Experts of Their Own Experience

Simple Methods for Collecting and Making Sense of Youth Participant Data

Listen   **Learn**   **Inspire**   **Implement**
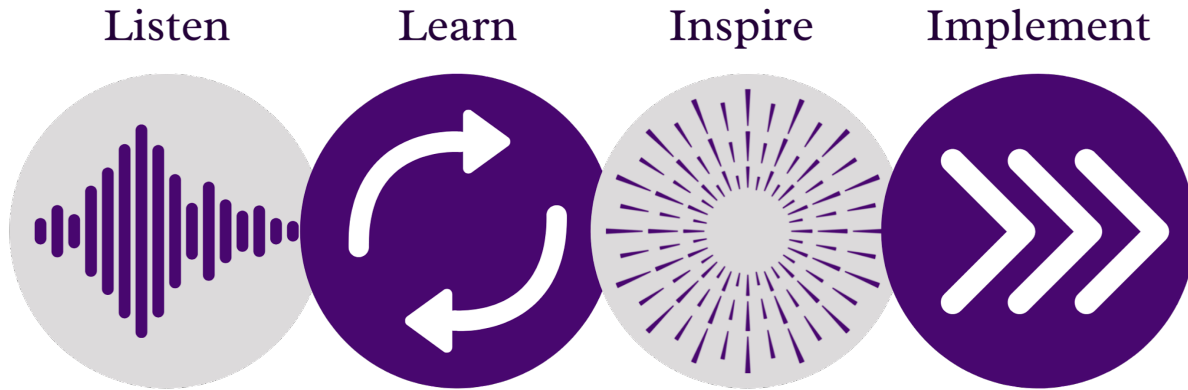
The Informed Change process is rooted in equity-focused qualitative methods that create space for young people (and others!) to be heard. The process includes four phases:

1) Listen: We start by connecting and engaging with young people and adults in their own context through their experiences and stories.

2) Learn: We explore data from our listening sessions and surface themes about impact and opportunities for change.

3) Inspire: We help organizations tell their story of impact and co-create a roadmap for action and transformation.

4) Implement: We support organizations by developing custom tools and processes to achieve their goals.

This resource provides youth-centered data collection and analysis methods that you can use to conduct steps one and two of the process.

Try different combinations of listening methods (data collection) and learning methods (data analysis) to find the best fit for your program, staff, and youth participants.

Curious about digging deeper and exploring the next steps? Contact the Informed Change team to continue the conversation at www.informed-change.com/contact.

Listen: Strategies to Collect Data

There are four Grounding Questions to consider when collecting qualitative program improvement data: What's working? What's not? What would you change? How have *you* changed? Regardless of your data collection method and the specific questions you ask, you'll usually be gathering data that answers these four questions.

Method #1: Telling Stories around the "Campfire"

This method is helpful for gathering in-depth data (stories) about participants' experiences. Create a real or imaginary campfire with space for youth in your program to sit around it. (If you're in a space where building a real fire isn't feasible, gather some flashlights or lamps to create a "lampfire.") Set the tone with camp snacks like trail mix or S'mores. Provide an object to pass around so that when someone is speaking, others listen.

Create a set of open-ended questions based on the four Grounding Questions. Ask participants the questions and record their answers using a digital voice recorder or by taking notes. Share power with youth by inviting them to help ask questions and/or record answers.
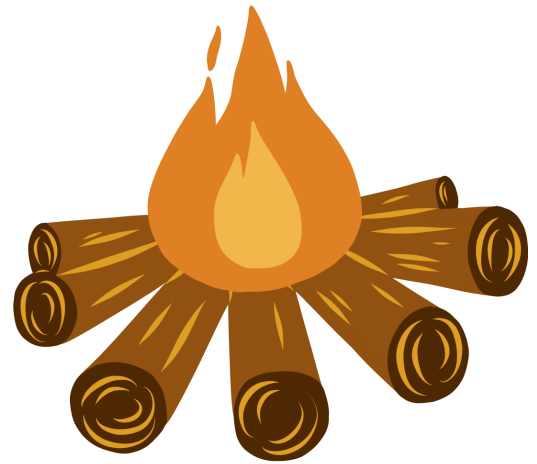
Method #2: Sticky Note Wall

This method is helpful for gathering a large amount of data quickly and for participants who like to think visually and move. Choose three questions to pose to youth participants. They can be as simple as the first three Grounding Questions or they can be about specific aspects of your program.

Mark three columns on a blank wall or whiteboard and write one question above each column. Hand out lots of sticky notes to youth participants. Ask them to think about their answers to the questions, write their ideas on sticky notes and stick them to the wall in the appropriate column. (Remind them that if they have multiple ideas to answer one question, they should put each idea on its own sticky note.)

Once everyone has had a chance to post all of their ideas, invite a few people to share their ideas and elaborate on them. You might ask, "Why is that idea important to you?" This activity can serve as a starting point for a deeper conversation.

Method #3: Plus, Minus, Delta

This method resembles Method #2, but it focuses on program changes. On a white board or two large sheets of poster paper, create one sign divided in two sections labeled "+" (plus) and "-" (minus) and one sign labeled "Δ" (delta, which means "change"). Lead a group discussion to brainstorm ideas to add to each category.

In the plus category, write participants' favorite things about the program and things that they think work well. In the minus category, write things participants don't enjoy or things that aren't working well. In the delta category, write participants' ideas for possible changes that could address the program's challenges and build on its strengths. Share power by inviting a youth participant to be the recorder. Once the ideas have been captured, have a group discussion to discuss changes that could be prioritized for program improvement.

Method #4: Before and After

This method is helpful for gaining an understanding of program impact. Youth who enjoy thinking visually or drawing may particularly enjoy this method. If your participants enjoy drawing, give each person a large blank sheet of paper. Have them draw a line down the middle. On the left side, they should draw a small seedling tree and write "Me, Before [Program Name]." On the right side, they should draw a large, fully grown tree and write "Me, After [Program Name]." Ask them to fill in each side of their paper with their reflections on what they were like before joining the program and what they are like now that they have participated in the program. They are welcome to write or draw their reflections. Prompt them by asking:

- How do you feel or act differently because of your participation in this program?
- What do you think about now that you didn't think about before?
- What can you do now that you couldn't do before?

Once everyone has filled their paper with reflections, invite them to share the main ideas on their sheets. Take notes or record the discussion to capture participants' ideas and reflections.

You can add specific questions focused on your program's outcomes and context as well. If your participants do not enjoy drawing, you can print the tree images and the prompt questions for each participant.
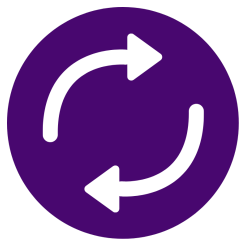
Learn: Strategies to Engage with Data

The second step in the Informed Change process is engaging with data (stories and lived experiences) that was collected during the first step.

Method #1: Seeing Patterns

This method works well to make sense of data collected through the Sticky Note Wall and Plus, Minus, Delta activities. Once you collect the data, look at patterns together as a group. Start with these discussion questions, which focus on the "What" of your data:

- What do you see?
- What stands out?
- Are any big ideas emerging?
- Which ideas can be grouped together?
- Which ideas don't easily fit into the groups, and what is important about those ideas?

Next, begin to categorize your data based on some of the patterns that have emerged. (This is very easy with the Sticky Note Wall activity, as you can simply move the sticky notes to group them together. For other data sets, you can sort them by marking similar ideas with a symbol, color coding, or taking notes on another sheet of paper. Get creative - if you wrote on posters, you can even cut out each idea and re-arrange them into categories.)

Once the data is organized, discuss these questions, which focus on the "So What?" of your data:

- Why do you think these patterns exist? If there are things that don't fit within the patterns, why might that be?
- What are some strengths of our program you can see in the data?
- What are some things we could improve about our program?
- What other observations do you have?

Method #2: Checking Your Reflection

This method works best to analyze data collected in reflective methods, like "Telling Stories Around the Campfire" and "Before and After." After collecting data, spend time reviewing participants' stories and reflections.

Look for themes that show up across the stories: What do multiple stories have in common? What patterns and unique stories do you see? You can do this as a staff team or with a smaller group of young people, such as a youth advisory council.

Once you identify a few initial themes, gather with the youth participants again. Share the themes you observed on a printout, poster, or whiteboard. Discuss the following questions with participants to dig deeper and confirm that the themes you identified resonate with them:

- Do these themes ring true for you? Why or why not?
- What's missing?
- What's something we should have asked, but didn't?
- Do you see any new patterns or themes that we haven't identified yet?
- What do you think are the most important takeaways from this information?
- How can we use this to make our program even better?