SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: LEARNING CYCLE III

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GRIPTAPE LEARNING CHALLENGERS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the years before its founding 18 months ago and since embarking on each of our learning cycles, GripTape team members have heard from thousands of young people who express a deep, abiding desire to design, execute, and assess their own learning. These youth are hungry for opportunities to create, experiment, and produce, but find their passions stifled, their paths blocked, and accessible resources lacking.

GripTape is changing all of that. We exist at the boundaries of what people perceive possible, with the resolute conviction that youth can and should drive their own learning. We walk this talk every day, placing total decision-making authority into the hands of young people and designing alongside them to expand opportunities for youth to pursue their passions free of adult direction and oversight. What we see is surprising and powerful.

At GripTape, we use principles of user-centered design and lean startup methodology to develop, test, iterate, and refine our supports in service of learning and advancing the domain of learner agency. Through our iterative program model, data collection and analysis, and targeted partnerships, we aim to contribute to a growing knowledge base of the skills, competencies, and mindsets that emerge when youth are given full control to drive their own learning. Our strong desire is that these efforts spur greater commitment to youth-led learning across all contexts in which young people develop.

The GripTape Learning Challenge offers youth full control over the what, when, where, and how they learn. We provide up to $500 in financial support for journeys that last one to three months, and an adult champion to offer encouragement grounded in genuine interest. In our latest learning cycle, we set out to test our model with more than twice the number of youth as in our last Challenge and to explore the experiences and development of young people participating in team journeys. Moreover, we sought to assess the success of our model with young people whose achievement was lower as measured by GPA than our first cohort, and to explore the impact of fewer points of contact between Challengers and their adult champions.

We saw youth design learning journeys across an array of passions, including community and police relations, geishas and traditional Japanese tea service, baking, plastic surgery, and the impact of bullying. The topics were as varied as the young people themselves, and speak powerfully to the limitless interests that youth will pursue when given the chance to develop their passions, goals, and plans unfettered by adult intervention.

These 21 Challengers executed 18 learning journeys that lasted between eight and 12 weeks from November 2016 to February 2017, with 19 of 21 young people successfully completing their journeys. Of youth who finished the Challenge, all were able to maintain complete control of their journeys, adjust their goals as needed, and persist through key milestones. 100% of these young people demonstrated achievement of their learning and expressed greater confidence as a result of taking part in the Challenge. Moreover, youth who successfully completed their journeys developed positive mindsets and greater abilities in the four skills that we posit undergird learner agency: forethought, goal-setting, self-regulation, and self-reflection. Critically, these youth uniformly said they want to pursue more self-designed learning and continue to be involved with GripTape.

As we push forward with our fourth learning cycle, we are continuously thinking about the remarkable results we see when youth design and lead their own learning. And we wonder — will you join us on this journey?
GRIPTAPE FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS

GripTape is an initiative founded on the unwavering conviction that youth can and should drive their own learning. As such, we create the conditions necessary for young people to design, implement, and assess learning experiences outside of school, and in so doing, accelerate achievement and deepen engagement across a wide range of settings. By exercising learner agency — that is, the ability to make intentional choices and take an active role in the direction of one’s learning — young people participate in a self-reinforcing cycle of growth that allows them to pursue areas of passion, build critical skills and competencies, and construct their roads to success. Through our work, we seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of the powerful impact such experiences have on youth, and to catalyze support for agency-rich learning experiences for young people, in and out of school.

Building on this core belief and the simple supports our young people called for, we created the GripTape Learning Challenge to provide youth aged 15–19 years old with opportunities to plan and lead their own learning outside of school. Having conducted surveys and interviews with more than 300 young people and directly worked with close to 40 youth through three iterative learning cycles, we see strong evidence to support our conviction that such experiences enable young people to develop the skills and competencies essential to succeed in today's knowledge economy.

GripTape’s programmatic and research activities are grounded in principles of user-centered design, such as rapid prototyping and iterative learning, with the strong belief that these practices will best enable us to incubate and accelerate proven models that build learner agency. In service of these efforts, we partner with education researchers to develop learning plans, data collection tools, and interview protocols that enable us to leverage our rapid cycles, with the goals of continuously refining GripTape’s agile, data-driven work and sharing our learnings with partners and other stakeholders.

LEARNING CYCLE III REPORT

This report is the third in a series of findings from GripTape’s iterative learning cycles, and speaks to our commitment to continuously refine our data-driven model. This summary provides results from our second Learning Challenge in which we worked with 21 underserved youth, as well as findings drawn from surveys and interviews with our first cohort of nine Challengers conducted six months after their learning journeys ended.

Along with this most recent summary, GripTape has produced several reports that offer comprehensive insight into our model and earlier learning cycles. A foundational literature review into such fields as cognitive and education psychology, complexity theory, and social and emotional learning, coupled with results from our first learning cycle, led to the creation of the GripTape Framework for Facilitating the Emergence of Learner Agency in which we detail the skills, competencies, environments, and outcomes of learner agency within the context of youth-designed and led learning. Our Learning Cycle I Summary of Findings describes the results of surveys, interviews, and focus groups we conducted with close to 300 youth exploring attitudes and experiences with youth-led learning. True to our data-driven, user-centered model, this research drove our first pilot in the form of the GripTape Learning Challenge, results of which are shared in our Learning Cycle II Summary of Findings.
GRIPTAPE STANDS APART

GripTape offers youth complete decision-making authority, modest financial resources, and a champion to provide genuine interest and encouragement. Our work focuses on underserved 15–19-year-olds and seeks to take advantage of learning that can happen anytime, anywhere. We challenge the notion that learning must be adult-guided and engineered or that it must take place in formal settings such as schools, believing youth can and should own this process.

As our own and other research attests, young people feel disengaged and disempowered by the school experience at strikingly high rates (Gallup 2015). Yet we know that learning outside of school can offer youth powerful means to develop the skills, competencies, and mindsets necessary to be engaged, inspired, and effective learners across all spheres of life — in or out of school. Our program model, the GripTape Learning Challenge, shows early success in helping youth find, in their own words, “direction and purpose.” From discovering a passion for coding through a theater lighting project to better understanding the causes of homelessness by executing a community banquet for homeless mothers and children, our young people are pursuing deep interests and strengthening learner agency skills as they execute their journeys without adult direction or intervention.

Through our governance structure, which places our Youth Leadership Board at the heart of our decision-making, program design, and youth engagement, GripTape has committed to building a vibrant ecosystem where young people actively construct the solutions and models that foster authentic, meaningful youth development. We believe — and our research bears out — that young people benefit from opportunities with fewer adult-imposed restrictions and less adult-engineered facilitation, and that, in turn, they seek out both additional opportunities to drive their own learning and means to support peers pursuing their own learning passions.

Our first three learning cycles show the powerful promise of these ideas in action:

- 90% or more of youth want opportunities to design and direct their own learning, and believe doing so will significantly help advance their development.
- 90% or more of youth increased their self-confidence by designing and implementing their own learning journeys.
- 90% or more of youth successfully met their learning goals, despite encountering significant obstacles along the way.
- 90% or more of youth want opportunities to support other young people in learning.

LEARNING CYCLE III

In this latest learning cycle, we tested new variables in our program model. We explicitly selected a portion of applicants with lower GPAs than those of our first Challenger cohort to determine what, if any, impact this factor had on young people’s ability to develop learner agency skills and successfully drive their own learning. In addition, we extended the possible duration of journeys up to three months, accepted our first Challenger teams, and shifted to an all-virtual recruitment model to ensure more equitable access and explore scaling strategies. Finally, we set out to test reduced adult support along with a formalized youth support role.
KEY QUESTIONS

The key questions we explored in Learning Cycle III included:

- Are youth successful at leading and completing their GripTape Challenge?
- Do youth develop the mindset and learner skills described in GripTape’s Framework as a result of participating in the Challenge?
- How does youth success vary by Challenge duration, membership in a team, level of adult support, and demographic characteristics?
- Can peers serve as formal supports for youth leading self-designed learning?
- To what extent do positive impacts on learner beliefs and skills endure beyond the completion of the Challenge?

MODEL & IMPLEMENTATION

GripTape provides youth with three principal supports through the Learning Challenge:

- Complete decision-making control over the design, implementation, and assessment of their learning.
- Grants up to $500 to support this learning journey.
- An adult Point-of-Contact (POC) to provide belief, interest, and encouragement without advice or direction.

We recruited youth from four East Coast partner organizations: Baltimore Algebra Project, TeenSHARP, The Future Project, and the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship. Interested 15–19-year-olds were invited to apply online for the Learning Challenge and required to respond to application questions in a format of their choosing (written, PowerPoint, video, audio, phone call, and so on). Finalists were invited to an in-person interview with a GripTape team member, and applicant “pitches” were judged using a rubric that measured such areas as learning goals, implementation plans, and passion. In the end, 21 youth were chosen to embark on 18 learning journeys, including our first team efforts, between November 2016 and February 2017.

It is worth noting that the GripTape POC role differs from a mentor or other adult support in critical ways. While POC’s communicate direct, affirmative belief and deep interest in the learning, experiences, and feelings of Challengers, these adults do not seek to shape, direct, or intervene in journeys. We believe this orientation is central to the development Challengers undergo. Moreover, POC’s fill a dual research and structural function through the orientation, check-in, and end-of-journey calls with youth, supports which may serve to advance learner agency skills through facilitated self-reflection. In addition to adult POC’s, nine new Challengers were also matched with “Peer Navigators” in this learning cycle, a role filled by young people from the first Learning Challenge and designed to test the efficacy of peer-to-peer support.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As noted earlier, GripTape collected initial application responses from prospective Challengers and conducted in–person interviews with finalists. Each selected youth completed an intake survey with questions related to demographic characteristics, the application process, attitudes and expectations about the Challenge opportunity, topic knowledge and interest, mindset, and learner skills. Following their Challenge, youth took an end–of–journey survey that again measured these areas along with experiences throughout the Challenge, learning and goal attainment, and interest in additional self-directed learning and continued engagement with GripTape.
During bi-weekly calls, each POC followed an interview protocol with specific guiding questions about youth experiences and the development or use of learner skills and mindset. These exchanges were documented in research logs and served to capture important breakthroughs and growth. Additionally, youth participated in an in-person, end-of-journey interview with their POC that relied on a standardized protocol with open-ended questions about the learning process and outcomes. POC’s, however, were free to pose additional questions to explore particular areas of interest.

As in previous learning cycles, the GripTape team and research partners coded, synthesized, and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data captured in surveys, logs, and interviews. Data points were aggregated for each Challenger to create mini-case studies, and key trends and outliers were identified to inform findings and subsequent model refinements.

In addition to data collection efforts with new Challengers, GripTape conducted interviews with our nine original Challengers six months after their learning journeys ended, with the goal of understanding the degree to which learner agency skills and behaviors persisted.

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

The Challengers who completed their journeys in Learning Cycle III ranged in age from 15 to 17 years old, were predominantly female, and were all youth of color.

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“The Challenge gave me the ability to learn through trial-and-error. It let me see where I made mistakes and how I can fix them so I don’t do them again. I have learned how to listen to myself, and [it’s] given me the courage to try it, knowing that I will learn from my mistakes.

—Youth Challenger
FINDINGS-AT-A-GLANCE

Learning Cycle III Challengers

90% of youth successfully completed their journey according to both Challenger self-assessments and their GripTape Point-of-Contact.

Of those completing their journey:

1. 100% of youth stated they were able to maintain complete control of the journey.
2. 89% of youth rated their content knowledge and skills for their particular topic as “intermediate” or “advanced” following their Challenge.
3. 100% of youth expressed greater confidence as a result of participating in the GripTape Learning Challenge.
4. 100% of Challengers persisted through key milestones of the journey process.
5. 100% of Challengers demonstrated achievement of their goals and appropriately adjusted them as needed throughout the journey.
6. 100% of youth are interested in pursuing additional projects that are self-designed and led or continuing to pursue further learning in their Challenge topic.
7. 100% of youth are interested in continuing to participate in GripTape specifically.
8. 100% of youth would recommend the GripTape Learning Challenge to their friend.

Learning Cycle II Challengers

Six months after completing the GripTape Learning Challenge, nearly all youth reported:

1. Significant, enduring increases in their self-confidence and mindset toward learning that, in turn, drive their motivation and persistence across multiple learning settings in and out of school.
2. Improved ability and increased use of the behaviors and practices that support learner agency, such as goal-setting, effective time management, course-correction, and self-reflection.
3. Heightened interest in taking charge of their learning enacted through seeking information and new learning opportunities that were present but ignored previously, such as conducting independent research or joining clubs in or out of school.
4. Successful instances of having seized opportunities to direct their own learning since the Challenge, such as networking with strangers, moving out of familiar experiences to try new domains, or assuming leadership roles.

OUTCOMES: CHALLENGER SUCCESS

GripTape’s definition of a successful Challenge includes several criteria:

- Youth maintain complete control of their learning journey.
- Youth persist through key milestones of the learning process, such as developing a clear vision, goals, and plan of action; accomplishing interim steps; reflecting on progress; and regulating activities.
- Youth appropriately adjust learning plans or goals as needed.
- Youth demonstrate achievement of these goals.
Consistent with the results of our first Learning Challenge, nearly all of the youth in Learning Cycle III met each of these benchmarks as assessed by their POC. We saw successful journeys for close to all Challengers even with more youth served, a reduced level of support, and greater variation in youth GPA. The sole example of an unsuccessful Challenge involved a team journey, which we discuss in a later section.

The 19 youth who completed their learning journeys expressed strong feelings of success and accomplishment. Youth were able to maintain control of their journeys, even with substantial adult involvement. 100% of youth who finished their Challenge reported they maintained complete control, even though approximately half also stated that others influenced them, or attempted to, during the journey. Nearly all Challengers reported they shared their experiences with adults other than their GripTape POC during the journey, and 95% of these young people stated that support and encouragement were vital to their success. Importantly, while youth did choose to engage non-GripTape adults for support, they were more likely to seek help with administrative tasks like errands, transportation, and materials than to ask for topic or planning assistance.

Challengers indicated they experienced significant learning, with 100% reporting they gained meaningful knowledge or skills and 89% rating their particular topic content knowledge and skills as “intermediate” or “advanced” following the Challenge. This represents significant learning compared to youth assessments prior to the journey when 76% of youth rated themselves as having no or “novice/beginning” abilities and knowledge.

In addition to these topic gains, 100% of youth who completed their journey expressed greater confidence as a result of participating in the Challenge, particularly in their ability to direct their own learning in the future. One Challenger noted:

*I will now approach learning with more of an optimistic attitude and confidence because I know I’m smart and capable.*

Not surprisingly, though, many young people faced uncertainty at times about their ability to complete their journey. 74% reported there were periods when they lost motivation or felt unsure about finishing, yet they consistently demonstrated resilience when faced with difficulties or uncertainty. Asked what motivated them to continue, Challengers cited their passion for the topic and their desire to accomplish their goals independently as key factors. One Challenger who had to revise her learning goals and implementation plans nonetheless considered her journey successful, and attributed this outcome to:

*[m]y tenacity. I really care about this project so I go out of my way to talk to people and figure it out. Others don’t work as hard as you because they don’t have your same vision ... so for me it is about going out and getting it for myself.*

When asked how they knew their journeys had been successful, the majority of Challengers defined success as meeting one or more learning goals, even if these were modified. Indeed, nearly all youth had to revise their goals, activities, or both during the journey, and did so successfully. When asked to describe situations that required modifications and their implications, rather than describe wholesale changes, Challengers more often described mid-course corrections that better aligned their activities with desired goals and realistic expectations for other participants.

Challengers also contended with plans or activities that simply did not work as originally designed. For example, in two cases, Challengers noted their original plans depended on responses from adults they
did not know (e.g., professors), and when these requests were ignored, youth had to re-tool strategies to obtain this learning from another source.

100% of youth said the desire to demonstrate to themselves what they can accomplish on their own was a moderately to very important factor motivating them to continue the journey in the face of difficulty or uncertainty. Challengers similarly noted the powerful impact of having an opportunity to explore a topic they do not have another pathway to pursue, or one they care about solving or consider important to their future. When asked what he did to persist, one youth noted:

I kept going. No tricks or anything. I wouldn’t let anything stop me from going farther and doing more.

Another Challenger responded by saying:

I just reminded myself that everything I will go through is going to have challenges, but I have to keep going in order to be successful.

Youth described multiple ways the Challenge had an impact on one or more aspects of their approach to learning. Several described gaining an understanding of the orientation and practices needed to be successful learners, such as being persistent, maintaining focus, and having patience. Others credited the experience with helping them realize the importance of planning and organization in reaching goals, and noted they intend to use these skills going forward. One Challenger’s experience has led her to renew her commitment to finishing high school because she sees it as a stepping stone to her future success.

Another youth summed up how the GripTape experience changed her overall approach to learning:

The Challenge has taught me that there is more than one way to reach your goal. Just because I mapped out one way to do something, sometimes life happens and the plan I had no longer works. I learned that taking a different course doesn’t mean I’m doing anything wrong, but rather deepening my learning and experiences by having to draw up another plan.

**LEARNER SKILLS & MINDSETS**

Our Framework for Facilitating the Emergence of Learner Agency posits there are a set of skills a person must practice and gain competence in to effectively contribute to, influence, and guide their learning.

These skills include:

- **Forethought**, or the ability to set and inform an intention that will guide action plans and strategies (vision).
- **Goal-Setting**, or the ability to set goals and anticipate likely outcomes (plan).
- **Self-Regulation**, or the ability to construct and follow through on an appropriate course of action and course-correct as needed, building on emotional intelligence (implement).
- **Self-Reflection**, or the ability to reflect on one’s thoughts, actions, and experiences and learn from them (evaluate).

Additionally, we assert that passion for a topic as well as positive mindset — or, belief in one’s ability and competence coupled with the conviction that one can get better and grow — are critical markers of
learner internal locus that must exist or be developed to facilitate learner agency. The experiences that Challengers faced as they pursued their learning, and in particular, their actions and dispositions as they responded to the day-to-day circumstances of the journey underscore the importance of these skills and competencies. Challengers largely practiced each of the learner skills, and in so doing, developed greater awareness of the need for others. Further, this mutually reinforcing system, where initial experiences with learner agency lead to the emergence and often strengthening of these facilitative skills, make successful practice of learner agency more likely in the future.

**LEARNER SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

Youth who completed their journey uniformly expressed greater self-regulation as a result of participating in the Challenge, pushing through setbacks that arose and altering goals as needed. Young people practiced these skills each time a plan had to be altered to fit a new constraint, with youth increasingly valuing flexibility and independence. Indeed, nearly all of this learning cycle’s Challengers said they were now more likely not to give up when a task is hard, to determine their goals and the path to achieve them before starting, and to change their plans as needed based on a growing understanding of the problem. As one Challenger explained:

> Now I know that I need to set goals in order to know what I plan to get out of learning. Then working towards those goals will motivate me to continue learning even when the thing I’m learning seems uninteresting. Now I will also approach learning by looking at how far I’ve gotten instead of how much I have not done in reaching my goal. I will change my perspective to think more positively about my lifelong learning journey.

A number of Challengers discussed new abilities to reflect positively on their actions and experiences, including two youth who said they had been highly self-critical prior to the Challenge but developed positive mindsets and self-reflection skills following their journey. As one young person described:

> I am starting to learn how to [self-reflect] as a learning experience instead of a negative experience … I needed to be my own hype-man rather than my own hit-man.

Youth overwhelmingly noted an increased likelihood to practice self-reflection as a result of participating in the Challenge. 94% of Challengers stated they would be more likely to look back at problems to see if their solution makes sense, think about how their plan could have been improved, and consider what they did well. As one young person said:

> I learned that planning is definitely a major part of learning. Without a proper plan, you can get overwhelmed with ideas and end up frequently changing your goals.

Moreover, nearly all youth reported that they are now more likely to figure out their goals and how to accomplish them as well as consider what may happen in the future to impact their work.
Challengers discussed believing they can change, learn, and grow, and overwhelmingly credit their GripTape experience with strengthening these convictions by giving them the opportunity to seize “the steering wheel” of what and how to learn. All of the young people who completed their journey expressed interest in pursuing additional independent learning experiences, including further exploring their topic and continuing to be involved with GripTape. Indeed, many remain engaged through other opportunities such as our user-centered design workshops, presentations to new and existing partners, representation at conferences, and leading youth-to-youth recruitment efforts in collaboration with our Youth Leadership Board.

TESTING NEW COMPONENTS

By testing several new components and characteristics of our model, we set out to understand the circumstances in which youth can successfully lead their own learning and explore ways to best scale our efforts. Specifically, we sought to learn how youth experiences and success vary by duration, level of adult support, demographic characteristics, and team participation.

Ultimately, we found very little variation in youth success based on most new program variables, with 19 of 21 Learning Cycle III Challengers successfully completing their journey. Youth demonstrated success under all of the following conditions:

- Journey durations of six weeks to three months.
- Receiving, on average, twice-a-month interactions with the GripTape Point-of-Contact.
- Pre-Challenge GPAs ranging from 1.0–4.0 or higher.

TEAM JOURNEYS

The one variable in which we saw the greatest divergence was team journeys, which we defined as a group of youth who applied and planned to implement their learning together. In Learning Cycle III, we selected three teams with two or three youth per group, and saw very different experiences among them.

One group collapsed before their journey started, with a single remaining team member who elected to push forward on his own and ultimately completed a successful Challenge. A second team began and made initial progress, but soon encountered significant difficulties they seemed unable to overcome by the end of their third week. A final team, comprised of two members, successfully designed, executed, and completed their journey. Of the two unsuccessful teams in Learning Cycle III, interviews with youth revealed a notable absence of team process leadership and shared commitment to the journey experience. These factors seemed to have hampered the ability of group members to launch or make progress which, in turn, amplified emerging implementation and relationship fissures.

While GripTape’s experience with group journeys is limited, we offer several preliminary observations about teams in general. To begin, while youth often inquire about applying as a team, no more than four did
so in this learning cycle. One hypothesis for the gap between expressed interest and action is that young people may, in the end, be unwilling to sacrifice autonomy and personal passion for teamwork. When given the opportunity to design and pursue their learning with full decision-making authority, very few youth appear willing to risk the potential rewards of this experience by aligning with other young people around passion, goals, and execution. Indeed, this orientation may be exacerbated by experiences in formal education settings in which youth are often forced to work in teams that are established by adults. Or, an arguably simpler hypothesis is that it is not financially advantageous for young people to apply together — the GripTape grant remains $500 regardless of the number of journey participants.

**PEER NAVIGATOR IMPACT**

Research from our first learning cycle established convincingly that young people want to support their peers in driving their own learning, a desire (which we call “youth activation”) that was expressed by nearly all surveyed. Building on the success of the POC support model from our initial Challenge, we co-designed the Peer Navigator role with youth to test the hypothesis that young people can provide peers with encouragement that, in turn, helps them drive their learning.

Similar to their adult counterparts, Navigators were trained to listen, encourage, and inspire — but not to direct. Youth were deliberately matched without common interests in order to eliminate the potential tendency to provide advice when interests are shared. GripTape team members established the pairings, and new Challengers who were provided with a Peer Navigator were not given the option to decline this support. Youth-to-youth contact took place weekly by phone or text.

While youth generally expressed appreciation for the encouragement received from their Navigators, many also said this support did little to enable them to propel their own learning, instead expressing the sentiment that this “... was one more thing I have to do.” By contrast, these Challengers did express desire to connect with other young people around shared learning interests. This important insight is informing our development of a new online youth learning community that we will test in our upcoming cycle to determine if this platform offers an effective means to scale youth-to-youth learning and activation.

**ALUMNI CHALLENGERS: STICKY GROWTH**

This latest learning cycle gave us the opportunity, for the first time, to begin exploring the enduring impact of the Learning Challenge on youth. To this end, we interviewed Challengers who participated in the previous cycle six months after the completion of their journeys to better understand which skills and competencies have persisted or grown in the interim.

These youth spoke overwhelmingly about how participation in the GripTape Challenge led to increased and enduring self-confidence and positive mindset about what they can accomplish if they try. Moreover, they described how this strengthened confidence and outlook, in turn, translated to greater motivation, perseverance, and seizing new learning opportunities, in and out of school.

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It takes a lot to approach a problem and say you have the ability to solve it. I can learn how to do new things and know it is going to be successful.
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— Youth Challenger
Youth framed their gains in self-confidence as significant and far-reaching, offering multiple examples of how this belief, coupled with the specific experience of the Challenge and skills developed, had transformed their approach to learning. Young people recounted that they now not only believed they could achieve their goals, but that trying, in and of itself, was important to their growth. Confidence in their ability to “go after new things” by setting realistic goals and making smart plans was a common theme. Challengers also pointed to greater self-confidence as leading to growth in their communication skills and comfort engaging with other people in a range of settings. They described no longer being nervous or afraid to seek out people or enter new, unknown situations.

For many youth, mindset shifts translated broadly to their approach to learning in multiple contexts. They cited a new realization they “don’t need a teacher to learn,” and that learning does not have to be for a grade or paper alone, but can rather be for their own benefit. The broad applicability of their heightened resilience and tendency to persevere led to similar insights, with youth describing new understanding that not everything has to be perfect to be worthwhile and that they can still progress even if interim steps or long-term goals do not go as planned. Interestingly, some youth made clear reference to applying these beliefs not only to their work in areas where they had great interest, but also to less compelling situations they might have previously resisted. One young person described how these beliefs have risen for her passion projects, but also how they have enabled her to recast activities she finds less meaningful as “seasons,” or positive steps on her way to other goals.

Youth also described enduring growth in all four of the learner skill sets. In particular, young people consistently cited their improved abilities to set realistic interim and long-term goals, make sensible plans, organize their work, and manage their time as concrete outgrowths of their GripTape experience. Self-regulation and reflection skills were cited hand-in-hand with goal-setting and organization, as former Challengers described their abilities to assess progress against their plans, course-correct as needed, and learn from their experiences. Notably, youth indicated a clear awareness that using these skills will improve their likelihood of success in and out of school, now and in the future.

Finally, most alumni Challengers described having demanded and seized new opportunities to direct their own learning across a range of contexts — and not only to learn, narrowly defined, but to lead in areas they care deeply about and to explore new domains and roles. From consistently speaking out in a class in which they would have previously been passive bystanders, to entering a children’s book illustration contest for the first time or co-leading a professional photo shoot for New York Fashion Week, youth cited multiple situations where they engaged more directly in their learning and/or took on new roles since the end of their journeys. One Challenger described several extracurricular positions she has assumed in her school and said:

[I] set goals, did all of the process logistics, and began fundraising. When other people weren’t into doing the work, I did it all on my own! In the past, I would have given up.

Moreover, she stated explicitly that she is practicing these skills in order to strengthen them over time. Notably, many youth stated that the absence of opportunities coupled with, in many cases, misaligned structures or adult mindset, hampered their ability to lead their own learning, especially in school, which in turn limited their practice of these new skills.
A former Challenger summarized his new perspective on directing his own learning pathways months beyond his journey by stating:

*I hadn’t even considered it before. Now that I’ve seen the possibilities of guiding your own learning, it’s so much easier to approach different things that I want to learn! I had always been interested in lighting. Now I’m in a technical theatre class, and I got to design lighting for The Lion King! I have been doing more things, trying out for solos and different acting things that I normally wouldn’t ... it’s absolutely linked to my increased confidence.*

**LEARNING CYCLE IV**

In our fourth learning cycle, which will launch this summer with 50 new Challengers, GripTape is interested in five broad areas of inquiry:

- What did youth accomplish over the course of their learning journey?
- What did youth learn as a result of taking part in a GripTape Learning Challenge?
- How did youth beliefs change during their journey?
- What percentage of youth were successful, and why or why not?
- Which components of our support model contributed to Challengers’ success?

In 6 and 12-month post-journey interviews that we will conduct with past Challengers, we will investigate:

- To what extent have these youth demonstrated behaviors related to learner agency in the intervening months since their journey?
- To what extent have they developed new agency skills and competencies?
- To what extent have their beliefs continued to evolve over this timeframe?

In addition, we will analyze experiential differences and success among all Challengers as affected by key characteristics like age, gender, school engagement, and length of learning journey. We also intend to work closely with selected partners who are tracking traditional achievement metrics for their youth to better understand the engagement and completion rates of these young people in educational settings beyond GripTape.

Further, our upcoming learning cycle will allow us to test the outcomes of a youth-to-youth recruitment strategy designed and implemented by former Challengers and our Youth Leadership Board. This campaign includes a youth-designed application process, direct recruitment through youth-led partnership development, targeted support for Challenger alumni recruiting, and youth-to-youth outreach in the form of presentations made by former Challengers and Youth Leadership Board members.

We will test refinements to the POC model as we explore the most successful ways to provide this resource to youth. Alternative structures will include fewer points of contact over the course of Challengers’ learning journeys as well as all-virtual check-in calls and end-of-journey meetings. With these shifts, we aim to begin determining where efficiencies exist that will inform our scaling efforts.
Finally, we intend to serve youth explicitly identified as disengaged, using former Challengers, Youth Leadership Board members, and selected partner organizations to identify these young people. Our goal is to deepen our understanding of the model’s efficacy with disengaged youth, and to begin identifying other programmatic components that may be essential to ensure their success. This work will form the foundation for future research aimed at defining metrics that better align with young people’s self-identified levels of engagement, passion, and purpose, regardless of their performance on existing educational benchmarks.

This summer, as GripTape again more than doubles the number of youth we serve in a single cycle, we will also be launching a principal component of our scaling strategy: our mobile-optimized web app, the Youth Squad. The Squad, comprised initially of GripTape Board Members as well as 50 new and 30 alumni Challengers, will allow young people to foster relationships with peers around learning and provide access to youth-to-youth expertise and resources. Supported by an intern serving as an Online Community Facilitator, we will closely study usage patterns, behaviors, and analytics to gain insight into the efficacy of this community to foster youth-driven learning. We expect to glean early lessons about the role technology can play in supporting the development of learner agency skills and competencies among Squad members, as well as the potential impact of an online learning community comprised exclusively of young people.

**GRIPTAPE’S FUTURE**

True to our iterative model, GripTape will emerge from our fourth learning cycle with additional key questions to guide future refinements, including:

- Are disengaged youth successful with greater or fewer points of contact with their POC? How do these results compare with more engaged youth?
- How do increases in learner agency skills impact achievement outcomes in other learning contexts for youth? What measures will GripTape use to assess these effects?
- How far can adult support be reduced in our model?
- How does an online support community compare with in-person support?
- Do youth seek and provide learning support in an exclusively youth-populated online community?
- Does asynchronous, virtual support provided via the Youth Squad drive youth-to-youth engagement more effectively than in-person support?
- In what ways is youth-to-youth recruitment successful — or not? Are there other supports or tools that would lead to greater success in these efforts?

As GripTape looks to the future, we will continue partnering with mission-aligned organizations advancing learner agency within their own contexts, such as those focused on youth-adult collaborations to improve communities or to expand passion pathways within formal education environments. By spring 2018, we will build an organizational website to make our research protocols, instruments, implementation guides, and reports publicly available so that other stakeholders may adapt and learn from them, thereby expanding our collective understanding of the impact of learner agency within the range of domains in which youth develop and pursue their goals.
Grip tape is an anti-slip adhesive used by skateboarders to anchor themselves to their board so they can take control of where they want to go and how they want to get there. GripTape, the organization, gives young people the traction they need to seize control of their own learning, choose their purposes, and achieve their full potential. GripTape is an initiative of the America Achieves accelerator, and part of a community of change-leaders seeking systems change across education.

While we recognize that young people today must rely on adults and adult-engineered systems, both in and out of school, we will continue to push the boundaries of what we believe to be possible by expanding opportunities and environments in which youth truly architect their learning paths. GripTape will continue to advocate for experiences that place young people in control of their learning, and in so doing, catalyze transformational change across youth-serving environments.

“"I am making these decisions. Consistently work[ing] hard. I am doing it for myself so I want to keep doing it and do it more."”
—Youth Challenger