

The Harry Potter Alliance

Janae Phillips

In college I worked with a nonprofit that wanted to engage youth in a community-driven city-planning process. I was the youngest member of the team, at least in part because they hoped I could show them how to talk to younger people, and I was excited to be surrounded by many experienced activists from my community. Of course, city planning isn't a particularly riveting subject to pitch to a sixteen-year-old who doesn't generally get involved in these sorts of things, so I spent a lot of my time trying to develop ways to catch their attention, feeling confident that once they got involved they would be highly invested. At one point I pitched an idea to frame the project as preparation for a zombie apocalypse, where it was up to us to make our city the best it could possibly be to increase our chances of survival. I was met with a pretty emphatic "no," not because the idea wasn't the greatest thing ever (it wasn't, to be fair) but because they didn't think it was "serious" enough. I tell this story frequently, not because I'm embittered about my long lost zombie city-planning program but because it's such a clear example of a great and terrible truth: the majority of organizations don't really want to engage with youth; they want *youth* to engage with *them*.

It's a situation I encountered throughout my time as a student; knowing I wanted to work in the field, I joined just about every leadership program I could find. Across the board, I began to see a disparity between the values most student leadership programs teach—accessibility, community organizing, engagement—and how they were designed. The programs were built to serve the students like me, the early adopters who would stick with the program regardless of how much fun it was; in some cases this was rooted in a belief in the traditional way of teaching these subjects, but in others it felt almost intentionally boring, like the leadership development version of a prerequisite "weed 'em out" course. I watched the vast majority of students drop out of these

programs after a semester or two and still more walk right past our table at dozens of student activity fairs, perhaps because they knew what “resume booster” really means: we can’t think of a compelling reason you’d want to spend your time on this, but we think you should anyway. That’s not to say any of these programs were bad—as a student they totally transformed my education—but they were caught in the trap of trying to motivate young people to engage on the organization’s terms rather than designing programs to engage with youth on their terms. In some ways they had subscribed to an idea that young people not prepared to sit through “serious” instruction (perhaps code for “adult” instruction), were not equipped for the importance of the subject matter or the challenges activism would ask of them. In doing this, the design of the programs can create barriers for the vast majority of potential youth activists.

The [Harry Potter Alliance \(HPA\)](#) was the first organization I encountered as a student that seemed to flip this script. HPA is an international nonprofit whose mission is to turn fans into heroes by drawing parallels between popular media and real-world social issues, a model we call “fan activism.” In doing so, HPA engages with young people in a way that naturally fits in with their everyday lives, interests, and passions, and has been doing so for ten years. Participants, self-identified as “Wizard Activists,” can engage with the HPA either as individuals or as members of [local chapters](#), a network that represents six continents and dozens of nations. When I started my own chapter, I immediately noticed the marked difference in my experiences; we had a steady stream of interest at student activity fairs, and most of the students in the chapter weren’t involved in any other leadership or service organizations on campus, certainly not activism. This is true for participants in HPA chapters in general, where seventy-four percent say HPA is the first time they’ve participated in activism.

The [utilization of stories](#) to drive engagement is not unique to the HPA—in fact, the more you examine the engagement strategies most prevalent in education and educational technology now, the more you find that stories are in fact the common denominator. Project-based learning, game-based learning, gamification, digital storytelling—all of these methods rely on stories, whether real or imagined, to engage learners. Perhaps there is something to be said for the relationship between a story’s ability to transport us to other worlds and the gaming concept of flow, that feeling when you’re so in sync with the task or challenge in front of you that for a moment

you're able to think about nothing else. On a more drawn out scale, could it be that the transportative nature of stories allows us to reach a kind of flow in our engagement with a process?

Of all the places I've found the influence of stories, the most striking was in the very leadership model I'd been taught in those college programs. The Hero's Journey is something most of us learn about in English courses as a literary template present in a majority of our most beloved fictional stories: the journey of the hero from individual discovery and development, to finding and leading a group, to impacting community. This template lines up remarkably well with the Social Change Model of Leadership Development, a highly regarded and widely utilized model that emphasizes development through individual, group, and community leadership. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised by this. After all, the heroes experiencing the Hero's Journey are developing leaders themselves; so often the ones we fall in love with the most are the youngest—the Harry Potters and Katniss Everdeens and Avatar Korras. The youngest heroes with the most development to experience are the ones who leave the biggest impression on us; there's a relatability and excitement in their stories in particular. If this is true for fictional characters, it can certainly be true for our own young leaders.

In the HPA Chapters Program, we build our programs on what we call the Narrative Leadership Model. Derived from the intersections between the Hero's Journey and the Social Change Model of Leadership Development, Narrative Leadership treats participants as developing heroes. We think about access points as Calls to Adventure: What is the piece of information or the experience that will spur our new heroes into action? Is it something they have already experienced in their lives that we can help frame for them, or is it something we need to bring to their attention? Once they're ready to go on this adventure, we work on helping them develop their own Hero Identity—what are the values, beliefs, experiences, and skills that make them a hero with unique strengths. Then, we encourage them to make explicit Commitments to the work they're going to do, their own heroic pledge to see this through until journey's end. Sometimes Commitments look like signing literal pledges; sometimes they look like telling the world what you're agreeing to do on social media.

Just as the wise old wizard who trains the young hero is often such a critical character, so too are our mentors in our world. Mentorship is weaved into everything we do, from connecting our chapter members to experienced community organizers to emphasizing spaces where chapter organizers can help each other from around the globe. After all, Hermione was just as much of a mentor to Harry as Dumbledore. That global network—about a quarter of the program is outside of the United States—is the foundation of an emphasis of the Strength of Diversity, a reaffirmation that all of the strongest teams, from Dumbledore’s Army to The Avengers, are made up of heroes with their own unique experiences and skills. Being a hero is not about fitting a particular mold but finding ways to hone your strengths and leverage them to best help your community. If that is true, then a diversity of backgrounds can only possibly make our communities stronger, not weaker.

The Chapters program is a reflection of the value the HPA places on empowering people to be activists for their own communities—that the best heroes are local heroes. Our chapter organizers are given resources to show them how to take our global campaigns and implement them in the most effective way for the unique circumstances of their communities, are encouraged to connect with other activists and organizations already doing work there are on the ground. We emphasize to them what community organizers know best: there is Power in Communities, and the most effective heroes activate the strength of their own neighborhoods and the combined force of neighborhoods working together to create change.

This process of development ultimately leads to a hero participating in what we call Epic Love. You’ll know this moment when you see it: it’s Harry going to meet Voldemort; it’s Bree Newsome removing a Confederate flag; it’s a student choosing to spend a Saturday in a soup kitchen; it’s staring at yourself in the mirror and, despite what society may have told you, telling yourself that you are beautiful. Acts of Epic Love are those that are not required of you, that may take some courage or some sacrifice, but that you do because they will make the world that much better. When all of those things come together—answering the call to adventure, the emergence of new heroes, the combined strengths of those heroes creating new teams, the acts of leadership from a place of love—to create change, that is our world’s brand of magic.

Not every youth or young adult needs something like the Harry Potter Alliance to be motivated to join a leadership program—there will always be the students looking for resume boosters, willing to sit through as many lectures as it takes. But if we truly want to engage youth, and if we truly want to create change of global proportions, shouldn't we be designing programs that reach beyond those few? Personally, given the choice between “serious” programs and heroic adventures, I'd choose the adventure every time. As story-driven engagement design continues to transform the way we think about education. I hope that we can change the narrative around the things youth are passionate about in the process. Perhaps their deep engagement with books, or games, or movies, or TV shows can be seen not as disengagement from the rest of the world but as learning how to be heroes.

About Janae Phillips

Janae Phillips is an engagement designer and youth advocate who wants to change the way we think about leadership education. She's the Chapters Director at the Harry Potter Alliance, where she oversees the international Chapters Program and educational initiatives, including the ARG-based leadership conference Granger Leadership Academy. Born and raised in the Sonoran Desert, she holds an M.S. in Educational Technology from the University of Arizona. A museum nerd and proud Hufflepuff, you can find her most places online @janaeisms.