

Promoting Equity and Access in Public Libraries' Computer-Supported Youth Programming

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Abstract: This poster documents public youth librarians' efforts to incorporate digital and networked technologies into programming and demonstrates the roles that librarians can play in creating CSCL environments. Using connected learning as a framework, we identified challenges faced by youth librarians in their efforts to create equitable computer-supported learning environments.

Introduction

Library-based learning environments are increasingly supported by computers and other networked technologies. Unfortunately, well-resourced libraries in affluent neighborhoods are typically best positioned to offer rich computer-supported learning experiences (Braun, Hartman, Hughes-Hassell, & Kumasi, 2014). To address this challenge, we conducted interviews and focus groups with youth librarians, asking them to describe their youth programs, their use of technology, and the struggles they face in their efforts to create equitable, inclusive computer-supported learning environments.

Theoretical context

Our work is theoretically informed by Ito et al.'s (2013) connected learning framework, which promotes connections across three learning spheres. *Academically oriented* learning helps young people align their learning activities with future ambitions. When learning is *interest-driven*, young people are motivated to acquire knowledge in areas of personal interest (Barron, 2006). Learning that is *peer-supported* allows young people to interact with and learn from others with shared interests. Connected learning environments also embody three core properties. *Production-centered* environments offer activities and spaces that allow for experimentation, remixing, and design. When young people work cross-generationally with a *shared purpose*, their learning becomes collaborative and embedded in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Finally, *openly networked* infrastructures such as online communities are used to provide support and collaboration across diverse contexts.

The current study

The following research questions guided our investigation:

RQ1: How are public youth librarians across the country currently incorporating technology into their youth programming?

RQ2: What challenges do public youth librarians face with respect to creating equitable computer-supported learning environments?

Method

Context

This study is embedded within a larger initiative, ConnectedLib, which aims to develop a suite of professional development resources to build public librarians' capacity to leverage digital media and connected learning principles. This three-year study is jointly conducted by the University of Washington and the University of Maryland, and three library partners: Providence Public Library, Seattle Public Library, and Kitsap Regional Library.

Participants

We conducted interviews with 66 youth librarians working in public libraries. We also organized three focus groups with 26 youth librarians during the Young Adult Library Services Association's (YALSA) Symposium in November 2015, American Library Association's (ALA) Midwinter Meeting in January 2016, and the Maryland/Delaware Library Association Conference in May 2016. Our sample represents 41 states and the District of Columbia, and rural, suburban, and urban libraries from all regions of the United States.

Data analysis

Using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), we developed a coding scheme that aligned with Ito et al.'s (2013) connected learning framework and our research questions, and employed a joint iterative process of collaborative discussion among researchers (Smagorinsky, 2008). All researchers discussed the codes applied and agreed on definitions, discussing areas of disagreement until reaching consensus on all coded excerpts. We repeated this process three times until achieving satisfactory levels of reliability (average Kappa statistic for final round of coding = .98, range = 0.76–1.00) (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Results and discussion

Technology use is ubiquitous in library youth programming; 98% of librarians we interviewed described some form of technology use, such as providing production-centered activities or free access to digital tools and equipment. Several libraries are engaged in efforts to offer technology that supports youth's interests in music, gaming, and design. Some librarians described more passive uses of technology, like providing access to digital and networked technologies. Much of this technology use exemplifies aspects of connected learning, particularly *openly networked* and *production-centered* experience (like a learn-to-DJ program).

We uncovered three main challenges that public youth librarians face. Librarians find it difficult to implement equitable, openly networked infrastructures because they often don't have the digital tools they need due to library policy. Providing experiences that go beyond simply introducing new technologies is also challenging for non-dominant youth, since librarians were often unsure about how to design or facilitate technology-focused or -infused programming. This uncertainty bled into their relationships with youth patrons, leading to concerns about how to serve as effective digital media mentors.

Our findings point to potential strategies to support connected learning in ways that address equity and access. First, libraries need support in providing technological access, especially for non-dominant youth. (Seattle Public Library's program to lend Wi-Fi hotspots is one promising strategy.) Library administration must also address restrictive social media policies. Finally, librarian training should expand into areas like mentoring, design thinking, and 21st century skills, with a focus on reaching out to non-dominant youth.

Limitations, future directions, and conclusion

The diversity of our sample is a strength of this study, however, since participation was voluntary, our sample may consist primarily of librarians who have an interest in connected learning and CSCL environments. In the next phase of the study, we will develop a suite of professional development resources aimed at enhancing librarians' capacity to leverage digital media and connected learning principles, vetting preliminary content through participatory design sessions with youth librarians. This research is a first step in understanding how youth librarians are incorporating the connected learning framework into the planning and creation of CSCL environments and points to specific needs, including collaboration between researchers and librarians to develop connected learning environments; and training that provides assistance with navigating technology, mentoring, and connected learning principles.

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