

## Creating Markets for Youth Brokering: A Specialist's Approach

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### Introduction

To foster effective youth brokering and develop deep connections to support young people, youth service organizations need not look far beyond the schoolhouse door. Forging connections with traditional in-school educators is an important opportunity to create new learning environments or “markets” which can better serve youth. Working alongside both teachers and their students since 2011, Beam Center has learned lessons on how best to support interest-driven learning and afford better chances for students to navigate possible new paths for themselves after they graduate. Beam Center acts as a “brokering specialist,” creating a platform in which teachers and students can each approach learning in a new way. It starts with authentic partnerships among students, teachers and the youth service organization and involves communicating with each other, working together and building relationships to support mutual learning that goes beyond a single project or intervention. This creates an environment where “brokering” for the young person is not only more likely but more fruitful and timely.

Beam Center supports youth development with creative, technology-integrated workshops and projects for public school students in New York City. We work with students and educators on a wide range of in-class and out-of-class workshops that include small and large-scale projects as well as professional development. This paper will detail Beam Center’s experiences working with teachers and students from Brooklyn International High School (BIHS), a Title 1 school of newly immigrated students from over 50 countries with a 100% English Language Learners (ELL) population.

### Background:

One stated goal of the HIVE Network is to create *Connected Learning Systems*, where youth encounter a wide range of experiences and are supported as they explore future opportunities with a rich social network of adults, peers, and institutions (Ching, Santo, et al, 2015). A key concept is to foster pathways that can enhance student trajectories and options. Yet, it has also been observed that youth are not very good at capitalizing on opportunities. Even when they are invested in an activity or learning

opportunity, they can have a hard time expressing this to adults and educators. Thus, there is a call to youth service organizations to help identify and develop tools that can help youth better connect and build upon a what can be a single experience. We must identify and foster these connections more explicitly and to seek ways to make it more natural, comfortable and likely that a youth will continue to engage and move forward. Apart from hand-holding (though there can and should be a fair amount of that), how can youth development organizations be sure that they are helping young people make these important connections for themselves?

### **Making Markets for Youth Brokering**

Work on developing student networks naturally shines a light on the need to foster networks among teachers as well. Leah Gilliam, former Director of HIVE NYC observed,

Increasingly, we're seeing traditional classroom teachers embrace our local learning network, allowing them to gather broad perspectives, solve problems—and pursue innovative applications for blended learning. (Gilliam, 2015)

Beam Center's experience points to a classic rule of youth engagement: "Don't tell me. Show me." The youth organizations themselves must show students the hard work of reaching out and collaborating with educational institutions and other youth organizations. By modelling the advice we give to youth, we not only become more trusted brokers in the eyes of young people, we are able to add grease to these potential relationships, smoothing the way for youth to have organic connections and increase the likelihood they will reach beyond singular opportunities. Potent pathways need not be long ones. Bolstering short connections may in fact be more powerful than longer, but more tenuous connections.

To extend Ching and Santo's "youth broker" metaphor (2015), in financial markets a "specialist" operates as an independent facilitating agent between buyers and sellers. Specialists are not simply brokers, executing trades at the direction of customers in exchange for a transaction commission. Specialists make markets. They put their own capital at risk to maintain liquidity by holding and deploying inventory of a given financial instrument. If demand becomes unbalanced to either the buy or sell side, the specialist steps in to meet the demand until the gap between offer and bid narrows.

In the context of youth development, Beam Center sees itself as a specialist. We create a platform for all participants in the youth support ecosystem--teachers, parents and youth--to view their own and each other's skills, interests, and experience through the lens of "real world" needs and inspirations. Beam Center's approach is often in counterpoint to typical "top-down" learning. We create a neutral zone where both teachers and students are learners and the notion of expertise is fluid. When first

introduced to digital fabrication, neither teachers nor the students are experts. With Beam's assistance as specialists, teachers and students can create the learning environment together. This is the market in which ideas, opportunities and connected learning occur.

To support this collaborative framework, we model constructive relationships that influence young people in their perceptions of their teachers and their perceptions of themselves. Our relationships also allow the classroom teachers to see students in a new light and to support them as they become ready for new challenges. Finding ways to engage classroom teachers outside of school, such as inviting them to observe the apprenticeship in action, offers a chance for them to get a totally new view of the child. The students also see a Beam teacher and their school teacher collaborating and learning alongside each other at school, changing the way the student might perceive the teacher. It represents an authentic relationship that the students experience too, as they work alongside Beam Faculty. Furthermore, the classroom teacher and student dynamic can change. The student who has been trained at Beam Center is a resource for his classroom teacher, valued for the special skills and experiences he has had. Indeed, the success of this model is due in part to the fact that teachers and students are learning simultaneously and both become open to new ideas and better appreciate the skills and talents of others. Though sometimes implicit, everyone is invited to participate in this model of meaningful collaborative work. The typical authority structure of a traditional classroom plays out in a new way, and allows for deeper relationships all around.

Over the last five years, Beam Center has observed several ways that youth brokering occurs within our in-school and out-of-school collaborations. It is the specialist's job to "narrow the gap" between buyer and seller and make the cash (or in this case, the knowledge) exchange happen. In this paper, we will present 3 ways in which this dynamic occurs with case examples for each: 1) the student moves closer to the teacher, 2) the teacher moves closer to the student, and 3) the student becomes the teacher and moves outside of the zone, having effectively gained the advantage of the brokered trade. These dynamics are overlapping and not always linear, but overall demonstrate how even a small network of support can effectively broker better opportunities for the students.

### **1) Narrowing the Gap: Student moves toward the teacher**

Narrowing the gap by moving a student closer to the expectations of a teacher is the simplest and most relevant form of brokering to many youth-service organizations, as the focus is the student. By learning a new skill, the student becomes a resource for his community and also gains experience that can be used in other ways. Here, a specialist's job would be to inform or facilitate in a way so that school professionals or

others in the student's network are aware of these new skills and experiences so they can be leveraged into other opportunities.

Case 1: A junior (YG) at Brooklyn International High School (BIHS) learned how to solder and do digital fabrication as part of a BeamWorks out of school internship program. In the next year, one of his teachers embarked on a soft circuitry project, as a result of participating in Beam Center Connected Teaching professional development. When executing the project at school, the classroom teacher relied on YG to act as a classroom assistant to help other students. YG had never been given this sort of leadership position at school and it bolstered his confidence. Later, he became an afterschool assistant at Beam Center and is currently helping train younger teens, acting as a mentor for new apprentices.

## **2) Narrowing the Gap: Teacher moves toward student**

Sometimes educators lead the way, and here the gap can be narrowed by bringing a teacher closer to student interests. The specialist can provide professional development or can help guide a teacher as she applies her inspired interests to the classroom. Beam Center's collaborations with school educators not only create new paths and options for individual students, they help foster school culture change. In this way, a strengthened network lives on to influence many more students beyond a single project or intervention.

Case 2: The Poetry Machine is an example of a large-scale project that was created over a 6 week period with 2 classroom teachers, one Beam faculty member, and 90 high school students from Brooklyn International High School (BIHS). Two BIHS teachers, John Derian, a Physics teacher and Ben Walsh, an English teacher, generated the original concept for the Poetry Machine. The activity was co-designed by Mark Kleback, a Beam Center faculty member with experience in interactive electrical engineering. The project consisted of the creation of an interactive 4 feet by 8 feet board that read magnetically attached laser-cut words and tweeted the overall content on the board through an Arduino microcontroller. Most of the activity took place inside BIHS during English and Physics classes, but students also traveled to Beam Center to use the laser cutter during school hours. Classroom teachers and students were engaged in a somewhat unusual experience: to build and test a large ambitious project together.

The large-scale project generated opportunities for students to learn to work together, share tools and ideas, provide peer assistance and embrace their intellectual diversity. Students claimed new roles as leaders and teachers as the project activities unfolded. This dynamic also served to create connections among school community

members, especially their teachers, while increasing student motivation and engagement in the activity as a shared goal.

There was a sense of community ownership of the Digital Poetry machine, teachers observed, “They [the students] can do something that can be a showcase outside school and shows their work. They can go and present it, and they really like that.” (Otero, Cohen and Freedman, 2015). The act of showcasing the work, even if just at school, opens brokering opportunities for students. Educators who were not directly involved in the project still see and experience it. The students have a chance to explain their work and have a tangible example of success to share with peers or adults in the community. Because the Poetry Machine was co-designed by BIHS classroom teachers, there was a high overall level of excitement and engagement among school staff and students.

### **3) Student Becomes the Teacher: New Paths and Options**

Ideally, the relationship among teacher, youth and specialist is supportive enough to encourage the young person to reach beyond the network, and actually take steps toward a new path to the future. Sometimes that means college, though youth service organizations must also recognize that if college is not a good match for a young person’s interests or skills, having options is even more critical. Quite simply, new skills equal new options, but it is also essential to have aware adults that can help assist the young person in connecting the dots.

Case 3: A junior (EG) had a history of truancy and was connected to Beam Center by a school art teacher who encouraged him to get an art mentorship. This BIHS student was one of the first BeamWorks apprentices and worked on two large-scale collaborative projects at Beam Center; he was later hired as an afterschool assistant. When he was ready to apply to schools, EG worked closely with Beam Faculty/apprenticeship leader Brett Aalsburg to assemble his portfolio. EG earned a full scholarship to Pratt and forged a new path for himself, transforming from a student on the road to expulsion to a role model student and successful college applicant. The support of both his school and Beam Center were critical as the student explored interest-driven learning which developed into a pathway to success.

Case 4: RC came to Beam Center as a junior from Brooklyn International High School. After completing the Beam Works apprentice program, he was hired to work as a shop assistant at Beam Camp over the summer in New Hampshire. He learned to weld and wire electrical circuits during his apprenticeship and was able to use these skills at Beam Camp. Indecisive about going to college or whether to return to his native

Dominican Republic, RC decided to pursue trade school for welding and electrical engineering in NYC.

Case 5: PP was a recent graduate of BIHS who stayed in close touch with her teachers. Due to citizenship status, she could not attend college so she went to trade school for welding and electrical training. Her teachers told us at Beam Center about this talented and enterprising young woman. Beam Center hired her as an assistant, but also taught her Maker pedagogy and advanced skills in digital fabrication. She is now a lead teacher for Beam Center, helping run a Beam Intensive class at BIHS as well as co-leading the BIHS internship program. In the fall 2016, PP will return to her alma mater to work as BIHS FabLab manager.

## Conclusion

These are all examples of how even a small network can create an effective youth brokering space. School educators, Beam Center staff and the students themselves could communicate and strategize over individual student needs, yielding better outcomes for the student that went beyond a one-time interaction that is common for many youth service organizations.

Jason Fleischauer, a BIHS teacher, reflected on the school's partnership with Beam Center,

It's been a major benefit to the school because when you have students that feel like they have more autonomy, they feel like they have more confidence, they have a skill set that's unique, it really filters down into all aspects of their life. (New Learning Times Video, 2014)

In the traditional school model, students have reasons for resisting learning that they find boring, outdated or not relevant to them. Teachers also have reasons to resist new learning especially when it is out of their comfort zone or involves new skills that they may be unmotivated to adopt. Beam Center works as a catalyst and a planner to create a middle ground where roles are less distinct and learning is more open and fluid. We have found it useful to think of ourselves as specialists in the youth brokering ecosystem, supporting an environment where both students and teachers can learn from each other. In the best case, students will internalize themselves as the expert and will act on new paths and opportunities, beyond their Beam experience and beyond school.

## References

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