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Professional Resource:

How Using Social Media Forced a Library to Work on the Edge in Their Efforts to Move Youth From “Hanging Out” to “Messing Around”

An Excerpt from an Upcoming Edge Project Working Example

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Towards Understanding Youth's Learning Through Digital Media

In 2009, Mimi Ito released *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media*, a book composed of 23 related studies. These ethnographic studies interrogated how learning is being experienced by teens via informal uses of digital media. This collection of studies, however, finds that these three different modes of participation with digital media, in fact, support the development of a wide range of new media literacies.

According to this framework, learning begins when teens go online to “hang out,” on their computers or their mobile phones, using social networking tools and engaging with games and other electronic content. Once teens have connected with friends and family using social media tools and joined interest-driven communities, they become exposed to the mutual interests of their learning circles and move towards a different mode of participation: “Messing Around.” The third mode of participation, “Geeking Out,” occurs when a youth learner jumps headfirst into a particular topic, theme or area of interest. A youth may become part of a specialized knowledge group that focuses on a certain issue or topic “with the goal of improving their own knowledge and expertise or to educate or to inspire others.”

But how can programs at the “hanging out” level be re-imagined or transformed to offer youth a different mode of participation? How does an informal learning institution such as a library, whose primary delivery for programming resides at the “hanging out”

level, develop new programs, support educators, and offer the required technology infrastructure to allow youth to engage in a different mode of participation, namely “messing around”? This is the challenge offered by Ito and the one recently taken up by the New York Public Library, through participation in Global Kids' Edge Project Initiative.

The Edge Project – Global Kids

The Edge Project is a new Global Kids initiative funded by the MacArthur Foundation with a goal to expand the capacity of civic and cultural institutions to use new media as innovative educational platforms that engage youth in learning and promote youth civic participation. More specifically, the Edge Project is interested in civic and cultural institutions bringing cutting edge digital media into their youth educational programs. It is equally interested in where this type of programming - due to technology, its pedagogical implications or both - is a disruptive force challenging the educators and/or the institutional cultural to work on the edge of their comfort level. There is a balancing act they must undertake, being receptive to how new media challenges their current educational culture and practice while, in turn, challenging the educational potential of new media through interacting with that very culture and practice. At the end of the day, we want to better understand the following questions: how do institutions find their balance working on this edge and do different types of institutions respond in different ways?

¹ Mizuko Ito et al., *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009, p. 17.

Rather than wait two or more years to report on the work with all of the Edge Project partners, each project will conclude with a Worked Example, such as this, to explore one aspect of the project in its use of digital media to work on their “edge”.

This worked example is about the second Edge Project, called Digital Expressions (DEx).

Global Kids’ Digital Expressions at the New York Public Library

Digital Expressions was the second completed Edge Project. The program launched in the Spring of 2010 at the New York Public Library. Since the 1920’s, The New York Public Library has been one of the pioneer libraries in responding to and celebrating the needs of teenagers. The library also dedicates much of its physical space to adolescents which provides youth with a safe environment to learn after school and hands-on instructional programming by artists, designers, writers and more.

When the library decided to expand its digital media and learning footprint, Global Kids’ DEx curriculum, with its focus on “social media for social good,” seemed like a great project to test these new learning methods at the library. DEx supports youth educators to work with young people to foster their acquisition of digital media production and analytic skills through youth engagement in participatory media or “Web 2.0” tools. Participants use web tools to engage in activities that map, remix, and blog original and online content to make their voice heard on important social issues while gaining critical social skills and cultural competencies that will be critical to their participation in civic life in the 21st century. The program was inspired by work produced through Henry Jenkin’s New Media Literacies and is designed to not only develop youth’s skills but also support their ability to understand and articulate what they have learned.

The program was developed to test the assertion that using social media could afford NYPL the opportunity to engage young people in practices that would inspire them to mess around, as opposed to just hanging out. However, the Library was required to negotiate edge points at several steps along the way.

The full report explores three examples, one of which will be addressed below. This example will highlight one form of youth media produced in the program, define the edge points which emerged as pedagogies and practices came into conflict, and explore how those points were negotiated. These edge points

tended to form around two sets of forces, the specifics of which will be detailed within the example, as well as how the library staff and teens were able to address, work through, or circumnavigate around them.

Figure 1: NYPL staff assist two youth participants



Worked Example: When Programming with Digital Media Challenges Pedagogical Practice

The structure of the Digital Expressions project represents a new model for teen programming at the Library. Traditionally after-school teen programs at NYPL have been primarily for self-selecting drop-in youth. Programs are designed for a minimum of a single session or a maximum of six sessions if the project is realized as a series.

However, even those designed as a series have been significantly less formal, allowing drop-in attendance for any of the sessions. This culture of learning engagement is based on nationally recognized youth development principles. The Library recognizes that middle and high school youth have many priorities after school, including the library, study groups, extracurricular activities, sports and more. The Library’s open door attendance policy for programs welcomes all youth who are interested, regardless of whether or not they have attended previous sessions.

Up until recently, this was the norm for all program attendance at the Library. However, in recent years funding needs have required the Library to record and report on the outcomes of its programmatic offerings. This shift in models has affected both the content and attendance requirements of much of what the Library offers. This shift has also permeated the older, open-door policy attendance practice that has been the cultural norm for programming at NYPL. Library staff in local branches have noticed this shift and have at times expressed doubt that youth would even

be interested in attending multiple session workshops. In other words, they were afraid that youth would be unwilling to commit the time and intellectual and social demands required by projects like DEX.

Edge Point 1: Digital Media Requires Commitment

This presumption was first challenged in Spring 2009 when NYPL developed its first partnership with Global Kids. The project, entitled Playing For Keeps (P4K), taught youth about global issues, game design, and how to combine the two into what is often referred to as a “serious game.” It was the first project that forced NYPL to work on the edge and collaborate on a substantive digital media project. P4K set the precedent for building capacity towards a new, long-term lifelong learning model for after-school programming at NYPL.

The new project, Digital Expressions, was met with similar doubts as to the depth of content and length of time required as a new set of NYPL staff were trained to run the programs. At first these concerns seemed founded.

For example, in spite of an extensive and visibly successful outreach campaign, the dynamic and engaged Seward Park staff could not attract youth to the program even after expending considerable effort. They had tried to create a new programming schedule for the series which posed a conflict in the youth’s after-school schedule. When, however, they decided to overlay Digital Expressions on top of their Teen Advisory Group, an already successful preexisting program designed on the previous model, the youth participants welcomed the deeper level of commitment. The branch was successful in retaining its ten students for every workshop, as were the other two branches.

Edge Point 2: Digital Media Supported Depth

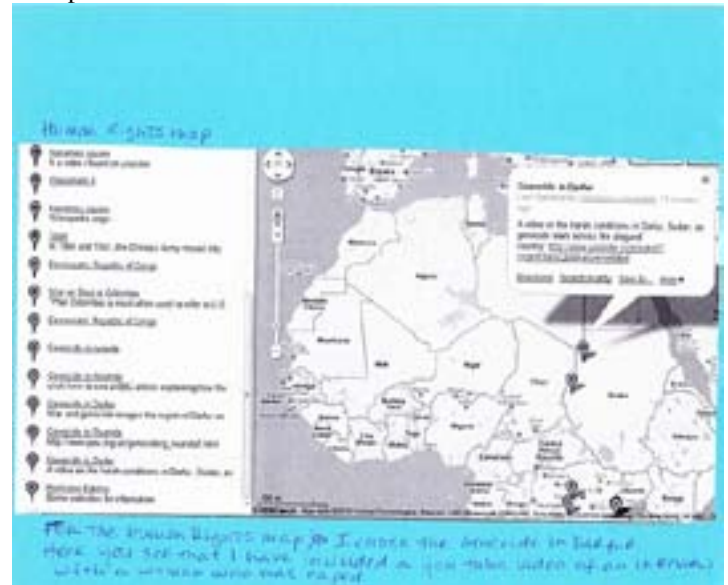
Increasing the depth of engagement from “hanging out” to “messaging around” proved an edge point for the Library. They also experienced another edge that also required negotiation: the depth of content.

The participants were offered opportunities for self-expression through social media, the focus of which was largely directed toward social and global issues. For example, they went beyond simply collaborating on the creation of a Google Map; they created a Google Map documenting human rights abuses around the world.

At the start of the program, some staff expressed concern that youth would think the program content was too similar to the school experience, and would

therefore not inviting. One staff member remarked that, for an informal learning program, the Digital Expressions curriculum felt too much like a global studies project. She was worried that the association with educational content would prevent youth from attending the programs. Ultimately, however, staff found that not only did youth attend the program but they participated at a deep level of engagement at nearly all of the workshops, and their work showed it.

Figure 2: One youth’s contribution to the group’s Google Map on human rights abuses earned this participant her “transmedia navigation” page for her ability to talk about and display “the ability to follow the flow and stories and information across multiple modalities.”

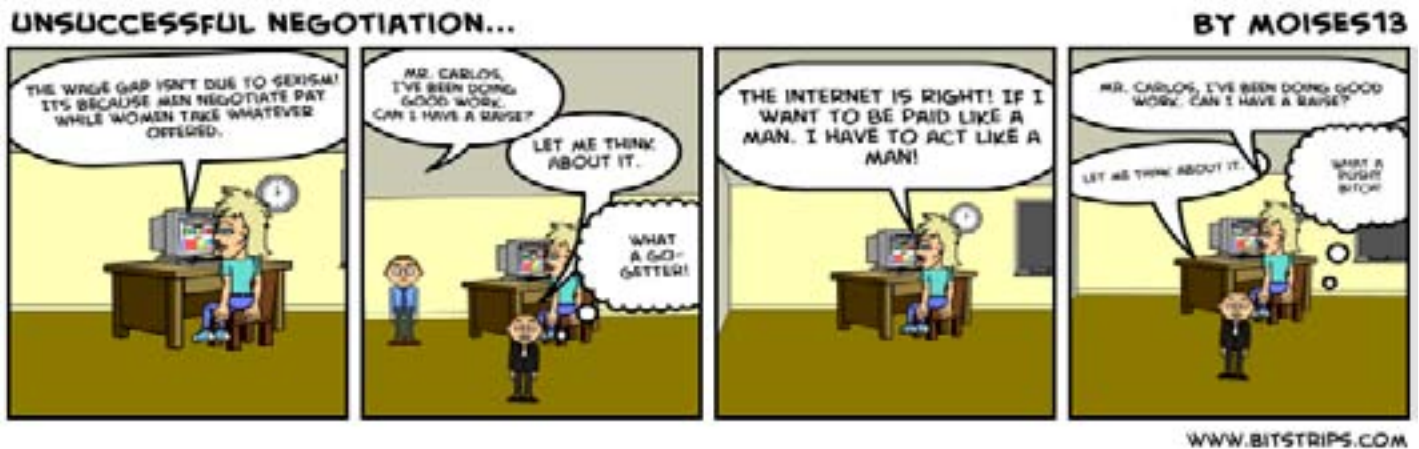


It’s important to note that NYPL has offered homework help, tutoring and other formal-learning based classes after school. What distinguishes their design from these two digital media-based programs was that they were marketed as addressing school-based needs and were never as time-intense as Digital Expressions or Playing For Keeps. And, in fact, none were ever as popular as these two longer projects, which engaged the youth every time they came to the library. As one participant reported, during the Google mapping sessions on genocide, “You hear about this, but now that I’m thinking about it and working on it, my mind is blown.”

What We Learned

The New York Public Library has always offered opportunities for youth to hang out, mess around and geek out in analog form. Supporting messing around and geeking out with social media using technology, however, presented the Digital Expressions project with

Figure 3: The above comic earned the participant his “negotiation” badge for his ability to talk about and recognize “the ability to travel across diverse communities and respect multiple perspectives.”



several barriers. While the staff initially experienced tension as the program design forced them to move from a “hanging out” to more of a “messaging around” mode of engagement, once they saw that youth were engaged and enthusiastic, they were all able to follow their lead.

DEx required the library to reconsider its philosophy on recruiting youth for informal learning programs. That is, it forced the library to think about how it can encourage youth to participate in multiple session programs after school. While the youth seemed excited to attend the programs because of the connections to real world issues and social media, the largest hurdle arose in breaking the old philosophies and doubts that have circulated through the Library from an older organizational philosophy that existed both before social media and the concept of lifelong learning.

However, in its new lifelong learning model, the library is prepared to play a stronger role in supporting throughout the day for youth. Projects like Global Kids' Digital Expressions have proved to be an effective model on which to build new curricula that engages youth in serious content.