

Youth One – Created by Youth, for Youth

www.youthone.ca

Project Background

The story of Youth One is an interesting tale of how the energy of a few individuals became one of Canada's most dynamic and inclusive on-line communities. Youth One was billed as a unique youth managed and moderated online community and a Canadian first.

The project's main emphasis was to provide an opportunity for youth to connect with career and educational resources and for them to be valued in the Edmonton community at large. Youth One includes an informative web site, chat rooms, discussion forums and a crisis chat facility. Youth One is an excellent example of how technology can help produce vibrant communities from a dispersed range of network access points.

The concept of Youth One grew out of an Edmonton youth leadership forum in 1996. A group of local high school students wanted to sustain the energy of this forum on a long-term basis. They felt that the Internet was the perfect means to reach out to other young people and set out to build a web-based youth community. The initial website was fully youth-driven; however, it needed broader community partnerships and support in order to achieve its full vision. The relationship with Edmonton's The Support Network provided the needed springboard for Youth One, while allowing it to maintain its youth-centric values. With the backing of The Support Network, an application for the full piloting of Youth One was submitted to the Office of Learning Technologies in 1999.

Activities

Youth One's main attribute is a Web site that combines the features of an electronic magazine, an information portal and an interactive learning community. Created "By Youth, for Youth" the site was, and continues to be, regularly maintained to include a variety of youth-oriented articles, features, forums, links and opinion polls. Key topics of interest include education, skills development, employment, health, and money management.

Chat rooms and forums provide an interactive way for youth to speak out and discuss issues of interest. Volunteer moderators act to keep discussions lively and open. Youth One's peer support forums provide a safe and moderated environment to discuss relationships, health and other personal issues. These forums are moderated by trained volunteers and are set up to ensure the safety and confidentiality of users.

The crisis chat facility is an excellent opportunity for the Support Network to extend its crisis counselling mandate into an Internet environment. Trained support workers are available 12 hours per week to help youth deal with pressing personal issues.

The project was actively promoted through local media and at major youth events. The project team produced a print magazine, known as MOZ (Mosaic of Youth) Magazine, which served to increase interest in the on-line community. This magazine was distributed at various youth events and educational institutions in Edmonton.

Partnerships

Youth One has partnered with government services, such as Hire a Student, and with community groups to promote the integration of a wide range of perspectives. Partnerships with the Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers and Big Sisters increased the project's volunteer base and provided a wide range of credible content.

Learner Involvement

The project's vision was for youth to lead the development of a virtual community for their fellow youth. As such, learner involvement was the cornerstone of Youth One. On average, over 100 youth volunteers are actively involved in the Youth One community. Volunteers were the foundation of the project, acting as moderators, crisis counsellors, administrators, content authors and promoters.

The project has given youth real opportunities to get involved and to build their portfolio of skills. Vivian Giang, Youth One Editor in Chief writes *"When I first started volunteering with Youth One, I was trying to find my interests and my skills and improve on different talents that I had. I discovered that I really liked writing and am now pursuing it as a career path. Youth One not only provided me with opportunities to help out in the community, but it also allowed me to discover my passion"*. Project Manager Miep Raedschelders notes that *"most of the volunteers that end up staying on with Youth One end up sticking with education. Most of our youth do end up going up into post-secondary education"*.

Over 5000 volunteer hours were contributed in 2003 alone by volunteers

like the one described above. Youth One has emphasized giving volunteers meaningful roles which give youth the opportunity to pursue career-type work. Research has shown that youth are much more interested in doing this kind of work. Youth One coordinators successfully met the challenge of balancing the volume of volunteerism with the desire to provide meaningful career-type volunteer opportunities.

Youth One has also created opportunities for the inclusion of youth with disabilities. The online environment gives youth with a wide range of disabilities the opportunity to volunteer and participate to the greatest extent possible without having to disclose their limitations.

Challenges

One of the key challenges of Youth One was to build a community that could serve the needs of a wide and diverse range of youth. It was important not to characterize Youth One solely as a crisis management site or as a casual chat forum. Youth One overcame this challenge by remaining open to different ideas and opinions and allowing the project to evolve into a multi-dimensional environment. The involvement of young persons in key project roles was a critical success factor in the creation of a multi-dimensional and open image for Youth One.

Sustainability

Youth One continues to grow with site visits almost doubling since the end of OLT funding in 2003. Statistics from the summer of 2004 have placed unique visits in the range of 140,000 for the first quarter of that year. The project is also sustained by the ongoing support of partners.

In order to maintain the site's relevance in the face of a rapidly changing youth community, ongoing content and design adjustments have been carried out. Much of this change is driven by user feedback and from the ideas of youth volunteers themselves.

Youth One has continued to secure funding for new innovations for its community. One of the most significant is the YouthSPEAK! forum which has brought Youth One's discussion forums to life in schools, post-secondary campuses and public venues. Its vision, like that of Youth One, is to create a community of confident and empowered young people through open dialogue, education and proactive participation.

Project Results and Impacts

The project gave youth in Edmonton and around the world a safe forum where they could meet, learn, discuss, find support and foster new ideas. One user said *"I didn't know a place like Youth One existed, and soon discovered this place to talk about my life, and what my life was all about. I could share stories with other people from my community, help others, and vent about things that were happening. Since it's on the Internet, I could go whenever I wanted, and participate in ways that were relevant to me, without worrying about fitting in."* The project has also resulted in an enhanced youth volunteer culture. Through their varied contributions to Youth One, volunteers developed employable skills, including writing, facilitation, conflict resolution, project management and strategic planning.

The mentoring, employment preparation and portfolio building opportunities provided by Youth One have made

considerable contributions to the development of a lifelong learning culture in Edmonton. Youth have acquired skills through their interactions in the Youth One community that will be valuable assets to them as they make the transition to adulthood.

This volunteer culture has been enhanced with the Youth One's next evolution, YouthVolunteer! This project provides youth with the opportunity to link with a wide range youth-friendly volunteer opportunities and build their employability while making meaningful community contributions.

Youth One has recently taken its message of community involvement and volunteerism into the international arena. Relationships have been established with the International Association of Volunteer Enterprise. The Youth One model has been replicated in places as far away as Scotland and Russia. This is a true testament to the energy, ideas, creativity and collective strength of Canada's youth.

This success story was based on an interview with Miep Raedschelders, Youth One Program Coordinator in June 2004.

The Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, acts as a catalyst for innovation in the area of lifelong learning and skills development enabled by technology.
www.hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca (key word: OLT)