

# Linking Youth to Local Creative, Arts, and Technology Scenes

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This resource explores how youth development organizations can leverage local creative, arts and technology scenes to connect youth to social and cultural experiences. These kinds of experiences can support interest development, learning and pathways to opportunity.

## What's the Issue?

Place-based digital learning programs are situated in local contexts, often drawing on talent, resources and activities from local creative, artistic, and technology scenes. This brief looks at the ways that out-of-school time organizations 'leverage the local,' and specifically the ways that they connect youth to the social and cultural experiences of practicing professionals and institutions in their surrounding neighborhoods and communities.

In this resource, we look at a couple of examples of what this looks like in practice. We explore how the Western Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT) brings youth into a local music awards show, called The Jammy's, connecting their participants to both people and experiences in Grand Rapids' music scene. We consider Digital Harbor Foundation (DHF) in Baltimore, Maryland, and look at the way they connect their youth participants to a vibrant local 'maker' scene, bringing their work to wider audiences. Finally, YOUmedia,



based at Chicago Public Library, leverages the wide array of cultural institutions in Chicago to bring in new programming for their youth. We then explore outcomes associated with this approach, various challenges and tips and guiding questions for organizations to consider.

## What Does it Look Like?

WMCAT, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is an organization committed to giving their youth meaningful exposure to work as media, arts and technology creators. WMCAT employs a teaching artist model, where their instructors and staff are drawn from the local arts and technology scenes. Their studios include video and audio production, digital photography, graphic design, and video game and mobile app design. WMCAT works frequently with partners in the city bridging the learning and pedagogy of WMCAT to experiences in the community. One such experience is The Jammy's. Mike, a teaching artist with WMCAT shares about how he's connected youth in his program to the event:



*WMCAT Connecting Youth to Local Professional Scenes in Grand Rapids*

*There's been one special event that we've taken the students to, the Jammy's. It's this annual event that's kind of a big deal in Grand Rapids. It's like our version of the Grammy's for local artists. The students made a CD last year that played at the local radio station, W-Y-C-E, which puts on the Jammy's.*

*It's great. About a thousand people go to this event. The students brought this CD in and from that, they've now been invited to play at this year's Jammy's. The students have gone for the last three years, and WYCE has been very kind to let them go backstage and let them do interviews with the artists, have other 'behind the scenes' access.*

*The whole thing has been a great connection that we've built on to now get the students out performing in public...That's really intentional because minorities are often excluded from greater participation in the culture in Grand Rapids. This lack of participation and representation is something that comes up among my peer group and younger artists. It's something they complain about. They'll say, 'Oh, we never get into the venues' or 'You're only playing white rock bands here.' I feel like this is a good chance to get the students out and connected at a very young age to disrupt that culture..."*

In addition to bringing their participants out to events, WMCAT also brings local professionals into their space with a program called Friday Flip, where local business-people come into the space to discuss the types of paths through college and industry that make sense for their profession. These talks are coupled with career field trips, where participants are taken out to see those careers in action.

By connecting youth to experiences within the Grand Rapids community, as well as bringing professionals in to share their knowledge and stories, WMCAT is helping to bridge their participants to both social and cultural capital that exists within their local context.

Digital Harbor Foundation (DHF), based in Baltimore, Maryland, is an organization that is heavily focused on the 'maker' ethos. For example, the introductory course for the program is known as Maker Foundations, which focuses on areas such as 3D printing, web design, and game design. Over time, DHF has realized the unique potential of their students to work in the local tech scene in Baltimore, and they have actively connected their youth to jobs within that tech scene, as well as provided them with workplace skills to succeed in those environments. Shawn Grimes, DHF's Director of Operations, explains:

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*Fearless Solutions is a local software development company. And they usually hire two of our youth a year. The last one they had they held onto for about two years. She was one who had gone through our youth employment program, and they raved about her. And then some of the other ones are usually like smaller tech companies. I have a friend who runs a government consulting company that he's always hiring contractors for and so he's waiting for our unit to finish up. We also have a local 3D design company called Direct Dimensions. And that's one of our goals for our print shop [for more information see [our resource on DHF's 3D Print Shop](#)], to get those youth internships at the company this summer.*

Shawn himself comes from that same tech scene, and part of the inspiration in starting DHF was to connect youth in Baltimore to opportunities in the tech industry. Mary,

Special Projects Manager at DHF, describes the process of making matches between youth in the program and external opportunities:

*It depends on the opportunity itself. Sometimes it's a more extended experience, an internship, it might be a job, something similar. There's more vetting that happens, and these are also less frequent. But we also get a lot of opportunities for like 'hey, I need this one specific thing', it might be like 'I need this website' or 'I want these awards cut out of acrylic', whatever it might be. In these cases I tap into my knowledge, and then I confer with program staff to see if there's any youth they think would be interested. We have a shortlist of people, and I'll just blast out the opportunity to them, and then follow up with everybody and their parents to see like 'hey, did you see this opportunity?' And being clear about this is the timeline for when we need a response."*

At DHF, connecting youth to the Baltimore tech scene also takes the form of connecting their youth with local events centered around technology and making. As an example, Darius, a former student who's now staff at Digital Harbor (for more information see [this resource](#)), has been managing their client-based work PrintShop for more than a year. During that time, he has grown as a manager at the same time that his employees have grown as workers. Darius himself came up through the DHF Foundations program, and parlayed his experiences there into opportunities that reached as far as being invited to present at The White House in 2016. Darius is now sharing similar opportunities with his staff, and he talks about providing space at a local maker event called Garage Fest:

*So we had this event called Garage Fest ... It's a local event. The first one was at the City Garage, not far from here. It's another makerspace. And I had youth apprentices go over there and they basically presented on their own. And we raised a couple hundred bucks [for the program]. We sold a lot of items, and we got a lot of exposure through that. And I didn't really train them for talking to people outside, but they spoke proudly about themselves.*

This was paired with several other partnerships to draw clients to the 3D Print Shop program—including working with a local hospital's physical therapy residency program to print student design projects, as well as working with a local artist to create objects for an installation that she was designing.

### **Local Partnerships with Cultural Institutions at YOUmedia**

YOUmedia, a program of the Chicago Public Library, also brings in many practices typically associated with public library youth services. One such practice is direct partnership with local cultural and educational institutions as a way of bringing programming to their teen populations. Jeremy Dunn, Director of Teen Services at CPL, described some of those partnerships:

*Some key [partnerships are] the Museum of Science and Industry, the Adler Planetarium, the Shedd Aquarium, the Poetry Foundation, and the Art Institute. So we're are interested in this range of cultural institutions that also provide*

*programs or particular expertise. We have relationships with people in all of those institutions, and we continue to circle back to them to do different projects.*

Jen Steele, the Partnerships Coordinator in the Teen Services department, expanded on YOUmedia's selection strategy, describing the categories that make community partnerships work:

*[We look at] a number of factors: Have they worked with teens? Are they comfortable working in an less structured teen environment, such as YOUmedia? Do we have shared missions and goals? Is what we're both bringing to the table going to be mutually beneficial? Do they have staff capacity to recruit participants and run programming? I think there is sort of a misconception that, 'Oh, the library has all these teens and all I have to do is show up.' So really, we ask ourselves a lot of questions before bringing in community partners.*

In this case local organizations bring content and expertise of working artists and local professionals to youth participants. In exchange, YOUmedia uses their deep connections with their youth to help these partners expand their reach.

## What Does it Lead to?

Interactions and connections to local scenes and creative communities can be beneficial for both youth, educators, and youth-centered organizations more broadly. Here are some of the outcomes that might come from thoughtful community connections:

- **Building youth social capital.** This refers to connections to individuals and organizations that allow one to gain information, find resources, and explore opportunities. For example, someone in your social network may pass along information about a job opportunity they learned about from another connection of theirs. Without your social network you may never have known of that opportunity.
- **Building youth cultural capital.** Cultural capital refers to the ability of an individual or group to act within a situation through their familiarity with the norms and expectations of a given practice. For example, if you are attending a mixer at a work event, cultural capital

## Guiding Questions

As you consider how you might connect your youth to local creative, media and technology scenes, ask yourself:

- What institutions or community events are relevant to our youth and their developing areas of interest?
- Are there connections that our educators have that we can draw on to make connections to local creative, media and technology scenes?
- Do youth participants have meaningful avenues of participation in experiences we're developing in relation to the local community?
- Is there an exchange of learning between adults from these scenes and youth participants?

refers to your ability to talk to navigate conversations, talk to your peers, and demonstrate your ability within your field. This sort of deep, cultural knowledge allows an individual to make strategic moves within their field and to navigate the inner workings of an industry.

- **Youth contributions to community.** By connecting their youth to other people and institutions, youth development organizations create contexts where youth are able to engage in projects that actively contribute to the betterment of their communities.
- **Building staff social capital.** Through local connections, educators at community-based organizations gain important connections that they leverage in future projects.
- **Increasing organizational expertise.** Intentional interactions with external professionals and institutions can lead to deeper skills and knowledge for educators, increasing the overall capacity of the organization in various areas.

In the examples of organizations we highlighted we can see these forms of capital evidence themselves in a number of ways. At WMCAT, program facilitators connect youth activity to local artists, and specifically artists of color. For example, by sharing the history of black musicians in Grand Rapids, students are given the ability to act as archivists for that history. At DHF, program facilitators leverage their connections with the local technology industry to provide opportunities for their students, while also connecting youth to experiences with other makers and designers in the city. At YOUmedia, program facilitators leverage the library's traditional role as a community cultural institution to connect their youth with programming opportunities, while also sharing knowledge with others.

In all of these cases, organizations are acting as a bridge, or a broker, to a wide variety of forms of capital: economic capital through employment opportunities; social capital in the form of personal connections to local artists, technologists, and other professionals; and cultural capital in the form of modeling engagement within local creative and technological professions.

## Tensions and Challenges

There are, of course, some tensions and challenges that need to be actively navigated in order to lead to the outcomes we outline above:

- **Matching participants to developmentally and socially appropriate opportunities.** Youth experiencing a mismatch can lead to negative experiences, something especially important to be aware of in fields such as media and technology, where youth non-dominant groups have been historically underrepresented.
- **Making meaningful connections.** Not all connections to local scenes are substantive, and active attention must be given to ensure that the relationships and activities that come from these connections provide real opportunities for the development of social and cultural capital, as well as authentic youth contribution.

## The Role of Technology

Increasingly, connecting to local actors and scenes is not only a function of face to face interactions, but also ones that take place within the digital sphere.

This might involve youth working with program educators to circulate their creative works online through social media, and involving local actors and institutions in that process (see [Free Spirit Media's resource on distributing youth produced media](#) for more information).

Additionally, youth-produced technology projects, as well as client-services they might provide (see our [resource on the topic here](#)), act as opportunities to engage with the local community. This might involve a client-based program tabling about their services, as described above in the case of Digital Harbor Foundation's [3D Printshop](#), or having media projects shared at a community event, as described in the case above of WMCAT's youth having their music played at the Jammy's.

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