



1. What is different about YC's work nowadays?

Youth Communication was founded as a youth media organization, with our roots in journalism and magazine publishing. For over 30 years, we worked with NYC teens to publish stories in one of our two magazines-- *YCteen* (formerly *New Youth Connections*) and *Represent*, which were read by thousands of teens in schools and through distribution to foster care agencies. Each time we delivered bundles of magazines, we knew that the previous issue had been picked up and read by teens who saw themselves in the stories written by their peers.

In the early 2010s, YC staff and board realized that fewer teens were voluntarily picking up our print magazines. However, teachers told us that *when they assigned the stories*, teens were as captivated by them as they had ever been. But teachers also said that to use the stories in instruction they needed common-core aligned lessons and professional development.

That information was the catalyst for a new approach. We shifted from the “youth media” model that we had used for 35 years, to a “professional services” model (see below). To build on this new model, we launched an education department, with staff who focus on creating curricula and providing training to educators. Increasingly, teens read our stories in curricula, as part of formal instruction. And instead of reading stories by themselves, they read them in groups and have structured conversations about them with their peers.

2. What is YC's professional services work?

We now reach teens primarily through the adults in schools, afterschool and other programs. Our first focus is on supporting teachers, but we have also worked with staff in after school programs and in juvenile justice and foster care settings. There are two aspects to this work: a) training educators to use our story-based *curricula* with teens; and b) using our story-based training to change educator *mindsets* about their students.

Curricula and Training: since 2015, we have created seven curricula, each of which consists of an anthology of true stories by teens and a 300+ page curriculum guide, with detailed lessons for using each story. In addition, we have created a uniquely engaging staff development program—built with our stories at the core—to help educators learn to use the lessons to lead rich and powerful discussions, writing, and other activities.

Mindsets: While training staff to use our new curricula, we (and our customers) noticed that reading and talking about the stories had a powerful impact on educator mindsets. They began to see new strengths in their students, gained renewed appreciation for the challenges in students' lives, and saw the impact of trauma. As a result, they became more open and responsive. This led us to create professional development in which we

use the stories to help adults better understand and empathize with their students. Some topics include: understanding social and emotional learning, gender responsiveness, and supporting homeless youth, among others.

3. Why is social and emotional learning so important?

In the past two decades, there has been increasing recognition that success in work and life requires strong social and emotional learning (SEL) skills, as well as strong academic skills. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)—a leader in this field—codified a set of five key skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. CASEL and others have conducted extensive research, and the evidence is that strengthening those skills helps young people do better in school and life.

Of course, we didn't need research studies to know that. But the codification of SEL skills into the five categories was helpful to us. We used the SEL lens to look closely at the thousands of stories our writers produced. The SEL skills leapt out. We immediately saw that we could create curricula that used YC stories to show how teens use SEL skills to achieve goals, and help students recognize and practice those skills in their classes.

To date, our professional services work has succeeded beyond our wildest hopes. The response from virtually everyone we have trained—teachers, after school staff, foster care mentors, juvenile counselors, and probation officers—has been overwhelmingly positive. Again and again, we hear that our training is inspiring, and that the curricula are more engaging and effective than anything staff have ever used before.

We have closely aligned our programs to the methods that are shown to be effective in the CASEL studies. We are also collecting survey data from schools and agencies that have used the programs. Both teens and staff report that the program engages hard-to-reach students, strengthens SEL skills, and increases the teens' sense of agency.

4. What is special about YC's approach to this work?

Youth Communication's approach to SEL is unique on multiple levels. First, all of our work is based upon the true stories of teens, so teen voice and agency is implicit in every facet of our work. The way in which we prioritize youth voices in social and emotional instruction also makes this content uniquely culturally relevant to the teens reading these stories in classrooms. The stories and lessons are particularly appealing to harder-to-reach teens, who are at a high-risk of becoming disengaged.

Furthermore, because the lessons and training are focused on reading and analyzing text, students also practice crucial literacy skills while learning foundational social and emotional skills.

5. Do you still run writing programs and publish the stories in magazines?

The writing program continues to be at the heart of our work. All of the curricula and training that we provide is based on the honest, authentic, and compelling stories by

the teen writers. There are hundreds of organizations that provide SEL training, but ours is the only one based on true stories by teens that show how they actually used SEL skills in their own lives.

Our writing program is led by full-time professional editors, with support from several part-time editors. They work with 45 teen writers each year. And the writing process is still essentially the same: the writers decide what topics are most important to them and then spend weeks or months, often working through 10 or more drafts, to complete a 1,500-word story that will have the power to engage and move a peer.

Most stories are still first published in the print and digital editions of *YCteen* magazine, which circulates in NYC public schools, or *Represent*, which circulates in foster care agencies in New York and around the country.

Our goal is to reach more and more teachers and students with the stories. *How* we reach them—i.e., print magazines vs. digital stories; printed curricula vs. tablet-based programs; in person training vs. web-based training, etc.—will continue to evolve.

But the writing program itself will remain. There's no shortcut to a powerful, authentic story.

6. Where will YC grow? Across NYC? Nationally?

Both! Before shifting to the professional services model, for 20 years we licensed our stories to other publishers to use in their curricula, and we published more than 50 anthologies of our best stories on various topics which sold more than 200,000 copies. The vast majority of our book sales and story licensing was to organizations that used the stories outside of New York City—from Maine to Arkansas, to California. The appeal of our content transcends geography.

However, it's a much bigger challenge to provide professional development to staff at an Arkansas school than it is to provide books. Building a regional or national professional services platform will take thoughtful planning and investment. For now, we look forward to growing our impact in New York City schools and out-of-school programs across all five boroughs.

7. How will this work be financially supported?

As a non-profit organization, Youth Communication is still primarily funded by grants and donations from generous individuals, foundations, and corporations. We contract with city agencies, schools, community-based organizations and others, who purchase our services.

However, providing high-quality, story-based training costs more to deliver than most customers are able to pay. To have a real impact on teens' (and educators') social and emotional skills requires carefully crafted curricula, strong professional development, and regular follow-up coaching. That, too, costs more than our customers can pay. We

will continue to seek private funding to make up for this difference, and are planning to increase our overall organizational budget from both kinds of sources to increase the impact of our stories.