

Breaking Down Barriers: Transforming Libraries into Learning Labs

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Abstract

This poster will introduce a key educational collaborative project in libraries and museums between the U.S. MacArthur Foundation, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the Urban Libraries Council, the Association of Science-Technology Centers, the Chicago Public Library, and the Digital Youth Network. Using this project, the authors will share how research on how the use of technology by digital youth has influenced practice in this collaborative venture; demonstrate how the basic research has led to a broad-based understanding of connected learning that breaks down barriers for youth in a networked world; validate the presence of information-provision persons in library learning labs; and explore what this means from a university perspective for the education of 21st century librarians working with youth.

Keywords: collaboration, libraries, technology, youth, learning

Citation: Dresang, E. T., Eshleman, A., Mills, J. E., & Bayo Urban, I. (2014). Breaking Down Barriers: Transforming Libraries into Learning Labs. In *iConference 2014 Proceedings* (p. 1113–1116). doi:10.9776/14393

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1 A Key Educational Collaborative

It all started as part of the MacArthur Foundation's decision, as part of their Digital Media and Learning Initiative, to try an experimental learning space for teens called YOUmedia. Opened in 2009, YOUmedia occupies an open, 5,500-square-foot space on the ground floor of the Chicago Public Library's downtown Harold Washington Library Center. A dedicated member of the Chicago Public Library staff oversaw the project design and content. From there it spread to four additional Chicago Public Library spaces and then through a grant process to 24 additional public libraries and museums across the country. This expansion was made possible through funding from a partnership between the MacArthur Foundation and the Institute for Museum and Library Services, founded upon the success of YOUmedia. The Urban Libraries League and the Association of Science-Technology Centers joined the collaboration to support the design and implementation of the additional learning labs and to provide a community of practice, technical support, and cross-project collaboration. A prime purpose of these learning labs was to turn teens and tweens from consumers of media to creators – in essence to put youth into the driver's seat. Nonetheless, the adults in the learning labs play an essential role as mentors for the youth; mentors came from library staff and the Digital Youth Network (DYN), another partner in the venture. The learning labs incorporate both traditional and digital technologies and serve as a prime example of the iSchool purpose of connecting people, information, and technologies.

2 How Research Influenced Practice

With a grant from the MacArthur Foundation, Professor Mimi Ito, a cultural anthropologist, and a cadre of other researchers set out to conduct a multi-year study of teens use of technology in both formal and informal spaces with an emphasis on interest-drive use in information spaces. In 2009, the MIT press published the findings of their research in a book, also available free online as a .pdf, called *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out* (Ito et al.), to represent the different levels of participation with digital media. The research was revolutionary in that it demonstrated the same young person actually used various technologies at different levels rather than adhering to just one use as much previous research indicated.

In the hanging out stage, teens tend to spend more time talking with one another than engaging with the technology, although they may be hanging out with friends on Facebook or other digital media. In the messing around stage their interest in technologies increases but in more of an exploratory or casual manner, e.g., exploring games, than with a systematic or identified purpose. In the geeking out stage, however, teens are much more purposeful and engaged in the use of technologies and their use in the creative process. The Learning Labs often become maker-spaces. One of the questions to be answered in the YOUmedia learning lab was what made the difference for teens who were just hanging out and those who were geeking out.



Figure 1: YOUmedia Learning Lab



Figure 2: Young Engaging in YOUmedia Learning Lab

At any rate, the design of YOUmedia encourages all three of these uses for teen participants. According to Ito, libraries are transformed, as barriers come down, into loud, exciting learning spaces. This collaborative is one of the largest and one of the most unique ventures to be based directly on academic research, demonstrating the importance of research and of applying research to practice. YOUmedia is about reimaging learning in the 21st century.

3 Connected Learning

Ito's research, supported by the MacArthur Foundation, expanded from the original 3 principles to a more holistic look at how 21st century youth are learning from digital media. The term 'connected learning' has been applied to this overall view, and specific principles underlying it have been identified (Ito et al, 2013).



Figure 3: Mizuko Ito

The purpose of recognizing connected learning is to provide teen users of online networks with the opportunity to learn with the support of peers and caring adults in ways not otherwise possible or available. "This model is based on evidence that the most resilient, adaptive, and effective learning involves individual interest as well as social support to overcome adversity and provide recognition" (Ito et al, 2013, 4). The topic of digital badges has been incorporated into the implementation of connected and shared learning with research currently underway to determine the value of these seemingly extrinsic motivators. Mozilla and HASTAC as well as the Gates Foundation support this collaborative effort. One organization that has adopted the idea of rewarding librarians with badges for reaching identified competencies is the Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association.

4 The Value of Information Professionals in Learning Spaces

There have been two formal annual evaluations of the YOUmedia experiment conducted by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR). One of the questions to be answered in the YOUmedia learning lab was what made the difference for teens who were just hanging out and those who were geeking out. (Austin et al. 2011; Seebring, et al., 2013) From teens came the answer – the mentors.

Supportive adults who built upon teen interests but provided visions into possibilities were key to the success of the learning labs. YOUmedia staff found that teens left on their own did not automatically connect with workshops and other structured activities that were designed to teach new skills and provide opportunities to explore interests more deeply. That changed when adults reached out to connect with youth socially, acting as guides and "cool" collaborators (Austin, 2).

5 What This Means for iSchools Educating 21st Century Librarians

Paying attention to the transformation that is taking place in libraries across the U.S. and other countries, e.g., The Edge in Queensland, Australia essential for iSchool educators. It means a two-way street – research into practice and practice back into research and teaching. Traditional 'library school' courses do a disservice to aspiring information professionals unless they acknowledge the Breaking down of Barriers to learning that have transformed the spaces and roles of libraries. At least one university in the U.S. has taken on the role of emphasizing Digital Youth in terms of hiring faculty and developing new courses and curriculum. Moreover, faculty from this university are spearheading efforts to develop a community of

researchers from a wide variety of disciplines in a ‘connected learning’ collaborative network. Others have the same purposeful agenda, in order to provide the proper educational experiences for their students

6 Barriers Broken Down

Numerous barriers have come down as this innovative project of transforming libraries into learning labs. The barriers between and among organizations and associations have come down as the value of collaborative relationships, such as YOUmedia, has become apparent. One of the most significant ones is the barrier between adults as custodians of information and youth as passive seekers. Adult and youth are partners in a productive learning environment; for some libraries this means a change in fundamental culture as well as context. And it means putting youth in the forefront of decision-making. More attention has been given to the learning spaces in libraries and they have been designed for more flexibility and appeal. The recognition of the validity of building upon youth interests rather than directing them and the need for equitable access to information have come to the forefront. The value of both technologies and people has come to the forefront in an age of questioning the role of librarians. Ito’s research that looks deeply into the context of the learning that takes place with digital media and in broadly into the connected learning situations is key in understanding the widespread implications of this transformative educational program.

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