

Connected Learning Principles in Action

The following is an excerpt from the chapter “Supporting Youth Learning” by Crystle Martin in the book Putting Teens First: A Roadmap..

Learning in Libraries

Libraries and library staff need to support connected learning by locating their efforts within a broader ecosystem of youth learning and by actively supporting connections to and from their programs and spaces. Libraries, which have long been centers of community activity, are uniquely situated to become a nexus of connected learning because their mission centers on personalized and interest-driven learning. As guides to information and technical literacy, library staff are often already guides to connected learning. Libraries are also perceived in highly favorable ways by non-dominant populations as lifelines to learning, technology, and information. A recent Pew Internet and American Life study indicates that African American and Latino families are more likely than their white and Asian counterparts to place a high value on libraries. 36 Libraries are well positioned to not only connect formal and informal learning, but also to do this for the populations that are most marginalized in terms of traditional academic programs and indicators.

Examples of Librarians and Library Staff Supporting Youth Learning

What can it look like when library staff support youth learning? The examples from a variety of library settings help to answer that question.

A Rural Library

At a rural library in Washington State, Samantha, a teen librarian, works to introduce teens to new ideas and interests, through informal learning, with potential for helping teens learn about career pathways. One example is a STEAM program that Samantha designed. For each day of the week, she creates a program for each letter of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math). Previously, Samantha conducted an art and science program, but was feeling a little intimidated by this expansion to her program. Samantha decided that she could either try something completely new or use an existing program she was familiar with. For example, Samantha had used Rovers—small Arduino-based robots that can be programmed by youth and then operated using the youth-created programming—and could build on the activity. She also connected more intentionally with parents and caregivers as a way to draw on their personal professional expertise.

The STEAM program was a success, and as the program grew Samantha developed opportunities for teen mentorship. She fostered relationships with teens and was then able to help them develop leadership skills. Samantha’s process included going through a project plan with teens and then giving them the chance to demonstrate the activity to other participants in the program.

Not only was Samantha helping teens gain leadership skills; she supported acquisition of 21st-century skills and computational thinking by providing opportunities for all involved to problem solve, iterate, and learn by trial and error. This approach clearly supported collaborative and peer learning.

For Samantha, creating this new series of programming was a rewarding experience. She notes that facilitating these programs taught her to experiment. Revising plans along the way is a necessity. She had originally planned to run the program every week but pared it down to six times a semester. Samantha warns that not everything is going to go as planned, but this is to be expected.

This type of programming was new for Samantha. Before designing this series, her philosophy of library programs centered on the idea that “learning was not the role of libraries.” Samantha goes on to say,

“[That was] until STEAM programming [came along].” Samantha explains, “STEAM lends itself to informal learning; [it] might be the kind of thing kids could do in their home already, but many don’t. The family kind of learning that some families can’t/don’t do because of lack of resources, time, etc. There are many young families in my community with not a lot of money and not a lot of options. The library’s role is to provide and facilitate learning opportunities outside of school. It is supplementary. Things that they wouldn’t get in school.”

Samantha also stresses the importance of offering teens real work experience, as she was able to provide in her STEAM programs. Leadership experiences in libraries, she says, “teach them about being on time, calling in when sick, structuring volunteering like a real job to give them that experience and possibly a leg up in the future.” Actual coaching and mentoring became part of her programming; the teens needed feedback on their actions. She feels that it was easy to build into current programs, and that it was value added for the programs and the teens. She concludes that a lot of libraries are reluctant to implement STEAM programming. They are afraid of not being an expert. She points out, “You can make valuable experiences for kids and teens without being an expert.”

Urban Library: Teen-Only Space

As a teen librarian in a southern urban library serving mostly African American youth, Juliette makes teen programming an important part of her practice. She offers one program a day, ranging from small programs like self-directed trivia questions to a large program once a month. These programs not only teach teens life skills but often impact youth outside of the library experience.

For example, Juliette offers programs that teach life skills and career preparation. The Kitchen Chemistry program fits into this category. Once a month, teens come to explore the intersection of food and chemistry. This program not only teaches youth the important skill of cooking, but also about the chemistry behind cooking. Juliette’s Teen Fashion Apprentice program is an opportunity for youth interested in fashion to explore it as a career. She partnered with local community members who work in fashion and with institutions that provide hair and makeup training. These professionals come to the library to talk with teens, who are then offered the chance to have an internship working with a professional in their studio to learn about the day-to-day work of a fashion career. These programs not only support career readiness; they also help develop lifelong learning skills from cooking to interviewing.

Juliette has a strong belief about the steps required to design programs of this type. First, she views her library as a “destination library.” She works to create an environment where youth feel welcome and

want to hang out. This means she needs things for them to do. When designing programs, she focuses on meeting teens where they are. “You may have an idea of what teens would be interested in, but you have to understand that when teens are ready, they will take something in but it can’t be forced.” For her, it is about “creating lifelong learners.” She says the most important part of her practice is “developing relationships so we can serve [teens] again wherever they are at as they go through life.” She continues, “Learning is a two-way street. If we aren’t learning from them, we aren’t serving them well. You need to be flexible, be willing to shift roles and see it more like a community space, and support learning as a network.”

Urban Library: Teen Media Space

Hyun, a teen librarian, runs a tech-driven media space in a library that shares a building with a high school. She creates opportunities for youth to lead interest-driven technology-based programs. Examples include a teen who organized a reception for a photography exhibit and another teen who organized a film screening. By organizing these events, the teens were able to explore what it means to be an artist, learning what it takes to create, promote, and exhibit work—all aspects of informal learning.

The teen librarian brokered a connection between an intern who wanted to be a photographer and a professional wedding photographer. Hyun set the intern up with an informational interview, giving the teen the opportunity to ask the professional about starting and maintaining a photography business. Working as an informal learning mentor, the librarian was able to leverage the intern’s interest in photography into a professional opportunity where the teen could better understand what it is like to have a career in photography.

Hyun runs an internship through the lens of connected learning (CL). “I can practice CL because I’ve had the chance to get to know the interns so well. I know what their goals and strengths are, so I actively try to find resources that match those. [For example, I] encouraged [one of my interns] to lead the workshop and advocate for the [Media Space]. Another intern wants to be a doctor, so I had him do the tutoring and other workshops so he could practice his communication and presentation skills. Another is interested in photography; she took photos of staff members at work, and another intern interviewed each staff member and selected the best representatives for the project they were working on. [The teen photographer] took about 100 photos of each staff member. It was good for her because she got to work with people she had never met before, unlike previous photos she had taken that had mostly been of friends. It gave her the experience of working with clients and taking portraiture. The interns went through the library to photograph and interview library workers. After interviewing 15 librarians for three hours a week, they gained a good idea of how varied librarianship can be.”

Branch Library, Urban System

Carol is a teen librarian with 23 years of experience working in a largely low-income Latino immigrant community. At the urban branch library where she works, Carol offers programs that focus on helping youth who come from non-English-speaking households to prepare for the future. The teens she serves face unique challenges, including being the first in their families to consider attending college. Along with challenges related to being a first-generation college student, these students also face challenges related to documentation status.

To help the teens she serves navigate the complicated world of college readiness, Carol created a set of programs. First, she annually holds a five-week SAT study course. In week one, the teens take a practice test. For the following weeks, based on the results of the practice test, the teens have study sessions on how to improve their work in the English, math, and essay sections. At week five, the teens take the test again. The program has been very successful. The room can only seat 70, but usually more than 100 sign up for the program.

Carol also holds workshops for college preparation. This includes a workshop for parents and students on financial aid, including conversation about deadlines. She offers workshops on study habits and time management. Another program Carol hosts is a panel made up of previous volunteers who have gone to college and high school students who are applying to college. These youth are generally all first-generation college students and come from an area where going to college is far from being a given. The students on the panel talk about their experience with everything from filling out college applications and FAFSA to understanding financial aid packages and choosing a major. The panel creates an opportunity for candid information sharing and dialogue between college students and those considering going to college. The panelists often talked about how working at the library had an impact on their ability to envision college being within their reach and how Carol's mentorship allowing them to develop their interest in tech (through programs like teen-organized tech-petting zoos) helped them envision potential career opportunities.

Carol also has a very active volunteer program. All volunteers are required to apply for the program, and when accepted, one of the assigned tasks is to help run programs. "The way I approach the volunteers and their training and how I work with them is that I am very conscious that I am building their confidence and skills. And I tell them that. I give them a lot of responsibility and decision-making ability. I tell them they are a team. I give them a job to do immediately. I will have them set up the room in a certain way as a group and then leave. Depending on the group, they've either pulled together as a team and done it or are standing around. If they haven't set up the room, I give it to them again. Usually the second time they figure it out. If I have a volunteer helping a student on the computer who tells me a problem, I ask them, 'How do you think you can solve it?' I use the Socratic method a lot. Afterward I tell them very specifically 'that was really good leadership' or 'that was really good problem solving.' People forget how important feedback is—all people want to see their work valued. If a teen is showing natural leadership, I will put them in charge of something and then direct other teens to that teen. I will also encourage a teen who is hanging back to take leadership. With a teen who was acting immaturely, I had a conversation about his leadership and overall approach. I want these teens to see that they are running these programs and running the library. I want them to see they have these skills and can do it."

Carol continues, "Teens have the opportunity to become my administrative assistant. They are learning real life skills. One teen who had been working as my admin then got a job in an eyeglass lab as a senior because she had developed a lot of confidence working in the library. The teens learn a lot of problem-solving skills from the work." She says, "I've written so many recommendations for teens over the years that help them on their journey." Carol has an approach that supports the learning of the

teens. She explains that she supports her teens “whether it is fixing [a] car, learning to canoe, finding a job, or finding relief from domestic abuse.”

Connected learning is a framework under constant development that offers principles and examples that can be adapted and remixed. Putting connected learning into practice provides a lot of opportunities for libraries and the teens they serve. Integrating the framework into library service can start as a small addition to an existing program and lead to a complete redesign of the way a library supports informal learning.

Conclusion

Supporting youth learning is essential to youth success. For youth, learning is not something that happens only in the six hours a day they are in school, but instead their learning expands beyond their formal learning environments into out-of-school locations such as the public library. The learning that teens participate in outside of their formal learning environment offers opportunities for them to expand their horizons.

Librarians need to bring connected learning into their practice and into their library. This can necessitate changes in approach and priorities, but as the examples included in this chapter illustrate, implementing connected learning does not require money—it requires a certain mindset. It is about creating relationships with teens and creating opportunities for youth to be exposed to and pursue interests, to leverage peer learning, and to connect interest to opportunity—all of these in turn support youth career and college readiness. Connected learning is not just a way to describe learning that is happening in interest spaces; it is also a model for design, intervention, and policy. It is at the intersections of youth learning where librarians have the opportunity for the largest impact. Connected learning is not about a technology or a technique; it is about focusing the learning on the learner.