

Studio Y

Studio Y Innovations: Applications for Impact

by **Bronwyn Oatley** ~ 06 Aug 2014

Each year, around the world, students submit millions of applications to undergraduate institutions, pouring hours into a metaphorical black box—honing resumes, crafting cover letters and providing any necessary supplemental information—that are only ever read by a couple of admissions officers. But what if we could do it differently? What if we could create community impact with our applications?

This year, Studio Y decided to do just that.

In the application for Cohort II to the Studio Y Fellowship, we asked candidates to not only tell us their story and share their purpose (questions designed to create personal reflection and impact), but also to *create a valuable experience for others in their community that demonstrated their passion through an “Innovative Assignment”*—a prompt designed to create tangible community impact.

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“In choosing to implement the innovative assignment we wanted to accomplish two things,” explained RJ Kelford, Studio Y Manager. “First, we wanted to better understand the way candidates think, how they create, and how they engage with others; and second, we wanted the application to serve as an opportunity to create impact and encourage people to take action all across Ontario.”

For the Innovative Assignment, we included a few key rules to keep applicants on track: the experience had to demonstrate their passion, it had to have a beginning, middle and end, and it had to involve the applicant and at least two other individuals. With that, applicants were given the freedom to create and explore—with the ask that they provide some documentation of their experience as well as a reflection on their intentions, process and learnings.

How did it go?

In short, it went pretty darn well.

When all was said and done, we had received 159 completed applications with 159 acts of service to communities across this province.

Furthermore, we were thrilled to see the diversity of assignments, demonstrative of the diversity of this province. We saw in-person and online discussions about race, spirituality, identity and history; we saw experiential service trips in nature; and we saw multiple instances of arts-based activism.

For her Innovative Assignment, Willow Johnson, an Ottawa native, worked with three children, ages 4, 6 and 7 years old, to co-create a dance class that she helped facilitate for a dozen adults out of a community centre in our nation’s capital.

“I created this class to attempt both to give adults the space to move freely and express themselves, but also to give the children an opportunity to be seen as leaders,”

Willow explained in her report about the experience. “I wanted to flip roles, expand people’s horizons, and do it in a fun and beautiful way.”

Watching the video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlyoGIBVKN0>) of the creation of the workshop gave me shivers as I saw Willow work with these three young people, effortlessly bringing out their natural curiosity, creativity and wisdom—an opportunity she might not have seized, had it not been for Studio Y’s Innovative Assignment.

For her Innovative Assignment, Taylor Holden hosted two assemblies at her London-based high school, raising awareness about mental wellness and resiliency with hundreds of her peers.

Taken out of context, such an act might seem unremarkable. After all, we all know that students present to their classmates quite regularly. But as the lens zooms out, we saw an inspiring 18-year-old woman raising awareness for a cause amongst those for whom this might be a regular topic. Moreover, this experience was facilitated by a simple prompt in the Studio Y application, “Create an experience for two or more people that demonstrates your passion.”



(<http://www.marsdd.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Taylor-Holden1.png>)

Taylor Holden delivers a presentation on mental health and wellness in front of her high school for her Studio Y Innovative Assignment.



(<http://www.marsdd.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Taylor-Holden21.png>)

The good and the less good: Reflections from the Studio Y Staff

The Innovative Assignment was a gamble. While our team had one precedent to follow (our friends at Kaos Pilot, a design and business school out of Denmark, had used a similar structure and mentored us through the process), we had no idea how it would go over with Ontario's young people. Would they think this made the application too long, discouraging some from applying at all? Would this format disadvantage introverts? And what if the experiences created actually had a detrimental impact on communities?

While some of these questions linger, overall, we're pleased with the results of the experiment.

THE GOOD:

- **Sometimes all that's needed to evoke action is a simple prompt:** It's astounding to

recognize that all of these acts of service were triggered by a simple prompt. Kelford explains, “Through the Innovative Assignment we got a small window into how powerful these applicants are in their communities when you find a way to activate them.”

- **People got off Twitter to engage their communities:** The majority of the Innovative Assignments were not conducted online, but rather were in-person conversations with friends, classmates or colleagues.

THE LESS GOOD:

- **Longer applications = Less applications:** This year, we received 30 fewer applications, likely due to the length of the applications and our ask to applicants to create a community experience, a project that requires more time and commitment than a standard application. That said, we did see the quality of applications increase, with a greater number of applicants receiving higher scores according to our ranking system than last year’s group of applicants.
- **Creativity needs constraints:** While we were excited to see the Google Hangouts and discussions on a wide variety of topics, these types of discussion-based activities outnumbered any other. Moving forward, we might seek to add further constraints to the prompt, encouraging a greater variety of community acts, encouraging folks to move beyond discussion.

What can you do?

If you work for an institution, consider whether applications for impact might make sense for your application. While not every application process has the same goals of the Studio Y application, there are countless ways to be creative in designing a prompt that aligns with your organization’s mission, encouraging action even at the application stage. If you’re a student, or applying to an institution, you might consider performing an impromptu “application for impact,” demonstrating your deep interest in the institution of which you hope to be a part.

If you’d like any further information about the Applications for Impact model, don’t hesitate to reach out to our team at studioy@marsdd.com.

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Bronwyn is an Associate with Studio Y where she focusses on community and partnerships. **See more...** (</bio/bronwyn-oatley/>)

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