys a set of rights like the right to vote or the right to equal protection under the law. In exchange for rights, citizens

are expected to obey the law, cast their ballots, and voice their opinions on public issues. 4-H members learn and practice the procedural elements of legalistic citizenship by electing club officers and using parliamentary procedure in their club meetings. They experience national government and politics through 4-H programs like Citizenship Washington Focus.

Under this definition, citizenship provides important freedoms, protections, and responsibilities. This understanding puts government at the center of public life, however, and there are limitations to what government can contribute to public life. This definition of citizenship also raises questions and concerns for certain groups of people in our country. For example, for Native Americans, it may symbolize a status imposed by force. For Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans, it may bring up questions of legality and documentation, and for African Americans, it may bring to mind more than 300 years of struggle.

Citizenship can also be defined in terms of patriotism: A belief that America is the greatest nation on earth and that we, as American citizens, share a common set of values. The Pledge of Allegiance, which 4-Hers often recite with the 4-H pledge, reflects this definition. In this sense, citizenship is a powerful tool that unites us in times of crisis and reminds us of our common destiny. This definition, however, can just as easily exclude. Not everyone is proud to be an American and, because it doesn't necessarily promote tolerance, nationalism may not be the most effective way to protect our planet.

Yet another definition of citizenship reflects how we address our shared concerns. This definition has many names, each with a slightly different emphasis, including community ser-

vice, community building, public deliberation, and civic engagement. In this article, we will use the term public work. Public work is important, common, and visible effort involving many people on behalf of the community or nation. It solves common problems and creates things of lasting value. It can be paid or voluntary work, done in communities or through institutions. It helps build our shared pool of wealth and resources, or our commonwealth (Center for Democracy and Citizenship, 1995; Boyte & Kari, 1997).

Principles of Vital Practice

The public work understanding of citizenship defines it as an activity which we do, together, on an on-going basis. In 1996, a group of leaders in the fields of youth, community, and civic development met to discuss how public work could help integrate these fields. From the conference, an agreed-upon set of principles for the practice of youth and civic development emerged (Wingspread,

1996). These principles recall many of the best 4-H practices, some of which continue and flourish today, and some of which have been largely forgotten. It is important to note the variation among 4-H community clubs, counties, and states in their

reflection of the following principles. Exploring how 4-H reflects these principles provides insight as to what must be done to rebuild 4-H and how to fully integrate 4-H youth and civic development.

Principles Fully Realized

The following principles of youth and civic development are at the heart of the 4-H experience, and demonstrate how much 4-H contributes to civic development.



Young people's intelligence, talents, experience, and energy deserve respect

4-H is a youth-driven organization staffed by professionals and volunteers who respect and foster the intelligence, talents, experiences, and energy youth have to offer. To this end, 4-H uses the experiential learning model in the development of educational programs. Through vital practice, young people actively learn then share their experiences, reflect on its importance, connect it to real world examples, and apply the resulting knowledge to other situations. 4-H gives youth the opportunity to explore and discuss alternative approaches to solving problems, and to decide where they stand on issues that are important to them, their peer groups, their families, and their communities. In addition, 4-H youth are respected as both learners and teachers, and their knowledge, talents, and skills are put to use educating others.



Emphasizes youth relationships with parents and other adults

Vital practice emphasizes personal relationships with parents and other adults who support and care, and public relationships that empower effective action. Research from the Search Institute (Benson, 1996) reveals that supportive relationships with adults bring safety, stability, and encouragement to young people's lives. In addition, partnerships between young people and adults strengthen these relationships and facilitate shared learning and accomplishment. Relationships of this quality take time to develop. In 4-H, youth and adults make the necessary long-term investment, and are encouraged to talk to each other, listen to each other, and express interests in each others' ideas. Adults form mentoring relationships and partnerships with youth in which they work side by side, planning and carrying out important work. Youth also practice

the "adult" side of the equation by mentoring and coaching younger club members. These relationships provide opportunities for practice, learning, growth, and contribution.

Cooperation is valued

Vital practice gives young people the chance to learn the essential skills of teamwork, including accountability, negotiation, and appreciation for the practical uses of diversity. Vital practice also helps create a positive peer environment and cooperative spirit among other young people and adults. The 4-H model supports individuals as they develop their capacity to contribute and work cooperatively on issues of mutual concern and interest. To this end, 4-H promotes cross-learning and sharing among youth and adults. Although a lot of 4-H project work is done individually, many 4-H events and activities encourage group involvement. Young people work together to plan events and activities that involve cooperative action. Examples include Share-the-Fun performances and 4-H Project Fairs. Throughout the process young people learn to determine individual and collective roles and responsibilities, establish timelines, implement plans, evaluate their work, and celebrate their accomplishments.

Expanding Our Understandings

The following four principles are not foreign to 4-H; they are part of our heritage and continue in narrower versions to this day. Here, our challenge is to look back and move forward.

Provides opportunities for young people to be productive

Young people are productive. Vital practice provides opportunities for young people to engage in public work, producing things of lasting value to our communities and our commonwealth. Vital practice also gives young people the

chance to develop emotional, social, intellectual, and civic skills through public work.

4-H encourages the involvement of young people in the creation of processes and products of value to themselves, other club members, and the community. Projects are central to the 4-H experience. They involve youth in growing, building, and creating things of value, and they attract youth to the organization and encourage them to maintain their involvement. In the past, community needs drove development of projects; today, projects focus almost exclusively on 4-Hers' learning, development, and enjoyment. Little attention is paid to how the project could benefit others. By simply asking "How can this benefit more than me?" and then acting on the answers, 4-Hers could add new dimensions of learning to their projects and increase the value of their work.

Public work and skill building link together

Projects are not the only way youth produce and learn in 4-H. Members direct their experiences in a variety of areas, and in doing so, further their learning and sustain youth-directed programming. Young people choose their projects and activities, and more significantly, they help choose activities for their club. These often include cross-age teaching activities that have lasting, positive impact on the teachers and learners, and service activities that benefit and improve communities. These decisions are often made and activities carried out, however, without explicitly acknowledging their impact on individuals, the club, 4-H culture, or the community. This limits 4-Hers' understanding of the value derived from the process and outcome of their work. By noting these benefits, 4-H could better help young people develop who they are, learn important skills, create new learning opportunities and community service activities, and increase their capacity to contribute.

Young people participate in 4-H governance

Vital practice puts young people in positions of responsibility where they can learn skills of governance. Because young people learn to be leaders in the places where they spend most of their time, 4-H young people have opportunities to learn and experience governance in formal and informal roles. Formal roles include serving as club officer, county-wide planning committee member, or statewide federation officer. Informal roles include members deciding in which projects and activities to participate, and voting on club resolutions. Although these opportunities for governance exist throughout the 4-H experience, adults tend to underestimate the type and level of contribution young people can make. One way to counter this tendency is following standards for governance that call for serious youth engagement. Civic Organizing Inc. has developed such a set of civic standards (Michels & Massengale, 1998). They include:

- All who are impacted by a problem, including young people, are involved in defining the problem.
- All stakeholders, including young people, contribute resources to solve the problem. Resources include time, knowledge, relationships, and capital.
- All stakeholders, including young people, are part of the policy-making function of the work. This means they help determine the rules and distribution of resources, and make other important decisions.
- All stakeholders, including young people, contribute to the sustainability of the work. By following civic standards, adults involved in 4-H can create opportunities for young people to make decisions and act on them.

Vital practice is less focused on “fixing” youth through service delivery, and more focused on building youth capacities for productive contributions.

Young people’s public work is visible

Vital practice encourages discussion and celebration of young people’s work by larger publics, including adults and other young people. Perhaps more than any other youth organization, 4-H makes young people’s work visible. Through demonstrations, exhibits, and shows, youth share their work and gain recognition for their accomplishments. Much of this visibility, however, is focused on individual achievement and is competitive. Judgment is made according to a variety of criteria, but the impact on or contribution to the community is rarely one of them. Even the educational value of the 4-Her’s work—determining what was learned through the project—is often neglected at this stage. Minnesota is addressing these concerns by recognizing youth who can demonstrate and articulate how their project has benefited their community. This recognition, along with other efforts such as having the youth do their projects in public settings and discussing their work with community members, will place 4-H on a larger public stage.

New “Old” Ground

The last two principles challenge us to take our work to the next level by consciously recognizing and acting on the preceding principles. Again, these aren’t new to 4-H, but are part of a powerful and largely lost civic tradition.

Young people’s efforts connect with civic challenges for our time

Vital practice puts young people’s work within context of larger issues and encourages them to answer questions such as, “What is the social benefit?” and “How does this contribute to democracy and our ability to shape our common destiny?” 4-Hers are often asked what they have learned from an experience and how they will apply what they’ve learned in the future. When

youth can answer questions like those above, 4-H will again be able to claim to be a civic organization. One way to accomplish this is by explicitly connecting young people’s work to issues that dominate public discussion, newspaper headlines, and legislative debate. For example, when youth involved in a 4-H health project on cigarette smoking use what they’ve learned to more fully understand and speak to the current debate on tobacco, youth, and advertising, they have expanded their sphere of involvement. By seeing how their work educating young children about the dangers of smoking can influence these debates, they will have a better sense of how they, their concerns, and their actions contribute to the world around them.

Youth work contributes to community and institutional change

The effects of young people’s work on community attitudes and practices is central to vital practice. Vital practice is less focused on “fixing” youth through service delivery, and more focused building youth capacities for productive contributions. 4-H work positively influences adult and community attitudes toward youth. As 4-H work gains greater public purpose, depth, and visibility, it can move 4-H, other institutions, and whole communities to work with and value youth in new, positive ways. For example, if 4-Hers take what they’ve learned about smoking (including the public debate), and create new education programs or work to pass new smoking ordinances, they can change their communities and themselves. The impact can go beyond that. By demonstrating the valuable contributions young people can make, 4-Hers can change how communities, institutions, and organizations view and treat young people. As a result, more of those communities and organizations will work with young people in ways that support the above-mentioned principles.

A 4-H Response: Public Adventures

Public Adventures is a new 4-H citizenship program that builds on what 4-H does and expands our traditional understanding of citizenship. Its goal is to engage youth in public work and help 4-H more fully practice the principles of youth and civic development. With support from the 4-H Cooperative Curriculum System and the Kellogg Foundation, a national group of 4-H Extension educators, specialists, youth, and others is developing the program's curriculum. Through the Public Adventures curriculum, groups of middle school students will work with an older partner to engage in public work. The curriculum will guide young people through the process of identifying a public issue they care about; designing a project to impact the issue in a lasting, visible way; gathering information, resources and support; and finally, taking action. In the process, young people will learn important skills and develop confidence in their ability to participate in and contribute to public life.

Bibliography

Benson, P. L. (1996). *Developmental assets among Minneapolis youth*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.

Boyte, H. C., and Kari, N. (1997). *Building America: The democratic promise of public work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Center for Democracy and Citizenship (1995). *Reinventing citizenship: The practice of public work*. St. Paul: University of Minnesota Extension Service.

Center for 4-H Youth Development (1995). *Keys to quality youth development*. St. Paul: University of Minnesota Extension Service.

Civic Practices Network (1996). Civic dictionary: Defining youth development. World Wide Web address: www.cpn.org

Konopka, G. (1973). Requirements for the healthy development of adolescent youth. *Adolescence* 8(31), 2-25.

Michels, P., and Massengale, A. (1998). Civic organizing framework. <http://www.activecitizen.org>.

Because young people will choose their issues and projects, there won't be a "typical" Public Adventures project. One group might address public safety by working to have a stop sign placed at a busy intersection, another might organize a sports club to provide after-school activities for youth, and yet another might contribute to downtown revitalization by painting murals over graffiti-covered storefronts. All projects, however, will be based on a commitment to creating, changing, or improving things that are valuable to a broad public.

Conclusion

The goals of 4-H are youth and civic development. By building on what 4-H already does, 4-H has the opportunity to integrate these two ideas. The result will be youth and adults who can better fulfill their roles as citizens, communities that can better take advantage of what youth have to offer, and a 4-H program that fully serves its public mission.

Pittman, K. (1991). *Promoting youth development: Strengthening the role of youth serving and community organizations*. Washington DC: Academy for Educational Development.

Walker, J., and Dunham, T. (1994). *Understanding youth development work*. Center for 4-H Youth Development, College of Education and Human Ecology; Educational Development System: University of Minnesota Extension Service.

Wingspread Conference Report (1996). Rebuilding communities, renewing democracy: Weaving youth and civic development. Proceedings from the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread conference, Emerging Best Practices: Weaving the Work of Youth and Civic Development, March 1-3.

Portions of this article have previously been published in "Citizenship and Young People's Role in Public Life," *National Civic Review* Vol. 86, no. 3, Fall 1997; and "4-H and Citizenship: Public Adventures," *Fast Forward* Vol. 1, no. 1, January 1998, a publication of University of Wisconsin Extension 4-H Youth Development Programs.