

# Communities of Practice and Connected Learning: Breaking Down Walls through the Use of Information and Communication Technologies

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## Abstract

Valuable Initiatives in Early Learning that Work Successfully (Project VIEWS2), is an Institution for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Research Grant with the objective of providing evidence-based methods for planning and evaluating the outcomes of public library early literacy programs. This study, unusual within Library and Information Science (LIS) research, consisted of a two-year experimental design with an online intervention. Forty libraries throughout the U.S. State of Washington were randomly assigned in the two- condition study: control (20) and treatment (20). The focus of this poster is to look at how the design of an intervention, administered during Year Two of the study broke down walls among the experimental librarians through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The existence of an ongoing community of practice across geographic boundaries will be verified by post-intervention surveys and in-depth phone interviews.

**Keywords:** communities of practice, early literacy, online learning, libraries, design

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## 1 Introduction

Valuable Initiatives in Early Learning that Work Successfully (Project VIEWS2), is a study funded by an Institution for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Research Grant. The Project VIEWS2 study, unusual within Library and Information Science (LIS) research, consisted of a two-year experimental design with an online intervention. The overall objective of the research was to provide evidence-based methods for planning and evaluating the outcomes of public library early literacy programs. Forty randomly assigned libraries (13 large, 13 medium, and 14 small) throughout the U.S. State of Washington were included in the two-condition study: control (20) and treatment (20). The focus of this poster, rather than on the overall objective of the research, is to look at how the design of an intervention, administered to the experimental librarians during Year Two of the study, broke down walls among the librarians widely separated geographically, through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Methodologically, two pre-intervention surveys provided knowledge of the librarians' context and led to the design of a connected learning experience. The existence of an ongoing community of practice across geographic boundaries will be verified by post-intervention surveys and in-depth phone interviews prior to submission of the final poster draft. Findings of this research can be applied to designing other ICT educational situations.

## 2 Theoretical Basis for Intervention Design

EL-Capstone<sup>1</sup>, a research-based survey instrument administered before the intervention, revealed to us that though librarians indicated a reasonable comfort level with the early literacy core knowledge to be presented in the intervention, they did not feel comfortable implementing the knowledge in their practice. We wanted to create an intervention that would build confidence through peer support and shared learning opportunities, thereby breaking down the geographical barriers among the participating librarians.

Therefore, a social constructivist approach to communities of practice and the principles of connected learning incorporated in webinars were chosen as appropriate theoretical bases for an intervention designed for librarians who were too widely distributed to meet in person.

Communities of practice have long been considered a successful mode for adult learning and as method for building confidence. As noted by Yukawa, “communities of practice stress that learning is not merely knowledge acquisition but more fundamentally a process of identity formation and empowerment through participation in learning communities” (2010, para 7). While much has been written on communities of practice as a whole, we chose to explore this particular community of youth services librarians, in the context of using planning and evaluation tools developed by the research team, aimed to measure and inform early literacy learning in storytimes.

Connected learning is a recently introduced concept, originating from the work of Mizuko Ito and others with the learning of youth in a networked society (Ito et al, 2013). However, several of the principles of connected learning as readily apply to adult learners in an ICT learning situation. In our design of the meeting, we chose to incorporate two aspects of the Connected Learning principles and values: “Peer-supported,” i.e., contributing, sharing and giving feedback in inclusive social experiences that are fluid and highly engaging (para 17) and “Social Connection,” i.e., learning becomes meaningful through relationships (para 15), believing that these would help facilitate a community of practice and a cohort of experts.

## 3 Context Informs Design

Two surveys of the librarians gave us needed information about the context of the intervention. In addition to EL-Capstone, we conducted a survey to assess each librarian’s current technological capabilities and work obligations and provided assistance in preparing their environments. As a result, we created an intervention design that offered maximum flexibility and consistency with respect to meeting dates and times, as well as provided hardware and software support wherever possible to facilitate community and participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Capps, J. (2011). EL-Capstone Scale Development: An Emergent Literacy Concept Inventory. Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations. Retrieved from <http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/etd/4241>







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