The Youth Peace Collective: Building Bridges from the US to Israel-Palestine
Israel-Palestine, United States
St. John’s College
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Summary

The Youth Peace Collective (YPC) is a program for high-school students to learn about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a manner that aims not to change minds, but to offer a comprehensive understanding of the history of the conflict, learn critical thinking and media analysis skills, hear from Israelis and Palestinians about their lived experiences, and explore the common elements between core issues of the conflict and contemporary American socio-political issues. YPC has offered three programs to date: the six-week summer fellowship, the mini-course, and the conflict and identity workshop.

Project Description

The idea for The Youth Peace Collective was born from an observation that there are few programs and educational opportunities for Jewish (and as I came to learn, non-Jewish teens) to learn about Israel-Palestine in a comprehensive, multi-narrative manner. Most existing programming about Israel-Palestine is either a) heavily biased to one side of the conflict, and expresses little interest in exploring the other, and/or b) not broadly accessible to a large group of teens. The initial idea behind YPC was to create a program that would be balanced and broadly accessible, and to offer an educational opportunity where there earlier hadn’t been one. To fill this gap, the initial goal for YPC was twofold: first, a six-week summer program for Jewish high-school juniors and seniors to learn and ask questions about the conflict; and a website to both highlight YPC’s work and to offer a compilation of educational resources, first-person narratives from Israelis and Palestinians, recorded webinars, and more. Additionally, I would go on a ten-day trip to Israel-Palestine early in the summer.

I began the process of building YPC in early March by reaching out to as many Israel-Palestine peacebuilding and educational organizations and programs as I could, hoping to start by expanding my network within these fields, gaining input, and communicate my ideas for YPC. In this early stage, I spoke with individuals working at Tomorrow’s Women, the Jews of Color Initiative, Teach Palestine, Rimon, and Encounter. These conversations offered me valuable insight into many elements of program management and pedagogy that have been immensely valuable. It was at this stage of the project that I began to understand the scale of the task at hand: not only could I identify the lack of adequate programming on Israel-Palestine for American teens, but I needed to learn how to provide balanced narratives (or know and explain when and why they might or should be imbalanced); how to build a safe, close-knit, inclusive, and diverse community; and how to manage program logistics and market our program offerings. This was just the start. At this point, I gained several informal mentors, specifically Ali Amla from Solutions not Sides UK, and Adi Nassar from Amal Tikva. Ali and Adi were invaluable sounding boards as I worked to formulate and articulate the structure of YPC in response to these many considerations. Additionally, I was able to form relationships with both Resetting the Table, Kids4Peace Jerusalem, and This is not an Ulpan. Resetting the Table provided a two-part communication skill-building training for fellowship participants, while Kids4Peace spoke at our session on Jerusalem about their peacebuilding work and This is not an Ulpan offered a language and peacebuilding workshop for mini-course participants.

It was also at this stage of the project that I realized that the initial scope of my proposal was too much to take on as a single individual, even with help. I thus decided to focus my efforts and funding on making sure that YPC’s educational component would succeed. Even though not traveling to Israel-Palestine would limit my ability to expand my knowledge about the conflict, I believed that a trip to the region did not directly contribute to the goal of the educational program I was trying to build. Instead, I made the decision to hire co-facilitators to run the program with me. These individuals would bring a broader knowledge base and a diverse set of experiences in relation to the conflict that would provide a spectrum of opinions and perspectives while bringing more leadership to the actual program sessions.

At this point, I began formulating YPC’s marketing and social media strategies and planning the content for the program itself. I hired a graphic designer and worked with her to design the YPC logo and get our Instagram running. In late May, we launched the fellowship application and started a series of
Instagram ads for a targeted audience of teens. However, for the first several weeks we ran into a simple but challenging problem: no one was applying. I attempted to remedy this by sending hundreds of emails to Jewish day schools, summer camps, youth groups, and gap year programs, to see if they could help spread our programming to their teens. I received few responses, which contradicted my expectations that it would be easy to spread the word and receive applications. Three obstacles seemed to block our path. First, the difficulty of communicating information to teens through organizations they participate in, some of whom were not able or willing to spread the word about an Israel-Palestine education program.

Second, the reality that many engaged Jewish teens (those who would likely be more interested in our programming) would be at overnight camp or already have other summer commitments. Third and lastly, the simple fact of our offering itself, since YPC was meeting over zoom twice a week, and unlike some number of other extracurricular educational opportunities for teens, was not offering a stipend or other large incentive for participating. I made the decision to expand the range of students who we hoped would participate in the course to high-school students of all ages, who were non-Jewish as well as Jewish. This was a benefit, as the broader range of perspectives offered a more open environment to learn in.

Our last question, of program content, was a challenge. How would we keep participants engaged? How would we respond to questions that we didn’t have enough knowledge to answer? Which speakers do we hire? What extra opportunities for engagement do we offer? Taking a Compassionate Listening training at the beginning of the summer and an Advanced course in the fall equipped me with the tools to facilitate and helped offer a path to resolve many of my questions. Additionally, with the help of my co-facilitators, I compiled resources to use within our sessions and to send out in program emails twice a week. Throughout the course of the fellowship, we aimed to offer a range of activities with different lengths, forms, and content, to a) allow students of different learning styles to engage with the programming, and b) to determine for ourselves which activities best communicated the content and were most interesting to our participants. We then used surveys to do quantitative and qualitative assessments at the mid- and endpoints of the fellowship to analyze the efficacy of our different activities.

Despite this, retention of participants because of the online format was an increasingly difficult challenge through both the fellowship and the mini-course. In the fellowship, only half of the initial applicants consistently attended sessions; in the mini-course, that number was closer to one third. It was only in the Conflict and Identity workshop that attendance remained roughly the same across all sessions. This uncertainty often meant that we had to make spontaneous plans during sessions where we had fewer attendees than expected and meant that we modified the initial structure of the fellowship so that each session was rooted in educational content, rather than being based in a broader activity or community-building event. The bi-weekly emails (sent out after each session) were then opportunities to encourage the more involved participants to learn and engage more.

Despite these challenges, the feedback that we received from the participants that consistently showed up was overwhelmingly positive, which led me to lay the groundwork to run the mini-course. For example, one participant said in the mid-point survey that “the most valuable thing I learned and was reassured of throughout YPC is how to contribute to discussions and progress, even if I am not the main stakeholder; this theme came up throughout the program and by the end, my view of stakeholders have been expanded and illuminated—I feel heartened to go beyond myself and understand my role in the broader society. This lesson from YPC invigorates my calling to be aware and responsible for our world. I am empowered.” This comment was in response to one of the major themes of the fellowship, where we explored what it means to be a stakeholder both in speaking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other issues of peacebuilding.

Knowing that the participants from the fellowship benefitted from their experience at YPC, and having learned by experience a marketing strategy and a deeper understanding of pedagogy, I was hopeful that running another program (which became the mini-course) would allow us to reach more teens, especially the Jewish teens that I had initially hoped to target. For the mini-course, we were able to use the initial data from our Instagram ads to determine which were most effective and advertise for the mini-course using similar posts. We also utilized the connections I had built within the Jewish community. A truly special moment to arise from the mini-course was an email that I received from one of the teens shortly after it ended, asking where they could turn to learn more or to get involved in peacebuilding work—or if YPC had a program where they could do that.

After receiving an extension on the project, I decided that rather than repeating the mini-course framework, it would be most valuable to offer a version of our existing YPC programming that got to the crux of the successful elements of our work in the fellowship and in the mini-course: offering a program
that allowed teens to formulate their own identities in the context of global and personal conflicts, and to feel more personally connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This led to the formulation of the Conflict and Identity workshop. In this workshop, we focused less on educational programming and more on narrative, both our own and those we identified around Israel-Palestine.

This transformation included hosting a Jewish artist from Pittsburgh to talk about how the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting and her visit to Israel informed her art; hosting another two speakers over the workshop’s four Sunday sessions; and sending participants ingredients to make Za’atar pitas (a traditional food in the region) with their families. We faced similar challenges with the workshop as with the fellowship and mini-course, but overall, I was encouraged by the positive results I saw both from changes we explicitly made and from participant attendance. Of the fifteen teens that showed up, eight became part of our central cohort, and we had consistent attendance and communication across the board. During one of our speaker sessions, there were so many questions we had to cut the teens off early! Additionally, we received so many sign-ups initially that the program cap we had set at 15 was met within six days, and we closed the application early. Several changes made on our end, including offering a virtual seamless gift card weekly so as to reimburse participants for the cost of their lunch while joining us, and having less material dense sessions and emails, also clearly boosted participant engagement. Additionally, I participated in a second and advanced dialogue training between the mini-course and workshop and was much more competent as a facilitator. Although YPC had no external sources of funding this past summer and fall, I plan to identify and pursue other funding opportunities moving forward to continue offering programming for teens.

Reflection

Running YPC this summer changed my expectation of how realistic peace in Israel-Palestine might be. Although I believe peace is possible, the learning I did this summer alongside these teens absolutely demonstrated for me that peace is likely much less plausible than I thought it to be. Hearing from Israeli and Palestinian speakers helped me appreciate the impetus among individuals to create peace, but at points, that impetus felt negated by the sheer force of the political realities in Israel and Palestine when we spoke about the consistent failures of the diplomatic peace processes, the challenges the anti-normalization movement poses to peacebuilding efforts, and the decades of contradictory narratives. At some points, it seemed almost as though the YPC participants felt similarly. For example, in one of our activities, while looking at the B’Tselem interactive settlement map, a participant asked why Israel could just keep building settlements, even though they’re illegal according to international law. After asking her a series of questions to walk through why she thought Israel could keep doing that, she said that it did not seem to her that Israel was held accountable for the building of settlements at all. For that to be the conclusion that one of these teens arrives at is disheartening, but it was also inspiring to see them continue to ask challenging questions of themselves, each other, and the political reality of not just the conflict they were studying, but their own country. I am not sure whether I can define peace, since the work I did this summer seems fundamentally defined by its privation, but it is clear to me that these young people I worked with and their peers have the capacity to create it. I believe YPC has offered a space for teens to learn about peace, conflict, and broader political issues, and a way to do that that allows them to question without limitation, speak without judgement, hold dialogue, and be heard in their educational process. I have come to believe education and dialogue (on any topic) are themselves are the necessary foundations for peace, and that offering those tools and opportunities to youth is how we build a more peaceful world.

Personal Statement

“Teenagers are at a unique stage in their lives because they are able to consider complex and challenging questions while still having the capacity to reexamine their beliefs and attempt to understand other narratives. Through YPC, it was incredibly meaningful to teach teens about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because they were able to truly confront the many realities of the conflict and existing obstacles to peace while reformulating and rearticulating their held opinions. I was truly inspired by these teens, and they made me optimistic for peace in a way that I hadn’t been before” –Elena Hochheiser, YPC Director and Founder