PHC | Pennsylvania Humanities Council

TEEN READING LOUNGE

Program Development Guide

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Photo by Mark Garvin.

Welcome to Teen Reading Lounge, our award-winning, interactive humanities program for youth!

At the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, we believe the humanities are an essential tool for positive youth development, and Teen Reading Lounge is built on that belief. The humanities naturally push teens to ask questions and share ideas, activities that are vital as they begin to discover who they are, who they want to be, and how to relate to other people. Teen Reading Lounge participants use the humanities to explore their communities and build valuable skills in communication, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, literacy and leadership.

In 2010, we began this journey into humanities programming for youth in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office of Commonwealth Libraries. Together we selected six brave public libraries to pilot the program - and since then we've seen close to 80 libraries and over 1,000 youth from suburban, rural and urban communities participate. Our library partners have played an important role in program development by providing feedback on the model, its implementation and its impact on participating youth. The work they've done has helped us better understand the needs and interests of youth in our state and the role the humanities can play in building skills that prepare them for the future.

Because Teen Reading Lounge is a flexible model, we've seen youth from public, private, charter and parochial schools participate--as well as those from home-school settings. Teen Reading Lounge has engaged young people across the socio-economic spectrum, through program series and outreach intentionally designed to reach diverse groups of youth, including those from low-income backgrounds.

Moving forward, as we continue our work with Pennsylvania's public libraries, we aim also to expand the program to include a variety of youth-serving organizations across the state. And we are delighted to include you among those program partners. The following collection of resources can guide you as you create a Teen Reading Lounge series of your own. You'll find many resources in these sections that will help you work with young people to design, promote and deliver a successful Teen Reading Lounge program.

Thank you for the valuable work you do in your communities. We look forward to working with you!

Laurie Zierer

Laurie Zierer
Executive Director, Pennsylvania Humanities Council

What is Teen Reading Lounge?

Philadelphia City Institute Branch, Free Library of Philadelphia. Photo by Mark Garvin.

Teen Reading Lounge (TRL) is an award-winning, nontraditional book club for teens ages 12-18 that immerses them in the humanities as a way to build 21st century learning skills—that is, skills and traits that are vitally important for success in school and the workforce, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Grounded in positive youth development (PYD) research, the program is guided by the belief that young people should be encouraged to take an active role in their learning.

Teen Reading Lounge is youth-driven, meaning that young people work side by side with program staff to build a series that reflects their interests and needs. Youth select texts to explore based on topics and issues they are interested in, and participate in group discussion to explore these issues. Inspired by the texts, youth design and participate in projects that deepen their understanding of a book's ideas. Over the course of a Teen Reading Lounge program, which usually consists of 6-to-8 regularly scheduled sessions, young people will learn how to interpret data, ask questions, share ideas and consider diverse perspectives and life experiences. Youth can even use TRL as a springboard for action by designing civic engagement and service projects to address community needs.

While the program is centered on reading and book discussions, **it is not school or school-like**. TRL often occurs during afterschool hours on a weekday. TRL is an opportunity to spend time with peers, reading and discussing books they have selected and developing projects that relate to the book or topics youth have been discussing. The discussion is the pivotal link for learning and action. As the program facilitator and/or coordinator you may introduce the discussion through a question of activity, but the youth chart the discussion pathway.

The three essential elements of Teen Reading Lounge are:

BOOK LIST:

Selected by participating youth, the TRL book list is unique to each group and often provides a unifying theme for a TRL series. The list should be built with participating youth to ensure it reflects their interests and needs. Texts can be from any genre (fiction, nonfiction) and take many forms (audio books, graphic novels) as long as they are age-appropriate, spur dialogue and can inspire hands-on learning.

YOUTH DISCUSSION:

At PHC we believe that discussion is essential to building a stronger understanding of who we are and how we view the world around us. Host sites should provide opportunities for young people to come together, share ideas, ask questions and consider perspectives different from their own. Guiding young people through critical exploration helps them build important communication, social, literacy and critical-thinking skills.

PROJECTS AND WORKSHOPS:

A well-designed TRL project or workshop can help young people make hands-on and real-world connections to the reading list. Not only do projects provide opportunities for practical skill-building, but also effectively deepen youth's understanding of issues and themes found in the texts. Projects should be youth-driven and can take many forms: field trips, creative workshops, author visits, debates or mock trials, media and theater productions, youth-penned publications and civic engagement activities. In fact, you may see all of these in one series! We encourage host sites to think about incorporating new and perspective-broadening experiences into your program.

Albright Memorial Library. Photo by Chris Balton.

You can't have Teen Reading Lounge without a motivated, dedicated team! **Evaluation data gathered from past host sites indicates that a strong program facilitator is the most important ingredient in a successful TRL program.** In other words you can't deliver TRL alone. As host site you have the all-important job of bringing the team together and managing them throughout the TRL experience.

Building Your Teen Reading Lounge Team

Youth

The most important collaborators in your TRL program will be local youth. The program you build should reflect their interests and needs, so be sure to involve them early on in the process. We strongly suggest sites engage young people in the design of the program. If you have a youth advisory board, ask them to participate. If you don't have one, TRL can help you create one. Youth can also assist with program delivery, acting as co-facilitators for discussion or team leaders for projects--both great ways to build leadership skills!

Site Coordinator

If you're reading this publication chances are you are the site coordinator. This individual is usually a frontline staffer responsible for planning, implementing and delivering youth programming at the host site. In addition to managing all aspects of program planning, promotion and delivery, the site coordinator should play an active part in the TRL program-- meaning, site coordinators should participate in each TRL session so they can build or strengthen their relationship with local youth. This individual will also be PHC's main point of contact, and will be asked to coordinate evaluation procedures, oversee program budget and complete any required reports related to the program.

Program Facilitator

Often dubbed as the site coordinator's "creative collaborator," the program facilitator works with the site coordinator and youth planning team to plan and deliver programming. The program facilitator may even work with the site to create session plans for each TRL meeting. And as the name suggests, this individual also facilitates discussion related to the books and oversees the projects and workshops you plan for your group.

Host Site Support Staff & Volunteers

In order to create an inclusive, youth-friendly space at your site all staff should know about your TRL program. Some may even participate in planning, coordinating and delivery. In fact we encourage it! Make sure your 'organizational team' is in the TRL loop and when appropriate find opportunities for them to participate.

Directors and Board Members

In order for a TRL program to be successful, an organization's leadership must be familiar with the program and actively support its development and implementation. Directors and board members play a big role in cultivating a youth-driven and inclusive culture for young people visiting your organization. In addition, directors and board members can help to secure resources for your program, aid in staffing transitions during a program cycle and be an advocate for your program by keeping important stakeholders informed about your successes.

IMPORTANT! All adults working with youth are required by law to have current clearances before a program takes place. Please visit the PA Keep Kids Safe website for more information on how to obtain clearances.

Schlow Centre Region Library. Photo by Brian Tolbert.

Youth in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is one of the largest states in the northeastern corridor of the United States. With this size and geographic migration, the diversity of youth across Pennsylvania is growing. The increased number of youth living below the poverty line and the growth in the population of ethnically/racially diverse youth who reside in Pennsylvania and nationally has influenced PHC's emphasis on inclusive programming.

We strongly believe TRL has the ability to serve all youth and that all youth should have access to high-quality learning opportunities that support their ability to grow into healthy, mature, thriving adults. Serving all youth through Teen Reading Lounge means reaching out to and including youth who are economically disadvantaged, ethnically/racially diverse, differently abled, and sexual-minority and gender-minority youth.

One of the most remarkable recent demographic changes in Pennsylvania is the stark increase in the number of economically disadvantaged youth who live here. The public policy blog Third and State reports that Pennsylvania saw its student poverty rate jump from 36.51% to 43.56% between 2008-09 and 2013-14. Half of all school districts in Pennsylvania suffered from concentrated poverty in 2013-14, meaning the poverty rate equaled or exceeded 40%. (The federal poverty threshold for a family of four with two children was $23,624 in 2013, with low-income defined as $47,248 for a family of four with two children).

We strongly believe that all youth should have access to high-quality learning opportunities.

Youth who fall below the poverty line in Pennsylvania live in every county and include all racial/ethnic groups, not only racial/ethnic minorities. Whether you are serving economically disadvantaged youth, ethnically and racially diverse youth or other youth who meet our definition of diverse, you will need to learn more about their communities and experiences. Be sympathetic to the challenges youth may be dealing with, but don't allow this to limit your expectations for the youth.

We encourage you to empathize with your TRL participants. We also encourage you not to confuse empathy with pity. You may work with youth who are living through or have experienced challenging community, family or academic situations. It could be one teen, a handful of teens or your entire TRL group. Sometimes adults working with youth mean well, but relax programmatic standards because they feel sorry for what the teens are experiencing and perceive the youth as incapable of handling "one more thing." While relaxing expectations may feel like the right thing to do in that moment, more than likely it is not.

In actuality, all youth need opportunities to thrive and be challenged. Keep high standards for all of the teens! Develop relationships with your teens so that you begin to know when they are having a particularly challenging day and need a break. This will help you make the necessary program adjustments that are attuned to where youth are, but allow you to maintain high programmatic standards. You empower youth by meeting them where they are and helping them take steps to the next level.

Working with Youth

Working effectively with teens, especially those that are older, means shared decision-making. If you have ever worked with elementary-age youth, you know as the adult you are often guiding the program and making most if not all of the design decisions. You are setting the schedule, developing the rules and choosing the activities. This is an adult-driven and appropriate approach for children.

Youth-driven programming involves much more input from participants and is appropriate for teens. When you work with youth, you'll want to co-facilitate the program, allowing them to make many of the programmatic decisions and to assume more program responsibilities that allow for leadership development. For example, you might have a teen who is responsible for attendance, or one who serves as a timekeeper of facilitating the group discussion. How you make these decisions about your collaboration with youth will depend largely on the youth you serve and your relationship.

By engaging youth in high-quality humanities programming, organizations can help young people grow socially, intellectually and emotionally. Meeting these needs requires a strong relationship between the organization and youth.

So what can individual staff members do to develop strong and enduring relationships that foster youth to grow to their fullest potential?

Promote social and emotional growth

- Strive to make each individual feel valued and a part of the community.
- Treat youth with warmth and respect.
- Model caring, positive and responsible behavior.
- Provide support and encouragement when youth talk about challenges.
- Establish clear rules and guidelines for behavior.

Promote intellectual growth

- Encourage youth to read, learn and be inquisitive.
- Introduce youth to new ideas and issues.
- Model intellectual curiosity and commitment to lifelong learning.
- Model and lead quality humanities discussions that promote critical-thinking, problem solving, and ways of sharing differences and similarities while fostering respect for others.
- Demonstrate an understanding of many learning styles.

Build strong youth and adult partnerships

- Actively solicit young people's ideas and opinions.
- Integrate their ideas and opinions into activities.
- Demonstrate flexibility.
- Strive to understand youth's interests and needs.
- Give them leadership roles in the program and at the site.
- Actively extend invitations to youth to join programs.
- Provide opportunities for volunteerism.

Andorra Branch, Free Library of Philadelphia. Photo by Mark Garvin.

Stages of Adolescent Development

Martin Library. Photo by John Beatty.

Teenagers are in the developmental stage that bridges childhood and adulthood. We've all been there! Rapid physiological, cognitive and emotional changes are occurring, all at once. Whether your memories of being a teenager feel fresh or faded, the first chart below serves as a reminder of what teens are experiencing developmentally. It is only a guide, as some youth experience puberty sooner and others later; but it is a good reference for understanding the youth you work with.

Identity Development and Movement Toward Independence

Future Interests and Cognitive Development

Ethics and Self-Direction

Sexuality

Physical Changes

Early Adolescence (Approximately 10-14 years of age)	Middle Adolescence (Approximately 15-16 years of age)	Late Adolescence (Approximately 17-21 years of age)
Emerging identity shaped by in/external influences; moodiness; improved speech to express oneself; more likely to express feelings by action than by words (may be more true for males); close friendships gain importance; less attention shown to parents, with occasional rudeness; realization parents not perfect; identification of own faults; search for new people to love in addition to parents; tendency to return to childish behavior during times of stress; peer group influence on personal interests and clothing styles.	Self-involvement, alternating between unrealistically high expectations and worries about failure; complaints that parents interfere with independence; extremely concerned with appearance and body; feelings of strangeness about one's self and body; lowered opinion of and withdrawal from parents; effort to make new friends; strong emphasis on the new peer group; periods of sadness as the psychological loss of parents takes place; examination of inner experiences, which may include writing a diary.	Firmer identity; ability to delay gratification; ability to think through ideas; ability to express ideas in words; more developed sense of humor; interests and emotions become more stable; ability to make independent decisions; ability to compromise; pride in one's work; self reliance; greater concern for others.
Increasing career interests; mostly interested in present and near future; greater ability to work.	Intellectual interests gain importance; some sexual and aggressive energies directed into creative and career interests; anxiety can emerge related to school and academic performance.	More defined work habits; higher level of concern for the future; thoughts about one's role in life.
Rule and limit testing; experimentation with cigarettes, marijuana, and alcohol; capacity for abstract thought.	Development of ideals and selection of role models; more consistent evidence of conscience; greater goal setting capacity; interest in moral reasoning.	Useful insight; focus on personal dignity and self-esteem; ability to set goals and follow through; acceptance of social institutions and cultural traditions; selfregulation of self esteem.
Girls mature faster than boys; shyness, blushing, and modesty; more showing off; greater interest in privacy; experimentation with body (masturbation); worries about being normal.	Concerns about sexual attractiveness; frequently changing relationships; more clearly defined sexual orientation, with internal conflict often experienced by those who are not heterosexual; tenderness and fears shown toward opposite sex; feelings of love and passion.	Concerned with serious relationships; clear sexual identity; capacities for tender and sensual love.
Gains in height and weight; growth of pubic/underarm hair; increased perspiration, increased oil production of hair and skin. Girls: breast development and menstruation. Boys: growth of testicles and penis, nocturnal emissions (wet dreams), deepening of voice, facial hair.	Males show continued height and weight gains while female growth slows down (females grow only 1-2 inches after their first menstrual period).	Most young women are fully developed; young men continue to gain height, weight, muscle mass, body hair.

DEVELOPING Your Teen Reading Lounge Program

Teen Reading Lounge was designed to be flexible in addressing the developmental needs of youth ages 12-18. Grounded in positive youth development (PYD) research, the program is guided by the belief that young people should be encouraged to take an active role in their learning.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is "an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths" (**www.youth.gov**).

Teen Reading Lounge works well as a PYD model because it introduces *humanities* content to teens using an informal learning, non-traditional format. The humanities often bring to mind subjects like history, literature, and philosophy. But the humanities—and a solid humanities education—are much more than just knowledge in these areas.

At the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, we base our work on the belief that the humanities and the skills they teach provide a path to collaboration and action toward positive change: ways of thinking, learning and coming together that identify and respect differences, nourish a sense of shared humanity and provide context as we work together to shape the future. Engagement with the humanities is especially important for teens because doing so supports the development of 21st century skills considered essential for education and workplace environments.

If a host site keeps positive youth development and the humanities in mind while guiding youth through the Teen Reading Lounge experience, young people will have meaningful opportunities to develop and practice the skills needed to be successful in their lives.

Read more about program characteristics that support youth developmental stages here.

Selecting Your Teen Reading Lounge Facilitator

Organizations hosting Teen Reading Lounge are required to select a facilitator before the program begins. The program facilitator is a creative collaborator who comes on board to help a site engage youth, design the program, facilitate discussion and oversee projects. This individual should be from a host site's organization or community, reflect the target audience and have a background that complements the skill-set of the program staff. Many TRL facilitators have a background in a humanities, education or a creative field.

When we asked prior TRL host sites to list the three key characteristics or skills that are important for a TRL facilitator, the top three were:

1. Flexibility 2. Patience 3. Empathy

Hiring facilitators who enjoy working with teens and are prepared to address issues teens may be experiencing was also a high-priority request. We also strongly suggest that site coordinators select an individual who complements and enhances the skill sets of existing staff and works well with them.

Finding the right facilitator can take time but our experience has shown that working with an individual who is experienced in learning humanities programming for youth has many benefits. Good facilitators can do many things for your program. They can handle programming while staff concentrates on recruitment and developing lasting relationships with youth; teach staff how to work with youth to develop programs; model attitudes actions and communications that lead to strong bonds with youth; and serve as a sounding board for planning with youth. Through their own connections in the community, TRL facilitators have also helped organizations recruit participants.

By law, adults working with minors must have up-to-date state clearances. Visit the Keep Kids Safe website to learn more about clearances and how to obtain them.

Program facilitators are an important part of the Teen Reading Lounge team. We advise host sites to take time and care finding the right individual for their group. You can find a facilitator job description as well as some tips for finding that individual **here**.

Oil City Library. Photo by Stewart Armstrong.

The youth you're working with have a voice and that voice should be heard and acted upon. We encourage sites to involve young people as early as possible in the development of the program. One way to do that is to recruit a planning team made up of young people in your community. In addition to taking part in the program, this group can help you connect with other young people to learn their interests and needs and promote the program. A planning team can also help lend credibility to your Teen Reading Lounge program. Young people are more likely to participate in something of their own design and something that reflects their interests.

If you already have an existing youth advisory board–great!–ask them to help plan. If you don't have a pre-existing group, that's okay. Ask young people who are attending other programs and events, or just hanging out in your space, to help you. This team–like your Teen Reading Lounge program–may build over time. Remember, it's better to start somewhere, even if it's one small step–than to not try at all!

Recruiting Your Youth Planning Team

When you're building your planning group or deepening an existing one, keep in mind diversity of experience and interests. Think about recruiting young people from different backgrounds to ensure that your program reflects the young people in your community. Looking at your community demographics or doing a community mapping exercise may help you with recruitment efforts so that you're reaching out to all groups of young people in your community.

In addition to building a youth planning team, think about how the team will incorporate youth voices. The best way to learn about young people and their interests is to ask. There are several ways you can do this. Below are a few ways past sites have gotten to know their young people:

Talk to them!

Ask young people about their lives and what matters to them. Host a chat & chew. Serve some food and ask young people to come and talk about what matters to them. What issues are they interested in? How can your organization help them connect to these issues through programming?

Create a short survey for young people to formally give feedback.

One host site created a youth interest survey and distributed it during lunch periods. Remember to report out about this feedback, showing young people their voices are being heard and honored.

Take notice of what they're interested in.

If you're already working with young people on a regular basis, what are you noticing about what excites them. What are they passionate about? Use that as a springboard for conversation to learn more and connect the program to their passion.

The Teen Reading Lounge experience is more than just a program. It's an opportunity to engage young people from the very beginning and open up a dialog with them about their experiences, interests and needs–an essential step to building lasting relationships with them and showing them their voice is valued and needed!

We also recommend spending at least the first TRL session working collaboratively with youth to establish a set of program rules that set the terms of engagement. Work with the youth to collaboratively establish program rules and guiding principles for acceptable and expected behavior in the early stages of programming. Positive youth development best practices suggest providing opportunities for autonomy and ownership to teens as a best practice that has been proven to result in better social and academic outcomes for youth. As you prepare for this session, you should identify rules that you want to be sure make the list. To start the discussion, ask youth what they believe are important guidelines for working together. Allow the youth to establish a list. For African-American and Latino/Latina youth, respect is almost always one of the first items youth add to the list. This is likely due to the value these cultures place on collectivism. If you notice the rules you identified did not make the teens' list, introduce them to the group and add them to the list. Once programming begins, the rules come to life; it is worth your time to establish this list.

Photo courtesy of Pottstown Regional Public Library.

A typical Teen Reading Lounge cycle consists of 6 to 8 sessions, and time is given to two elements unique to the programming experience: discussion and hands-on learning projects. Generally, a Teen Reading Lounge program is 60–120 minutes long with 90 minutes being the most popular choice. Host sites have scheduled sessions weekly, biweekly and sometimes monthly. Be sure to be consistent with dates and times to optimize participation.

We recommend host sites run more than one cycle during a program year. Evaluations have shown us that the longer young people engage with the program the stronger the impact, particularly for youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds and youth of color. In addition, running multiple cycles of Teen Reading Lounge allows the site staff to get more comfortable with the program model and build relationships with young people.

Scheduling Your Program

As you begin to schedule your program, we recommend considering the following:

What is the best time to hold the program?

Some host sites have run the program immediately after school when young people are most likely to be in the space. We've also seen sites hold TRL during special hours like after the host site closes or on Saturdays. This lends a little bit of uniqueness to the program. Youth feel honored to be in the space during 'off hours.'

What other youth-related events may be happening in your community?

Being aware of other youth events or activities in your community may help you avoid a scheduling conflict. Past host sites have considered local school calendars and as well as community event calendars when scheduling their program. Also being aware of the cycle of activities in your community. For example, when does the local school do their spring play? When does your community's sports season begin? Are there any other activities important to your young people that you'll have to work around?

How will you make it special?

Teens are special. You are special for working with teens! You and your TRL group have worked diligently together. Make time to celebrate. Many past host sites have done this by holding kick-off meetings, closing celebrations or special exhibits and events highlighting the projects youth have completed during a TRL program. Make sure everyone knows about your work. Invite participants' families and friends, as well as program and community partners. Physical space and schedules may prevent your site from hosting an in-person celebration or a large celebration, but don't let that stop you. You can host a live-streaming event, an Instagram campaign, or create and host a Twitter Moment. Your teens will help you with the vision for the celebration. As the adults, your responsibility will be to help them develop a realistic plan within the program constraints. Let them shine!

Also, don't forget to make the TRL space special! Even if you don't have a lot of space, think about ways to decorate the space to indicate this is a special space for young people. Low-cost ideas like hanging up a sign that's easy to take down and store when needed or comfortable seating (not desks or plastic chairs!) can really help make a space special. Get young people to help design their space as well!

How will youth get to the program?

Take accessibility into consideration. In rural and some suburban communities the distance between youth programming locations and home places youth from lower-resourced families with limited transportation options at a disadvantage for participating. If there is no family car or only one family car these youth, who likely could benefit from the program most, may not be able to participate. In urban environments, transportation may be a barrier to participation, but other variables may become more influential on youth's access to a program. For some youth, neighborhood conflicts, or violence and other safety concerns may prevent them from attending a program. Our suggestion is that as part of program planning, you plan around barriers to attendance and create an attendance policy that is responsive to the constraints of your participants. Host sites should also think about outreach programming. There may be times when you have to offer Teen Reading Lounge off-site in a more centralized location.

What food and refreshments will you offer?

safe and healthy learning environment includes ample food and refreshment for participating young people. Some of your young people may be depending on it. If program funds can't cover the cost of food, think about ways to bring in donations from local restaurants or individuals supporting your organization to cover the cost of food. Don't present a program without it!

Philadelphia City Institute Branch, Free Library of Philadelphia. Photo by Mark Garvin.

Although Teen Reading Lounge is not exclusively a literacy program, reading and discussion are a major element of the program and key to a meaningful experience for young people. The program is designed so that organizations can work with their young people to select books and readings that are the right fit for their group. Identifying themes and subjects of interest is one of the first collaborative discussions you'll have with youth and this will directly inform your unique Teen Reading Lounge book list.

Building Your Book List

You may want to start off by selecting books yourself. We strongly suggest you fight that urge! As much as possible, youth should be working with you to build a Teen Reading Lounge book list that reflects their interests, experiences and culture. By inviting young people to share in this decision-making process, you address their need to collaboratively develop the program. Programs grounded in positive youth development (PYD) research and practices are designed this way and have better success with young people.

Past host sites have surveyed youth about their book and reading interests as a way to collaboratively build the TRL book list. For example, based on what you know about your youth's interests and needs, you could present a short list of titles and have young people choose what the group will read.

The number of books read during each program varies widely, depending on teen reading level, interest, and the general vision for your program. Typically, TRL groups have explored 2 books per 6-8 week cycle. Often sites have found that they have needed to adjust the reading schedule or the number of books read during the course of the program. We have some sample book lists grouped by interest and theme **here**.

As you begin this process, we encourage you to keep the following in mind:

Connect young people to books that reflect their interests.

They should ideally see themselves reflected in at least some of the books read and explored over the course of the program.

Encourage them to explore new worlds through a culturally inclusive booklist.

While you want your teens to see themselves in the fiction you select, you should also strive to expose them to a variety of authors, themes, issues, and identities. What other worlds could they see through books?

The books should also promote critical thought about issues that relate to the larger world.

Many books geared toward young adults do this in a variety of ways, but you should strike to make sure that both the books and the discussion about them relate to larger societal problems and events.

Consider different reading levels and reading interest.

You may have young people in your group that are low-level and/or low-interest readers. Consider building a book list that's inclusive of these audiences by using different formats: short stories, articles, audio books, graphic novels and comic books can all be good choices for these audiences.

Albright Memorial Library. Photo by Chris Balton.

Teen Reading Lounge uses discussion as a building block for exploration, building understanding and, when appropriate, taking action. PHC believes this is what guides us toward a deeper understanding of the diversity of human experience and, ultimately, ourselves.

Discussion is also an opportunity for young people to practice and develop 21st century learning skills like critical-thinking, analysis and communication and to build empathy and understanding of other experiences and beliefs. It allows young people to be curious about the human experience and build connections with peers from different backgrounds.

Fostering Youth Discussion

Two of the strongest outcomes for youth participating in Teen Reading Lounge is that youth begin to build a better understanding of others' perspectives and viewpoints and create friendships with fellow participants over time. This is because of the deep work they do to explore issues that are important to them. You, as the positive adult role model, can help guide them through this process.

The book or reading is a natural springboard into discussion. In our experience, site coordinators and program facilitators will have to do the planning to spark discussion but youth themselves should and will drive the conversation. Be open to letting them take the reins!

More than knowing the facts and details about the plot, Teen Reading Lounge discussions are about unpacking relevant themes and topics and giving young people a chance to connect them to their lives. Stay away from 'yes' or 'no' questions and start by asking 'why' and 'how.' Remember, you want to focus on questions that you couldn't possibly know the answer to. You want to elicit feedback from youth that's about them and allows them to practice articulating and thinking through their thoughts and opinions.

Open-ended questions are much better for discussions that invite youth to give honest feedback. Open-ended questions also allow young people to explore their thoughts and opinions in a way that doesn't prescribe a "right" or "wrong" answer.

Chester County Library. Photo by Mark Garvin.

CLOSED-ENDED QUESTION	OPEN-ENDED QUESTION
Did you like the main character in the book?	What did you like about the main character in the book?
Did this book change or reinforce the way you think about the world or issue?	How did this book change or reinforce the way you think about the world or issue?
Was there a particular passage or scene you liked in the reading?	Tell me about your favorite passage or scene in the reading. Why did it stick out to you?

Many popular YA books have reading guides that you can access for free online. These are a great starting point for planning discussion. Make sure to stick to questions that model openness and invite real-world connections and reflection.

Remember, teens are often interested in a social experience with peers. After a day of school they may not be interested in talking, at least about a book. Closed-ended questions that only require a "yes" or "no" response are not good discussion fertilizers. Think about what happens when you ask a teenager, "How was your day?"

As a facilitator you want to instigate discussion. If the answer to *"What did you like about the main character in the book?"* is a version of "I didn't," you can always follow-up with, *"What didn't you like?"* Open-ended group discussion is a major aspect of Teen Reading Lounge and invites young people to share their thoughts and opinions. When you go into discussion without an "agenda," you'll be surprised by what you learn!

You will know you have created a safe space for teens if they begin to open up and share. When teens are comfortable they will bring up topics that may be uncomfortable for you, for them and/or for their peers. These topics may include sexism, bullying, racism, political preference, homophobia, etc. **The teens were brave to share in this space; we applaud you for creating the space and them for their bravery.** Know that your opinion may differ from the opinions of your program members and that there may be differing opinions among the group. You are *facilitating* discussion, you are *not leading it*, and the youth voice is the most important during these moments. Facilitating discussion of these topics takes practice and the ability to move out of your comfort zone as well as an awareness of your local community. Below is a list of strategies that will help you.

Take 5:

This is a great strategy to use when conversation becomes too intense for youth to hear each other. Stop the conversation and ask the youth to take five minutes to free write or draw what they are thinking and feeling in quiet. At the end of the five minutes, ask youth to share. This usually allows self-reflection and moves the conversation into a space where there is more listening and learning occurring.

Debate the Issue:

Ask youth to research the topic and provide parameters for acceptable sources of information on all sides of the topic. Assign youth to the side of the debate with which they disagree.

Journal:

Create questions that are prompts about the topic and ask youth to journal about the topic. Ask for volunteers to share their journal. Use this as an opportunity for more meaningful informed discussion and when possible connect the discussion back to the book.

Active Listening

Active Listening is an attempt to clarify and understand another's thoughts and feelings. These techniques can also be important for de-escalating an agitated teen or managing a sensitive situation. See below for five important components of active listening.

Stop:	Seek out private places in the library where you can talk with a teen without being over-heard or interrupted.
Look:	Look for nonverbal clues (facial expressions, body language) that will help you identify how the other person is feeling.
Listen:	Match the verbal and nonverbal cues and decipher both the content and emotion of the teen's message.
Question:	You may need to ask questions in order to understand the other person, sort out their feelings, clarify a word or phrase and/or verify your conclusion about a teen's meaning or feeling.
Paraphrase:	Paraphrase what you think another person is saying in order to let them know you understand what they are expressing.

When Action is Required

Increasing your capacity to talk about sensitive issues with youth means that they may want to disclose personal things about their lives that require special attention, and intervention. Often times, teens feel more comfortable confiding in someone other than their parent or caretaker so knowing how to listen and help is important. When should you act? Who should you tell?

Two situations may arise in which it is necessary to act: cases of abuse (mandated reporting, see below) and another crisis or challenge in which you fear for a teen's well-being. Calling in a third party is difficult, especially if you have built up a relationship with the young person. They may be angry that you have betrayed their trust. Always be open and honest with the teen asking for help. Tell them what steps you are going to take to ensure their safety and stress you are doing so for their well-being.

In Pennsylvania, individuals working directly with children are mandated reporters meaning they must report any suspected instances of child abuse or neglect to the PA Department of Public Welfare's 24-hour Childline (1.800.932.0313).

It's always better to be prepared before a situation arises. Know your site's protocols around helping a child. Identify social service and youth-supporting organizations or individuals in your community. Local mental health agencies can help assess suicide risk. To begin building this list, check out the following helpful resources:

- **PA Department of Human Services: dhs.pa.gov**
  DHS also has a Directory of Services for Children, Youth and Families: keepkidssafe.pa.gov/cs/groups/webcontent/documents/document/c_260653.pdf
- **Juvenile Law Center, county-specific resources for each state: jlc.org/resources/county-resource-guide**
- **Prevent Child Abuse Pennsylvania: preventchildabusepa.org/**
- **National Institute of Mental Health: nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml**
- **The United Way Helpline: 211us.org**

A cheat sheet of these resources can be helpful for teens and their caregivers looking for help or treatment. For example, local counseling and crisis centers should be listed on this handout. Make connections with individuals at these organizations as well.

It is also important to consider seeking support for yourself. Use your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if you have one or seek out support from your supervisor or other trusted staff member.

Photo courtesy of William Jeanes Memorial Library.

As the site coordinator and program facilitator, you have the special job of helping young people build a stronger appreciation for the humanities and connecting youth with projects that invite them to explore their interests.

Teen Reading Lounge allows youth to design, participate in and lead hands-on projects, and events. Typically the hands-on portion has incorporated other aspect of the humanities–oral history, debate/mock trial, writing–as well as creative projects like the visual arts, theater and media. We've also seen host sites blend STEM learning with humanities exploration as well as invite in YA authors, special guest speakers and take field trips. The model remains flexible so youth can drive what these activities look like. The rule of thumb here is to make sure the activity connects to the book and themes you're exploring and provides opportunities for youth to build 21st century learning skills.

Developing Youth Projects

Projects will vary depending on the ages, interests and abilities of the young people involved. However, these projects should provide an opportunity for young people to explore the real world, think critically, express themselves creatively and take action on current issues and challenges in their community.

Some guiding principles:

- **Lead with youth voices**
- **Build knowledge and skills**
- **Value inquiry**
- **Attempt to solve a problem**
- **Make room for discussion and reflection**
- **Make it relatable and relevant**

We've provided you with lists of activities and a few examples of humanities-connected activities that support PYD, but be sure to ask youth what they are interested in experiencing and incorporate those activities as much as possible. TRL is about connecting the humanities to reading and connecting reading and the humanities to teens. Be open to integrating the options the youth suggest, including them in design decisions increases the likelihood of a higher retention rate and active participation.

Photo courtesy of Radnor Memorial Library.

In addition to the examples, you can visit pahumanities.org/impact for an interactive program map with many examples of past Teen Reading Lounge projects.

Humanities Activities

- Stage a debate or mock trial
- Conduct oral histories in the community
- Research family and community histories
- Explore a new culture or tradition

Art Activities

- Develop a community mural
- Create a personal photo documentary
- Put on a play
- Write a story or create a comic book or 'zine

Experiential Activities

- Develop a TRL blog or vlog
- Visit local landmarks and spaces
- Create a scavenger hunt
- Invite a local celebrity, community leader or politician to the program for an interview

Photo courtesy of Greater Olney Branch, Free Library of Philadelphia.

Teen Reading Lounge can provide a platform for youth to take action on issues that are important to them. Thomas Erlich defines civic engagement as "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes."

This comprehensive definition encompasses a range of civic engagement activities such as participation in food drives, an annual walk or run fundraiser, serving as a youth representative on community boards, involvement with local political organizations, participation in community preservation activities, or developing an agenda to address or bring attention to social inequities such as inadequate funding for public education, gentrification-community displacement, police brutality or health disparities.

Opportunities for Civic Engagement and Community Service

For socially disadvantaged youth, those who are racially/ethnically diverse, labeled at-risk, or low income and silenced about issues that directly impact their lives, civic engagement projects provide a platform to express their voice collectively and respond to challenges from a first-person perspective. Imagine what teens can do when provided the opportunity!

Early TRL civic engagement projects were largely organic and self-directed. Book discussions instigated reflective and critical conversations among participants that led to "do-something" projects. See the diagram below for how we have seen Teen Reading Lounge discussion lead to projects and community action. This is not always a linear process and your path may vary. Sites can also start with an issue, build a project or action around that issue and research texts/books for youth to read to ground or expand their understanding around the issue.

Books as a Pathway to Civic Engagement

You may have teens that are eager to implement a civic engagement project with your support. Some of you might have teens that are stumped about civic engagement and will require more support from you to design a project. The ***Five Stages of Social Action*** can help guide this discussion and uncover young people's passion and interests.

PHC also has examples on our website—see pahumanities.org/impact—that should help you to understand the variety of possibilities and demonstrate what teens can do when they have an opportunity.

B.F Jones Memorial Library Central Library. Photo by Christopher Perry.

PHC has found that many different types of teens may be attracted to a TRL program because of the youth-driven, hands-on nature of the program. It is probable that low-interest or low-level readers will attend your TRL program. PHC believes that there is an opportunity to introduce these young people to the value of the humanities and how it can be a springboard for finding their own voice, building a stronger understanding of themselves and the world and taking action in their community. Host sites can create a safe, nonjudgmental environment that celebrates reading and peer-to-peer discussion without the pressure of tests or grades. Past host sites have confirmed that regardless of reading interest, teens are drawn to discussing issues important to them and participating in activities that allow them to thinking more deeply about what matters, discover their own creativity and take action.

Strategies for Low-Interest or Low-Level Readers

What can you do to welcome and include these young people in the program?

- Select easier-to-read texts such as short story collections, poetry or graphic novels.
- Help them understand the genre or format. The aim of TRL isn't to teach literary terms or genres. However, if your group is unfamiliar with the format or genre, a short explanation can help them feel more comfortable.
- Stay focused on themes. Even if participants aren't skilled readers, they may connect to themes in the book. Allowing those participants to voice their opinions and respond personally to the book can help them understand the value of reading beyond the classroom.
- Start the book discussion with a summary of the assigned reading(s). You should prepare this in advance, but you may also ask 1-2 youth to present the summary to the group.
- Integrate audiobooks into the reading. Play snippets from the audio reading to the group and/or suggest the teens listen at home.
- Read aloud. TRL groups with low-interest and struggling readers have dedicated time to reading together. Not all young people have to read, but this is a great way to get young people who may not read on their own engaged in content and to prompt discussion.

Teens who have read are likely to reference the text when they share, others will focus only on personal experience. This strategy provides opportunity for all youth to participate. Working with low-level readers or those with low interest in reading will require more planning, but continue to approach planning from a youth-driven angle. For example, you may need to develop a complete book list for youth to choose from that includes short stories, novels and poems in advance.

Teens in general are a marginalized group. They are often asked to listen and be quiet. When you're working alongside populations that are even further marginalized, it's even more important for them to feel Teen Reading Lounge is for them. Trust them to guide you to what they want to explore!

Evaluating Your Program

Evaluating a teen program such as TRL is an important step in assessing its impact and advocating for its value in your community. PHC strongly encourages host sites to articulate a specific goal before the program begins and include methods to measure progress.

In addition, building in time for reflection and evaluation allows program staff to take note of the skills young people are building during a Teen Reading Lounge program. Are they building communication skills? Do they listen more to one another? Are they taking the lead in guiding discussion more? Intentionally looking for these kinds of outcomes helps PHC demonstrate that TRL can build essential 21st century skills in young people–but it also helps you build a case for why TRL is a valuable program for your community. Conversely, if you're not observing differences in skills building or noticing that you're not meeting your original program goals, perhaps the program needs to be revamped.

Finally, while attendance is not the only indicator of success, tracking it through session sign-in sheets can help host sites see if youth are "voting with their feet" either positively or negatively. Of course dips in attendance can indicate other issues–like a conflict with a school play or other community activity–but sometimes it can point to youth's dissatisfaction with the program. Tracking this will help you understand these patterns more–and provide supporting data to convince leadership and other funders to support TRL in your community.

Sites hosting TRL with PHC funding will work closely with PHC staff to evaluate their program. Sites offering TRL on their own are encouraged to track attendance and build in times to gather qualitative feedback from youth throughout the program. Stories, informal discussions with young people about what they like and don't like and pictures are all excellent ways to gather qualitative data. End-of-program surveys are a good way to understand skill-building and if an organization's programmatic goals were met. PHC can provide sample forms upon request.

Greater Olney Branch, Free Library of Philadelphia. Photo by Paola Nogueras.

Promoting Your Program to Teens

Teens have multiple options competing for their time, why should they choose Teen Reading Lounge?

Your best resource for developing a teen promotion plan is working with teens! If you haven't already done so, establish a rapport with the teens who frequent your program site. As a frontline staff member, you are the connection to the teens. Your relationship will help with your recruitment. Ask teens with whom you already work to help you to design and implement your campaign.

Meet teens where they are! Word of mouth remains a strong influence on teen participation. Word of mouth includes virtual and physical spaces. Don't forget about schools, libraries and parents or guardians. You'll need to develop a campaign for those spaces that addresses adult and teen interests. Use adult language for your adult audiences, but take time to modify the language you will use for teens. Become familiar with Teen Speak.

Spend some time researching the most popular virtual spaces, i.e. apps and social media for youth. Learning the popular virtual spaces is a simple as asking teens, but bear in mind that what is popular and effective changes rapidly. Enlisting the help of teens to navigate these spaces is essential. Your program site should strongly consider opening Instagram, Twitter and Facebook accounts, if you don't have these already established.

In addition to virtual spaces, take time to learn the most popular physical spaces in the local community and the most popular time youth are in those spaces. For example, this might be the library, the recreation center, a game center, the local mall, a supermarket or the county fair. Use the information you gather to develop your promotion plan.

We provide TRL marketing templates that can be modified to ensure your promotional materials directly target youth using teen-friendly language and images that reflect the youth you would like to recruit. Use photos that are culturally inclusive. If you want to attract girls, use photos that include them. If you want to attract African-American youth, they should appear in the photos you use. If you have permission to use photos of youth in your programs, wonderful! These photos make your campaign more authentic.

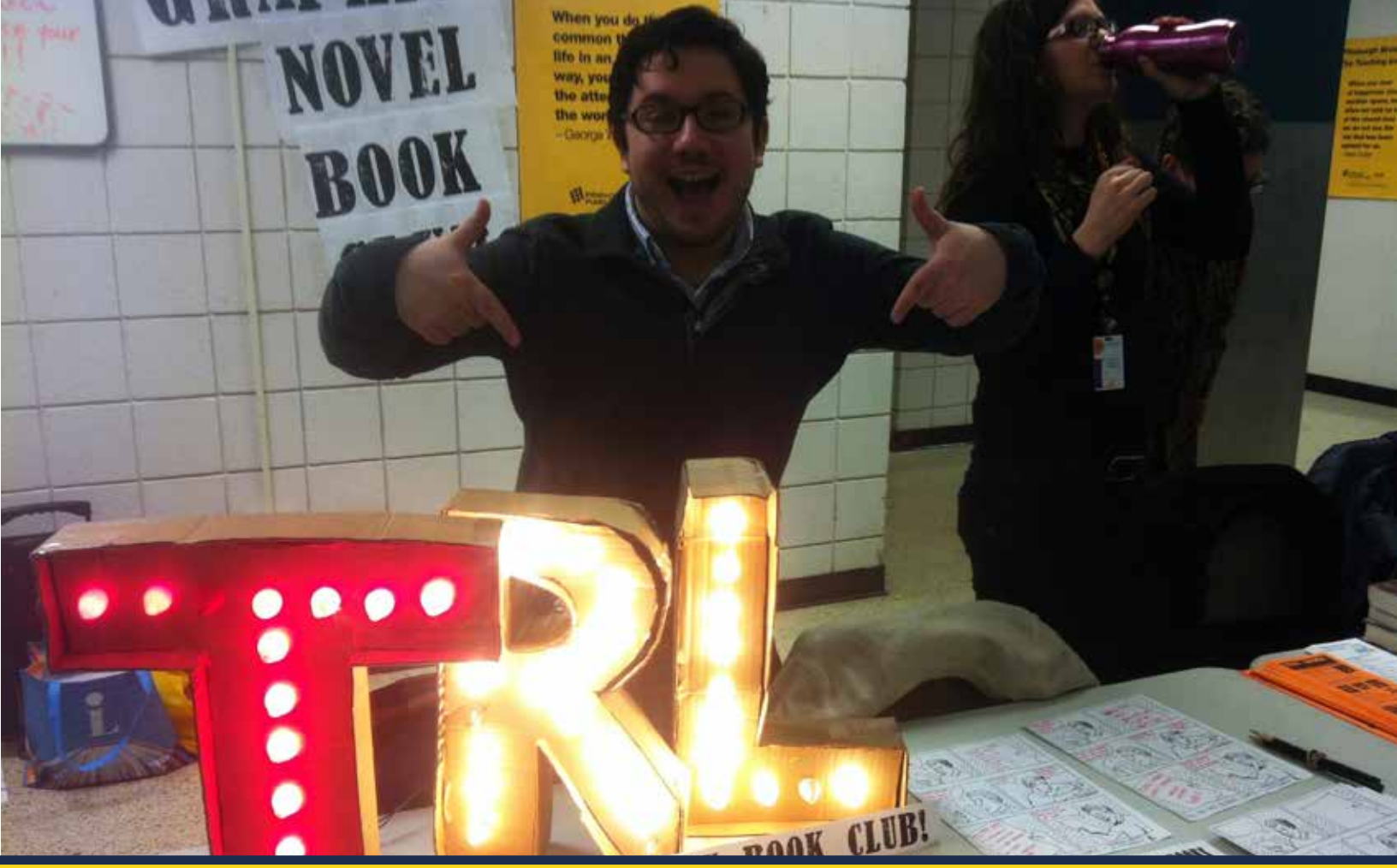

Photo courtesy of Georgiana Deming.

Basic Promotion Strategies

- Inform all staff at your site so they can talk it up!
- Enlist teen ambassadors.
- Visit schools.
- Visit/identify community resources to help to spread the word, including places of worship, recreation centers, and libraries.
- Establish a calendar that includes dates and locations for rolling out your promotion plan. Share the calendar wherever you are promoting TRL.

Another strategy is to offer incentives for youth participation. Incentives could be monetary, gift cards, service or intern credit. Teens are often required to complete service learning or community service hours for matriculation. Work with local schools to have TRL added to a list of acceptable experiences. With so many alternative options competing for young people's time, offering incentives is often an effective recruitment and retention strategy.

B.F Jones Memorial Library Central Library. Photo by Christopher Perry.

It's essential that you promote your Teen Reading Lounge program to young people in your community in order to drive participation. But it's also important to promote your program to your community—including parents, guardians, teachers and education leaders, community organization and business leaders, and elected officials—to let them know about the good work you're doing and engage their support and guidance.

Once you've got information flowing through your website, social media, etc., the trick is to make sure the right people—beyond your typical audience—see it.

Promoting Your Program to Parents, Guardians and Your Community

We will provide you with a number of resources and templates to help you get the word out to people, including a sample press release and sample calendar. It's important to keep in mind that effective public relations include more than just media! Placing a story or calendar listing with local or regional media outlets is a valuable way to make your program visible. But it's equally important to do some public relations work with others in your community—based on your specific program needs.

For example: Maybe you've had more teens sign up than you were expecting, and you need help covering expenses. Consider contacting potential funders—or places that can provide in-kind donations—that is, donations of food or materials for your sessions.

Another valuable audience for community relations is elected officials. Whether it's the mayor of your town or city, or a state or federal legislator, elected officials can connect you to agencies, community leaders, or funding sources that can help make your program shine.

You'll find a sample letter to legislators among the resources we provide to all Teen Reading Lounge sites, and we urge you to take the time to connect with elected officials at least once during each Teen Reading Lounge program cycle. We at PHC get in touch with federal and state legislators at various points during the year—to tell them about Teen Reading Lounge programs in their areas. Without fail, we always hear two things: They're very impressed by the programs that all of you are running and while they like hearing about the programs from us, they'd much rather hear about them from you, their constituents!

About the Pennsylvania Humanities Council

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The Pennsylvania Humanities Council is an independent partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities and part of a network of 56 state humanities councils that spans the nation and U.S. jurisdictions.

Today, across the commonwealth, we put the humanities in action to create positive change. Our programs and grants bring Pennsylvanians together to build avenues for civic involvement and community development, and for youth and adult learners to strengthen skills for school, work, and personal improvement.

Learn more at pahumanities.org

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INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

325 Chestnut St. • Suite 715 • Philadelphia, PA • 19106

800.462.0442 (PA only) • 215.925.1005

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