

Beyond Library Walls: SPL as an Incubator of Youth Opportunity Brokers in Seattle

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Essential to the success of any learning experience is the inclusion of well-defined measurable outcomes. In my experience, digital media programs are designed to primarily promote objectives that focus on learning how to use a specific tool. Whether the program is a 3D printing class, a game design class, or a computer programming class, learning how to use the tool tends to take central stage. Other objectives such as collaboration and communication, problem solving and negotiation, for example, might be considered peripheral skills that program participants might develop “by osmosis,” or are not intentionally included in the program design at all. One of these often peripheral or marginalized objectives of digital media youth programming, and the one I would like to bring attention to in this writing, relates to helping youth find and join other learning opportunities of their interest in the city. Assuming this role, educators provide a pathway for youth in their development as they navigate the complex demands that lead to a successful academic and professional path. This role of connecting youth to new opportunities and pathways has been defined as “brokering” by Ching, Santo, Hoadley and Peppler (2015):

While the term brokering conjures up images of contract negotiations (i.e., “brokering a deal”), social scientists have adopted this term to signify resources or helpful services that one individual can provide another. For example, Cooper (2014) defines cultural brokers as individuals who “provide resources for youth in bridging across their cultural worlds in ways that reduce educational inequities, such as when a teacher links immigrant parents’ skills in sewing in teaching geometry to their adolescents (Civil & Bernier, 2006), or when a religious leader supports immigrant students developing both college and cultural identities by keeping their home language (Su, 2008) (p. 172).¹

¹ See “On-Ramps, Lane Changes, Detours and Destinations: Building Connected Learning Pathways in Hive NYC through Brokering Future Learning Opportunities”

I'd like to pose some essential questions and offer some strategies to implement the practice of brokering within youth programs for Youth and Family Learning Services at the Seattle Public Library.

The Seattle Public Library is the hub of the Seattle-area network of 27 branches. 2016 marks the 125th anniversary of the first public library to be opened in Seattle. After it was adopted as a department of the city in 1890, the Library opened its first reading room in the Occidental Building in Pioneer Square on April 8, 1891. In 2015, the library had a grand total of 633 Teen Programs, with 17,884 attendees. The Summer of Learning program alone had 96 programs with 5,564 attendees. The most commonly spoken languages for the Homework Help program, for example, are: Vietnamese, Amharic, Somali, Spanish, Tigrinya, Mandarin and Oromo.

SPL engages in various organizational efforts to connect to the community in Seattle and provide services that reflect their needs and interests. These efforts take different forms: a community outreach initiative, community listening events, and events to create awareness about homeless youth or the LGBTQ youth, among others. While these are valued by the community around the city and library staff, few of these programs take place over long periods of time and at the same location. I argue that it is important to consider the extent to which this short-term model can provide an opportunity to build strong and lasting relationships with the young people served.

Based on previous work I have conducted with the youth development non-profit, Global Kids Inc. and the New York City Hive Learning Network², since joining SPL in May 2015, I have engaged in the design of digital media learning experiences at the Library that can be sustained over an extended period of time. A significant aspect of this approach involves encouraging repeat attendance from youth as well as

<https://hiveresearchlab.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/hive-research-lab-2015-community-white-paper-brokering-future-learning-opportunities2.pdf>

² See <http://hivenyc.wpengine.com/portfolio/hive-youth-meet-up/> for information about the Hive Youth Meetups, a project I led in New York with the support from various youth serving organizations part of Hive NYC.

incorporation of brokering practices in our programs that help young people find other opportunities, either at the Library or in other parts of the city or online. This approach and initiative has had some positive reception but it has also encountered some difficulties in implementation. Working through those challenges is essential, as creating youth social capital through brokering and supporting librarians to become impactful brokers has the potential to expand the role of libraries within a young person's ecosystem and highlight the essential role that libraries may play as an invaluable site of enriching experiences as well as a wayfinder of other opportunities. Librarians already assume a role of knowledge brokers when they connect people to information and resources. Now it would be important to expand that role to include youth opportunity brokering as part of the services they provide. It will also advance the Library's goal to establish programs that align with the following service priorities - developed in 2013 and 2104 as an extension of the library's strategic plan:

Youth and family learning

Provide Library services that support youth and families in academic success, career readiness and life.

Technology and access

Serve as Seattle's primary point of access to information, lifelong learning, economic development and creative expression through innovative use of technology and digital resources.

Community engagement

Offer Library programs, services and collections that reflect community needs and interests, feature community voices and create meaningful experiences.³

While integrating this concept into librarians' practice should ideally be introduced into pre-service programs that are preparing the next generation of librarians, this doesn't

³ For a complete list of the Seattle Public Library service priorities visit: <http://www.spl.org/about-the-library/mission-statement>

prevent us from examining ways to implement it with current working librarians. The following are some questions to discuss as we examine the practice of brokering in the library context:

- How can the library prepare youth librarians to expand their notions of brokering to go beyond sharing of knowledge but to also include sharing of future learning opportunities?
- What changes in institutional supports and mechanisms would the library need to introduce to establish the practice of brokering in its youth programs?
- Can brokering be explicitly embedded as an outcome when designing learning experiences for youth?
- Are youth service librarians in the position to take on this new role?

In addition to these key questions that we have raised in our context, we have also identified additional strategies that may help us move forward with regards to our goals around more impactful brokering. These strategies include:

1. Working with the library administration to obtain support for the implementation of youth brokering at the library.
2. Expanding on the already familiar role of the librarians as knowledge brokers, by creating a training curriculum that introduces youth librarians to the concept of brokering for youth as defined in the Hive Research Lab white paper.
3. Develop tools and resources that help library staff to see the connection between youth opportunity brokering and traditional models of librarianship.
4. Identify and distribute opportunities available in the City of Seattle for youth to facilitate the role of the librarian as a youth opportunity broker.
5. Design programs with specific outcomes linked to the role of youth opportunity broker for librarians
6. Incorporate a research component to evaluate the role of a librarian as a youth opportunity broker, and to get youth perspectives on how the adults serve as brokers to them.

7. Align efforts of youth programming at the library with the goals of the Race and Social Justice Change Team which is part of the City of Seattle [Race and Social Justice Initiative](#).
8. Form partnerships with other youth organizations in Seattle to find learning opportunities for young people.

In order to achieve the objective of providing brokering opportunities for youth not only at the library but at a citywide level, consideration should be given to the creation of a network of youth-serving organizations in Seattle. Such a network will create an ecosystem for young people to explore and will provide access to learning and career opportunities available to them in the city.

SOME INITIAL STEPS

Some efforts are already happening in this area. For example, “[t]he Road Map Project is a region-wide effort aimed at improving education to drive dramatic improvement in student achievement from cradle to college and career in South King County and South Seattle.”⁴ Although the Road Map Project aims at having a collective impact, it focuses primarily on formal education and doesn’t include youth opportunity brokering as a tool to build social capital as part of its vision. We see this as an opportunity to leverage and enhance strong and impactful work in our city by developing a networked strategy that incorporates ideas around brokering to increase youth social capital and that values both formal and informal learning spaces as rich resources for youth .

Creating collaborations with other youth-serving organizations in the area is essential to bringing the framework of youth opportunity brokering to a large institution like the Seattle Public Library. With that in mind, a partnership was created between

⁴ For more on the project see: <http://www.roadmapproject.org/>

SPL and Radioactive Youth Media⁵ at KUOW. One of the many public radio stations in Seattle, KUOW is the leading news and information public station in the city. As part of that partnership, Radioactive offers radio journalism training to youth at different library locations in the city. Two library branches, Columbia City and Southwest, have already hosted the Radioactive workshops, and we plan to continue the partnership. Observing the Radioactive program has provided helpful insight around successful strategies leading to youth engagement, mentorship and brokering opportunities. For example, one key strategy has been to identify key elements to create a space that allow relationship-building to emerge organically; we agree, in alignment with the Hive Research Lab white paper, that this is a key aspect of impactful youth opportunity brokering.

Such strategies practices include:

- Establishing clear goals for the program at the outset
- Accountability: being clear about what is expected of the youth participants in the program
- Fostering an environment where relationship-building emerges due to the planning as part of the curriculum development, and strategies to create structure in the program. For example: students are assigned a mentor who sends regular reminders, they are paired with a support partner to check in with throughout the program, start each day with check-ins and a team-building game, and end the day with reflection.

As the Seattle Public Library prepares to disseminate and create new programs through the Digital Media and Learning position that I lead, we look forward to contributing and learning from the discussion around building social capital for youth and to discuss strategies and practices from other members of the community on the subject.

⁵ <http://kuow.org/radioactive-youth-media>