

Chapter 9 pathway notes

Young adults with purpose in Guatemala

Designing inclusive pathways with young adults: A pathway from Guatemala

Purpose

These pathway notes support chapter 9 of the book: *Designing inclusive pathways with young adults: Learning and development for a better world*. The chapter profiles the work of the Guatemalan movement 'Young Adults with Purpose in Guatemala (YAPG) in conjunction with the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL). YAPG began in 2012 and was established for those aged seventeen and older. YAPG works with young people who live in challenging environments and are rehabilitating from a former lifestyle (addiction or street-life, for example) with the aim of reintegrating back into society. The challenge for YAPG is to facilitate the continued growth, development and progression to maturity of restored young adults and to unlock the potential in them to help and support other needy young adults in their communities. Organizations interested in this approach should contact The Nicodemus Trust via its website at www.nicodemustrust.org.uk/

GULL welcomes affiliation with any organization working with marginalized young people and the purpose of these pathway notes is to assist those who are using or developing a similar approach. For more details about how to affiliate with GULL please see: www.gullonline.org/affiliate

Background

The UK-based Nicodemus Trust is a relatively new charity, and it was established specifically to support movements like YAPG. Co-founder of Nicodemus Trust, Alastair Welford had been for many years, a Trustee of a UK charity that provides care and support to street children in Latin America. In this capacity, he had visited Latin America many times but on a visit to Guatemala in 2010, he was approached on the street by three young adults that he had first met when they were being cared for in a children's home. Although every effort had been made to help these boys, they ended-up back on the streets and so the idea for a movement focusing on the needs of vulnerable young adults came from this encounter and from on-going discussions between Alastair and Debbie Welford and their children, including Jonathan Welford. Jonathan had studied International Development at the University of Liverpool in the UK and went on to undertake a period of voluntary work in Bolivia. Here, he found himself working with teenagers and began to think about ways in which they might be better supported and integrated with development work. Given the fact that there are numerous agencies focusing on the needs of children, his experience also forms part of the Nicodemus Trust story as it reinforced the need for a dedicated outreach to young adults.

YAPG participants live in and belong to communities where poverty, addiction, abuse, street-life, violence and gang crime are rife. Their personal experience of these on-going issues enables them to support and empathize with others, and to contribute to long-term change. Having experienced life-enriching restoration in their own lives, they are passionate about leading and/or participating in initiatives that serve others in need. Nicodemus Trust provides co-ordination for this movement, as well as financial support in areas like education and healthcare and for YAPG's mentoring programme. YAPG's volunteer mentors play a significant role by journeying with participants as friends and role models, supporting them in their community outreach and by encouraging them to re-engage with education. The mentoring process also focuses on character, spiritual and self-directed development so that participants are able to begin to develop their capacity to make positive, independent decisions and life choices. The chapter explains YAPG's young adult mentoring process and the design and implementation of a development pathway in conjunction with GULL.

Pathway design and implementation

YAPG's mentoring programme began with 12 mentors and 32 young adults and to incorporate GULL's action learning approach, an integration plan was initiated by conversations between Jonathan Welford, the YAPG coordinator, and YAPG mentors, Luis Marroquin and Vanessa Lopez (the YAPG with GULL design team). Given the background of YAPG participants, they typically begin their development journey by working through complex personal issues and dealing with past events and situations. For example, most of YAPG's participants come from broken families and are grappling with various kinds of addiction. They may also have suffered abuse and been part of a group that had sought love and a life away from the home, often living a precarious street lifestyle.

Many young adults living in this situation form attitudes and exhibit behaviours that are contrary to societal norms. YAPG's programme is designed for young adults who are in transition from an addiction-free life and seeking to re-connect with society with support from a mentor and from others making the same journey.

Extracts from an interview with Jonathan Welford, YAPG Coordinator

Why did you decide to pilot GULL in the Guatemalan town of Chimaltenango?

The co-Founders of Nicodemus Trust had determined that wherever possible, the Trust would support existing local projects and so the work began by providing support to 'My Special Treasure' a project founded in 2008 that provides residential care and rehabilitation for severely abused teenage girls. In 2010, the girls from My Special Treasure began making weekly visits to the town's rubbish dump, donating clothes, food and teaching the children of families (who earn a meagre income by recycling items they find on the dump) how to read and write. As the work grew, Nicodemus Trust was able to fund the purchase of tables, chairs and other materials. In 2014, trained teachers and YAPG mentors Vanessa Lopez and Luis Marroquin were able to expand what had become known as the 'Education Centre' with funding support from a mix of local and international donors including a large funding agency in the USA, Nicodemus Trust and other charitable agencies. They are now able to provide free formal education and medical attention to 113 children from families living in the area surrounding the rubbish dump. The efforts of the Centre's salaried staff are supported by volunteers, including the teenage girls from My Special Treasure who continue their work – now in a larger and better equipped building.

What is your ambition for YAPG with GULL in the next 5 years?

I'd like to see our YAPG youngsters moving forwards so that by the time they are 23 or 24 years old, they have discovered a purpose for their lives, that they have jobs or small businesses of their own and they are supporting the on-going YAPG work as mentors. The long-term sustainability of the YAPG movement rests on our ability to facilitate self-directed development so that those who are 'being helped' now will be able to 'give back' later. In this, GULL provides an enabling framework so that participants can adjust and correct habits and behaviours, set goals and then discover and realize a purpose for life. The process is helpful in many other ways too – ranging from developing the discipline needed to succeed at school and in further or higher education to practical and important life skills like personal time management and team-working.

Summary

As reflection and self-directed development is a challenging task, YAPG's participants were initially rather wary of the GULL process. For Guatemalans, it is a completely different learning format and it generated a sense of hesitancy but also curiosity. To begin, YAPG's mentors completed the first draft of their Personal Learning Statement – A GULL format to assist participants to identify their own learning needs and aspirations – and the feeling was that this exercise had been helpful. It also enabled participants to better understand the concept of self-directed development and the ways in which they could customize their own development pathway based on the uniquely different personal and practical changes and improvements they had prioritized. Over time, the initial group of GULL students began to feel more confident and comfortable with the process – especially in relation to the self-discipline needed to sustain momentum and make progress. In this context, the principles of action learning and especially shared learning, encouragement and accountability to others are helpful as reflected in the comments below:

There are aspects of my life, behaviours and habits that I want to work on. GULL provides me with a practical format and process to become the person I want to be. Llancy, YAPG Mentor.

I'm not only writing about my life and the improvements I want to make, but thinking deeply about the changes I'm making and this is really helping me. I have been surprised to find that GULL is not only helping me but its impact has extended to my household too. Alam, YAPG Mentor.

Reflection and concluding comment by Kim Rojas, YAPG mentor

GULL's approach has a lot of potential in Guatemala because there are many people who struggle to earn a living without the benefit of a development pathway to help them to follow and achieve their dream. We have seen already at YAPG that with mentor support, it is possible to begin a journey that enables participants to discover their purpose and GULL provides a systematic way of doing this, coupled with recognition and professional certification. Today's young adults hold the key to transforming Guatemala so that life is easier for future generations, so our work is not just for now, but to bring about change for the next and future generations too.