

Strategies for Youth Engagement



Wisdom2Action
La jeunesse au
cœur de l'action

Presented by Lisa Lachance and Fae Johnstone

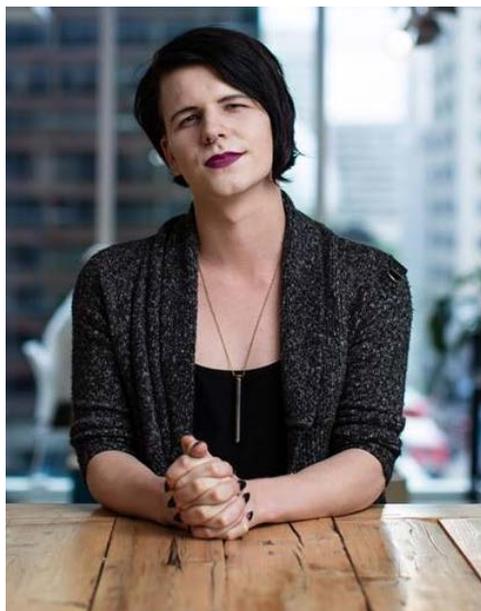
Land acknowledgement

Wisdom2Action is based in K'jipuk'tuk in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. We are all Treaty people and live in that territory under the Peace and Friendship Treaties of the mid 1700s.

Introducing Us!

- Fae Johnstone (they/she)

- Organizer, educator and writer focused on youth, LGBTQ2+ issues and health.
- Based on unceded, unsurrendered Algonquin Territory (Ottawa, ON).
- You can follow them on Twitter @FaeJohnstone.



- Lisa Lachance (she/they)

- President of Wisdom2Action
- PhD candidate in Health
- History of student, queer and feminist activism
- Child rights and participation in Canada and around the world
- Based on the ancestral unceded territory of the Mi'kma'ki (Halifax, NS)



Learning Objectives

- Understanding Youth Engagement
- Build capacity to create and maintain safer spaces that are inclusive and trauma-informed
- Youth-Engaged Facilitation
- Engaging less vocal youth
- Key Considerations for Meaningful Engagement
- Diversity in Recruitment



Who is Wisdom2Action?

- Founded in 2011, Wisdom2Action is a national knowledge mobilization (KMb) initiative that supports researchers, community-based organizations, educators, policy makers, and others working to improve the mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable children and youth.
- Wisdom2Action Ltd incorporated in February 2018 as a social enterprise and is incubated at Dalhousie University, Halifax



Wisdom2Action's commitment to youth engagement

- Promote change at a sectoral level, instead of service by service
- Identify youth-led or co-created promising practices
- All projects & events
 - Youth Advisory Committee
 - YAC co-chairs on Governing Board
 - W2A events
 - Co-led reports and funding programs



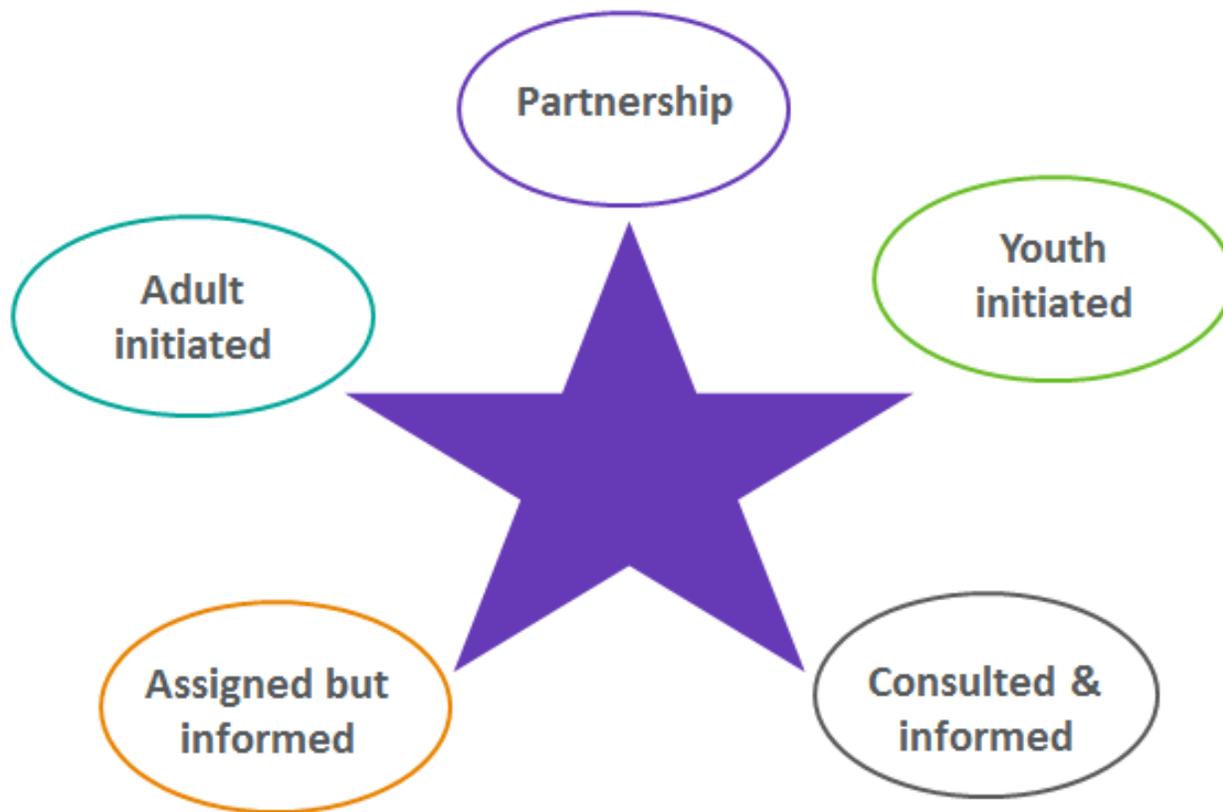
What is Youth Engagement?

- The meaningful and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity focusing outside the self. Full engagement consists of a cognitive component, an affective component, and a behavioral component, also known as “Head, heart, and Feet” [and spirit] (CEYE, 2009)
- “Empowering all young people as valuable partners in addressing and making decisions about issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe to be important” – The New Mentality



The evidence for youth engagement

- There is strong evidence across sectors, including mental health, health promotion, political science and others, that engagement in the decisions that affect them is positive for both youth and the services they use (Checkoway, 2013; Hawke et al, 2018; Lancet Commission, 2017).
- Youth engagement leads to better health outcomes for young people, adults, agencies and communities (Chawla & Heft, 2002; Checkoway, 2011)
- Youth engagement builds resilience and amplifies protective factors amongst marginalized youth (Ungar, 2013)
- Youth engagement can lead to increased social inclusion, which is a support for mental wellness, and youth engagement seems particularly effective in health promotion services and there are lower levels of mental health issues reported amongst young people who have been engaged (Burns & Birrell, 2014).
- Engaging youth in a meaningful way can help overcome the disconnect between marginalized youth and their communities, promote a sense of connectedness within a group or community, and allow youth to contextualize their experiences, as well as promote treatment adherence (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Dunne, Bishop, Avery & Darcy, 2017; Iwasaki, 2016; Lerner, Almerigi & Lerner, 2011; Smyth & Eaton- Erickson, 2009).
- Of particular value to First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities are those youth-driven prevention programs that leverage culture, language, and traditional practices (Wexler & Gone, 2012).
- Linking engagement projects to increased understanding of socio-economic processes coupled with the ability to take action on these issues supports the development of marginalized youth (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias & McLoughlin, 2006; Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009).



Tokenism

Manipulation

Decoration

Our Approach to Safer Spaces: Anti-Oppression

- Awareness that our world is shaped by forces of oppression, including but not limited to racism, sexism, classism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism and other forms of oppression.
- Acknowledges that oppression has filtered into every aspect of our society – our minds and our bodies, our social, political and economic realities, etc.
- Awareness of the overlapping and interconnected nature of oppression.
- Striving to create an approach that doesn't leave anyone out.

What are safer spaces?

- Spaces that strive to be safer and more inclusive.
- Spaces where people can bring their full selves and be supported, included and affirmed.
- Safer spaces are not guarantees.
 - We cannot guarantee safety.
 - But we can try.
- Safer Spaces are Co-Created.
 - Built on common goals and intentions.
 - Developed based off the needs of those present

How do we build safer spaces, as organizations?

- Safer spaces aren't just for youth. Safer spaces are built by organizations with a genuine, ongoing and intentional commitment to diversity and inclusion.
 - Organizational culture change.
 - Planning. Planning. Planning.
 - Policies and procedures that affirm commitment to inclusion.
 - Building service provider awareness and understanding.
 - Authentic Relationships with diverse communities.

Building Safer Spaces – In Action

- First and Foremost: Meaningful, authentic relationships with youth.
 - Relationships built on trust, respect, and communication.
- As service providers:
 - Education and Critical Self Reflection. Unpacking our bias, investigating our privilege. Acknowledging power dynamics and mitigating them as best we can.
- Co-create community guidelines for sharing space
 - The needs and experiences of the people in the room shape what a safer space looks like.
- Accountability, transparency and honesty.
 - Mistakes will happen. What matters is how we deal with them.

Building Safer Spaces – Operational Considerations

- Do young people know, from the get go, that we're striving to be inclusive of diverse identities? How?
- Is our space physically accessible?
- Are there gender-neutral washrooms?
- Is there mental health support available?
- Are we providing food and transportation?
- Have we reached out to diverse communities?
- What barriers exist that we haven't mitigated?



Engaging Diverse Youth

- Unpacking Assumptions: Who are 'traditionally less engaged youth'?
 - Youth who engage differently
 - Youth who were never asked to engage
 - Marginalized youth
- How do we support ALL young people to engage and contribute?
 - Intentionality.
 - Communication
 - Relationships.
 - Meeting youth where they're at.

Key Considerations for Engagement

- Diverse mechanisms for engagement:
 - Circles! Circles! Circles!
 - Sharing power
 - Focus on relationships – always.
 - Providing invitations to engage
 - Larger and smaller group discussions
 - Ability to contribute without speaking
 - Time to think and reflect prior to contribution

Convening Groups – Safer, Braver Spaces

- In Practice:
 - Access needs
 - Pronouns
 - Land Acknowledgements
 - Inviting and comfortable physical space
 - Fidget toys, chart paper, coloring sheets
 - Quiet space
 - “you know your body and your needs best”
 - So Much more.

Recruiting Diverse Youth

- Linking with youth-led and youth-engaged organizations.
- Building relationships with organizations focused on particular communities.
- Meaningful organizational relationships are built on mutuality and reciprocity.
- Targeted, intentional outreach and recruitment. Emphasizing commitment to diversity year-round.
- Ongoing reflection: Ask youth who choose not to participate why to identify potential barriers



Avoiding Common Mishaps...

- Negative Engagement:
 - Tokenism
 - Manipulation
 - Decoration
- Recurring Issues:
 - We promise more than we can deliver on
 - We put youth in positions we haven't prepared them for, and don't provide them the support they need.
 - We don't invest in the relationships.

Thank You!
Questions?



Check out Wisdom2Action.org to
learn more about our work!

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