The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.

Eleanor Roosevelt
Participatory Education

Please Touch Museum emphasizes student centered learning. We believe that students of all ages should have a voice in their learning and will be more committed to their program if they help to create it. The Youth Programs at Please Touch Museum try to employ the ideas of educators who emphasize student-directed, experiential, and differentiated education including John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Howard Gardner, the Foxfire Approach to Education, and our own belief in the benefits of children’s play. There is a list of resources at the end of this manual so that you can familiarize yourself with their work and our philosophy. Below I have used the eleven core practices of the Foxfire Approach to Education in order to describe our work with students and to explain how we design projects and approach the ACES students. Participatory education requires a new way of thinking for Youth Program staff and mentors so please read this with an open mind and heart.

The Foxfire Core Practices

1. The work teachers and learners do together is infused from the beginning with learner choice, design, and revision. The central focus of the work grows out of learner’s interests and concerns. Most problems that arise during classroom activity are solved in collaboration with learners, and learners are supported in the development of their ability to solve problems and accept responsibility.

At Please Touch Museum it becomes our responsibility to help students find the power in their own voices. Through this process they learn to rely on their own choices and decisions.
We work toward students becoming independent learners who can extend their learning without a teacher’s mandate. When we begin a project with students we start with some of their identified interests.

We are often asked, what do kids think is cool and what projects will hold a teenagers interest. Our answer is always **ASK THE KIDS.** All students have interests and ideas; it’s our job to listen to what their interests are, and to help them extend their learning. Adults will never know what is “cool” for kids without actively asking them and being willing to engage their ideas.

We have found that students often want somebody else to solve their problems. Our job is to help students solve problems that arise on their own and in collaboration with their peers. We work with students to find the resources to solve the problem. Its their job to take a risk, to lean on each other and to actually resolve it.

When students can design a project, initiate the work, work together to solve problems and accept responsibility for all outcomes the learning is incredibly powerful. It is a process that leaves students with a feeling of independence and self-reliance.

2. **The role of the teacher is that of facilitator and collaborator. Teachers are responsible for assessing and attending to learners’ developmental needs, providing guidance, identifying academic givens, monitoring each learner’s academic and social growth, and leading each into new areas of understanding and competence.**

This reliance on student voice cannot happen without an educator’s revision of their traditional role. Educators who are committed to youth voice and to participatory education must act as a facilitator and collaborator. This is perhaps the most difficult change in perspective and role for most educators. Being a facilitator is different than only giving choices around a project topic, or assigning students to particular tasks within the project. It means working with a group of students to help them to make all of these project decisions themselves.

Students can organize groups, develop and use a project rubric to develop and research the topic. Students can edit their work with peers and re-evaluate a timeline after missing a deadline, but they won’t do it if you decide for them. The group needs you to make sure that students are working together, asking questions and learning. Your job is to ask questions to help students extend their learning, set ground rules and evaluate the outcomes. This role (teacher as facilitator and collaborator) fits directly into the mission of children’s museums. This makes the museum a wonderful setting to support participatory education for high school students as well as very young children.

The great thing about the Foxfire approach is that it includes both facilitator and collaborator as roles of the educator. This approach does not suggest that educators do not also have a voice in the project. Teachers have important expertise that can be included in the project however it is given with the knowledge that all parties bring their own experiences and expertise to the table. Students and teachers collaborate together, valuing all knowledge that comes forward. Students are not only working toward a teacher’s goal and a good grade, instead the teacher and student are working together toward an area of common interest.
This change in a teacher’s or staff person’s role can feel scary. We must re-learn how to actively listen to the needs and opinions of students, make sure that we are hearing the voices of all students and not only the most vocal. We must make academic expectations and classroom needs clear. But most of all we must be brave enough to let students know when we are wrong. We must trust our students enough to turn a project over to them. We must find a balance within our selves in order to allow students to guide their own learning and to invest themselves within it.

This process of becoming a facilitator and collaborator is never a perfect science but it is worth the investment. Remember that youth can always do more than you think they are capable of. This is an opportunity to trust them and to learn about their passions and creativity.

3. The academic integrity of the work teachers and learners do together is clear. Mandated skills and learning expectations are identified to the class. Through collaborative planning and implementation, students engage and accomplish the mandates. In addition, activities assist learners in discovering the value and potential of the curricula and its connections to other disciplines.4

Student directed learning does not mean non-academic learning! The first things that we establish for projects within our youth program are the givers. The students and staff work together to identify the academic goals that they need to meet. In some cases, we present a few necessary academic goals that must be met. These goals and rules are posted before the project begins so that students and educators are working from the same platform. The Youth Program staff is never trying to get at learning behind the students back. Laying out the givens at the very beginning of the process helps to ensure that everyone—staff and student—are working towards the same goals.

4. The work is characterized by active learning. Learners are thoughtfully engaged in the learning process, posing and solving problems, making meaning producing products, and building understandings. Because learners engaged in these kinds of activities are risk takers operating on the edge of their competence, the classroom environment provides an atmosphere of trust where the consequence of a mistake is the opportunity for further learning.5

Please Touch Museum believes in learning through play. Here we see that mission embodied throughout our youth program. Students are actively molding the next steps of their projects. They participate and create every facet of their work. The Youth Program staff should help students narrow their goals so that they are working toward a measurable and meaningful product. Students become responsible for meeting their goals. Sometimes the group will not meet their goal, and then students must go back, re-evaluate what happened and decide how to move forward. This process of reevaluation to move forward happens within an atmosphere of trust. These mistakes are as important as successfully completed projects. Both mistakes and successes become experiences: experiences that students add to their personal bank of expertise. Students who own both their mistakes and victories are willing to take risks, and to stretch their own learning.
5. Peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork are all consistent features of classroom activities. Every learner is not only included, but needed, and, in the end, each can identify her or his specific stamp upon the effort.\textsuperscript{6}

I have found that students can be unwilling to believe that every student in their group has something important to say. Often students tend to value the skills that teachers value in the everyday classroom. For example, students with great writing skills or who can follow directions are considered smart, and the students with poor writing ability are considered less intelligent. This assumption on the part of peers makes this core practice exciting. The Youth Program staff’s job is to help students highlight each other’s skills and to make sure that all students support each other. Often projects at Please Touch Museum require very different skills than those of the more traditional school setting. Students find skills and talents that they didn’t know they had, and others find out that they still have a lot to learn. It is wonderful when a student who consistently gets straight A’s at school realizes that they need to ask a student, labeled as “special needs,” for help on a project. We encourage students to have each other edit papers, rehearse scripts for phone conversations, practice interviews together or to re-design a poster. The Youth Program staff must step back and have the students edit and support each other first. Creating a working climate where it is expected that other students will view and assess each other’s work is essential. The Youth Program staff needs to work to create an atmosphere where students have the language available to assess work in a supportive way and also to protest when they feel a critique is invalid. Students should be encouraged to defend their work and also to be open to student and staff suggested improvements. Staff should ensure that students provide feedback on each others’ work all the time and in different formats. Do not limit student collaboration to written work; find places for all students to use their expertise to help another.

6. Connections between the classroom work, the surrounding communities, and the world beyond the community are clear. Course content is connected to the community in which the learners live. Learners’ work will “bring home” larger issues by identifying attitudes about and illustrations and implications of those issues in their home communities.\textsuperscript{7}

Learning happens everywhere! By engaging the community, students learn valuable networking skills. Both staff and students learn about the challenge of building partnerships and the project has meaning beyond the museum or classroom. When the community is involved, the students begin to understand how to access resources that are around them but often not readily apparent. Encourage students to use their connections through family and school to help address the issues involved in their project. The museum is a wonderful venue to include community organizations and individuals. By building networks between the community and the museum’s Youth Program you are helping to show students that learning does happen everywhere. In addition, these community connections can help students as they graduate from school and move forward in the world. Foster these relationships and help students learn to articulate their needs to these individuals and organizations.
7. There is an audience beyond the teacher for learner work. It may be another individual, or a small group, or the community, but it is an audience the learners want to serve or engage. The audience, in turn, affirms the work is important, needed and worth doing.5

The projects that you do with youth in your museum are essential. Not only are they important to the students but others as well. Find an audience that is invested in the issue or type of project that your students are doing and encourage presentations, conversations or collaborations. This audience will help the students recognize the importance of their work and it can also become a way for students to measure the status of their project. The audience can help to extend the work and suggest further steps to the students.

8. New activities spiral gracefully out of the old, incorporating lessons learned from past experiences, building on skills and understandings that can now be amplified. Rather than completion of a study being regarded as the conclusion of a series of activities, it is regarded as the starting point for a new series.6

Our Youth Programs focus on process and not product. As educators we focus on illuminating the gifts of each student that works with us. Together we practice problem solving and critical thinking. We create exciting presentations and projects but more than that we continue. There is no real end point—we use our previous experiences to make the next projects and initiatives stronger. This is what keeps us going. We probably will not create a masterpiece the first time around. But all the mistakes and accomplishments in the first project lay groundwork for an even more complex and beautiful second work. At Please Touch Museum students stay with us from 9th grade through graduation. We have a significant amount of time to work together. Students are amazed at what they have accomplished by the time they leave. Youth Program staff are lucky to be able to watch students grow and change over time. The students consistently take on more responsibility for projects and take more risks within them. Take the time to build your projects, focusing on Process not Product.

9. Imagination and creativity are encouraged in the completion of learning activities. It is the learner’s freedom to express and explore, to observe and investigate, and to discover that are the basis for aesthetic experiences. These experiences provide a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction and lead to deeper understanding and an internal thirst for knowledge.10

What better place to encourage creativity and imagination than a children’s museum? Help students re-discover their imaginations, creativity, inquisitiveness and love of learning. This is one of the most vital pieces of your work with students and one that children’s museums are built to foster.

10. Reflection is an essential activity that takes place at key points throughout the work. Teachers and learners engage in conscious and thoughtful consideration of the work and the process. It is this reflective activity that evokes insight and gives rise to revisions and refinements.11

Reflect, Reflect, Reflect! This piece is so easily glossed over as we are all pressed for time and patience. However, this is an important part of every project. It will help you to spiral your activities and to move forward with your project. Reflection can help the group become aware of everyone’s understanding of the activities. It can help students realize when they are not sticking to their timeline. It may show students that they need to re-evaluate the direction a project is taking. Reflect independently and as a group in order to refine the project and re-direct students with problem spots.

Please Touch Museum has also found that good reflection throughout a project can help the students articulate their projects mission and their accomplishments. Reflection is a place to celebrate all accomplishments and to discuss project needs.

11. The work teachers and learners do together includes rigorous, ongoing assessment and evaluation. Teachers and learners employ a variety of strategies to demonstrate their mastery of teaching and learning objectives.12
Work together to evaluate the group’s work. Reflection and evaluation go together and help students to learn from their accomplishments and mistakes. Youth Program staff can use the academic objectives specified to the group in the beginning of the project as a part of the rubric. Students should constantly check back to the “givens” or academic objectives in order to stay on track with the academic goals of the project.

Students can meet goals throughout the project, not just in the culminating presentation or projects’ end. Through evaluation students can gain a picture of what has been accomplished and what still needs to be addressed in further initiatives.

**Getting Messy**

**THIS WORK IS MESSY!** It is difficult to open yourself to this type of powerful learning. I believe that it is harder to engage students in this type of active, participatory learning than to direct learning in a more traditional way. It is hard to feel vulnerable in front of a group of students and to trust that the students will meet the givens that you have in front of you. However it is worth the journey.

I have been working with students in this way for five years and the longer that I engage with students, the more comfortable and inspired I am by this “mess.” I can see the spiral that happens with our learning. Sometimes we spiral upward and out, making great academic and social strides, and other times we fall backwards. It is exciting to see how much students grow throughout this process. Somewhere in “it” each student finds that it is unacceptable to remain ambivalent towards their learning. Believe it or not, this is a huge accomplishment. This revelation, this energy, this excitement about learning, may be fleeting, but it is genuine. Students come to the museum disillusioned with school. Here we have the opportunity to get students investigating. We can listen to them and help them access an interest. Once we have them excited about learning, we can help the student extend it.

**Now how do we do that?** It gets complicated when we start talking about letting students do what they want and when I start describing the teacher as a facilitator. I think that every educator has a bit of fear when they let go of the traditional classroom. This process allows students to lead. To let students lead we have to believe that they are capable people. We have to stretch our preconceived ideas of youth to even engage this idea. Some days we are more successful than others. Even after five years, I often find myself trying to lead a project, when a deadline is looming. That’s when I know that I need to come back to the group. I admit to the group that I feel pressured about our deadline, and I find out how they feel. I ask them to help me figure out how to deal with this situation and I trust them to work with me to find a solution. Going to the students as a collaborator, not as the project leader, is a fundamentally different role for the adult. Even the students aren’t sure what’s happening at first. It takes a long time for them to trust that you really want their ideas and that it is not just lip-service. It also takes them awhile to know that this
project won’t happen without their investment. For Please Touch Museum, that has occasionally meant standing back and watching the students hit a few small roadblocks. With reflection, evaluation and sheer determination, we have been able to build a program that on good days comes close to engaging in participatory education.

Remember to reflect on what happens every day with your students. Remember to forgive yourself each time that you take back that traditional role as teacher. Remember to keep trying harder to really listen to students ideas and to see their progress. Remember to build a team that supports each other in victory and struggle. But most of all, enjoy getting messy!