

Educator Capacity to Support Youth Pathways in Media & Technology

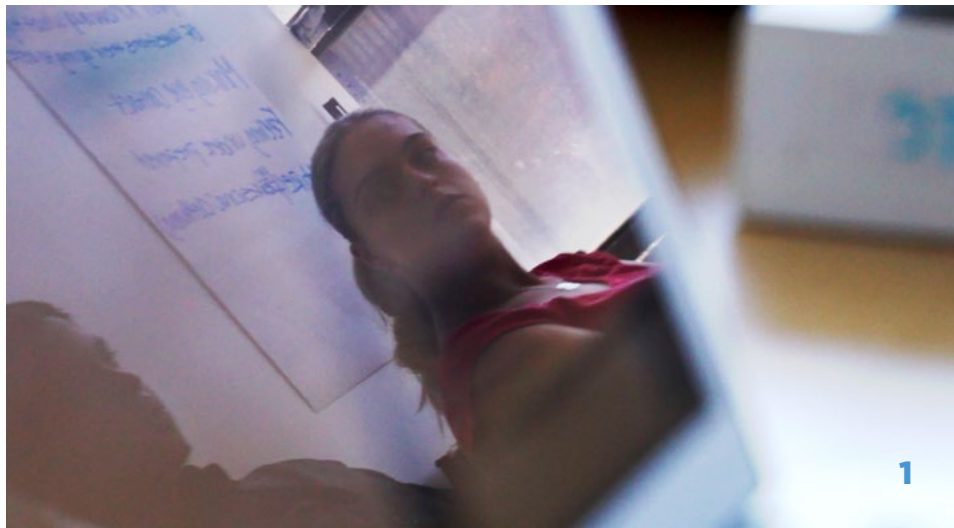
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To support youth futures in media and technology, youth organizations need to not only be purveyors of knowledge, but be able to directly connect youth to opportunity. This resource explores how organizations build capacity for educators to become ‘learning brokers.’

What’s the Issue?

One focus of many youth organizations today is to create opportunities for the youth they serve to deepen their interests and expertise through digital media and technology. To do this, one approach is to create ways for youth to figuratively travel along interest-based pathways to professional and community opportunities that take place in various settings outside the youth organization itself. In doing so, these youth organizations are often responding to shifting opportunity pathways locally and nationally. For example, the current labor market has become more precarious with the rise of contingent or “gig” work. Moreover, there is recognition of declining wages and increased automation in the workplace that might take the place of human work.

In addition, the post-secondary trajectories of young people are becoming more and more uncertain. For example, the cost of college is exponentially increasing, with completion rates at community colleges continuing to remain low. And while emerging fields in technology and creative media may offer new chances for work, the entry-points for these fields are less apparent than more established sectors. To address this, youth organizations are developing



culturally relevant, community-rooted and place-based learning programs that not only build skills and social capital with youth, but also directly support pathways to these opportunities.

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But to do this well, organizations must focus on the capacity of their educators to be strong connectors, or ‘learning brokers.’ In this resource, we consider what it means for educators to have capacity around supporting youth pathways in media and technology. In particular, we will look at the evolution of professional roles in youth organizations, the practices that practitioners in out-of-school time (OST) learning organizations employ in these organizations and the roles that network participation plays in the work of practitioners. Ultimately, the youth pathways have been identified by many as both a means to greater outcomes as well as an end unto itself. This brief seeks to provide some practical examples to transform or reorganize an organization in order for staff to support youth pathways.

What Does it Look Like?

Youth organizations seeking to support youth opportunity pathways have been found to address this issue in three different but related ways. First, they’ve shifted the professional roles played by front-line staff to include responsibilities that directly support youth pathways. Second, they focus on specific youth development practices that their educators engage in to support the development of pathways. Finally, they actively consider what networks their educators participate in so that they can be more effective learning brokers with greater knowledge of what opportunities are out there.

Two organizations that have actively and intentionally sought to support youth opportunity pathways in media and technology are the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT) and The Knowledge House (TKH). Located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, WMCAT is a youth organization that aims to create social and economic progress in people’s lives and community through visual arts and tech engagement, workforce development and social enterprises. Similarly, in the Bronx, New York, The Knowledge House is a youth organization that works to develop an education to tech employment pipeline for young adults in low-income communities.

One of the most important ways that youth development organizations have addressed the need to support youth pathways is by creating new, dedicated roles that focus on the issue.

At WMCAT, educators in the role of ‘student coordinator’ don’t run any programs themselves, but they are the ones that think most actively about making sure current youth participants get to WMCAT programs and are connected to future professional or post-secondary opportunities. They’re supported by the data-sharing agreement that WMCAT has with their local school district, which gives student coordinators insight into how their youth are doing in terms of attendance and grades.

At The Knowledge House, the organization has put into place two key roles that support youth pathways, specifically oriented towards the organization's goal around entry of low-income youth into the tech sector. An Industry Partnership Coordinator actively works to develop and manage relationships with local tech companies where graduates of TKH can get placed in internships and full-time jobs. And a Talent Manager focuses on understanding the current group of youth participants in TKH programs, noting student interests, their levels of expertise, and what might be good opportunities to connect them to that are a good 'fit.' The Talent Manager is supported by a [strong data infrastructure](#) at the organization that has data on student interests and program participation, and this person works actively with the Industry Partnership Coordinator to help match students to various opportunities with the organization's employment partners.

Incorporating Pathway-building Practices into Programs

In addition to new roles, effective organizations also have existing educators incorporate pathway-supporting practices within their pedagogy.

For example, WMCAT educators explicitly connect youth participants with local companies through field trips in order to illustrate what work is like in the creative sector. While this brokering of connections was never explicitly referred to as a 'career trip,' these opportunities sought to expose youth to professionals in their community and ask the question, 'How did they get there?' These experiences enable the participating youth to imagine themselves within the context of specific professions and specific professional settings.

In addition, WMCAT educators try less formal approaches. For example, they let their students know about the recording studio resources available at the local library. This is not a feature of the program, but rather simply connecting the content of a program or the interests of students with resources that exist right down the street from the organization.

At The Knowledge House, the organization intentionally connects their programs with real-world projects (see our brief on [Client-based Work as Pedagogy](#) for more



New Pathways-focused Educator Roles

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information). For example, one of their staff facilitating an advanced class in web development seeks out partnerships where the organization works with startups to identify meaningful projects that their youth can productively engage in. This gives the youth concrete opportunities to work with clients as part of a class, experiencing project management and engaging in their technical skills. This authentic experience and application for the youth is both dependent on the facilitator being able to make the real-world connections with projects within the flow of a class while also having the contacts and knowledge to work with businesses and provide value to them.

A Focus on Educator Social Capital and Network Participation

In order for a youth development organization to be effective in connecting youth to new opportunities in media and technology, it needs to have staff that are well connected. After all, it can't connect to opportunities it doesn't know about. To do this, effective organizations do two things: (1) they hire staff that span multiple worlds, and (2) they support staff to participate in broad professional networks.

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The Knowledge House actively hires front-line staff who span specific professional worlds who can leverage their rich, sector-specific social capital to connect youth to new digital learning experiences. For instance, a program manager at The Knowledge House was previously a coder at a non-profit. However, she also had non-profit arts management experience prior to TKH. This provided her with not only a window into these different work communities, but also separate social networks that she can leverage to connect students. It is also worth noting that the Knowledge House hires extensively from their alumni. Depending on the hire, this may align with the hiring of tech specialists, but it also suggests that the alumni have an idea of the lived experience of the youth they are serving and can potentially address impediments to engaging in pathways.

Many of the organizations that were studied in this project actively promoted engagement in a variety of professional networks on the part of their staff. These might be networks of other youth development and digital learning organizations, such as the Hive Learning Networks in New York and Chicago, or local tech meet-up groups that might be the source of partnerships that lead to youth internships or fellowships.

Whether an OST organization is looking to support a pathway of learning or a pathway to work (or a combination), the roles, practices and social capital of the educators at the organization are significant for making the pathway visible, encouraging pathway participation and making connections to enable youth participation. And those roles played by staff are supported by their previous experience, the understanding of the mission of their organization and how their role within the organization is defined. The staff play an intentional role in brokering awareness, access and participation in these pathways.

What Does it Lead to?

There are several potential impacts that come from supporting youth pathways in media and technology. These impacts come both from the practical experience of youth organizations as well as the research literature on youth pathways.

- **Connecting program learning to 'real world' experiences.** Connecting youth to opportunities outside of the organization is one way to make connections between what they are learning in an organization's programs and the outside world. It is a recognition that learning and opportunities to learn happen across settings (youth organizations, home, school, work places), and it supports research on youth pathways, which shows that resources woven together from many contexts promote positive developmental outcomes.
- **Helping students push beyond their comfort zone.** Some organizations see supporting youth pathways as a way of getting students out of their comfort zone. It is a way to help students interact with people outside of their social networks and to cultivate a basic skill of curiosity, helping students recognize that there are other opportunities and resources that are not immediately in front of them.
- **Connecting youth to resources and expertise.** Of course, there is a tangible benefit of supporting youth pathways through direct connection to people, institutions, opportunities, and more. This has been noted to be specifically important for youth from underserved families. Research has noted that people with fewer resources often rely on external organizations to broker access to knowledge and resources (Allard & Small, 2013).

Some youth organizations see supporting youth pathways as foundational to programs and initiatives they are running. For instance, The Knowledge House's Bronx Digital Pipeline Initiative (which we highlight [here](#)) has been launched to provide students in the Bronx with a structure that exposes them to technology at the high school level and then helps them navigate pathways into a tech career through extensive partnerships with post-secondary and industry groups.

Guiding Questions

As you and your organization consider supporting youth pathways in media and technology, and your educators' capacity to do so, there are some questions you might consider:

- What kinds of youth pathways are most valued by your organization?
- What learning assets does your community possess that could anchor potential pathways?
- What professional networks can you or your staff participate in?
- How does your organization practice investment in the capacity and growth of your professional staff that mirrors the practices you invest in youth?
- How, if at all, does your organization offer its staff the agency necessary to make change and respond to the communities that they serve?
- How can your organization design professional development that helps staff understand and change the systemic structures of communities and educational environments that reinforce inequality?

Tensions and Challenges

While building educator capacity for supporting youth pathways in media and technology might be a goal, there are certainly challenges associated with this work. For example, pathways need to be responsive to the needs of the organization's students. At The Knowledge House, one of their staff people stated that they do not "want to create cookie cutter developers who just go and do the work that you're told 9-5. We know that for that cultural change to happen, we need to really be responsive to the needs of our students." Thus the pathways must be tailored to the interests and needs of the students about to travel on them.

In addition, pathways as a metaphor necessitate youth organizations to be clear about what is meant by a pathway. Pathways can serve as openings to careers or a place in the workforce. Pathways can offer a guide to opportunities to deepen one's interest and expertise through service and experiences in their communities that are not necessarily connected to a career direction. Pathways can connect learning spaces within the learning ecology of the city. While all of these pathways may be appropriate for an organization's learners, the roles that staff play and the ways organizations build their staff's capacity are different for supporting these different youth pathways.

Finally, how to effectively broker these pathways is itself a knowledge and skill to be learned and practiced by educators. While strategic hiring of educators can enable access to built-in expertise and networks, in general, building the capacity of educators to broker and support pathway participation may need to be incorporated into larger plans for professional learning within a youth organization.