

Reflections on the Crowfoot Library Youth Leadership Program, February – March 2004

By Keith Lee

In February and March of this year I was part of the team that helped organize and facilitate a Youth Leadership Program, based on the Toastmasters International YLP curriculum, that was coordinated by Colleen Ritchie and run in partnership with the Crowfoot branch of the Calgary Public Library. In this article I would like to share a few of my observations about our implementation of the program and some of the lessons that I learned through my role as an Assistant Coordinator for this program.

The Youth Leadership program is a course developed by Toastmasters International intended for young adults and teenagers. According to the coordinator's guide, the program is

a workshop, designed to be conducted in eight sessions. Each session should last one to two hours. Participants learn how to prepare and present a speech, how to conduct meetings, how to evaluate, and effective listening skills. By the end of the eight session, they'll have developed self-confidence and interpersonal communication skills that they will use for the rest of their lives.

Led by Colleen Ritchie (Calgary Advanced Toastmasters, aka CATS) as coordinator; our team consisted of Guinevere Soare (from Speakmasters), Kathryn Henry (from Bow Valley Toastmasters) and myself (from SAITSayers). Our liaison with the library was Cathy Freer-Leszczynski.

The committee had several planning meetings before the program began. We obtained the course materials, including a manual for each participant and guides for the coordinators. To get further insight into the program, we consulted with Nandini Venkatesan, who had run several Youth Leadership programs before and offered several recommendations about how to effectively implement the program. Among other things, she stressed the need to establish and maintain ground rules for the students and the importance of flexibility in adapting the program to the participants.

The library began taking registrants for the program in early January and the roster filled up fairly quickly. At the start of the program we had a full class of twenty students, ranging in age from 11 to 15. In this particular class, the majority of students were female and there was a mix of public school and home-school students.

The class was held on Saturday mornings at a meeting room at the new Crowfoot Branch. The facility was well-lit and equipped with a whiteboard, presentation easel, tables and chairs. A lectern was available but discovered that if it was used it sometimes would be taller than the eye-level of some of the participants. To overcome this, footstools were sometimes brought in for the shorter students to stand on. The tables were placed in a U-shape.

The meetings were scheduled to run from 10:15 am to 11:30 am but more often than not the start of the meeting was delayed as we waited for students to be dropped off. It was common for the first 10-15 minutes to be spent coordinating with the students regarding their roles so the meeting proper usually started at 10:30 am and ran until 11:45 am or so. A five-minute stretch break was scheduled after the presentation of the speeches and speech evaluations, which were usually completed around 1100 am.

As part of the planning process, we created a table summarizing the flow of the program.

COMPONENT	SESSION →	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8*
Get acquainted!		X							?
Election		X			X				
Speeches			X	X	X	X	X	X	
Evaluations			X	X	X	X	X	X	
Table topics				X	X	X	X	X	
Panel discussion				X					
Chairmanship						X	X		
Listening exercise						X			
Progress evaluation								X	
Selected program									X
Evaluation of program									X

*The eighth session was to be designed and run exclusively by the participants, so the exact content was not known beforehand...

During the first session, we ran an icebreaker exercise where the participants paired up and interviewed each other. Later, Guinevere did an Icebreaker speech and I provided an evaluation; afterwards we explained to the participants that they would all get an opportunity to do icebreakers during the second, third and fourth sessions. A third of the class was assigned to prepare their icebreaker for the second session; the other 2/3 of the class would deliver their speeches in the third and fourth sessions.

Also in the first session, there was an election of an executive committee among the participants, including a President, Vice President, Secretary and Sergeant at Arms. There would be one committee serving for sessions 2-4 and a second committee serving for sessions 5-7. These “club officers” were responsible for introducing speakers (President, VP), keeping minutes (Secretary) and opening the meeting (Sergeant at Arms). Colleen prepared a useful summary for each officer summarizing his or her duties.

Following each class, a debriefing session was held to review the proceedings of the session and to discuss what succeeded and what would need to be reassessed about our approach. I found the debriefings to be good inspiration for ideas that we introduced into later sessions, particularly a greater emphasis on interaction between the participants so they could bond and learn more about each other.

During the second session, the first group of students delivered their speeches. Many were reliant on notes, but all of them delivered interesting stories about their interests and goals. The focus of this meeting was to introduce the class to techniques for speech evaluations, so in the evaluation section of the meeting I led a group discussion about what each speaker did well and invited the class to offer suggestions about what each speaker could improve; the intention was to gently introduce the concept of a “sandwich”-style evaluation of their peers.

In a later session, in an exercise inspired by the CATS ‘Evaluation Boot Camp’, I performed an Icebreaker speech and Guinevere delivered two different evaluations – a whitewash and a cut-throat. We then had the participants offer their observations about the value (or lack of value) of each style of evaluation. In subsequent sessions, when the participants began to offer oral evaluations of each other’s speeches, Kathryn Henry provided a very high-energy review of the

sandwich method. This progressive and multi-faceted approach to evaluations was generally successful but reinforced how tricky it is to do evaluations well; it is easy enough to point out things that a speaker may be doing well, but the difficulty comes in identifying areas of improvement **and** offering concrete suggestions about ways to change.

Also during the second session I conducted Q&A regarding how to compose a good speech. To focus the session, I had the group answer the question “What’s so great about the Internet?” and compiled their answers into an organized speech.

After this exercise, I offered one of the participants a second chance to do his icebreaker. On his second try, the student was significantly more confident, enthusiastic and natural in his delivery and spoke more freely and in greater detail about his interests and goals. Later I asked him what he felt the difference was between the two speeches; he replied that he had held back on his first speech because he didn’t want the other participants to think he was a nerd! I found this incredible. Attitude and comfort level counts for so much!

To introduce the concept of Table Topics, Colleen used a talking stick (actually, a talking football) and had the participants develop a “group story” that each person added to for about a minute at a time before passing on the ball to the next person to continue the narrative. The participants enjoyed this exercise very much. In subsequent sessions, the table topics master role was introduced and individual table topics were called for. It was interesting to observe how competently several of the participants handled table topics; there were definitely some very strong impromptu speakers in the class.

As the program progressed, participants were given the opportunity to vote for best speaker, best table topic speaker and best evaluator. The reward for “winning” these coveted prizes was a chocolate bar; this was added incentive for participants to abide by the rules of table topics so they avoided disqualification.

One problem that we identified was the need to enforce a minute silence between speakers so that the evaluators (both coordinators and students) could collect their thoughts and write comments in the participant manuals about their presentation before the next speaker began. I often took notes during the participant speeches regarding their content and delivery but would not have time to fill in comments in their manuals until the break or after the meeting.

Timers and grammarians were also introduced to track speech times and the use of filler words. Each role was assigned to two people to engage more of the participants. During one of the later table topics sessions I found it was useful to note which specific filler words that speakers were commonly using by writing them on the whiteboard; this was a good complement to the grammarians, who frequently only noted um/ah fillers. (Coincidentally, I was often the coordinator most dinged for fillers...)

Many of the icebreaker speeches were very entertaining and helped the participants learn about each other and get more comfortable with the group. In fact, many of the second speeches were elaborations on ideas introduced by the speakers during their icebreakers!

We encouraged interaction between the participants by introducing exercises that involved work in small groups. For instance, during Session Four we conducted an exercise on speech organization where each group of three or four students was assigned a topic and had to come up with a speech, with a definite purpose, thesis, supporting points for the thesis and conclusion. A representative from each group then delivered this speech for the others.

The President and Vice President of the executive committee were responsible for introducing the speakers and coordinators for each portion of the agenda. Initially, we had each participant provide an introduction card for the President or VP to read which listed the person’s name, grade and favorite food. After the icebreakers were done in session four, we felt that it might be

appropriate to have the participants revise their introduction cards, considering how much they had learned about each other.

During the first half of the program, group evaluations were done for each speaker, led by a coordinator; in the second half, a coordinator would introduce the evaluators and provide a general evaluation. One challenge that we identified regarding evaluations was how to get the participants to become more actively engaged in the evaluation process for their peers. Every student was provided with evaluation forms for recording their observations but it seemed that these were rarely used during the first half of the program. In the second half we began assigning specific evaluators for each speaker as per the program design, but it would have been nice to find a way to get more of the class involved in submitting feedback to each speaker about their presentations.

One thing that became very clear was that if an exercise was introduced it would have to be clearly explained at the start what the purpose of the exercise was supposed to be. This was illustrated after I began an exercise by saying “Now, you’re going to get into groups...” and then had to fight to get their attention after they had split into groups and commenced chatting without receiving any directives. In later sessions we made a point of explaining our intentions first.

In the fifth session, Colleen ran an excellent presentation on the purpose and principles of chairmanship and parliamentary procedure, using a motion to paint the meeting room walls hot pink and dress the windows in frilly curtains to spark an amusing round of debate among the participants. That exercise was a great example of how the concepts of the program could be introduced and embraced by the participants if presented in an accessible fashion.

During the second half of the program, Guinevere presented education modules to the class regarding gestures (Session 6) and the use of voice and vocabulary (Session 7). These were well-delivered and well-received because Guinevere engaged the class with her physical illustration of effective ways to employ gestures in conjunction with speech content and the way that she led the class through several fun voice exercises, respectively. Timing the presentation of the education module concepts so that the students would have a greater opportunity to review, absorb and apply the information so they could incorporate them into their later speech projects was a challenge; this was identified as an issue later on in the program.

The final session was organized by the participants and spearheaded by the Presidents of the two executive committees. They conceived of two challenging Table Topics sessions: in the first, an interviewer would question a rock star, members of his family and members of the general public; in the second, various candidates were interviewed for a lucrative position as the rock star’s manager. The session was good fun and closed with exceptional presentations from both Presidents and voting for the winners of each “contest” in the presence of the parents of the participants.

Three key lessons about workshop facilitation that I gathered from my experience with this Youth Leadership Program were the following:

1. Keep it focused: Know why you are doing each discussion, exercise or education module and let the participants know too. We found that if it was not clear what the goals of an exercise were it could easily get out of control or we could lose the attention of the group and would have to work hard to recapture it.
2. Keep it interactive: By engaging the participants in meaningful exercises and giving them opportunities to apply the concepts about speechmaking, evaluation, chairmanship and other techniques and skills, they can have fun and learn at the same time. Also, the more opportunities the participants have to work together, the better they can bond as a group, and as a consequence, the more comfortable they will be when they challenge themselves during speech projects and table topics.

3. Prepare and Debrief Regularly: I found that the better prepared I was for a session the more smoothly it went. As well, the debriefing sessions at the end of each class were invaluable for developing and refining our presentation of Toastmasters concepts to the audience.

Overall I found my involvement with this project to be very educational and certainly increased my appreciation for the skills and talent of the participants and my fellow Toastmasters, as well as my awareness of what specific skills I would like to improve myself so that I can more effectively pass on that knowledge to others.

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