

# Client-Based Work as Pedagogy in Informal Digital Learning

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How can digital learning connect youth to professional practice? In client-based work models—producing videos, apps, websites, 3D fabrications, and more for external clients—youth produce hands-on projects with real world relevance, developing both hard and soft skills in the process.

## What's the Issue?

Many organizations that incorporate digital media and technology want to connect youth to professional practice through hands-on projects that have real world relevance, and better prepare youth for a changing work landscape that requires both hard and soft skills in order to thrive. One pedagogical model that accomplishes this is **client-based work** in digital and creative disciplines. Client-based pedagogies involve young people working on projects or services that serve some sort of need for an external client—producing videos, apps, websites, 3D fabrications, and more. In the process, young people are apprenticed into professional practices and learn important skills that aren't only technical, but also focus on things like project management, client-relations and collaboration.

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This resource outlines design considerations, learning goals and ways of structuring these client-based work pedagogies within the context of a youth development and community-based organizations. It explores both what kinds of client-based work are possible in creative media, technology and making, how to structure youth and educator roles in these approaches, where money and paying youth comes in, “high-stakes” vs “low-stakes” client-based approaches, structuring feedback to youth participants on their work with clients, and more.

## What Does it Look Like?

Client-based work can be structured in a number of ways, each with different benefits and drawbacks. We focus on two approaches: one where young people work in a functioning, revenue-generating social enterprise where clients pay for goods or services (working with paying clients), and a second where youth work with a professional or audience that creates a context for a youth-driven project, without the pressure of a paying client (working with an audience).

### *Working with Paying Clients*

This model involves the development of dedicated social enterprises as initiatives within larger organizations, with young people apprenticing into functioning business efforts that serve paying clients or customers that receive some sort of product or service. For example, the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT) houses the [Ambrose Print Shop](#), a for-hire screenprinting shop that prints t-shirts and posters for clients. The print shop is run by young adults that come from WMCAT’s youth programs who do everything from screen printing to customer service and invoicing clients. Free Spirit Media’s (FSM) social enterprise, [Free Spirit PRO](#), involves young adults collaborating with FSM staff to produce documentary videos and PSAs for clients including local foundations and nonprofits. FSM staff usually develop the relationships with clients and work to scope each project, and then assemble teams of young adults that are members of Free Spirit PRO to shoot footage and, sometimes, engage in editing and post-production. The Digital Harbor Foundation’s (DHF) [3D Print Shop](#) offers digital fabrication services for local clients and is run by youth employees and former youth program participants that both fulfill printing orders and maintain complex 3D printing equipment.

These approaches feature paying clients, and generate revenue that are used to both pay young people as well as fund associated staff positions. In some cases, revenue can also support broader programs within these organizations. In each

## Guiding Questions

Do client-based work pedagogies align with your core goals around youth development and learning?

- If so, what kinds of disciplinary areas (film, web design, fashion, etc.) within your programming represent opportunities, both in terms of the skills and interests of your students, as well as your staff?
- What kind of client-based work model makes sense in your organizational context? A more social enterprise approach that develops revenue, or a prototyping approach where clients aren’t paying, but rather serving as a context for students to develop lower-stakes projects?
- What kinds of project roles do you see staff and educators playing, and which will be taken on by young people? How do these decisions affect what kinds of learning opportunities the initiative might have for your students?

case there are a range of roles divided among organizational staff and youth participants. Sometimes, young adults, often graduates of other programs in an organization, are themselves full-time staff that help run the initiative. This is true in the case of Darius, who was the manager of DHF's 3D Print Shop and a former program participant in the organization's Maker Foundations high school courses. At the same time, the 3D Print Shop also employs part-time youth apprentices that are in high school.

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### ***Working with an Audience***

Another approach still involves youth working with clients, but is more low stakes, and doesn't involve a social enterprise or business venture associated with client-based projects. Models like these are usually embedded in more traditional youth technology programs.

For example, at The Knowledge House, youth participants in advanced web design courses work in teams on capstone assignments where they develop web projects for local businesses and nonprofits. Sometimes multiple teams of 5-6 young adults may work on the same problem for the same client, with each at the end of the semester presenting their prototypes and getting feedback from the client. It's not expected that the business partner will adopt the prototypes, but they do need to provide the course participants with legitimate problems to tackle, and real feedback on projects, ideally at multiple points along the way.

Similarly, YOUmedia's ProjectUS program partners with a local brand, such as a boutique fashion studio, and then has student teams work over a semester or summer to produce a deliverable for that client. Each student team is made up of 'suites' that work on different aspects of the final deliverable - the 'style' suite works on developing a new apparel look that fits the client's brand, the 'media' suite creates photo and video documentation of the new look, and the 'sound' suite creates music for a soundtrack that will accompany a final presentation at the end of the program. There might be anywhere from three to five different teams that present their project to the client, and in some cases, a winning team will have their design go to production by the client partner. Most importantly, the client is interacting with the student teams along the way, giving them feedback on initial projects, and then acting as judges for the final deliverable presentations. Kiko, one of the teaching artists that works on ProjectUS, shared:

*The point is to work in collaboration as it would be in the real world. A fashion student is going to need a photographer to shoot their line, and the photographer learns to collaborate with them and with the audio production team. Collaboration is a big piece in ProjectUS, bringing your expertise into a project with other creatives. Then you take all of your skills, and you create for an outside party, which is a professional partner.*

In these approaches, program staff are creating supports for student teams and their projects, facilitating skill-building workshops and classes, creating time for teams to work on projects, and giving feedback along the way. Here, staff are not actively collaborating and co-producing the deliverables that will be presented to clients. Since the final products are not being paid for and most often not actively used by the clients, this creates a different dynamic where projects are not necessarily meant to be professional-grade, and more emphasis is put on having the youth lead on the creative processes involved.



## What Does it Lead to?

For youth, there are a number of potential outcomes and benefits associated with participating in client-based pedagogies:

- **Client-relations skills.** In technical and creative fields, communication skills include understanding client needs, specifications and contexts. Young people working to create products for clients or audiences can gain experience in articulating client priorities (especially when clients themselves cannot fully articulate them), negotiate possible solutions, and balancing the resources and technical constraints that define a client-based project.
- **Collaboration and time-management skills.** In most of these models, youth must work collaboratively within teams in order to translate client needs into designs, products, services and then work together to produce those within the context of a deliverable timeline.
- **Technical and creative skills.** In a given client-based project, there will always be core disciplinary skills related to the kind of output being created, be they film or photography, coding or graphic design, audio production or product development. Importantly, in client-based pedagogy, youth learn these skills in a situated context, serving an authentic need.
- **Contributing to local communities.** In being actively involved in the design and creation of projects, youth participating in client-based work not only advance

their own learning, but also play a role in meeting local needs of those in their community.

- **Reputation and social capital.** In that client-based models involve interactions with various kinds of clients, and often professionals in fields that youth are interested in entering, these models create contexts where youth form relationships, developing their networks and social capital in ways that can lead to future opportunity.

## Tensions and Challenges

Depending on the particular model, organizations interested in implementing this form of pedagogy have to contend with various challenges, including:

- Achieving depth versus breadth. It's more challenging to scale these models to involve greater numbers of youth, especially the more intensive and high-stakes social enterprise models. Often these initiatives employ a small number of youth, particularly if they involve paying youth.
- Balancing the needs of clients with the needs and interests of students.
- In some cases, youth might end up in positions where they are actually managing their peers, which can be a difficult transition.
- Some services or products that have demand within communities may not lend themselves well to youth skill development or may not align with youth interests.

## The Role of Media and Technology

In client-based digital learning programs, youth often not only get deep experiences learning particular production-related technologies (e.g. cameras, coding languages and environments, design software and hardware) but also may learn to use more collaboration, project-management and client-relations oriented technologies. These can include more basic collaborative software like google docs to advanced timeline and team management software to things like invoicing software that are not usually taught in more traditional digital learning programs that don't involve clients.

Most importantly, client-based pedagogies situate production tools within real world projects, focusing less on ensuring that specific tools or software can be used, but rather on making a great final product, not matter which technical tools are used.