

GROW

Empowering Young Adults in Morocco

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Introduction to the program

Connect Institute is currently running the Grow program for the second time, after a successful first run in February-May 2014. The program, which meets once a week for eight weeks, is designed for youth to develop certain skills: orally expressing their ideas, analyzing articles, and listening to others' opinions.

Youth gather weekly for this program. Their ages range from 20 to 27 and all are university students or graduates. They help to guide the sessions, yet also benefit from the guidance of Taha Balafrej, who serves as a facilitator. The sessions provide an environment in which the participants can develop their ideas.

They come voluntarily, without being obligated to do so, unlike school or work obligations. Sometimes their parents are not even aware of their attendance. They find a positive and safe climate in which to develop their thoughts and share their ideas. Some have even chosen to come to continue on with a second and third cycle, after they have completed their first cycle in the program.

Program Goals

The youth cite a desire for personal and professional development as their primary motivations for participation in the program, specifically learning the art of expressing themselves clearly, developing self-confidence, exchanging opinions and ideas, and being able to analyze documents.

Their stated goals overlap with the goals of the program, which are as follows:

Goals

- Develop self-confidence;
- Develop curiosity;
- Improve ability to listen to others;
- Strengthen analytical skills;
- Foster intergenerational dialogue and fellowship;
- Understand, analyze, and critique ideas, including written materials.



GROW participants engage in discussion with older members of the Connect Institute.

Context: Youth in Morocco

Youth make up 30% of the population in Morocco yet nearly half neither study nor work (The World Bank). There is a high level of exclusion of youth in Moroccan society. A 2012 World Bank report, “Promoting Youth Opportunities and Participation,” offers suggestions for policies to increase youth employment, activity, and participation in society.

The report recommends an approach to youth policy based on three principles: youth participation, non-formal learning methods, and integrated, youth-friendly services. GROW provides an opportunity for the second of these three principles: non-formal learning. This is defined as a process that covers a wide variety of learning fields and takes place outside of the formal education sector, through youth work, youth clubs, sports associations, volunteerism, peer education, and other activities that offer practical, experiential learning opportunities. Non-formal learning can provide youth with soft skills that benefit youth in their personal and professional lives.

Context: Positive Youth Development:

Some of the skills and assets most important to positive youth development have been outlined by the Search Institute in its developmental assets framework, which has become the predominant approach to positive youth development, replacing the conventional problem-solving approach. Of this compilation of 40 assets, ten of them are strengthened by participation in GROW:

- Other Adult Relationships: Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
- Community Values Youth: Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
- Youth as Resources: Young people are given useful roles in the community.
- Adult Role Models: Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
- Positive Peer Influence: Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
- High Expectations: Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
- Youth Programs: Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
- School Engagement: Young Person is actively engaged in learning.
- Responsibility: Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
- Interpersonal Competence: Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.



Methodology

At the beginning of each session, participants are given one minute to auto-evaluate their “état d’esprit” and subsequently share it with the rest of the group. Some examples of their état d’esprit: satisfaction, unique, well-being, disorder, contrast, dynamic, confidence, awakening. The same exercise--check out--is done at the end. These exercises encourage participants to turn inward and reflect, which helps them increase sensitivity and know themselves better.

Check In



Check Out



Following the check-in the group discusses what is going on at the Connect Institute--as youth, their participation and opinions are valued just as much as older members of the Institute. The youth sense that the community values them, which is one of the developmental assets for positive youth development. Additionally, they are encouraged to volunteer and participate in other ways in events of the Connect Institute and the wider community, for example organizing and engaging with Agora, an Agadir community event which brings people together from many sectors.

Subsequently, one participant is called upon to give a three-minute synopsis of the previous session. Not only does this allow people who were not present to be informed, but it also provides an invaluable opportunity for the youth to develop public speaking skills and critical listening skills. The participant has to speak impromptu and think on his or her feet.

A similar exercise follows: one participant has taken responsibility for reading a text prior to the session. This person gives an expose about this text to the others, none of whom have read the text. The speaker hones his or her oral expression and must communicate effectively within a given time limit. At the end of five minutes, the listeners give their impressions and critiques of the expose.

After the two exercises to develop speaking and listening skills, there is a short musical interlude, which widens youths' cultural horizons by exposing them to pieces of Western classical music.

Following the musical interlude is the main activity: discussion of a text that everyone has read. The texts come from renowned international sources, most of which are in English, in order to push them to read more

“Chaque samedi était pour moi l'occasion rare de m'exprimer tout en apprenant à travers les remarques et critiques de mes condisciples et de l'animateur de Grow.” – GROW participant

in this language, which is an increasingly important skill in modern world. The readings cover a wide range of topics which will be discussed in the following section.

The purposes of discussion are to understand and learn the ideas of others; to think and formulate one's own opinion according to one's values; to share and transmit one's opinions to others; to influence others; and to in turn be influenced by them. Before the larger group discussion, youth have the chance to voice their thoughts in smaller groups of three.

Diversity of Topics

One of GROW's goals is for the youth to develop their sense of curiosity about a wide variety of topics. Although they are diverse, some main themes are Morocco society, the larger world, and the human condition.

The aim is to give the participants leads that will interest them and motivate them to dig deeper on their own time once their curiosity is stimulated. Another reason participants are encouraged to delve further into the topics outside of sessions is to diversify the sources from which they receive information - to not rely on just one source on which to base their opinions.

The content is a means to this end; it is not an end in itself. The real aim is to broaden their perspectives and reshape how they view learning. They should be intrinsically motivated to learn, rather than extrinsically motivated as they would be by grades in a formal academic context.

Topics range from travel writing about hash production in Morocco, to the ethical dilemma of a case study on corruption, the gap between generations, and an excerpt from a Moroccan novel.

One participant, after being exposed to Rachmaninoff for the first time in a GROW session musical interlude, went home and took initiative to learn more about this Russian composer. He discovered that Rachmaninoff's First Symphony was a critical failure that caused him to stop composing for four years. This symphony was not appreciated during the composer's lifetime, yet 50 years later it became part of the symphony canon. This in one instance of GROW achieving its goal of stoking youths' curiosity and encouraging them to delve further into topics that attract them.

GROW also provides a forum in which youth feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. During a discussion on religion, the participants were respected and everyone allowed to voice their opinions. However, they were challenged and asked to open their

Encouraging youths' passions

- **One participant is an aspiring chef. He was encouraged and supported by his peers and was given the opportunity to present some of his dishes at the Connect Institute.**
- **Other participants' passions that are supported by GROW and the Connect Institute: photography, poetry, and writing.**

minds and think for themselves instead of accepting what is told them without applying critical thinking.

Another session focused on certain taboo topics which youth are not normally able to discuss openly and frankly: love, marriage, and sexuality. Yet, in the context of the GROW session, they could freely express their opinions without the usual inhibitions. They are encouraged to reflect on these issues and come to their own conclusions.



A GROW participant poses a question during the Connect Institute's signature event Agora.

A discussion of an article entitled "Making Hash in Morocco" brought up the following issues:

- How the hospitality of Moroccans, especially in the Chefchaouen area, shaped the experience of the author.
- How an American journalist decided to come by herself with her friend to Morocco and weren't limited by the clichés that they had heard about in the media.
- Do we need a foreigner to come and analyze Moroccan problems?

The conversation evolved into a debate about women's safety in Morocco and certain privileges that tourists enjoy. Yet, it is worth noting that this level of critical thinking was not present in the first half of the discussion. Mr. Balafrej urged them to re-discuss in small groups, take stronger and bolder stances, and then resume the larger group discussion.

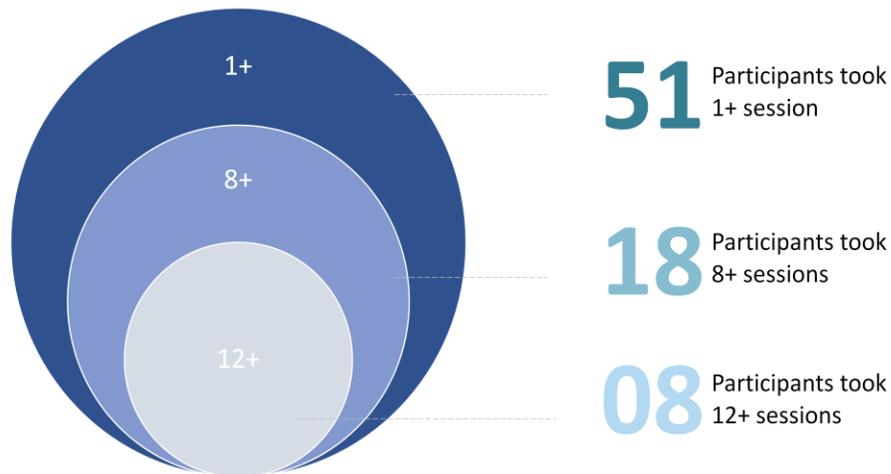
"I decided to change the sources I get my information from. On Facebook I liked pages that promote ideas that I'm unfamiliar with; I want to learn more from them and not just surround myself by the same old influences." – GROW participant

Many Moroccan youth are not accustomed to professors or other authority figures truly seeking out and valuing their opinions, so encouragement and practice are necessary to break out of these habits.

Conclusion

As GROW enters its fourth cycle in early 2015, many participants, girls and boys, have thus far benefitted from the program. There are many other Moroccan youth who could benefit from this program if it were expanded, beginning with the Connect Institute, and then through university partnerships. These crucial skills and traits—curiosity, critical thinking, public speaking, analyzing texts and arguments—are not being developed elsewhere- not in schools and rarely in homes. Nor are there many other places where youth can feel free to speak their minds in a safe, supportive environment. The GROW program is providing this for its participants, who have found it to be very valuable for their personal development. Other Moroccan youth need and deserve this as well.

28 Workshops
3 Cycles
2 Reports



About Connect Institute

Connect Institute

Connect Institute is a non-profit social enterprise.

Based in Agadir, and supported by a large network of people, the Institute offers its members a rich environment for the mind and the senses alike.

The Institute proposes a series of experiences and events, through which you can explore new possibilities, find inspiration, share knowledge, rest, challenge your ideas, discover new ones, and embrace transformation. By organizing workshops, seminars, yoga or acting classes, among other activities, the Institute's goal is to connect individuals and to allow them to share their sensibilities and passions for the world around us.

Taha Balafrej - Founder and Director

Born and based in Agadir

He has held many jobs and had many enriching encounters as a Math Professor, Political Advisor, Administrative Director, Consultant, Director at OCP Company...

Holder of PhD in Mathematics and a certificate of the executive program "Transforming your leadership strategy" from MIT Sloan School of Management, October 2011

He is a journalist, blogger, traveler, speaker, walker, married father of two

His fields of expertise are environment, human development, climate change, education and social change....

He has founded Connect Institute in order to broaden his world and contribute to the ongoing change by sharing his experience, his knowledge, his happiness and his values.



Sanaa Belabbes - Project Manager

Born in Agadir

Management Student, preparing for PhD

Interested in entrepreneurship and wants to contribute to change and development of his country by undertaking actions with youth of her age.

