

53. Youth-driven innovation, engagement and empowerment

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Outline of the topic

Innovation studies have largely ignored the potential of youth, despite evidence that youth engagement in a variety of endeavours has positive outcomes. Creating strategic entry points for youth and promoting empowerment in youth also promote intergenerational equity and sustainable development, key concerns of innovation studies.

Youth-driven innovation requires liberating youth's creativity through youth empowerment. Youth-driven innovation ranges from those innovations entirely led by youth, to innovations initiated by adults but engaging with youth. Youth-driven innovation can be incremental or radical, aesthetic or functional. Youth can also contribute to the diffusion of innovation.

Stimulating youth's capacity for curiosity and creativity builds capacity for innovative behaviours. Empowering youth, particularly through creative engagement (as a key first step to innovative behaviours), has been shown to foster youth-driven innovation with economic, social and cultural impact. With youth as architects of innovation, empowered by their talent, creativity and environment, evidence points to increased local activism, social cohesion, citizenship, solidarity and entrepreneurship.

Conceptual overview and discussion

Youth is not a uniform social category and may or may not denote a particular age range. Rather it tends to describe a social group that shares common characteristics, such as transitioning to adulthood, or transitioning from school to work. A key feature of this social category is that youth are in flux; they are developing – gaining capacity, awareness, skills and expertise – over time.

Current youth ages 15 to 18 are sometimes referred to as generational alpha, and they are already shaping the media, popular culture, brands and consumerism in contemporary society. They are a *digital-everything*

generation and are completely immersed in technology. By the end of the 2020s they will be entering adulthood, the workforce and households of their own. The COVID-19 global pandemic drastically reset societal norms and further intensified this generation's interest in the world around them and their place in it. Additionally, the development of youth has been greatly impacted by the pandemic, including their relative preparedness to face the dynamic nature of future life. In the context of a comprehensive vision for youth development, scholars have argued for the importance of both formal and non-formal education to unlock creativity and inspire engagement in the economy, in social change and in innovation processes.

Empowerment in youth is a developmental life process. It promotes an increased understanding of the world and various positive roles that youth can undertake. It is also a dynamic and creative process and empowering experiences may vary by context. Given the important relationship between empowerment, creativity and innovation and social movements, empowering youth can have a broad and positive impact. Adults in care roles can also play a significant role in nurturing and facilitating empowerment in youth by reducing context constraints and encouraging exploration and experimentation.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child includes economic arguments for youth inclusion for improvements in education and health and livelihood. Empowered youth are more likely to be more creative, productive and engaged. Thus, models of empowerment can be drawn upon to consider how to engage youth in such processes and activities. Models of empowerment include concepts such as mastery, agency, self-efficacy, self-determination and self-regulation. However, where youth are concerned, it often includes a subset of goals that are personally meaningful and power oriented.

Additionally, youth face more structural barriers to empowerment and the ability to engage and experiment with creative and innovative behaviours. These include the practicalities of engaging, how to prepare youth to engage productively, how to convene youth together and how to mobilize their ideas. Other barriers include legal-age restrictions, lack of financial investment opportunities, and not being taken seriously. Social context may either promote or deter moments

of transformation that are possible through empowering experiences. In a recent study on youth engagement, Williams identified both enablers and barriers to youth engagement. In addition to supportive adults, enablers include technology, physical access, time, availability and a conducive or appropriate environment. Barriers include physical, mental or emotional ability and the need to feel included and accepted (and to belong).

Application

Empowering youth and fostering their engagement in creative and innovative behaviours may take the form of promoting youth led start-ups and businesses, providing a forum for youth to address pressing societal challenges creatively and collectively (such as poverty, access to education, the climate crisis or unemployment), or mentoring, sponsoring or otherwise supporting youth in a range of activities. According to NESTA (the UK National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), youth-driven innovation often occurs in one of three domains: (1) the commercial or service domain, such as fashion, music, design or software; (2) the civic or political domain, which includes citizenship behaviours and advocacy, and (3) the cultural, subcultural or countercultural domain, which includes both commercial and cultural facets.

Understanding and measuring empowerment requires a theoretical framework which appreciates how individuals assert control, use resources and change their environment and circumstances. Theorizing youth empowerment from a youth-informed perspective reinforces empowerment as a processional concept with clear stages of development. This process begins with youth learning about empowerment, and proceeds to a phase where they practise and develop confidence and competence in using power and being empowered. Williams (2024) identifies five stages of the empowering process, including: (1) youth becoming familiar with empowerment and understanding the basic traits and language associated with the concept; (2) youth identifying (and identifying with) empowered roles and empowered individuals in society; (3) youth practising empowerment in certain situations, such as work, school, home or community; (4) youth learning to be responsible with power and authority and gaining confidence and competence; and (5)

youth being able to envision an empowered future self, able to achieve a range of desired goals.

In a follow-up study on youth engagement, it was revealed that today's youth are engaging in a range of activities which can promote creative and innovative behaviours and allow them to witness, experience and experiment with empowerment, including work, creative arts, elective learning, games, civil engagement, sports, social media, volunteering and various social activities. Additionally, this same study identifies key motivations for youth engagement, including social connection, a sense of accomplishment, altruism, a sense of responsibility, enjoyment, as well as social pressures and educational imperatives. Adults can play a critical role in supporting youth empowerment and engagement, including parents, caregivers, teachers, employers, healthcare providers and community organizations. These social networks not only present favourable environments for empowerment, experimentation and creativity, but also the potential for feedback, development, positive adaptation and knowledge mobilization.

Like innovation, empowerment involves progress, achieved over time, resulting in increased personal power and influence. Whereas innovation fosters novelty and improvement (either incrementally or disruptively), youth experience empowerment as a part of their own personal development and as part of their role in society. As youth mature, they acquire both the language and experience necessary to make sense of empowerment, empowering experiences and empowering responses. They can express their thoughts and feelings, including articulating the specifics of their experiences with empowerment and the personal meaning of such experiences. Emic perspectives from youth point to the need for empowering activities to be strongly linked to personal goals, to be personally relevant and to be future looking. Youth also wish their empowering experiences to resonate with a larger purpose (e.g., social innovation or sustainable development). Innovation studies point to the benefits of social inclusion as leading to better knowledge, processes and outcomes. Including youth in innovation processes would extend these benefits. For example, youth engagement in innovation processes may include involving youth as co-producers of content or

strategy, having youth involved in intentional innovation, or understanding how youth use systems and products to detect different drivers for development.

Equipping youth with both the opportunity and the support to engage with confidence in empowering activities (beyond intellectual learning) is critical. Once empowered, youth are capable of youth-driven innovation, where youth initiate potential solutions to a problem. As innovators, they have enormous untapped potential, including economic, cultural and social impacts. Youth can stimulate new demands on education, on the economy and on social services. They can drive or influence innovation of products and services and can often be a major force in innovation diffusion.

To empower youth and engage them in creative and innovative behaviours, NESTA suggests: (1) promoting youth-driven innovation with positive images in the media, (2) providing structures and supports to develop innovators e.g., toolkits, (3) providing access to supportive networks and mentors, (4) providing development to enabling adults, (5) providing space and place for youth to explore and be challenged and (6) recognizing and celebrating youth-driven innovation.

Critical summary

Positive psychology encourages the perspective that well-being is attainable when individuals can be nurtured for their unique strengths and virtues and engaged meaningfully. Happiness, hope, resilience and positive mental health in youth have a predictive relationship in youth ages 15 to 18. Adults in care roles should reflect on how to play helpful roles and enable youth empowerment and specifically minimize potential social constraints. Youth empowerment and engagement stimulates youth capacity for curiosity and creativity and builds capacity

for innovative behaviours, including youth-driven innovation.

Further readings

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