Digital After-School Programming as Prevention: Positive Outlets for Youth Expression in an Increasingly Hi-Tech World

By Anindya Kundu

Youth and Unsupervised Free Time: A Social Problem with Significant Consequences

Youth development benefits from structure and supervision in both school and non-school environments.¹ Children from low-income homes tend to spend the most time unsupervised, with 17% spending three or more hours a day without adult supervision. Many children miss out on the types of care, attention, and positive environments critical during their developmental years. Youth left unsupervised during after-school hours can face greater negative consequences of substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, as well as other forms of delinquency.² When these negative behaviors are learned early on, these behaviors have the potential of becoming deeply rooted over a child’s life.

A Solution & Intervention – Tapping into Youth Interests for Effective Prevention

After-school programming can provide critical and positive outlets for youth who face higher risks of substance abuse and delinquency. By aligning with youth interests, these programs have the power to be both preventative and correctional. Participation in such programs generally increases youth safety, promotes development of interests and skills, reduces drop-out rates, improves academic performance, and strengthens social skills³. And while some people believe that good programs can only be found and accessed in well-off communities, many free after-school programs exist around the country, spanning across a variety of institutions. These programs can serve all youth, allowing young people to spend their free time in more productive ways.

Youth and Digital Programming: A New Frontier to Reach Young Minds

Attracting and recruiting youth into after-school programs may seem like a formidable task, especially when youth feel estranged from school and other learning institutions. One of the strongest methods for recruiting alienated youth is to align programming to their present interests at the after-school site.⁴ Delinquent and unsupervised youth are often anxious to find safe places where they can receive personalized attention, and access equipment that is both recreational and challenging.

While youth interests vary, digital media has proven to be particularly successful in attracting today’s youth into after-school programs. American youth (ages eight to eighteen) spend an average of seven and a half hours using all kinds of media daily, which is more time than many K-12 students spend

¹ Downey, Broh, von Hippel, 2004
⁴ Schwartz, 1996
within schools across the country. Researchers find that the majority of students, regardless of background, are increasingly interested in learning how to use new media to express and establish their own identities and create innovations. For example, 57% of youth who use digital media produce websites, art, stories, blogs, music remixes or videos. Media can provide disenfranchised youth with tools to connect them and their views to the broader public, allowing them to participate in civic engagement, helping them feel like engaged stakeholders rather than disregarded members of society. These tools enable youth to fight stereotypes rather than internalize them. Through digital learning, young people can build skills, learn creatively, and find unique senses of purpose. This connectedness acts as a protective factor against substance use and other forms of delinquency.

A National Endeavor that Continues to Gain Headway

Digital learning in after-school programs is gaining national recognition. At the federal, state and private levels there is an active push for American youth to become digitally literate. As of 2013, the Obama Administration has raised over $700 million in public-private partnerships under the Educate to Innovate Initiative, created to encourage and foster science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs throughout the country.

Model Program: Learning Lab

One example of these partnerships, specifically within the realm of digital after school programs, is the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the MacArthur Foundation partnership to fund the creation of 24 “Learning Lab” sites across 24 different American cities. The Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Bronx programs were established prior to the Learning Lab grant and helped serve as flagship models that the other sites could follow.

The 27 cities with Learning Labs projects are: Chicago, IL; Washington, D.C.; Bronx, NY; San Francisco, CA; Thornton, CO; Columbia, MD; St. Paul, MN; Kansas City, MO; New York, NY; Columbus, OH; Portland, OR; Allentown, PA; Philadelphia, PA; Nashville, TN; Houston, TX; Dallas, TX; Madison, WI; Rochester, NY; Berkeley, CA; Billings, MT; Poughkeepsie, NY; Tucson, AZ; Richmond, VA; Tuscaloosa, AL; Pittsburgh, PA; Lynn, MA; and Las Vegas, NV.

These Learning Labs are being established with the intention to grant youth fairly unrestricted access to cutting-edge technology and skilled mentorship. Each institution will match funds and develop partnerships with local educational, civic, cultural and business organizations to increase the breadth of resources offered and cultivate a network of learning opportunities for youth in the community. Housed in different libraries and museums, the Learning Labs project shows that digital after-school programs can sprout up in any given local context.

Both public and private organizations have the potential to create such programs, given a little institutional buy-in and a committed adult staff to ensure continued programming. Technology in these spaces can range from basic circuit boards to music and video stations. Organizations need not feel monetarily constricted by their technological offerings, so long as they can provide time and mentorship to youth to make these programs effective and engaging.

5 Austin, Ehrlich, Puckett, Singleton, 2011
6 Greenhow, Robelia, Hughes, 2009
7 Austin et. al., 2011
8 Levine, 2008; Goodman, 2003
9 www.whitehouse.gov

10 IMLS Press Releases. For more information on National Learning Labs, feel free to contact the author of this article directly.
Turning Ideals into Sustainable Reality: Creating Effective Digital After School Programs

Putting these concepts into practice to develop a working after-school setting for kids requires special considerations. Research shows that a newer, participation-oriented method of instruction, Connected Learning, is effective in increasing youth engagement and excitement towards learning. Grounded in research as well as traditional and innovative approaches towards learning, Connected Learning adapts and seeks to uncover the following questions:

1. How can education be a shared responsibility amongst networks of institutions, like schools, museums, libraries and other communities? How can education leverage youth participation in civic engagement, as well as intellectual, social, recreational, and career-oriented pursuits? How can education utilize modern tools that allow adults and youth to work together?

2. Connected Learning triangulates three principles, which, if included in learning settings, fosters and promotes youth growth:

   - **Interest-powered:** Leveraging things that appeal to youth to enrich their desire to learn and achieve. Interests can develop and mature over time, during which youth develop diverse identities.

   - Peer-supported: Youth cooperation enhances learning. Adults too can be peers in the learning environment, sharing expertise and providing quality feedback when appropriate and welcomed.

   - Academically oriented: Academic achievement and intellectual growth spur political and economic opportunities for youth. When peer culture and interests can be connected to academics and credentials, young people can begin to fully realize their life opportunities.

These principles seem particularly well suited for the digital age where youth have the ability to become more independent, social, hands-on and create new things, while developing and maturing into contributing members of society. Paying attention to these principles when planning and designing an after-school setting helps lay the initial groundwork for strong after-school programs.

The HOMAGO Model

To further ensure that young people form organic and productive relationships with technology and other people, after-school settings need to provide doses of both self-directed and supervised engagement. One example of such a framework is the HOMAGO model, or the Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out approach to digital instruction and programming. These three “levels” of participation with digital media were identified as effective for youth engagement following a three-year ethnographic project that spanned 23 field sites, and included over 800 youth and young adult interviews and 5,000 hours of online observations. (The following descriptions have been adapted from the YouMedia Network.)

11 ConnectedLearning.tv

12 Ito et. al., 2008
**HOMAGO Model**

| Hanging Out | • Flexible and spontaneous engagement between youth, mentors, and resources  
|            | • Lots of freedom for youth to try new things  
|            | • Youth begin to learn what most interests and motivates them in the world of digital media  
|            | • “Neutral” and “welcoming” feel  
|            | • Youth drive their own experiences with support and encouragement from mentors |
| Messing Around | • Youth display a more active interest in media  
|              | • Youth tinker and attempt to create and make products they want  
|              | • “Experimental” – youth learn through trial and error, and soak up technological content  
|              | • Opportunities for conversations and the exchanging of ideas is provided  
|              | • Enough structure is given for clear-cut activities and thinking of goals |
| Geeking Out | • Youth start to develop actual expertise around their fields of interest  
|            | • Youth establish objectives that they wish to pursue through media and form strategies for accomplishing them  
|            | • Youth interact with mentors on a more collegiate level, exchanging ideas and engaging in discourse  
|            | • Hands-on projects where youth are continually challenged to create things and pursue interests  
|            | • Provide youth with outlets to display, share, and present their work with a broader audience |

Through these frameworks, digital after-school programs have the ability to appear informal in setting, when in actuality there can be much deliberate structure behind the learning environment. This continues to attract and recruit youth while ensuring that they are experiencing productive programming.

**Mentors: Going Beyond the Hard Resources to Further Benefit Lives of Youth**

Mentors in after-school settings provide guidance to youth to build meaningful relationships that intrinsically attract, recruit, and maintain youth, more so than gadgets can by themselves.\(^{13}\) Relationships with adults are uniquely necessary in digital learning environments that are equipped with state-of-the-art technology that students are not accustomed to using regularly. Dedicated and skilled mentors help youth by enhancing self-esteem and behavioral and social competence, effectively preventing substance abuse and delinquency.\(^{14}\) At the same time, when mentors are absent or aloof, there are declines in these qualities. Thus, it is of utmost importance that after-school programs pay particular attention to hiring a committed staff that understands and takes pride in its ability to affect the lives of youth. Mentors should also be careful not to overbear. When youth craft their own learning and influence policies that affect them, they feel engaged and are likely to generate

\(^{13}\) Karcher, 2004

\(^{14}\) Schwartz, 1996; Karcher, 2004
innovative solutions to problems. In essence, when young people are taken seriously, they tend to take themselves seriously.

The Importance of Peers: Influencing and Keeping Each Other on Positive Tracks

In addition to needing autonomy to learn, youth also need each other to learn better and be positively influenced. Peer relationships are important components to real-world skill building. When disadvantaged youths bond in environments that grant access to skills, rewards and opportunities, they can be effective at curbing each others’ risk for delinquent behavior and substance abuse. Young adults can serve as examples for one another, helping to keep each other on positive tracks.

Interestingly, youth creativity and passion towards technology is shaped predominantly through play and peer-group socialization rather than through academic achievement. Thus, in digital learning environments, peer bonding is essential in increasing the learning that takes place, allowing youth to share innovative ideas and collaborate. Again, unstructured, informal environments, and the freedom to “hang out,” allow tech-based programs to make scholastic programming more fun and conducive for positive youth development.

Resources


15 Noguera, 2003; Catone and LeBoeuf, 2012
16 Ito et. al., 2008, O’Donnell, Michalak, Ames, 1997
17 O’Donnell et. al, 1997
18 Ito et. al, 2008
19 Ito et. al, 2008


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