Peer-to-Peer Professional Learning around Informal Digital Learning

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Digital learning programs require educators that have diverse skills, spanning the technical and the pedagogical. We explore how organizations use various peer-to-peer professional learning approaches to foster cultures of inquiry and knowledge among their educators.

What's the Issue?

Many informal education organizations have been lucky enough to find educators with a range of expertise as artists, musicians, digital media gurus, youth advocates, and more. But how do we ensure that the person we hired for web design skills also understands how to weave in social and emotional support into every lesson in ways that reflect our organization's goals? Or how do we help the talented music teacher keep abreast of advancements in technology so that our youth benefit from both her understanding of music and new digital learning experiences? And, most importantly, how do we provide opportunities for informal educators to continually grow through professional learning experiences that not only allow them to be the best teachers they can be, but also keeps everyone in the learning community excited about our shared work?

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CAPACITY

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Out-of-school educators have too often been de-professionalized by harmful stereotypes that frame the afterschool educator, the librarian, the teen facilitator, or the community artist as 'babysitters' simply there to 'entertain' youth, but not necessarily play substantive roles as teachers and mentors. Those who actually work in informal education contexts know that these characterizations are both offensive and wrong. Providing opportunities for peer-to-peer professional learning can help counter these stereotypes while supporting informal educators' growth in their teaching practice.

This resource explores how peer-to-peer professional learning experiences can be invaluable for supporting informal digital learning that aligns with organizational missions/visions. Through examples from DreamYard, AS220, and The Knowledge House, this resource explores various formats of peer learning that can happen in informal learning organizations, the impacts this can have on educators and organizations, the tensions and challenges for such work, and the role of media and technology in professional development contexts that support digital learning for both adults and youth.

What Does it Look Like?

Peer-Led Pedagogy Groups

At DreamYard, a community-based organization focused on arts and social justice in the South Bronx, a variety of peer-led learning groups support staff to learn together about new topics relevant to their work and/or share teaching approaches.

In one professional learning structure called the DreamYard Learning Community, full-time staff organize and lead monthly meetings for one another where they can establish shared ways of understanding what racial equity means, and how to work towards racial equity at DreamYard. Educators collaborate in teams to prepare for these meetings, choosing readings to share and discuss (e.g., articles, video clips, news, etc.) around topics such as sexual orientation, immigration, housing and transportation and other issues that relate to their youth's everyday experiences in a racialized world, as well as to their own interactions within the organization. These meetings last 2-3 hours, and all staff have opportunities to organize and lead the meetings throughout the year. One important aspect of these peer-led meetings is that staff are collaborating across programs, and working with others in the organization who they might not otherwise learn from and interact with.

Peer-to-peer professional learning can take on a variety of goals and structures including:

- Peer-led pedagogy groups
- Coaching
- Digital documentation of pedagogy
- Peer-to-peer teaching practice
- Group deliberation about student support

Another approach DreamYard has developed, more focused on supporting part-time teaching artists, is called the Social Justice Pedagogy Team. This group focuses on how social justice relates to program pedagogies, and specifically around how to use social justice frameworks toward DreamYard's core themes: Create, Connect, and Empower. The Arts Center's teaching artists as well as administrative staff engage in 3-hour meetings, occurring 5-6 times per year. These meetings allow for teaching artists across the programs to share community building experiences and engage with guest speakers. Additionally, cohorts of peer groups meet in between these meetings to discuss their work and classes together, which are shared back with the rest of the community by the 3rd or 4th meeting of the year. One or two sessions and/or projects a year focus on how digital learning can intersect with social justice pedagogy, as teaching artists are introduced to various digital learning tools that they can begin to integrate into their own work towards the creation of digital portfolios, blogs, and other forms of digital storytelling.

For example, The Sankofa Create Project focused on providing opportunities for people of color (educators and youth alike) to control their personal narratives and histories using a digital platform. This project sought to teach educators and youth about ways to counter negative stereotypes and harmful depictions of people of color that are created when their stories are taken up and filtered through lenses that they did not choose or produce. Teaching artists at DreamYard would develop lessons based on the Sankofa project idea, implement them with students, then digitally document the projects created by youth to share back with one another. By creating "digital narratives for Black and Brown posterity," teaching artists and subsequently their youth could learn to use digital tools toward creatively sharing their own and/or students' stories in ways that were socially just.

Coaching

In parallel to these Social Justice Pedagogy Team meetings, teaching artists at DreamYard experience coaching that connects the meeting themes to lesson-development and program practice. Coaches—who are or have also been teaching artists—observe the program classrooms three times a year, offering feedback on what they saw as well as helping their peers think through ways to build social justice pedagogy themes and digital learning into their lessons. For example, one year DreamYard focused on media literacy and community in the "Connect Project." Educators created a lesson or a series of lessons that explored, interrogated, and investigated questions such as 'What is community?' or 'Who and what do I care about?' 'How do we create a space where people are listening

Guiding Questions

While building peer-to-peer professional learning opportunities for educators in your organization, you may want to consider the following:

- What is your organization's mission and values? To what degree and how do you want your mission and values to be a through-line in your teaching staff's professional development?
- Are your teaching staff isolated from one another? Or are departments somewhat siloed within your organization? How can you build overlap in teaching staff's work hours so that they can interact and support one another?
- What are the digital tools that you want all your staff to gain comfort with, so that they can build these into their own lessons and pedagogy? What are the digital tools that staff are excited or curious to learn about?
- Who are the natural leaders in your organization who would be excited to help plan and execute a peer-to-peer learning plan for your teaching staff?
- What pedagogical practices do you want your educators to gain fluency with, regardless of the media or technology?

and being heard?' or 'What builds and breaks down community?' Digital tools were incorporated into these projects, and educators also identified research or theory that they felt related to the content or structure of their projects. Coaches supported educators in developing these projects, that were then presented to peers.

Digital Documentation of Pedagogy

DreamYard teaching artists also work on annual projects where they document and share the work they are doing in their classrooms with the larger teaching community within the organization using digital tools. This supports further peer-to-peer learning and counters the potential siloing of various educators in their specific areas of expertise. For example, one year DreamYard teaching artists worked with high school teachers and Parsons School of Design faculty to understand how best to support and create digital learning portfolios. Educators created their own blogs to document their classes and support young people in creating blogs and slideshows as well that documented their learning processes. Through this work, they developed a cyclical Digitize-Organize-Publish approach to explaining the digital portfolio development process. This digital documentation approach had a two-fold purpose of allowing learning to happen across peers in the organization about what other teaching artists were doing in their classrooms, but also for teaching artists to, through the process of digitally documenting their practice, extend their individual learning with digital tools over the course of the year that had recently been introduced to them in shorter workshops.

> A digital documentation approach allowed learning to happen across peers in the organization while also supporting teaching artists to extend their individual learning with digital tools.

Peer Observations of Instruction

At AS220, educators improve their pedagogical skills through a two-week long experience where they practice teaching lessons in front of their peers. Reflecting together on student engagement or lesson structure, educators offer feedback after experiencing each other's workshops. This provides an important opportunity for educators to not only learn about each other's approaches to teaching, but also offers educators an opportunity to empathize with the experiences of their youth when put in the position of workshop student vs. workshop educator. Especially for educators newer to the organization, this type of experience offers a way to not only practice new lessons or ideas while gaining the input of other experienced educators, but also begin building a learning community of educators who can trust each other for support and input on classroom or workshop contexts.

Group Deliberation about Student Support

At the The Knowledge House, whose program model aims to support deep development of technical skills and advancement into more advanced programs, program educators both strategize and learn from each other in weekly instructor meetings that are focused on discussing specific students. The weekly meetings are an opportunity for instructors to talk through challenges that students are experiencing,

be it in terms of grasping certain concepts, or with completing work or consistently showing up for programs. In the meetings, instructors meet with each other, along with a program director, to discuss specific cases, and then strategize around how to change their approaches to support struggling students. In the process, instructors can not only decide on new tactics, but expand their pedagogical repertoire by hearing from their fellow educators.

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What Does it Lead to?

Across the various organizations, peer-to-peer professional learning gave educators opportunities to collaborate while simultaneously learning from one another. This had many important positive impacts, including:

- **Increasing educator self confidence.** When educators have the opportunity to lead professional development, offer advice to colleagues based on their own practice, gain comfort with new digital tools while documenting their own teaching, or try out lessons with fellow educators, they can gain new pride, excitement, and confidence in their unique art of teaching. This, in turn, can be an important stepping stone to further professional growth and leadership that supports the goals and visions of our organizations.

- **Decreasing staff turnover.** Your organization may experience fairly high turnover rates for teaching staff. This may be because teaching positions are part-time and thus employees are already juggling several jobs to make ends meet. Or employees may be in school at the same time that they work for your organization, or have other long-term career goals in mind beyond teaching for your organization. While you may not see impacts on staff turnover immediately upon implementing peer-to-peer learning opportunities for your teaching staff, offering these types of professional developments may gel your organizational community in ways that can slow the vicious cycle of staff coming and going from your organization. When educators' peer-to-peer professional learning is treated as a priority, organizations are signaling to their staff not only that they expect their educators to continue growing in their

pedagogical skills and practice, but that they also believe in educators' long-term contributions to the organization and youth community.

- **Professionalization of educators.** Offering educators opportunities to learn—and specifically to learn from one another—brings the focus back on how every educator has a wealth of knowledge that they offer to our communities, and how all are professionals growing in their practice. Peer-to-peer professional learning opportunities help support the argument that our educators are, in every way, professionals.

- **Increased comfort with digital tools.** When specifically embedding digital experiences as mechanisms to facilitate learning within peer-to-peer professional development, educators can gain the dual benefit of improving their pedagogical practice with peers, while also learning how to use new digital tools. Importantly, peers can then serve as a valuable resource to one another in gaining increased comfort with new digital tools, and those educators in the community who have the greatest comfort or skill with specific tools can become the leaders that others can turn to when in need of help.

- **Breaking down organizational silos and increasing educator social capital.** When organizations support peer-to-peer professional learning, educators gain better knowledge of who knows what in the organization, what different areas of programmatic activities look like, and generally form stronger relationships outside their immediate teams. This increase in social capital across an organization, with attendant trust and understanding of fellow educators, can support a more robust, nimble and coordinated organizational culture.

- **Improved alignment with organizational values and mission.** Peer-to-peer professional learning opportunities that keep organizational values and mission at the center of activities (for example, how DreamYard ensured that core social justice values were the organizational theme for professional learning experiences, regardless of format) can ensure that educators are not only building their pedagogical skills and comfort with digital tools, but also seeing how their work aligns with the larger goals of the organizational community.

Tensions and Challenges

Professional development in informal learning contexts can often be an afterthought given the many other needs of an organization. While many may want to support the professional growth of staff beyond initial onboarding training, there may be roadblocks limiting the degree to which an organization can organize and even make time for professional development. These include:

- **Time.** It may feel like there is never enough time available for professional development. For part-time teaching staff, it may feel impossible to make room in their schedules for anything extra beyond planning and running programs. For others, professional development may feel like a waste of time and unrelated to their actual work.

- **Resources.** Professional development can often feel too expensive to build into one's organization. Hiring consultants or full-time staff to focus on designing and implementing professional learning opportunities for staff can be daunting, especially at the start. Paying educators for attending PD can also feel like an additional cost that wasn't originally budgeted for. If there isn't a champion for supporting growth across the organization, it may feel like there are not enough resources (human and monetary) available to build up a professional learning program for staff.
- **Organizational Culture.** It takes time to develop cultural norms in an organization that value putting time and resources toward professional learning. Team members may not initially understand why they should devote extra minutes in the day to attending a workshop or organizing a workshop or watching a colleague teach. Others may feel uncomfortable opening their programmatic spaces to other educators in the organization, with fears of being negatively judged.

Peer-to-peer professional learning may not initially seem like an easy approach to integrate into your organization—due to these time, resource, and cultural constraints—and positive results may not be visible during the first or even second year of such an endeavor. However, while the time/resources investment may seem great in organizing professional learning opportunities at the start, the long-term investment is minimal compared to the growth your organization will see through such efforts. We believe it is important for organizations to have staff who dedicate time to aligning organizational missions with professional development goals. Supporting your staff to be part of that effort through peer-to-peer learning opportunities can be a positive means for teaching staff to not only improve their own practice, but also the overall health of your organization.

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