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4 Pursuing Paradox: The Role of Adults in Creating Empowering Settings for Youth

Reed W. Larson and Rachel M. Angus

"... the medicine for mediocrity is the pursuit of paradox."

(Rappaport, 1981, p. 8)

Adolescence is a period when young people have the potential to develop powerful new skills for action: skills to plan a community event, create a multilevel work of art or business plan, or formulate strategy for a lobbying campaign. During this period, new cognitive capacities come online that permit youth to acquire higher-order executive abilities: skills for means-ends thinking and for organizing actions over time to achieve a goal (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2008; Keating, 2004). As part of this, adolescents become more able to understand dynamic real-world human systems and thus to be more effective in thinking through how to influence people and institutions (Heath, 1999; Larson & Angus, 2011). These new high-order cognitive potentials, however, are just that: *potentials*. Their realization depends on adolescents having the requisite experiences (Kuhn, 2009).

Many adults and professionals working with youth want to help them develop these action skills—to learn leadership, develop agency, or become

“empowered.” But they often encounter problems and paradoxes when they try to do so. Teachers who want to empower students run up against institutional structures that require faculty to play superordinate roles over students as authority figures, disciplinarians, and evaluators (Pace & Hemmings, 2007). It is hard to provide students genuine opportunities to develop action skills within a tightly controlled institutional environment in which authority and accountability are vested in a hierarchy of adults.

Youth programs—including community-based programs and extracurricular activities—appear to be more suitable than school classrooms for adolescents to develop these action skills. Youth participate voluntarily. The mission of many programs includes providing opportunities for youth leadership and empowerment. Programs for high-school-aged youth often engage them in decision-making roles in large individual or group projects that demand action skills, such as creating a website, planning an event, or impacting their community (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). Nonetheless, there are many instances in which the adults have embraced the goal of youth empowerment, only to have things go awry. A common scenario is for adults to make a commitment to youth’s control of a project, but then turn on youth when problems emerge, reasserting their authority and leaving youth angry and humiliated (Camino, 2005; Hogan, 2002; Ozer et al., 2008). Now, savvy youth professionals are generally able to avoid this scenario, but they still struggle with contradictions in how to reconcile youth freedom with setting limits, when to challenge versus support youth, and how to use their own agency to support young people’s development of agency (Halpern, 2009; Kirshner, 2006).

This chapter builds on Julian Rappaport’s (1981) description of the paradoxes professionals face in attempts to help others. He argues that their efforts to serve a client population—in our case, to develop action skills among youth program members—easily drift to one-sided solutions. Rappaport observes that professionals easily let their authoritative knowledge of clients’ needs trump clients’ own knowledge and abilities, resulting in clients’ disempowerment. To support people’s empowerment, Rappaport urges us to understand rather than avoid contradictions: “to play within the dialectic and to pursue paradox” (p. 16).

To pursue the paradoxes of empowering youth, we will begin with accounts from participants in different programs regarding how they developed action skills. As developmental psychologists we are interested in the *processes*—particularly the conscious processes—of development. In this chapter, we focus on the processes occurring in some (but not all) programs through which youth develop a specific set of action skills that we think is

central to individual empowerment. *Strategic thinking*, as we will explain, entails higher-order skills for agency in complex real-world contexts.¹

After describing strategic thinking and how youth develop it, we will turn to the focal question of how adults support the developmental process. How do they thread the paradoxes? Although this process is not something institutions or adults do *to* youth, we examine how advisors facilitate youth having experiences that help them learn strategic skills. Our investigation employs grounded theory analyses of data from a large longitudinal study. We compared leaders’ interactions with youth in programs that did and did not facilitate strategic thinking, giving special attention to the unfolding of these interactions in one program.

STRATEGIC THINKING AND HOW IT DEVELOPS: YOUTH’S ACCOUNTS

Skills for Action in Real-World Contexts

Young people are rarely taught in school how the real world works or how to accomplish goals in it. In social studies classes, for example, students in most nations are taught how government is supposed to work, not how it actually works; and they receive no training in how to influence governmental bodies (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001). School instruction typically presents the world as more logical and principled than it really is. Returning to our theme, young people are rarely told that the real world contains paradoxes and Catch-22s. Of course, as they move into adolescence, they begin to realize that the world isn’t quite as orderly and easy to understand as they are being taught. But this discovery often only begets cynicism and avoidance of adulthood, not skills for navigating this more complex reality.

Our perspective for understanding what is missing from youth’s learning combines elements of chaos theory and classic American pragmatism, integrated within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory. The first posits a universe that includes substantial disorder: metaphorically, there are lots of butterflies flapping their wings that shape events in seemingly random ways. The pragmatists described “a universe shot through with contingency” (Menand, 2001, p. 360). But in our view, much of the disorder and contingency in the human world is not so much illogical as ecological; it has a rationality to

¹ In choosing to focus on youth’s development of skills, we, of necessity, give less attention to accompanying changes in motivation, efficacy beliefs, and critical consciousness that are included in discussions of youth empowerment (e.g., Ginwright et al., 2006; Jupp, 2007).

it that stems from the complexity of human social systems (Gigerenzer, 2008; Larson, 2010). To function in this world, young people need to learn how human environments are shaped by nested layers of personality processes and micro-, meso-, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Each of these systems partly functions according to its own history, constellation of goals, and power dynamics; they are living systems animated by active and reactive human intentions (Lerner, 2002). Further, because these systems contain multiple actors and intersecting influences, contradictions and conflicts occur; things are not always what they seem on the surface. There may be unstated rules, hidden power dynamics, and leverage points for getting things done that are not immediately apparent. To become actors in the real world and make their way as adults, youth need to learn to think and act in strategic ways that anticipate the dynamics of human systems and how these systems interact with each other.

Our interest in strategic thinking was inspired by the work of linguist Shirley Heath, who found that young people in high-quality arts, technology, and other project-oriented youth programs appeared to learn new language forms that provide tools for dealing with these real-world dynamics. Heath observed that new entrants to these programs began using language adapted to doing work and achieving goals in real-world settings. They learned:

- Language forms for anticipating, planning, and acting in human settings (hypotheticals, modals, and scenario building; Heath, 1998, 1999)
- Language constructions for identifying real-world contingencies (e.g., if-then)
- Genres of communication employed by members of different professions whom the youth were attempting to influence (reporters, police, administrators, etc.)

Heath observed these changes in youth's verbal behavior. We wanted to understand the corresponding changes in youth's conscious thinking (Larson, 2000). What insights, concepts, heuristics, understandings, tools, and other skills for action were youth acquiring?

We first heard youth describe learning strategic thinking in a case study of Youth Action, a program in which African-American and Latina/o high school students were lobbying the Chicago City Schools to address capricious use of suspensions (Larson & Hansen, 2005). Youth in this program became motivated to correct these injustices (Pearce & Larson, 2006), and they reported learning strategic skills that helped them be effective in doing so. In biweekly interviews over 4 months, they reported learning to understand and predict how different groups of people think: not just school officials but also teachers (whom they were trying to recruit as allies) and fellow

students (whom they were trying to recruit for their rallies). The youth also described how understanding these groups' ways of thinking allowed them to plan effective strategies to influence them. For example, Miguel described learning that school board members valued data, and thus to influence them, one needed to "always have information that you can count on. State the facts and always state where you got the facts."

What caught our attention was that these skills entailed the development of adolescents' capabilities for advanced, higher-order reasoning, which we mentioned earlier. These youth were learning to think about how complex systems function and how to use this knowledge to achieve goals within them. They were developing their cognitive potentials to think about the dynamics—not just of logical systems but of irregular, "messy" real-world systems, like the rationality of different groups of people, the functioning of institutions, and how systems change (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Selman, 1980, 2003). A key adolescent capability that adolescents can develop is hypothetical thinking—abilities to generate reasoned deductions about future or counterfactual possibilities. Members of Youth Action were developing this capability and using it to think through plans (e.g., in formulating their presentation to the school board) and to choose actions that they deduced would be most effective. They were developing higher-order executive skills for acting with deliberate foresight, in ways adapted to specific ecological contexts.

Since our study of Youth Action, we collected similar data on 10 more programs, and analyses of these data have allowed us to better define strategic thinking and understand how it develops. Seven of the 11 programs (counting Youth Action) were in Chicago, with members who were primarily Latino/a and African-American. The other programs were in rural areas or small cities and were predominantly European-American. All were leadership, arts, or media arts programs and each was studied over a 2- to 9-month period in which youth worked on projects. The final sample of 108 youth (8–12 per program; 712 total interviews) included about equal numbers of high-school-aged youth of both genders. The findings we report first were based on analyses using the person (not the program) as the unit of study.

This larger sample helped us conceptualize strategic thinking as it was learned by youth across diverse programs (see Larson & Angus, 2011). Forty of the 108 youth reported learning elements of strategic thinking. Our analysis led to this definition: *Use of advanced executive skills to anticipate possible scenarios in complex dynamic systems (particularly human systems) and to formulate flexible courses of action that take these different possible scenarios into account.* In the leadership programs, the "dynamic systems" were the officials in the community they were trying to influence or children they were trying to teach. Youth learned how to anticipate how these different groups would

react to different actions or activities, then to plan their course of action accordingly. In the arts programs, they were the processes involved in creating a work of art within the context of real-world constraints. Across programs, the data suggested that youth progressed from formulating actions based on rote steps to use of flexible strategies: from following fixed rules to becoming able to make up their own guidelines for regulating their actions based on reasoned forethought.

An important finding was that many youth described transferring these new strategic skills to other domains of their lives, such as schoolwork, solving personal problems, and pursuing goals for their future. Although some of the skills they reported involved context-specific knowledge (e.g., how school board members think), the basic executive skills for strategic action seemed to generalize across contexts, at least for some youth. Of course, this finding needs to be validated with longitudinal research.

The Developmental Process

Scholars who study the development of adolescents' advanced reasoning skills stress that these skills do not materialize as an automatic product of brain maturation. They depend on a youth having *experiences* through which they actively develop these skills (Kuhn, 2009). Our analyses were aimed at identifying what the requisite experiences were for strategic thinking, based on accounts from the 40 youth who reported learning this skill set (see Larson & Angus, 2011). These analyses identified three key components of episodes through which youth reported learning strategic skills.

Youth as producers of their own development. First, we discovered that youth almost always described themselves as the agents of these episodes and of their learning process. They experienced control over their projects (as individuals and sometimes as part of a group). We know from educational research that experiencing control is associated with more effective learning (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003), and indeed, when we asked youth *how* they had gained a strategic insight or skill, they often said, "I realized that ..." or "I figured out that ..." They had created their own strategic knowledge. They also described learning through active experimenting, "tinkering," and "trial and error." Youth experienced themselves as the producers of their own development of strategic skills.

Learning from engagement with challenges. The second component in youth's accounts of their learning process was their mental *engagement in the challenges* they faced within the episode. These challenges were *tactical challenges*: they involved problems, demands, and obstacles related to achieving their goals in their projects. Youth described learning strategic thinking as a

necessary response to these challenges: they use terms like "we had to," "you gotta," or "I needed to." They reported learning because they had to analyze a situation, solve a problem, or figure out a way around something that stood in their way. Youth said their learning was driven by mental activity aimed at addressing the tactical demands of their projects. In Halpern's (2009) words, youth learned from "wrestling with" the challenges.²

Maria, a 16-year-old, provides a useful example of this process. Throughout the period of our study, she and other youth in El Concilio planned activities for young people in their Chicago precinct—activities aimed at keeping them off the streets and out of gangs. Over the course of the interviews, Maria described encountering numerous tactical challenges, such as:

- Figuring out how to distribute toys to children in the neighborhood
- Choosing dates for events: "Adults didn't like dates we had chosen."
- Asking stores to donate money and restaurants to donate food
- Coordinating use of resources with other programs: "Buses are in use by dance program"

It was not surprising, then, that what Maria reported learning over 4 months was: "How to solve problems: 'We can't do this. We have this, this and this. So we have to find other ways to solve the problem.'" Notice that she is describing solving multidimensional real-world (or ecological) problems in which "this, this, and this" need to be taken into account. When asked *how* she learned these skills, Maria said, "Like in everything we do, you can have an obstacle that you need to find a way around [to] make the event come true." For her, obstacles became challenges and they initiated new episodes of learning.

The analyses indicated that youth learned strategic thinking, in part, from individual and group brainstorming, creative worry, and, in some cases, laying awake at night thinking through different possibilities. The tactical challenges appeared to push youth into the realm of future-oriented thinking about contingencies, options, and the likely effectiveness of different courses of action. In other words, the necessity of the situations (the "you need to," "we had to,") appeared to initiate a creative process of developing new insights and strategies (Nurmi, 2004). Necessity is not only the "mother of

² This relationship between "engagement with challenges" and learning strategic thinking was confirmed with a statistical test. We counted how often each youth reported experiencing tactical challenges across all of his or her interviews and how often they reported learning strategic thinking. We then computed a partial correlation between these two scores (with statistical controls for program and a youth's number of interviews). As predicted from the qualitative findings, these two were significantly correlated, $r_{\text{partial}} = 0.22, p < 0.05$.

invention," it can be the stimulus for youth's active developmental processes.

Learning from results. The third key component in the learning episodes was feedback youth received from outcomes of their work. When they were successful in a step of a project, or the project as a whole, they concluded that their strategy was effective.³ Youth also described learning strategic thinking from things that went wrong. Jack, an actor in a theater production reported: "Something would get mixed up, and you had to recover from it. It definitely teaches you how to plan ahead and how to time things." Sara, from El Concilio, described learning from both the mistakes and successes in a sleepover they had planned. In many cases, youth reported learning from comparing the results of multiple events or projects in the program.

Often, youth described their learning process by relating a narrative of their work. These included descriptions of short learning cycles and the longer cycle of their entire project. Youth were the protagonists in these narratives (either as individuals or a group), and the narratives postulated causal links between the tactical challenges they had wrestled with, how they addressed them, and the outcomes that followed. Studies of expertise have found that even accomplished professionals (e.g., teachers, engineers, military commanders) often draw on narratives of prior experiences to make plan courses of action (Ross, Shafer, & Klein, 2006). These narratives are useful, we believe, because they encode complex thinking about why certain actions were effective in one type of situation but not in others.

In sum, the youth described learning strategic thinking through an active process of struggling with tactical challenges and deriving conclusions (or formulating narratives) from the outcomes of their responses to these challenges. We are now ready to turn to our focal question.

THE ROLE OF PROGRAM ADVISORS IN YOUTH'S DEVELOPMENT

Youth's Accounts of Adults' Contribution

If youth are the protagonists in these narratives and the agents of their own development, what is the role of advisors? Their position has been portrayed

³ This relationship between experiencing successes and learning was confirmed with a statistical test. We evaluated this finding by counting how often each youth reported experiencing successes in their projects during their biweekly interviews. These counts were significantly correlated with higher rates of learning strategic thinking, $r_{\text{partial}} = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$. However, experiencing negative outcomes from their work was not significantly correlated with strategic thinking.

as that of mediator, broker, or bridge between the worlds of youth and adults (Rhodes, 2004). Youth's relationship with advisors (as compared to with teachers in school) is more likely to be based on trust and mutual respect than on unilateral authority (Deutsch & Jones, 2008). But this bridging and this mutuality often rest on unstated assumptions. When push comes to shove, are you a friend or authority figure (Jeffs & Bank, 1999)? Straddling two worlds creates contradictions.

Not surprisingly, when we asked youth what contribution their advisors made to their strategic learning, their responses reflected these contradictions (Larson & Angus, 2011). The first theme that emerged from these analyses was that advisors aided them by *getting out of their way*. They helped them learn by allowing them freedom. When asked how leaders helped, one young man said, "They really just laid back, and let us take everything in control." However the second major theme, often expressed by the same youth, was that advisors helped them by *providing assistance when and if they needed it*. Advisors suggested useful ideas, kept them from making bad decisions, provided back-up support, and helped them if they got stuck. But how do advisors decide when to provide freedom versus assistance?

This is where we need to turn from examining the youth's to the advisors' accounts. The advisors are making decisions about when to provide support and when to step back. So we want to learn about the decision-making situations they face, how they respond to them, and how these situations ultimately relate to youth's learning experiences. How do they juggle competing imperatives to provide freedom and assistance?

Methods for Analyses of the Advisor Interviews

This section provides methodological information on our interviews with the advisors and our analyses of them. Our objective was to understand how advisors addressed the contradictions in their role and what they did to facilitate youth's experience of strategic learning episodes (e.g., engagement with tactical challenges, learning from outcomes)? Figuring out the connections between advisors' actions and youth's developmental experiences is, of course, a difficult task, and our attempt to understand it should be seen as only a beginning.

The approach we took to these questions involved two interrelated analyses. The first entailed comparing programs in which youth had high versus low rates of learning strategic thinking. Five of the 11 programs had high rates (40%–62% of program youth), and we shall call these the "strategic learning programs." In the other six, these rates were low (0%–25% of youth). The strategic learning programs included both urban settings (including Youth

Action) and rural settings⁴. The strategic learning programs included more leadership (including youth activism) programs and fewer arts programs, but there were exceptions going both ways. It is possible that this difference contributed to the findings, but our case-by-case comparison suggested that the results were more attributable to advisors' philosophies and actions than to the type of program. Other researchers have described arts programs in which youth learned higher-order strategic skills (Halpern, 2009; Halverson, 2009; Heath, 1999).

The principal data for these program comparisons came from longitudinal interviews with the one or two primary advisors from each of the 11 programs ($n = 17$ advisors). All were paid professionals, with the exception of one. Their tenure in the program averaged 7 years (range: 2–30), and this did not differ between the strategic learning programs and the others. Advisors were interviewed over the same schedule as the youth ($n = 125$). To provide an additional viewpoint, we conducted site observations in each program over the same periods (a total of 159).

The aim of these comparative analyses was to identify differences between high and low strategic learning programs that might account for greater strategic learning in the high ones. To conduct these comparisons, we employed a discovery approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first stage generated preliminary hypotheses about the features of advisors' philosophy and behavior that differentiated the high programs. To do this, we read all the advisor and observational transcripts and looked for differences between programs in advisors' statements and actions that might provide theoretical explanations for differences in youth's rates of strategic learning.⁵ Based on this initial reading, we identified six features that we hypothesized to differentiate the strategic learning programs and developed preliminary operational definitions to use for coding each. In several iterative cycles, we read back through all the data, coded passages, and revised operational definitions. We then compared the high and low programs on the frequency and intensity of passages for each of the six features. This process led to two features being eliminated because they did not differentiate programs (the time-length of projects, community relevance) and two being combined because of considerable overlap (activity structure and youth control were combined

4 The strategic learning programs included three urban and two rural programs (vs. four and two, respectively, in the other group); and they included four leadership and one arts program (vs. two and four, respectively). They did not differ in leader characteristics. It should be noted that youth in most of the programs that had low rates of strategic thinking reported development in other areas (e.g., developing responsibility, emotional resiliency), and these might also be seen as components of empowerment. All names used from programs, advisors, and leaders are pseudonyms.

5 In the six programs that had two primary leaders, the two provided quite similar statements on the dimensions that we coded.

into commitment to youth control). These analyses yielded three features that differentiated advisors' philosophy (*commitment to youth control*, *philosophy of experiential learning*) and actions (*leading from behind*) in the high versus low programs.

The second set of analyses was aimed at understanding advisors' roles in specific episodes of strategic learning. These analyses focused primarily on the five strategic learning programs and on episodes in which both advisors and youth provided at least some data pertinent to the three components of strategic learning episodes discussed previously. We employed an interpretive approach to reconstruct the sequence of youth's and advisors' experiences. These interpretive analyses were used to help understand and illustrate the three distinctive features of the high programs and how they were related to youth's active process of learning in context.

We give particular attention to one program in which the principal advisor, Lisa, was attempting to foster a more empowering setting for youth. The Federation was a 4-H leadership program in which members helped run events for young children in the local rural community. In prior years, these events had been planned by Lisa's colleague, Janet, a paraprofessional. But Lisa, who had a masters degree, had ultimate responsibility for the program as part of her job, and she wanted to change the social contract with the youth so that *they* organized the events. She wanted youth to take roles as leaders in the community and learn the strategic skills that would come from being in charge of the planning. Over the 9-month period that we studied the Federation, Lisa worked to change the setting, and, indeed, this program ended up as one of the five high-strategic learning programs. The experience of Lisa and the youth over this period provide a valuable example for understanding adults' roles.

Unlike youth in many studies of empowerment, members of the Federation were not from a marginalized ethnic group or social class. But as "adolescents" they were marginalized in their community. Young people's role in society is limited; they are viewed as naïve, irresponsible, and troublesome by the majority of adults (Gilliam & Bales, 2001). The Federation was located in an isolated, European-American (97.4%), and comparatively poor county (median household income = \$31,000). Lisa described the youth as:

... a very interesting, mixed bag of kids. We've got kids that come from all economic cross sections in the county, we've got kids from different high schools, different interest levels, and different levels of willingness to participate.

Lisa admitted that her goals for these youth were "pretty lofty," but she had also spent a few months in the prior spring trying to prepare the youth for the change.

ADVISORS' PRINCIPLES, PHILOSOPHIES, AND STARTING POINTS

Sarason (1972) describes how a setting exists in the minds of its creators before it is formed. Similarly, front-line practitioners bring guiding ideas, values, and principles to their work that shape the setting. Two of the features that differentiated the advisors of the strategic learning programs from the others were of this nature. They were foundational principles or philosophies that advisors articulated to us in their initial interviews and to youth at the start of program, then demonstrated in their actions. The first feature was a *strong commitment to youth control*.

Commitment to Youth Control

Lisa launched her effort to change the Federation by putting it right on the table, by telling youth that were now in charge. The program had an annual summer retreat at a 4-H camp in which advisors and youth planned activities for the following year. After doing an icebreaker, Lisa gave a short speech in which she told the 15 youth that she was "passing the torch" to them. It will be "your planning process," she said, adding that they collectively had more experience than she and Janet. Furthermore, because the youth were closer in age to the children they served, they had the knowledge "to take ownership of the vision." She and Janet would be there to provide support, but they needed to take the responsibility.

Lisa's language typified how advisors in the five strategic learning programs expressed their commitment to youth control. They repeatedly told youth "it is your program." The advisors did not take themselves out of the picture. In fact, they kept a foot in the door; they were still the "adult" who was ultimately responsible for the program. But they stressed the principle that youth should take "ownership" over decisions. For the Federation's rural White youth, there was no talk of oppression, or throwing off chains. Lisa did not use the word "power." Her philosophy was more John Dewey than Paulo Freire.

Although similar, there were also variations in how the advisors of these five programs articulated youth control. At El Concilio, where the mostly Latina/o youth also planned activities for children (as well as for youth their age), the advisor, Lucho, was more emphatic than Lisa. He often communicated that youth were in charge by leaving the room, telling them he would check back later to see what they had planned. At Youth Action, the advisor, Jason, used some Freire-like, empowerment language. He emphasized that the youth were "not only the leaders of tomorrow, but leaders today," and he described his role as working "side-by-side" with youth in working to address issues they chose.

In the two other strategic learning programs, the advisors were committed to youth ownership—but within a structured framework the adults had created. Harambee was an activism program in a low-income African-American urban neighborhood. For their summer session, the advisor (Mike) felt he needed to create structure in advance, because they would be meeting daily, 5 hours per day for only 6 weeks, and he wanted to get the 32 youth off and running on the first day. The advisors chose a theme for the summer (discrimination in transit service for their neighborhood) and preplanned the activities. But youth exercised control over major decisions *within* these activities. For a team working on a video, Mike described how: "Kids are shooting the footage, deciding what to edit, deciding what's important." Similarly, two adults leading a theater production of *Les Miserables* set the schedule and ran most of the rehearsals because they learned that their management skills were essential to coordinating the large cast of 107 members. But they encouraged youth to take ownership and control over development of their roles, and across the 3 months of rehearsals, they progressively allowed youth's control to increase. As described by Kirshner (2008), the adults "faded" as the youth developed the needed skills.

Across these five programs, then, the nature of youth control was adapted according to the number of youth, their developmental levels, and other contextual factors. But the commonality was a stated philosophy that youth had control over at least some of the higher-order decisions directing their work. A youth at El Concilio explained, "Lucho wouldn't tell us, 'You have to do this!' We wouldn't put as much effort in, because it wasn't our idea, it wasn't what we wanted." Youth saw their control over decisions as important to their engagement.

In contrast, advisors in four of the other six programs (those in which few or no youth learned strategic thinking) did *not* emphasize youth control.⁶ These adults emphasized that they were in charge. On the first day at Media Masters, a media arts program, the advisors provided no introduction or opportunities for input from youth. One of them stood in front of the group and started taking them through a number of difficult procedures in a software program. The most adult-controlled program was an evangelical dance group, Faith in Motion, in which the advisor taught dance moves and controlled rehearsals from the front of the room. Advisors of these four programs

⁶ One of the other two programs was a consciousness-raising program for young women, and the advisors, like Lisa, told youth that they were in charge of their agenda. But despite the advisors' hopes and encouragement, the youth decided they did *not* want to do a leadership activity in the community; they wanted to discuss personal issues that affected them. So there were few tactical challenges for youth to learn from. The sixth program was a leadership program in which youth were allowed quite a lot of control over planning activities, and we are not clear why youth did not report developing strategic skills (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005).

appeared to be less concerned with allowing youth choice than with structuring activities so they would learn technical skills. As a result, these youth did not have a role in higher-order decisions and thus had fewer opportunities to learn strategic thinking.

A Philosophy of Experiential Learning

The second feature that differentiated the advisors of the five strategic learning programs was that they had a well-developed philosophy of experiential learning. Without prompting, they described placing high value on youth having *direct* and *active* real-world experiences. Jason, at Youth Action, told us:

A lot of things with [community] organizing you can't teach, you have to experience it. I think the most important piece is providing opportunities for them to actually use their talents in real-life settings.

Lisa said she started out as a school teacher, but her interest shifted to after-school programs, partly because: "I'm a firm believer in the experiential learning process." In her opening speech, Lisa encouraged youth to take risks with new ideas. She told them they would learn even if an activity was not a big success. Lucho at El Concilio took this further, saying they would learn "even if we have the worst event ever." Parallel to our findings from youth's accounts of how they learned strategic thinking (Larson & Angus, 2011), advisors believed that mistakes provided useful corrective feedback and that successes provided validation of their actions.

But advisors' philosophy of experiential learning sometimes included playing a stronger role than youth described. Jason at Youth Action believed in "pushing [youth] out of their safety zone, so it's like a new situation for them, and they can test out their skills." He coaxed youth to take roles directing workshop sessions, reading at a poetry jam, and presenting to the school board. Jason explained that this "pushing" would help youth learn, "Oh, that wasn't so hard," or see, "This is what I have a problem with."

Most of these advisors believed youth benefited not just from the outcomes but from adult guidance in interpreting the events that shaped them. (No youth mentioned this contribution.) Lisa felt she had to help youth process the success or failure of what they had done: "Did it work? Did it not work? What should we do differently?" She encouraged youth to analyze what happened and why it happened. This adult role may be important because the underlying causal factors shaping real-life events can be masked

or confounded with other factors (Byrnes, 2005); so youth may see the underlying machinery at work. In some cases, advisors helped youth recognize success in what they saw as failure. The advisors helped youth shape the narrative of what had taken place (*see also* Priest & Gas, 1997).

In contrast, advisors of the six other programs made far fewer statements about experiential learning. Their philosophy centered on providing predictable, structured activities that would help youth learn skills and that avoided real-world risks. Rather than wanting youth to figure out the strategies and steps to reach a goal, they created structures and directly instructed youth on how to proceed. In short, these advisors largely superseded the possibility of a discovery process in which youth could uncover, engage with, and learn from tactical challenges.

Beyond Philosophy

This philosophy of youth control and experiential learning, however, was not enough. For one thing, advisors' commitment to youth control meant little unless it was accepted by the youth. At the Federation, Lisa made a unilateral declaration about passing the torch. Then, after providing a brief training, she turned the planning for the year over to the youth.

The youth didn't balk. They generated a list of activities they wanted to plan (a bike safety training; a campout; a state fair trip) and volunteered for committees to work on each. Lisa was especially happy when Tricia (the new President) and Adam (the Vice President) took charge of planning the next meeting's agenda:

They asked if I had anything the group needed to discuss. I reviewed a few items with them and asked that the group give each some attention. With that, the two of them dismissed me—asked me to leave. I was so incredibly pleased that they felt comfortable enough to kick me out, and confident in themselves to do the job.

Lisa's opening move was successful. As the year began, however, difficulties started to emerge.

WHEN GOOD IDEAS HIT THE FAN

Sarason (1972) observed that, time and again, when new settings are created, optimistic expectations are replaced by pessimism as reality takes over.

There is often a large gap, Sarason suggests, between people's vision for the setting and what can actually be achieved in the complex ecology of real life. Schwandt (2003) expresses a similar idea in writing that the expectations of practitioners are inevitably compromised when they have to be "carried out on a rough ground of paradox and contingency, ambiguity and fragmentation" (p. 361).

Adults working with youth can make a commitment to youth control and experiential learning, but sustaining these principles on the "rough ground" of daily practice is a different matter. It is then that contradictions rear their head. Just as youth in our study faced challenges in their projects, advisors faced challenges (or meta-challenges) in creating and sustaining circumstances for youth to learn strategic skills from these projects. The diverse challenges Lisa faced and the mixed success of her responses are instructive.

The Rough Ground of Practice

When Lisa began checking in with youth a few weeks after the summer retreat, some were making excellent progress with planning the events they had chosen. Rhonda, for example, was thoroughly absorbed in the tactical challenges of planning a party for 5- to 12-year-old children. She reported trying to figure out "stuff for little kids to big kids; a 7-year-old isn't going to be interested in the same thing as an 11- or 12-year-old, but [we are] trying to connect them all." Not surprisingly, Rhonda later reported learning strategic skills from her experiences.

Other youth, however, were already stuck or spinning their wheels. Lisa realized that although her training had helped youth think about the outcomes of their planning, it did not include the *processes* of planning, including how to start: "A lot of them very naively approached the first activities, 'Oh, we'll just do this.'" Some youth didn't seem to get the bigger picture. Zeldin and Camino (1999) have found that program advisors often overestimate young people's abilities, letting them take on complex planning tasks that would be difficult even for adults. As a result, youth can get off on the wrong foot or get overwhelmed.

Lisa felt she needed to act but wanted to do it in ways that kept ownership with the youth. For a committee that had made little progress planning a carwash, she described trying to stimulate their higher-order thinking processes. Rather than telling them what to do, she primed them with guiding questions, "What has to come first, and what has to come second?" Use of questions can direct youth's thinking to problems they need to address, while keeping accountability for solving them with the youth (Kirshner, 2008). As Lisa explained, "I wanted them to feel like it's their responsibility."

A more difficult challenge was the President's shyness. Tricia had trouble commanding attention. At one Federation meeting, our observer noted that while Tricia was trying to set a date, many youth started talking to each other. Despite Lisa's commitment to youth control, she decided she needed to step in and help Tricia get the date. In the next interview, Lisa explained:

This is where I'm going to get a little bit bossy—I won't allow Tricia and Adam to not perform their [jobs]. That's where coaching, supporting, facilitating and sometimes prodding is going to come into play on my part: to be pretty aggressive to make sure they take responsibility and initiative to lead their group. ... That's probably the harshest thing you'll hear me say (chuckle). I won't allow them to slough on this one, because it's so important for the group that they do the job.

This scenario was repeated at the next meeting. The group discussion was going nowhere, so Lisa interjected, "Why don't you move this forward, Tricia?" Tricia sought volunteers and set up a committee to plan the event. But then Tricia turned to Lisa for instructions on what to do next. Lisa's help only seemed to increase Tricia's dependency on adult guidance.

In our interviews, however, Tricia said she was unhappy with the disorder in the group, and over time, she started to plan in advance how to be effective in choosing dates and keeping the group on task. She also asked Lisa to give the group lessons on parliamentary procedure. As a result, by the end of the year, Tricia was better able to run the meetings by herself.

Lisa faced another challenge when she realized the officers had not been coordinating the work by different committees (something the advisors had done in years past). Two groups were both planning overnight campouts. One was for older youth the following summer; that was not a concern. But Becky's committee, assigned to 5- to 7-year-olds, was also planning a campout for the spring. Lisa spoke up, indicating that parents would not accept an overnight for young children, but Becky's solution was to shift it to an older age group.

Lisa formulated her situation in this paradoxical way, "How can I redirect them without making them think I'm redirecting them?" She went on, "I guess that's manipulative, but at the same time I don't want to squelch their enthusiasm; I don't want them to see me as the person who's always saying 'No.'" Lisa had ultimate responsibility for the group's activities but struggled with how to nix the overnight in a respectful way that did not undermine youth control.

Things came to a head when Becky made a motion to switch the target group for her campout from 5- to 7-year-olds to older elementary children.

Lisa responded by posing a host of logistical questions: Even with older children, parents would have a list of concerns. These questions led the group to vote down Becky's campout. Lisa followed up by encouraging Becky's committee to be more critical in evaluating their ideas but then concluded with a cheery, "Thank you, good thinking."

Afterward, most youth said Lisa had done the right thing. They recognized that this was an occasion where they had needed advisor input to keep them from a bad decision. Adam, who was on Becky's committee, conceded, "We were kind of drifting off." But Becky felt bruised. She did not accept that her plan was unviable and saw Lisa's quashing it as arbitrary exercise of adult authority: "Sometimes we come up with things and the advisors want something different. Like ours is a good idea but they want something [else]." For the next 2 months, Becky reported feeling disgruntled and disengaged.

Lisa, however, took on the goal of repairing Becky's sense of ownership. She met with Becky, trying to get her interested in doing a daycamp for 5- to 7-year-olds. Over several meetings, Lisa's patient encouragement had an effect. Becky conceded, "You just have to kind of compromise," and gradually she became engaged and excited by the challenges of figuring out how to help young children put up tents and build a campfire. As the camp approached, she was able to say: "It's my ideas; Lisa's helping me make it more attractive to little kids." The camp went well, and afterward Becky said, "I really had a lot of fun helping out all the kids." Lisa's extended campaign to restore Becky's ownership and engagement had succeeded.

The Art of Judicious Support

Reflecting at the end of the year on her attempt to change the program, Lisa said, "I've not made as much progress as I would like. I've had to do too much intervening." Although she had made a commitment to youth control, Lisa found herself responding to one challenging situation after another, exerting adult influence in subtle and sometimes less subtle ways. Youth did not know how to start, so she primed them with guiding questions. Tricia lost control of meetings; Lisa felt she had to step in. Becky started out with a full head of steam; Lisa reined her in, then pumped her back up when she was deflated.

This is the rough ground of practice. "It's always a tightrope you walk," Lisa said. She was repeatedly challenged by the pulls between helping youth and giving them freedom. She did resist many youth's bids for help, saying: "You guys need to make the decision. You run it the way that you want it to be run." And when Lisa did intervene, she tried to minimize her footprint. Although it felt "manipulative," she tried to redirect youth, rather than being

seen as controlling. "Every time I have an interaction with them, I have to really be conscious of what I'm saying and how I'm saying it. I don't want to come across as the authority." When she intervened, however, Lisa felt she compromised her goal of youth control.

But although Lisa felt she intervened too often, the youth seemed unaware. Tricia, told us: "We pretty much planned a lot of the activities. [The advisors] were kind of there if we needed help with anything, but they kind of let us run the show." We, as researchers, saw that Lisa and Janet provided assistance at many key moments, but the youth took credit for the many activities they had worked on. Similar to the results of the person-level analysis mentioned earlier in the chapter, the Federation youth reported that the advisors had helped them by allowing them freedom combined with the right amount of help when needed. From youth's point of view, Lisa had lived up to her side of the new social contract. With the exception of Becky's period of disgruntlement, Lisa's actions were not perceived as diminishing youth's control. Indeed, from our viewpoint, her judicious interventions appeared to keep youth on track. They helped *sustain* conditions for youth to feel control. It is possible that *experiencing* control is more important to youth's engagement than degree of *actual* control (Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003).

The youth justified the advisors' role developmentally in terms of adults' greater knowledge and experience. When asked about the adults' help, they explained: "They know what we're capable of doing;" "They're making sure we were staying on task;" "They know what workshops have failed in the past and what we can pull off." The youth trusted the advisors and viewed them not as a threat to their ownership but as benevolent overseers looking out for them, helping them keep their work at a level manageable for them. The advisors helped keep their work in what Lev Vygotsky (1978) described as *the zone of proximal development*. This is work at a level of difficulty that is challenging to youth but within their capacity when they have assistance from peers or mentors.

But one might ask: Were the advisors complicit in sustaining youth's dependency? Were they undermining youth's empowerment? What we observed was that youth were engaging in the processes for learning strategic thinking. Because they felt ownership, youth reported many occasions of mental engagement in the higher-order tactical challenges of planning events. These challenges included how to run a meeting, how to plan activities for children of different ages, and thinking systematically about how different plans would unfold. Indeed, many of these youth reported learning strategic thinking. This included Becky, who described learning to think through an activity from the children's point of view (e.g., setting up tents), imagining problems that might come up, and how they could steer around them.

The youth were also learning from the outcomes of their planning. They learned from mistakes, for instance, to expect the unexpected: “always have extra” and “plan for more people.”

The most important finding may be that youth needed less adult help as the year went on. They reported feeling more competent and, as one said, the advisors “were more likely to accept our plans.” Although Lisa experienced many “stops and starts,” the youth and adults had succeeded in changing the setting to one in which youth were exercising considerable control.

LEADING FROM BEHIND

Results of Program Comparisons

When we compared programs, we found that advisors of the five strategic learning programs worked as hard as those in the other six programs. Although they were committed to youth control, they were very engaged in supporting youth's work. But like Lisa, they often did so in subtle, indirect ways. This included devoting much mental energy to watching, listening, and trying to figure out whether, when, and how their intervention was needed.

The third feature we found that distinguished these five programs (in addition to advisors' commitment to youth control and philosophy of experiential learning) was that the advisors *led from behind*. This is the art of supporting youth's leadership while providing light touch guidance and assistance as needed.⁷ Consistent with their philosophy of experiential learning, these advisors found ways to respect youth's dominion over higher-order decision making, while assisting or redirecting as needed. They were not charismatic leaders; most were self-effacing and didn't draw attention to themselves.

Leading from behind was not easy, as we saw with Lisa. These advisors dealt with the “rough ground” of ambiguous and unexpected challenges. Each situation was different and required tailored decisions. They struggled with how to navigate situations in which youth dropped the ball, lost motivation, were in over their heads, or set out on plans that were not likely to succeed. At first blush, “leading from behind” sounds contradictory. Indeed, these advisors were “pursuing paradox.” They had to weigh competing

⁷ Grossman, Campbell, and Raley (2007, p. 40) use the term *leading from behind* in describing advisors' interactions with younger children in which there was a higher level of adult control. For our high school-aged youth, the advisors' actions might as accurately be described as “supporting from behind.” The concept of “autonomy support” (Ryan & Deci, 2000) might also be used.

imperatives and figure out when to intervene and how to do so in ways that were effective but minimally intrusive.

To deal with different situations, they employed the approaches Lisa used that balanced these competing concerns, from guiding questions to priming and redirection. Youth at Harambee, for example, were trying to interview people on the street for their video on local transit service, but frequent refusals made the youth frustrated. So after every street session, advisors debriefed youth, giving them praise and redirecting their attention from their frustration to thinking about techniques for getting good statements from people who did show interest.

A common objective of these advisors was to take a problem that was overwhelming and help break it down to be manageable for youth. When members of Youth Action were going to run a large meeting, Jason helped write out the agenda on butcher block paper, drawing open boxes identifying decisions the group had to make (e.g., Do we hold a rally or not? If so, what date?). When youth at El Concilio were building a haunted house, Lucho did the work of getting the materials, then let youth take it from there. Adolescents can have difficulty with problems requiring that many dimensions be considered at once (Byrnes, Miller, & Reynolds, 1999). By breaking problems down, advisors kept youth in their zones of proximal development and thus helped them learn. In comparing youth activism programs, Kirshner (2008) concluded that youth learned *fewer* organizing skills in a program where adults provide less structure and guidance. Young people may learn more when they grapple with strategic decisions within their capability.

Although these advisors mostly led from behind, we observed occasions in all five programs when they were more assertive, as Lisa was in prodding Tricia and redirecting Becky. Even Jason at Youth Action, who put the most emphasis on youth control, vetoed ideas; he also described sometimes “hounding” youth, including calling them at home, to get them to do things they had committed to do. But as with Lisa, these more assertive interventions made the advisors uncomfortable, and they followed up with efforts to restore any negative effects on youth's sense of control. At *Les Misérables*, the director engaged in a similar campaign as Lisa's to repair a breach in the actors' sense of ownership after it had been violated by a dialect coach (Walker & Larson, 2006). Pursuing paradox required not avoiding, but addressing, contradictions.

What is important developmentally is that these advisors sustained conditions for youth to experience episodes of strategic learning. By leading from behind they reinforced youth's ownership, helping them engage with deepening levels of challenges. Youth in these five programs (compared to the six others) reported dealing with more tactical challenges in their work: how to

plan an interesting discussion, how to get store owners to donate food, planning a session on safe sex, and how to get a play to gel. Youth were engaged with higher-order strategic decisions. They had to learn to anticipate, brainstorm, and think about real-world contingencies.

In contrast, advisors in the programs reporting low levels of strategic thinking often short-circuited opportunities where youth could have taken responsibility for tactical decisions. This was apparent at The Studio, when the advisor, Neisha, described guiding youth's development of artwork for the cover of a CD they were producing:

Not that I'm an artist, but I tend to know what looks good. The students were coming up with something that I really liked, and from there I just kind of coached them, and said, "Okay, you know, that looks good right there. Try making that line bolder, or try changing that color. Try duplicating that on the other side."

She was "leading from the front." Youth were told by an authority what would look better, eliminating the struggle with challenges that leads to learning through experience.

Youth in the five strategic learning programs also reported more learning from outcomes than did youth in the other programs. Because of their advisors' prompting, questioning, and redirecting, their work was often successful. It is an axiom of community organizing that one tries to provide novices with "easy wins" in their action campaigns (Kirshner, 2008). That is probably true in other types of youth projects as well. Successes not only confirm the strategies used, they build self-efficacy. Although youth in these programs had received quite a bit of assistance from their leaders, it was low-visibility assistance that allowed youth to *perceive* ownership of the work and its outcomes. They came away with the experience of being the protagonists in narratives of challenge and decision making that usually (but not always) led to success.

But if the goal is to create perceptions—to provide youth these narratives—the question becomes, How far should adults go in orchestrating optimal learning episodes?

Engineering Experiences for Youth's Learning

Lucho, the advisor of El Concilio, used what he described as "national security, CIA tactics" to shape some learning experiences in his program. For example, Sara was in charge of getting help from a local business for a party

they were planning. But Lucho, who knew the people at the business, didn't think they would respond to a request from a teenager, so:

I called ahead and said, "This is what we're doing, can you help us out?" And when he said "Yes," I said, "You know, one of my young people is going to give you a call and set up a meeting." That's when I pulled myself out of it. So when Sara called, it was already to a point where they knew she was coming, but they acted as if it was the first time she was calling.

Lucho in effect staged an experience in which Sara negotiated what he had already negotiated. In the interview, he was proud and adamant about the value of these "backdoor" actions. He said that telling Sara about his prior call would have been wrong:

In her eyes, and in my eyes as a youth development person, I would have been like, "I just cut her development out." And she probably would have been thinking, "What, he doesn't trust me, he thinks I'm going to fuck it up." And I didn't want her to feel that.

Lucho provided Sara with an illusion that she was the agent in these negotiations, so she could experience an episode in which she engaged with the challenges and received affirmative feedback from the results of her efforts. "We need to bring youth along," Lucho explained. In this and other situations, he created ready-made epiphanies for the youth.

Lucho was quite deliberate in presenting his "CIA tactics" to us (and to you!) as a challenge to our thinking. Is this a confidence trick or legitimate experiential learning? Our feeling is that Lucho's tactics created new contradictions. Although Lisa admitted to manipulating situations, she was leading from behind, not "from off stage," so youth saw what she was doing. We are concerned that Lucho's approach creates a breach of trust and that it may create experiences that are inauthentic to the real world. Lucho, however, might respond that breaches of trust are quite authentic to the rough and tumble Chicago world that he knows.

CONCLUSION: PURSUING PARADOX AND CULTIVATING EMPOWERING SETTINGS FOR YOUTH

What is the role of adults in facilitating youth's empowerment? How do we create settings that allow youth to develop strategic skills and other elements

of empowerment? We have a human tendency to look for simple and singular answers to these kinds of questions. Youth policymakers are currently concerned with identifying stable features of youth settings that can be used for establishing quality standards and improving programs. Quantitative researchers have a parallel concern with determining setting variables that predict positive youth outcomes (Larson, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004). We believe these efforts are valuable, but they get us only so far. They provide limited assistance in understanding *how* practitioners create and sustain positive developmental settings, on the ground, in response to the complex ecology of daily practice: How to cultivate conditions for positive developmental experiences, especially ones in which youth are the agents (Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker, 2009)

Part of the challenge they face, as Rappaport (1981) argues, is that "human social systems ... are paradoxical in nature" (p. 2). One-sided solutions for influencing or changing a setting rarely work. Indeed, a term that comes up again and again in writings on effective practice is *balancing*. Across applied fields from education to engineering to business, it is often recognized that practitioners' expertise lies in their abilities to balance, integrate, or adjudicate conflicting situational demands (Sternberg, 1998). It follows that to create settings in which youth empower themselves, it is necessary to embrace the contradictions inherent in that concept. What we found here is that practitioners who were effective in supporting youth's development of strategic thinking do this: they balance. Both from the youth's and the advisors' accounts, we found that youth's strategic learning appeared to depend on advisors maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between supporting youth's agency and intervening to keep their work on track. Effective advisors found ways to simultaneously respect youth's rights, ownership, and voice, while using their professional knowledge to provide measured assistance as needed.

Another part of the challenge is that human development (including empowerment) is a process that occurs over time. Although stable features of the setting—positive relationships, trust, and a commitment to youth control—appeared to be necessary to this process, youth reported learning strategic thinking through their participation in episodes. They learned through immersing themselves in the tactical challenges of trying to reach a demanding goal and then obtained feedback from their efforts. The role advisors played in supporting this learning, therefore, included not just maintaining stable conditions but facilitating youth's experience of these cycles. They stood back when they could, supporting youth's freedom, experimentation, and engagement with challenges. But they intervened when they judged it necessary, to help shape an authentic experience—and narrative memory—in which youth were the protagonists and the outcome was successful, or at least laden with useful information.

We must stress that even the most skilled leaders had both hits and misses in cultivating these learning episodes (Larson & Walker, 2010). As with Lisa, sometimes they were able to intervene in effective ways, and sometimes they were not. Some situations they faced lent themselves to easy solutions, and some were harder. Just as the youth were learning basic strategic skills, the advisors were engaged in their own process of learning "meta" strategic skills—skills for facilitating youth's experiencing these episodes.

In concluding, we should emphasize that this research employed discovery methods and is limited in scope. Empowerment involves more than learning skills, it involves development of motivation and sense of self- or group-efficacy to use those skills. We believe youth in our study gained these through the same types of cycles of learning, but more research is needed. Further research is also needed to build on existing knowledge on processes related to development of political consciousness and issues unique to marginalized groups of youth (e.g., Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Further knowledge about creating empowering settings for youth should also build on Seidman and Tseng's (this volume) valuable work, consider the role of program culture (Maton & Salem, 1995), and examine youth's co-construction of collective setting narratives (Rappaport, 1995).

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