

## Shaping the New Information Normal: Connected Learning through Empowering Young Adult Spaces

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### Abstract:

*Connected Learning is a research-based education approach that makes learning relevant to young people, to real life and real work, and to the realities of the digital age, where rapid change is constant. Connected Learning links young people to their interests, to inspiring peers and mentors, and to online tools so that they can build on the learning that they do in school and at home.*

*Learning Labs are programs and spaces in museums and libraries where Connected Learning comes to life. Equipped with engaging digital media tools and trained mentors, Learning Labs empower and motivate learners to identify and pursue their true passions—and turn those passions into pathways to new skills and knowledge. Learning Labs help teens pursue their interests, build a supportive network of mentors and peers, and link their passions to academic achievement, a meaningful career, or civic engagement.*

*This paper discusses the Connected Learning model, and how to engage youth through effective Learning Lab spaces in libraries. Examples from three metropolitan library systems: Miami-Dade Public, Columbus Public and San Francisco Public, illustrate exemplary Learning Lab models, and the potential for Connected Learning to impact both individual learners and society.*

**Keywords:** Connected Learning, Learning Spaces, teens, youth

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### YOUmedia Labs

Every afternoon, teens stream through the doors of “YOUmedia”, housed in the North Dade Regional Public Library in Miami. Young voices start to fill the air with podcast recordings they write and produce using brand new Apple computers. In the next room, young people edit self-produced documentary films with Final Cut, an industry-standard software kit for

film production. YOUmedia Miami's state of the art technologies, including Adobe CS-5 Suite graphic design and Garage Band music recording software, keep teens coming back to the center. Personal support from teaching mentors and peers, coupled with endless opportunities to pursue their passions, help young people connect their interests to potential career paths and life goals.

YOUmedia Miami is an inspiration for the recent development of "Learning Labs" in our country's public libraries and museums. They are one part of a new, research-based approach to education called Connected Learning. This is an approach proven to better engage young people and help them achieve more lasting learning outcomes. It is learning that is highly social, interest-driven, and relevant to young people.

### **Connected Learning**

Connected Learning, developed with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, is a research-based education approach that makes learning relevant to young people, to real life and real work, and to the realities of the digital age, where rapid change is constant (Ito & Gutierrez et. all. 2013). Connected Learning links young people to their interests, to inspiring peers and mentors, and to online tools so that they can build on the learning that they do in school and at home.

The goal of Connected Learning is to develop lifelong learners who have the higher-order skills including critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration needed to succeed in today's economy and to become global citizens. This is an approach proven to better engage young people and help them achieve more lasting learning outcomes.

### **Connected Learning in Action: A National Network with Local Impact**

As educators, our objective is to prepare all of our youth to meet the challenges of today's global economy and to obtain the higher-order skills that 21st century jobs demand. As of 2010, 59 percent of U.S. jobs require skills acquired through a postsecondary credential. By 2018, this figure will increase to 63 percent of all jobs, a trend that is likely to continue to grow (Carneval Smith & Strohl 2010). Schools cannot shoulder this burden alone. Communities and families must also provide engaging and effective learning opportunities for youth.

### **Learning Labs**

Community-based institutions like libraries and museums are well-positioned to engage students with personalized learning experiences and support. So, in order to help libraries and museums engage middle- and high-school youth in mentor-led, interest-based, youth-centered, collaborative learning using digital and traditional media, IMLS and the MacArthur Foundation created a grant opportunity for planning and design of Learning Labs, modeled on YOUmedia spaces. 24 Grantees were awarded in 2012 and 2013, and have been required to participate, in-person and online, in a community of practice that provides technical assistance, networking, and cross-project learning. Projects are expected to provide prototypes for the field and be based on current research about digital media and youth learning. While most grantee organizations are still in the planning and development phase, a handful of pilot Learning Labs opened this year. They continue to refine their models, and these organizations

have seen the important role that this framework can play in fostering mentorship and building community networks.

### **What are Learning Labs?**

Learning Labs are programs and spaces in museums and libraries where Connected Learning comes to life. They are places where young people, with the support of adult mentors, can build on their own interests and use their curiosity as a guide to experiment, create, and discover their talents. Equipped with engaging digital media tools, Learning Labs empower and motivate learners to identify and pursue their true passions—and turn those passions into pathways to new skills and knowledge. Soon, learners become creators and makers of ideas and content.

### **What do Learning Labs Do?**

At Learning Labs, young people can discover how a basketball connects to the physics concepts in their homework assignment; how a favorite song relates to writing poetry; or how elements of design are required to transform an empty block into a thriving community garden. And when peers and mentors offer encouragement and guidance, those connections can form deep and lasting roots.

### **The Power of Mentors**

For too many young people, their next step beyond high school is unknown—or, at least, how they will get to that next step is unknown. Many young adults, particularly those from less privileged communities, have a limited view of available opportunities and career choices. At the core of Learning Labs are skilled mentors who model pathways for youth and support the development of youth identity as creators, users, and teachers of digital media. Learning Labs help teens pursue their interests, build a supportive network of mentors and peers, and link their passions to academic achievement, a meaningful career, or civic engagement.

### **It's all about the People**

As libraries and museums plan their Learning Labs and begin to launch pilot programs, we repeatedly hear how important good mentors are to creating a place where teens can connect, collaborate, and learn.

### **Mentors Build Confidence**

Mentors at the Columbus Learning Lab help teens shift from simply replicating what they see online to bringing their own ideas to life. Instead of simply sketching concepts for new clothing designs, mentors help teens learn about the fashion industry and how to create clothes on their own. Instead of just designing on paper what a robot could look like and do, mentors help teens build them. The mentors are a constant source of confidence and encouragement to the teens, many of whom may not receive this type of support in other aspects of their lives.

### **Mentors, Development and Evaluation**

Mentors are also critical to the development process, application of new programs, and evaluation of operations in the Learning Labs. Each day, the two Columbus mentors write down their experiences in the Learning Lab. This allows them to keep track of successes and improve wherever they can.

In the first few weeks of the piloted Learning Lab, Brandi, a mentor at the Columbus Learning Lab, noted each day that many of the students were overwhelmed by the amount of time a new project or learning a technology skill could take. To help jumpstart the kids' involvement, she created "kick-starter" projects designed to take only 30 minutes to complete. The kick-starters have been tremendously successful in easing students into new technologies and projects and helping them start long-term skills development.

### **Mentors at the San Francisco Public Library**

Some Learning Labs are also incorporating mentoring into their development and planning process. The public library in San Francisco developed a mentor-led paid youth advisory board comprised of local teens. It is an active decision-making voice that recently provided input and feedback to the architects designing the physical space of the Lab. The students were excited to see their architectural ideas reflected in Lab's construction.

Cathy Cormier, the manager at the library's teen center in San Francisco said that the mentor-lead teen advisory board has really engaged the youth as active stakeholders, and it empowers them to see the Learning Lab come to life reflecting their ideas and input. With the guidance of adults on staff, the teens are encouraged to make thoughtful and informed decisions about the programming and space. They are gaining real-life skills and knowledge and are learning how to collaborate with each other—a perfect example of Connected Learning in action.

### **Community Partnerships**

Creating new community partnerships that advance youth learning and opportunity is a tremendous, if not unforeseen, outcome of the Learning Labs grants. We're excited to watch new local networks crop up as Learning Labs develop and expand.

### **Our Opportunity: Join the Movement**

We have a unique opportunity to help make libraries and museums even more relevant and to "own" learning in a new way by providing effective learning opportunities for young adults. By building on our existing strengths and fully using the tools of our connected age—just as generations before us harnessed the advances of their times—we can help create the makers and lifelong learners that our era demands.

### **Community Anchors**

Museum and library staff is, by nature, eager to help kids learn and master new skills. If we want to strengthen our role as community anchor institutions, expand our community of patrons, and provide relevant, high-quality learning opportunities for young people, we need to change the way we work with youth. As our institutions change, we need to find new ways to engage our community's young people and ensure they benefit from the rich learning opportunities around them. We can do this by building on our existing programs and by

complimenting what we and our partners already do well with new approaches that engage young people, foster their interests and help them to become the makers and producers of their own learning path.

### **Recent Convening**

In mid May 2014 at the San Francisco Public Library, IMLS held a national convening focused on learning spaces in libraries. Representatives of private foundations like Gates, Mozilla and MacArthur, library organizations like YALSA (the Young Adult Library Services Association) and the Urban Libraries Council, and practitioners from all over the country attended. We heard a great many things, but most importantly: librarians are seeing the great benefits that come from supporting all types of hands-on learning experiences in libraries, and are interested in coming together to continue to learn about best practices, models, shared goals and opportunities.

### **Please be in Touch!**

We at IMLS are very excited to support his work in our funding priorities this year and we look forward to hearing about your experiences. Please be in touch and keep us up to date on your work so that we can continue to build a community of practice around out-of-school learning in libraries.

### **Acknowledgments**

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