Learning Curve

Engaging with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds

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Young people who are at a relative socioeconomic disadvantage can find it hard to connect with certain educational and cultural experiences, meaning that a wealth of inspiring and enjoyable science activities may be inaccessible to such young people, with their main connection with science being mediated through formal schooling.

In November 2012 the Wellcome Trust’s Review of Informal Science Learning highlighted the challenge of reaching young people from lower socioeconomic groups (www.wellcome.ac.uk/About-us/Publications/Reports/Education/WTP056333.htm). In response, they commissioned the Platypus Research to undertake two strands of work: first, a literature review that examined previous work with this audience; and secondly, new research to find out what such young people do in their spare time and how we might better engage them with science.

The research identified ten steps that can be taken to maximize the success of engagement activities, including informal science activities, for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

1. Know your objectives and audience

Objectives for any engagement strategy must be clear from the outset. Identifying and understanding your audience is vital for success, as the best strategy will differ depending on the individuals and the community you wish to engage. For instance, a young person’s age, ethnicity and their level of engagement with school and education will have a big impact on choosing the best engagement strategy.

2. Engage a champion and be mindful of family influence

Engagement works best when a trusted and relevant champion is involved. This is particularly important for those disengaged from education, who can mistrust traditional authority figures such as teachers and people coming in from outside organizations. Coaches, youth workers, club leaders and peers are examples of effective champions. Strategies to engage young people from low socioeconomic status families may need to tackle the attitudes of their surrounding network of influencers. For example, some interviewees, including a minority of the children themselves, described some parents’ influence as either lacking or sometimes negative, and older participants were heavily influenced by peer pressure.

3. Ensure the activity is young-person-led

The best engagement involves young people in the whole process, right from the very start, and also consults teachers, youth workers, peers and those within the community. Both schools and youth organizations acknowledged the powerful impact of involving young people in decision making and in generating and implementing ideas. In some cases, guidance may be required to help with this process.

4. Ensure the activity is relevant and pitched at the right level

Activities should link, directly or indirectly, to something of interest to the young people targeted, and should be pitched at the right level to maintain engagement. Given that many activities popular among young people are sports-based, drawing links between science and sport may prove effective. Linking to or using technology could also be a good way to generate interest and foster engagement with young people.
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To ensure activities are at the right level:
- recognize young people’s existing skills rather than focusing on a deficit model that emphasizes where young people’s skills may be lacking
- consider the demographic make-up of the young people involved, and design teams and activities accordingly
- provide activities that challenge and stretch those involved, but pitch challenges at the right level to ensure participants can achieve success
- provide novelty and excitement by regularly changing activities
- allow for progression through stages or levels to maintain interest
- celebrate achievements
- take into account both the educational level and cultural differences of the young people when communicating with them, either verbally or in writing
- avoid being overtly educational as this can be off-putting for those disengaged from school
- provide the opportunity for ‘taster sessions’ so that young people can try something to see if they enjoy it.

It is worth noting that there is huge diversity across low socioeconomic status families, so a ‘one size fits all’ approach is less likely to be successful. To be relevant, activities will have to be tailored to fit the intended audience (see step 1).

5. Invest in long-term relationships for maximum impact

Long-term relationships are likely to have a greater and longer-lasting impact on young people, their schools or organizations, and the wider community. The reliability and regularity of interactions seem to be more important than their actual length, so consistent engagement (that happens, for example, every year or every month) is the most impactful, as it becomes part of a young person’s life experience. It appears that there is little collaboration or sharing of information or resources between establishments who work with young people. Although some schools may engage with other schools for older or younger children, or local youth organizations, links between schools at the same level or between youth organizations were not mentioned, and the sharing of information, resources, tools and best practices is rare. The level of collaboration could therefore be improved. Both schools and youth organizations welcome the chance to give young people different experiences; this provides a clear opportunity to establish links between them and funders or providers of informal science experiences.

6. Make it practical and interactive

Young people enjoy practical activities in which they can actively get involved rather than just watch. Informal science activities should be interactive and hands-on to maximize enjoyment.

7. Facilitate socializing with friends

Activities need to be organized in places where young people can be with their friends, as this is key to them finding something fun and enjoyable, particularly from secondary school onwards.

8. Be financially and geographically accessible

As much as possible, provide activities at low or no cost. Cost is a barrier to engaging with regular activities and cultural offerings for some, especially those with larger families, and trips to expensive attractions are rare.

Many young people and families from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds rarely travel outside their local area. Places they already go to are ideal for holding activities, such as schools, youth groups, churches, leisure centres and local parks.

Parents are more likely to engage in activities if they are hosted at venues with easy access, that provide a safe environment to play in, that have good ‘drop-off’ arrangements and that offer facilities for other family members to use while their child is doing his/her activity.

9. Celebrate and reward successes

Recognize and celebrate genuine achievements. Praising and rewarding young people for their efforts and achievements (through points, levels, badges or treats, etc.) are motivating and can help increase their self-esteem.

Ensure certain activities are such that young people can recognize them as being intrinsically rewarding and worthwhile to do or be a part of.

10. Communicate carefully and through trusted channels

The words used to describe any activity need to be carefully considered. The word ‘experiments’ tends to bring about more positive associations – young people are enthusiastic about the hands-on practical aspects of science – whereas ‘science’ itself appears to be strongly linked to formal learning and can be quite divisive.

Word of mouth appears to be extremely important as a trusted channel for communicating. Creating ‘buzz’ or ‘social currency’ among young people is an important way for providers and funders of informal science offerings to attract this audience. Schools can also be used to communicate with young people and parents who are more engaged with education.