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## Exploring the G.E.A.R.S. of learning for Youth through Community Development

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### Abstract

Learning leads to development and change for youth. It is through learning that the youth acquire knowledge, skills, values, and worldview that effect change that is based on the asset or strength-based youth development model. Such learning develops from their informal and nonformal learning that involves skill building, exploration, reflection, creativity, role experimentation from their leisure and play opportunities. Informal and nonformal learning take place from supervised Out-of-School (OST) programs where the young people develop various social skills. This paper examines the literature and theories related to OST settings, social learning, youth development, and how youth learn within a community. The youths referred here are those from *Generation Z* who were born between 1995 and 2010 or the late *Millennials*. Not all the youths' time in school are in the formal learning settings. Part of it is in the OST settings such as extracurricular activities of their school activities or in recreational pursuits for those not in the school system such as those in sports, recreational, or youth-serving organizations. Studies have found that OST programmes contribute to academic outcomes, social/emotional outcomes, prevention outcomes, and health and wellness outcomes, as well as developmental benefits where one of its programme elements is *active* forms of learning to enable youths to learn skills. Theoretically, OST relates to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural *activity theory* (AT). Since youth is a transition from childhood to adulthood, likewise, so is their learning, that is, low pedagogy/high andragogy. Together with a study on Gen Z learning and that of Bandura's social cognitive/social learning theories, a new model of youth learning was conceptualized for community of practice. This model is G.E.A.R.S – Guided, Experiential, Activity-oriented, Reflection, and Self-understanding. This model is a form of nonformal learning that is practical, holistic, and real world that complements formal classroom learning.

**Keywords:** Youth, Learning Approaches, Experiential Learning, Nonformal Learning, Community Development, Community of Practices, Learning Outcomes.

### Introduction

Learning is central to human behaviour involving attitudes, emotions, knowledge and skills leading to development and change and for youth, it precedes youth development (Lee et al., 2018). This is because it is through learning that an individual acquires knowledge, skills, values, and worldview to effect change (Merriam et al., 2007). Youth development is an

approach to a commitment that enables all young people to thrive through those learning acquisitions (Hamilton & Pittman, 2004, in Witt & Caldwell, 2018).

This thriving as pointed out by Witt and Caldwell (2018) is to be based on asset-based (strengths-based) model to support youth development. It will then require them to acquire knowledge, skills, and behaviours through opportunities for informal learning where there are elements of skill building, exploration, reflection, creativity, test ideas and experiment with different roles from leisure and play. And such opportunities come from out-of-school time (OST) settings.

Out of School Time (OST) is a supervised program that young people regularly attend when school is not in session that can include before- and after- school programmes on a school campus or facilities such as academic programmes specialty programmes, and multipurpose programmes that provide an array of activities (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). It can also be where the young people can develop social skills like teamwork, confidence, leadership and perseverance (The Wallace Foundation, 2021).

Since Witt and Caldwell have suggested that OST settings involved informal and nonformal learning, what then could be the learning framework that can serve as a model in OST settings for the youths to acquire knowledge, skills, and behaviours? This paper will explore and examine the literature and theories related to OST settings, social learning, youth development, and how youth learn within a community. It will fill the gap of youth learning through the nonformal and informal context, as well as suggesting a new model that is significant for youth learning.

## Literature Review

### The Youths

Universally, there is no common definition of who constitutes the youth. It depends on how *youth* is defined, whether theoretically, as life stage, chronologically, legally, or by the generation concept. For practical reasons, it has been defined chronologically where for example. the United Nations defined it in the ages of 15 to 24. In Malaysia, the *Dasar Belia Malaysia* (National Youth Policy) of the Malaysian government through the Ministry of Youth and Sports have defined Malaysian youths as from 15 to 30 years old. In the generation concept, the youth today will be *Generation Z*, that is, those born between 1995 and 2010 that puts them in the age of 20s, which is, early youths, or also late youths in *Generation Y* or *Millennials* (Cilliers, 2017; Popova, 2017; Panopto, 2020; Nicholas, 2020; Kakasa, 2021).

### Out-of-School Time (OST)

Youths do not spend all their learning time at school with its formal learning settings. Outside that school time, they also spend time in self-directed or recreational activities. This out-of-school-time (OST) can be in extracurricular activities for those still in the schooling system, or in recreational pursuits for those outside the school system such as in youth-serving or sports and recreational agencies (Witt and Caldwell, 2010, 2018). Findings from the Hanover Research Council (2009) found that OST programmes contribute to academic outcomes, social/emotional outcomes, prevention outcomes, and health and wellness outcomes where one of its programme elements is *active* forms of learning to enable youths to learn skills. Witt and Caldwell's (2010) studies however, found evidence of developmental benefits such as: reduce juvenile delinquency; increasing positive behaviours while reducing the negative ones; less violence from youth; improve educational performance impacting the quality of the future work force; decrease health care; increase youths' economic

contribution to society; help youth develop self-confidence, optimism, and initiative; increase civic responsibility and participation; and help reduce parental stress.

In the context of learning, OST can relate to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural *activity theory* (AT) which conceptualises learning as involving a learner, the task or activity, and mediating artifacts such as technology and laws (Merriam et al., 2007; Shultz and Hull, 2002). This is also a social and cognition theory that combines the individual with the activity in learning. His theory believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning" (McLeod, 2020).

Besides Vygotsky, another significant scholars who highlighted how community helps learner to learn are Lave and Wenger with their model of Community of Practice (1991). Each individual learner learning within communities of practice that they join made sense of and successfully built up their social identities so as to accommodate the cultures and ways determined by the communities of which they were members. Joining a community is a continuous process of participating and positioning oneself within that community. Becoming a member involves not only 'entering and coming to know' (Trowler and Knight, 2000; Tight, 2003), but also negotiating access, participating actively and continuously positioning themselves as full participants of the communities. Thus, learning in a community is a constant process entrenched in power relations, ideology and culture within the various COPs that they participated in. The formation of one's positive identity involves a combination of one's individual project and one's fulfilment of roles that are strongly determined by one's community of practice.

### **Youth Learning**

Since youth is a transition from childhood to adulthood, likewise, so is their learning where in the continuum of learning from formal to informal learning, nonformal learning is the middle phase of the learning continuum that is less structured, flexible, and guided. In the pedagogical to andragogical learning contexts, this phase will be in high pedagogy/high andragogy to low pedagogy/high andragogy, which are the 2nd and 3rd stages respectively in the learning continuum from childhood to adulthood as pointed out by Choy and Delahaye, 2003, 2005 (cited in Lee et al., 2018). These two stages in the continuum resonates with the nonformal contexts of learning in which while youth learners are not fully self-directed nor independent learners as in informal learning, yet it promotes their necessary skills and abilities, self-expression and keeping them motivated (Popova, 2017).

Taking a study by Nicholas (2020) on learning of Gen Z students, among the findings were that they want their work to be guided with exact directions with preference for facilitators rather than teachers, hence, *Guidance*; preference for working independently in a team and community setting with practical experiences through projects of internships, hence, this means being *Action-oriented*. Eventually, it is about learning in a vibrant environment that combine social interactions, technology, and assignments that simulate real-life situations or are community outreach projects. This is therefore related to the experiential learning approach that is also inclusive of reflective learning. Only then are where they would understand that they learned something, and discover more about the abilities, skills, and growth that they need for their growth and development. Eventually, they continuously develop their positive identities through the interactions that they are having with the community members that they work with.

Lee's study (2012) determined that youth learning is based on several learning theories such as Bandura's (1971) *social learning* and *social cognitive* theories of observation, imitation,

modeling for reinforcement and guidance involving psychosocial changes to build self-efficacy; *behaviourism* involving incentives for reinforcement; on *humanism* with the belief on their potential for growth and control over their destiny; on *constructivism* where they learn by being actively involved and making sense of learning from experiences; as well as developing cognitive skills as in *cognitivism* by reflecting back on the information gained from meaning generated from the experiences learnt.

All these point to the employment of David Kolb's (1984) *experiential learning cycle* of: (1) Concrete Experience (involving in new experiences); (2) Reflective Observation (reflect on the new experiences from experiences); (3) Abstract Conceptualisation (integrate the ideas and concepts to create new understanding); and Active Experimentation (making conclusions, generating understandings that can improve practice in making decisions and solving problems). The goal of this experiential process is to develop a new personality (Merriam et al., 2007). Kolb's point is that learning is a continuing process grounded in experience, and that it involves practical learning strategies such as simulation, case study, field experience, on-the-job experience, practical sessions (Knowles et al., 2005).

### **Community of Practice**

Community development within a community of practice can be a vehicle where youth learning and development can take place. The community of practice has the means to provide the youths with elements that are critically needed for youths to engage with their community for their successful development (Witt and Caldwell, 2018). Such a setting allows the youth to focus on their need to thrive and become partners in both theirs and the community's development. Community development within one or more communities of practices can promote both positive behaviour and general well-being of the youth while at the same time, prevent them from falling into negative behaviours, and is an environment that allows the youth optimal opportunities for their positive youth development by concentrating on youth to build their strengths, competencies, and engagements (Perkins et al., in Villarruel et al., 2003). Perkins and Borden (in Villarruel et al., 2003) also pointed out that OST can be the opportunity for them to engage in positive activities as well as to gain life skills.

### **Methodology**

This paper is exploratory as it is based on inductive reasoning as the concept behind G.E.A.R.S is still being tested and a work in progress. It primarily employs literature reviews on concepts of youth and learning to associate with OST settings, social learning, community development and community of practice.

### **Discussion**

The youths are not fully self-learners yet, but still need some form of guidance and support through empowerment and being personally responsible for their own learning. This form of learning is also what Leahy (2009) suggested as *authentic education* where the students learn on their own and with others interactively, and where it is challenging and worthwhile leading to their personal growth.

Out-of-school time settings are important to help youth successfully navigate through their adolescent years to develop the knowledge, values, attitudes, skills and behaviours for their adult lives (Witt & Caldwell, 2010), and as well as to develop life skills, and overcome negative

behaviours through the nonformal, community-based youth organisations where there are opportunities for socialization and learning (Perkins & Borden, in Villarruel et al., 2003). Wiltshire County Council (2008) for instance, has developed a youth work curriculum framework based on the concept of *Learning for Life*. Among the principles of this programme is that of being developmental designed for learning towards the acquisition of skills, knowledge and understanding associated with young people's personal and social development through informal educational activity that are enjoyable and fun in their communities. Their approach to learning and development is adopting Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle of "Experience of 'doing' followed by reflection and analysis of experience, for action learning and enabling learning to be built on" with the philosophy of "learning to learn...about life...through life, and for life". This learning is community and centre-based where the learning by doing involves the young people planning the programmes, interview panels, run peer-led projects and programmes, become volunteers in clubs, take part in Centre inspections and complete satisfaction surveys annually, evaluate every session, and organise and book their own outings and residential trips. Such community projects are diverse with activities that include arts, music, sports, drama and dance, ICT, residential, and international visits and exchanges. The community settings can be at youth development centres, youth clubs, youth cafes; mobile projects such as ROMP bus; streets, parks and public places where youths can gather; community centres; schools and colleges, faith-based premises; residential centres and camps; outdoor education centres; and other settings.

These concepts of learning in community development within communities of practices therefore also resonate with the philosophy of learning that Confucius, a famous Chinese philosopher (born 551 BC) advocated: "*What I hear I forget, what I see I remember, what I do I understand*" (In The Duke of Edinburgh's Award International Association, 2004). While this philosophy of Confucius had been a classic for centuries, it extended with the experiential learning cycle theory by Kolb (1984) where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience comprising of experiencing/noticing, interpreting/reflecting, generalizing/judging, and applying/testing (Beard and Wilson, 2018). Priest and Gass (1977, 2018) restructure the process as a four-step sequence of experiential learning of from substance to structure - acting and observing causes and effects of that action, understanding cause and effect to predict a general principle, understanding general principles in various settings, and to applying general principles in a new situation.

### **A New Model that is Significant for Youth Learning**

From these theories, concepts, and learning philosophies, G.E.A.R.S. (Guidance, Experiential Learning, Activity-oriented Learning, Reflection, and Self-understanding and Self-discovery) is conceptualized and proposed as a model framework for youth learning in OST settings that can then contribute to both youth development and community development. This framework suggests that learning for youth is to be in the nonformal and informal contexts that are flexible, adaptable and student/learner-centred. It is also learning that takes place in any settings such as on the field, online and virtual, activity-based, which in this context, will be through a community-based project or programme within communities of practices. The G.E.A.R.S framework of youth learning can fit into the (OST) settings when employed in community development projects within various communities of practices. With this nonformal learning approach, education can be more holistic and comprehensive as both formal and nonformal forms of learning would lead to informal learning.

G.E.A.R.S. is a model of learning that can help to facilitate the learning of youths based on evidence about how youth learn, and the transitional stages of learning of from childhood to adulthood. It is a more practical approach to learning than the traditional theoretical-based classroom learning.

In G.E.A.R.S, Guidance in learning can be in various forms such as through mentoring, coaching, facilitation; whereas, Experiential learning is about 'meaningful-discovery' whereby the learner restructure his perception of what is happening, and creating knowledge through the transformation of experience (Beard & Wilson, 2018); Activity-oriented learning takes place when participants do most of the work where the learning activities are designed for the participants to acquire knowledge and skill, rather than receive them (Silberman & Auerbach, 2006); Reflection is about doing and then reviewing and debriefing on the activities and experiences that had taken place in order to enhance learning (Beard and Wilson, 2018), or turning experience into learning (Boud et al., 1985), but through receiving feedbacks guided by the mentor, coach, facilitator, supporter, and where it is also part of the process in experiential learning; and finally, through these approaches of experiences, reflection, the learner develops Self-understanding and Self-discovery of what they have learnt.

The youths today are also very technologically savvy, and a lot of their current learning had gone virtually online. Since experiential learning is more pragmatic as it takes many forms, including digital - computer, smartphones, iPads/tablets and digital platforms where computer games, simulation, can be some of them. Hence, there is a need to review and re-structure the methodology of youth learning in this new era. Learning within both physical and virtual communities of practices can offer new ways of learning for youth.

Learning outcomes, after all is ultimately about change in knowledge, attitudes, skills domains, through self-understanding, with a long-term impact on the youths' adult careers, social lives, and their contributions to their community and nation building. G.E.A.R.S. is a model that can meet those learning outcomes.

## Conclusion

The framework of learning through G.E.A.R.S. though will be more effective if it takes place outside the classroom and out-of-school time (OST) through a form of activity, where, by doing it, they learn, not by the teacher, but self-motivated and self-initiated. It can be in any community development project or a programme so long as it is outside a classroom setting, within various communities of practices. Through this learning, they are then able to practice what they have learnt in the daily adult lives by equipping themselves with competencies, skills, and knowledge for their careers, relationships, families, and life's challenges, as well to adapt to the evolving and changing world (Lee et al., 2018).

Community-based learning can provide the platform for the youths to develop practical experiences and enhance learning when they run their programmes, while the community of practice benefits from the product and outcomes derived from the project. It is a two-way programme where all stakeholders gain from the G.E.A.R.S of youth learning. Such form of nonformal learning can provide the youths with a practical, real world, holistic approach to learning that complements the formal classroom form of learning through direct practice.

Finally, to conclude this paper is another quote by Confucius: *"By these methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the Bitterest."*

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