

# Sandboxes, Studios and Ladders: Comparative Program Structures in Out-of-School Digital Learning Organizations

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There are many ways to structure digital learning programs depending on the kinds of learning outcomes and youth pathways an organization cares about most. This resource explores various program structures, outlining how each offers different kinds of opportunities for learning.

## What's the Issue?

Unlike formal education contexts where students almost universally experience learning in age-specific groupings while moving from subject to subject throughout the school day, out-of-school time education programs have the opportunity to organize students' learning trajectories in more diverse ways to better match the needs of their youth and communities. Looking across leading organizations, we see digital learning programs that are structured quite differently, reflecting varying pedagogical philosophies and learning goals for youth, all with their own unique affordances and constraints.

This practice brief provides an overview of three different program structures utilized by out-of-school time organizations. The first is a “sandbox” approach, where freedom to hang out with peers and explore a variety of different interests allows youth to define their trajectories of learning and expertise development. Next we describe “studio” approaches, where youth can either sample or delve deeply into a selection of different program offerings focused on a range of skills or subject areas, each with expert support. Finally, we explore “ladder” program structures, where youth can level up over time from one programmatic opportunity to a next one that explicitly builds on the last, deepening their expertise along the way.

## What Does it Look Like?

Sandbox, Studio, and Ladder pathways create different contexts for entry into youth-driven digital learning as described below.

### *Sandboxes - YOUmedia*

A ‘sandbox’ approach focuses first on providing a low-stakes and [social environment for creativity](#) in which youth may initially show up to have fun with peers, but in a context where countless objects, activities, and opportunities can simultaneously inspire engagement with new skills and learning. This is true at YOUmedia, a program based at the Chicago Public Library, where the goal is to create a welcoming space where youth do not feel an agenda is being forced upon them, but where they can be connected with peers, resources, and supportive adult staff who can help them identify and pursue personal projects in anything from music production to fashion to animation. For example, teens usually arrive in groups, sometimes with food, seeking a place to hang out, eat, and chat, or other times with musical instruments, seeking a place to jam and create beats. However, as teens are hanging out with their peers, there are always other activities happening in the same space, such as an adult giving a virtual reality demo or peers designing animations on computers. Teens can then choose to move in and out of those activities - building on their curiosity about how to record albums or design clothing like their peers - which can evolve into youth-driven engagement with more formal projects and workshops or seeking adult mentorship to learn new skills.

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## Studios - AS220 and WMCAT

Studio style programming focuses on having choices of multiple, ongoing formal programs or spaces, each dedicated to different creative disciplines. At AS220 Youth, the studio-style approach involves offering a range of courses in five main programs, organized into distinct studios: visual arts, apparel/fashion, performing arts (poetry, acting, theater), music, and digital media (photography, video, graphic design, film). Youth visit AS220 and sign up for specific classes in the five different studios with the opportunity to learn skills specific to an artistic discipline and make their ideas come to life, all with the goal of allowing youth to organically gravitate toward what they find interest in, from teaching artists to entrepreneurs. The individual classes also offer youth opportunities to connect with the community organizations on paid projects. For example, the apparel design students created the logo and jerseys for a local roller derby team. Over time, experiences in the different classes can then lead to youth joining the AS220 apprentice program to become teaching assistants for instructors, or find internship opportunities outside of the organization. In these studio style programs, educators get to know youth over time to understand their interests and potential learning pathways toward best supporting their learning needs, so that youth are never stuck going down set pathways and can, instead, choose learning trajectories that work best for them.

At WMCAT, there are six studio options that youth can get involved with: photography, ceramics, fashion design, illustration, video and audio production, and video game design, with the options evolving over the years. Students can enroll in either a single semester or a year-long track of classes that meet twice a week, with Fridays being 'optional open studio' days where youth can work on projects, attend guest speaker events, or go on trips with their peers. WMCAT works closely with the local public school district and, as a result, they have opportunities to turn studio experiences for their youth into art credits on their high school transcripts, or to align shorter experiences with in-school learning targets where youth can create projects related to topics they are learning in specific classes over two week periods.

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In this way, students experience a taste of various creative pursuits while gaining new skills that they can continue to deepen if they want to, or simply explore in the short-term, with potential opportunities to relate them to in-school learning.



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### ***Ladders - Free Spirit Media and The Knowledge House***

In “ladder” program structures, youth can level up over time from one programmatic opportunity to a next one that explicitly builds on the last, deepening their expertise along the way. At Free Spirit Media, students’ learning pathways may include a studio-style experience with initial introductory classes in various programs—from journalism to television media—but the organization also focuses on supporting youth to move up ladders from the high school to young adult programs to internship opportunities in the city. For example, in the Real Chi Youth program, students may begin in high school programs learning about media reporting, but then continue to advance until they are going around the city in smaller units to report on various topics, setting up interviews and producing documentaries and news stories with community impact. In FSM’s Industry Pathways programs, students climb up the ladder of course options to build skills and portfolios that lead to internship placements in television and journalism industries

## **Guiding Questions**

As your organization considers the program structure it wants to pursue, it is important to ask the following questions:

- What are your organization’s goals for youth learning?
- How do you want to incorporate media and technology into your organization’s programs in ways that invite youth engagement?
- What are your local community’s greatest concerns and interests, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of addressing those concerns and interests with sandbox, studio, or ladder pathways?
- What learning pathways work best for your teaching artists, educators, and adult mentors? Are there specific formats in which your teaching community would thrive most?
- Who are the local companies and organizations that you want to partner with that could support your organization’s mission/vision in program design?

during their high school and college summers. Many youth who begin at Free Spirit Media are eventually placed on professional film sets or working at music festivals, learning career readiness, communication, and self advocacy skills that they can transfer into the working world.

At The Knowledge House, programming is focused to support youth to move from 'Intro Light' classes (courses delivered in modules of 20, 40, or 80 hours that are focused on exposing high school students to new tech skills and knowledge), to then secondary classes in the Core Program (which introduces youth—usually high school juniors or seniors or young adults—to technology-based tools and skills in a 150 hour course), followed by career training with the Knowledge House and/or partners. The advanced programs, aiming to lead into career opportunities, have two levels adding up to 200 hours over four months that provide career support and training, from resume review to experiencing 'mock dev shops' where youth form project teams to work on real client projects. These, in turn, lead to opportunities to interview with clients for potential subsidized internships paid for by both The Knowledge House and partnering companies. In these contexts, youth become skilled in areas such as data science or web development toward being career-ready and able to find paid work opportunities immediately out of the organization. To ensure that youth are prepared for rigorous learning experiences and maintain dedication to the process, The Knowledge House [recruitment process](#) involves interviews and tests so that youth show their persistence through challenges to enroll, while also proving when they are ready to advance up the ladder to experience new courses or career opportunities.

## What Does it Lead to?

Each of the different approaches to program structures described above have positive impacts on youth learning pathways in terms of skill and knowledge development. These include the following:

- **All of the above approaches provide space for youth to drive their own learning trajectories with support from adult mentors/experts.** Whether in a sandbox, studio, or ladder context, youth choose the direction of their learning experiences that can go as deep as they want them to go.
- **The sandbox approach provides opportunities for youth to explore new skills or subjects in low-stakes contexts.** Youth may just be hanging out with peers initially, but their ultimate experiences are learning new skills and pursuing their own projects in a relaxed and more exploratory environment.
- **Studio programs offer a range of opportunities for youth to test ideas and explore new skills in organized contexts with expert peers and adult mentors.** These programs allow youth to define their passions and interests over time and through hands-on experiences that, in turn, support youth in being better informed when deciding the next steps they want to take in their learning trajectories.
- **Ladder programs support youth to deepen their learning in specific target areas of interest that can eventually lead to career or internship opportunities.** Pathways for building expertise and finding paid jobs are clearly defined, helping youth to both envision and pursue their personal career goals.

## Tensions and Challenges

While the programs described above reflect well-established pathways in their respective organizations, all of the organizations have also remained nimble, keeping an open mind toward ways to shift and grow these pathways to better meet the needs of their local community, youth, educators, and leaders. In other words, while these pathways work well within each of the organizations described above, every organization is also continuously tweaking program offerings and building relationships with new partners to offer dynamic and improving pathways for their youth. The following tensions are important to consider when designing program pathways in our organizations:

- **Balancing which pathways work and how to make them better can be difficult.** Just because a specific pathway seems to work well this year does not mean your organization should stop trying out other potential pathways that may work even better next year. However, finding the right amount of bandwidth and educator support to offer different kinds of programming can be challenging.
- **Often organizations find the need to create hybrid types of pathways.** Combining the studio approach with the ladders approach, or the sandbox approach with the studio approach, may better fit the needs of youth and educators. For example, at AS220, the creation of the [FUTUREWORLDS](#) annual event has resulted in more ladder-type opportunities sprouting out of studio pathway structures as advanced students from each studio apply to be part of the FutureWorlds project team every year. Aligning your organizational structure to meet the interests and needs of both adults and the youth you serve is important.
- **Program pathways need to match your organization’s mission and vision.** For example, connecting youth with paid internships may not be an end-goal of your organization. Giving students a safe space to explore new interests may be more important. These questions about outcomes have to be considered by each organization.
- **Finding the right partners for ladder pathways can be difficult.** If potential client partners who want to hire youth do not understand the mission and vision of your organization, challenges can arise related to the hiring process, best practices for supporting the continued growth of our youth, etc.

## The Role of Media and Technology

Media and technology are the central tools and areas of learning for youth whether they are in sandbox, studio, or ladder type pathways. In the case of sandbox contexts, media and technology may be present everywhere in the space, serving as a hook to engaging youth in new learning opportunities as they hang out with friends. In the studio learning pathway, specialized media and technology tools are central to how youth create clothing designs or record music or engage in journalism projects. And in ladder contexts, acquiring expert skills and knowledge with industry standard media and technology can lead to incredible new internship and work opportunities that pay.