

The Role of Trust and Ritual in Youth Digital Learning

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Building trust and sense of belonging are especially important to collaborative projects found in digital learning programs. This resource explores ways that youth development organizations engage in trust-building and ritual in ways that are conducive to deep learning.



What's the Issue?

One of the challenges in youth development is breaking down barriers and building trust, something especially important when working on the kind of collaborative projects often present in digital learning programs. For youth who often have challenging experiences in formal education, collaborating with adults in projects for learning may seem, at first, alien. Yet this kind of opening up is a precondition to learning, collaboration and skill development. The more facilitators want processes of deep involvement and learning, the more they need the group to share values and culture - to trust one another.

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But breaking these barriers asks participants to be vulnerable. Opening up opportunities to learn is also opening up possibilities of failure, and that is something we rarely do. Indeed, traditional learning spaces encourage youth to guard against failure through testing and disciplinary practices.

How is it, then, that we as educators manage to get youth to open up and trust them, sometimes within weeks of meeting each other? How do we convey, quickly and efficiently, shared ideas, language and values necessary for working and building things together?

Surprisingly, for some organizations, the key to making complex digital projects of the future seems to be in practices that echo a distant past. Rituals and gestures of trust can be leveraged to bond teams and make youth feel ownership of the community.

What Does it Look Like?

Radical Trust at Beam Center

It's the most important meeting of the week; they call it 'Power Hour.' It's the one occasion where the whole team - from the executive director of the organization to its youth apprentices to all instructors who are often not in the building - shares the same room, what looks like a mix between a shop space, garage and office. Power tools, desks and random craft supplies are strewn about. Going around the room, they share some of the things that made them feel powerful and proud during the week, recounting stories of work and life. Then, after an hour, the group disbands; the director of the organization picks a broom; the head of education a large bottle of liquid soap. Every single member, in unison, moves to fill trash bags with debris, and empty bins with papers and tools. As upbeat music plays from a speaker, the scene is reminiscent of "tidy up time" at Kindergarten; this one slightly more feverish, but just as joyful. The music plays and in minutes it seems that all hierarchical relations have disappeared along with the trash.

The ritual may seem like a small thing, but it is part of a series of practices that promote horizontality among the staff at Beam Center. And this idea of horizontality, rare in education, seems to make sense in this organization where the lines between learner and educator can be blurry by design.

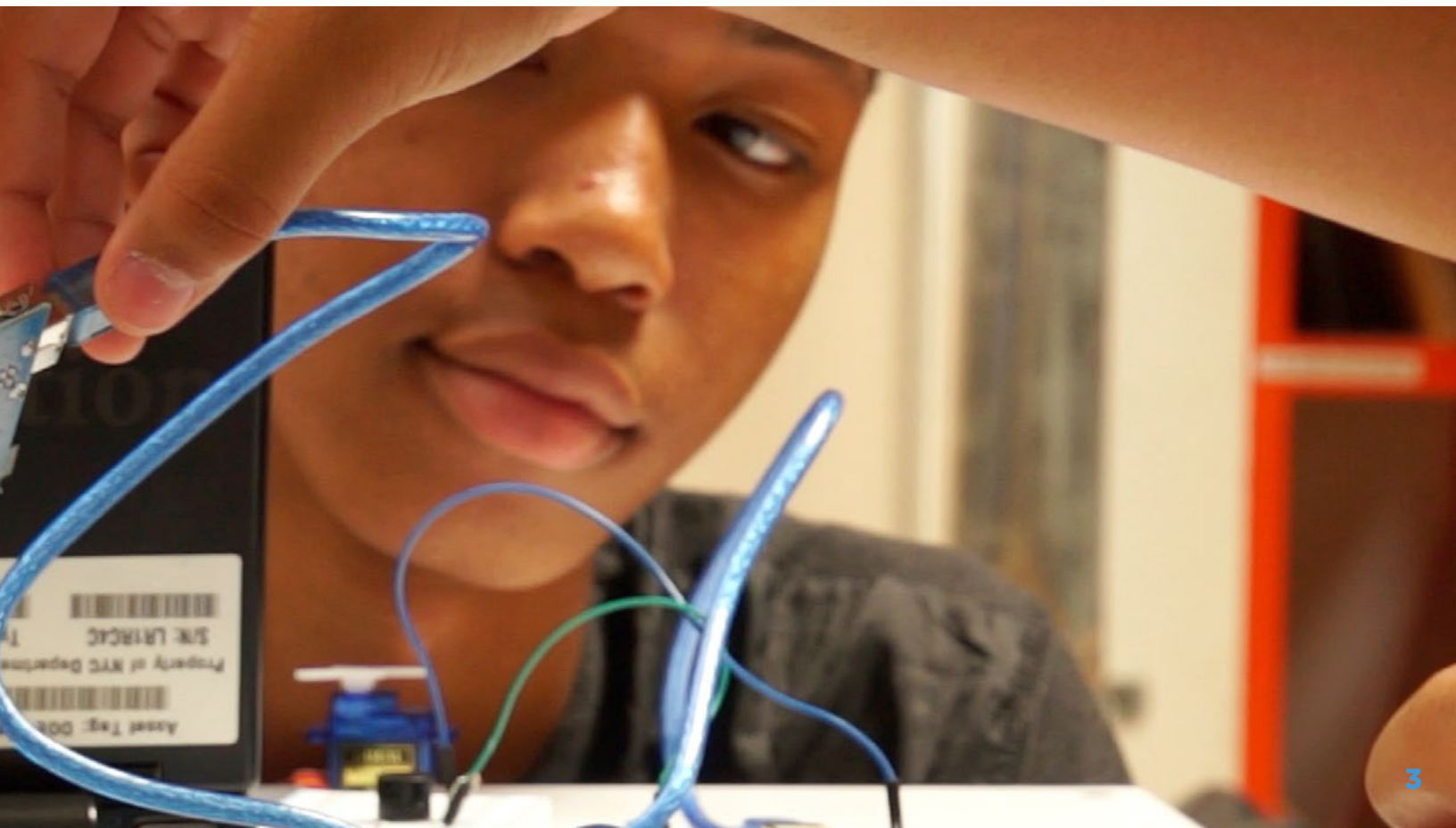
Beam Center is a digital educational maker space situated in Brooklyn, whose philosophy echoes some elements of the maker movement with a "Burning Man" philosophy of radical change. They teach youth directly and indirectly through several programs at a number of venues. They hold a Summer Camp where artists and youth learn about science and making as they collaborate on crazy projects such as a full-sized



reconstruction of a “fallen spaceship” or giant, human-sized flip books. They have workshops where they do smaller versions of these projects with younger youth in Brooklyn. They train and mentor teachers in schools across New York City schools on how to make their classroom more hands-on and project-based. And they also train dozens of youth, to be ‘Beam apprentices’ over the summer.

At these apprentice workshops, it is often the case that the actual people who are doing much of the instructing are apprentices themselves: eighteen and nineteen year olds who were students one or two years before, who often have a clearer understanding of the struggles and challenges that the newcomers are having than, say, a thirty-year old. These teaching junior-instructors, usually two or three per workshop, are guided and mentored by senior instructors who also help in the design of the curriculum. The twenty-four-odd high schoolers who are taught by them not only learn how to manage complex projects such as the design and programming of arduino robots, but they prepare to be educators themselves, participating in paid internships where they teach six and seven year-olds about STEM in craft-based workshops.

Calvin Stalvig, the apprenticeship director, describes that many students at the outset have a “shell to protect themselves. And then, when they step into a classroom with children, you see it all melt away, and they are so present.” Instructors nudge the youth along to get to that point of vulnerability. For one, most sessions will start with ice-breakers, which often do more than just make students laugh and relax, since they also encourage youth to be present and attentive. Cleaning at the end of the sessions, likewise, communicates that everyone is part of the team and collaborates. It may not be readily apparent to an outsider, but the practice also communicates a respect towards the space and the bulky tools. Indeed, there is reverence about the way instructors sometimes talk about or even hold the tools; the drills and saws become more than just “things”, but channels to make ideas happen.



The way that members and students interact with each other communicates a very specific culture. There is significant compassion and enthusiasm, but also accountability—not helping and contributing is always called out -or more precisely, “called in” as they say at Beam. And as youth become part of the culture, the team moves to trust them in ways that are less common in traditional education; youth will be working, pretty much unsupervised, with large power tools; sawing and welding and helping each other with what they have learned. “As youth and Beam staff collaborate and grow as a learning community, an abiding sense of trust is developed. Youth are trusted to work independently and explore with equipment, digital fabrication, and more”, says Stalvig. He states that through these interactions, youth begin to trust the expertise of one another, of the Beam staff, and also of their own process of creation.

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“Making things with other people has particular kinds of outcomes,” says Brian Cohen, founder and executive director of Beam. “Those are agency, expressiveness, persistence, compassion, recognition of contribution and recognition of the value of your own work.”

These rituals are part of how educators acknowledge that students’ efforts and their contributions to the space are valued. Stalvig mentions that when he sees them allow themselves to be vulnerable and then succeed, he will try to make them

Guiding Questions

As your organization considers how to build trust with youth, it is important to ask the following questions:

- Are there activities in your space where educators and students could gain from more cohesion and alignment in terms of clear, shared objectives or values?
- What are the values you want present in your space? What symbols or stories can be shared to communicate reverence and respect toward those shared values?
- What are the rituals and traditions that already exist in your community? How can you thoughtfully invite those rituals and traditions into your space?
- How much trust is placed in the youth in your programs? What are some of the risks of more trust and how can we plan for these risks?
- What could change in your program if you ‘radically’ trusted your youth? Do you think you or other educators may have been in the way of their learning by distrusting them at times?
- Think about places where culture has become immediately apparent to you. Try to identify some of the aspects that communicated that with clarity. What might the equivalent look like in your programs?

conscious (or meta-cognitive) of their process and what has happened, and support that moment of learning: “I want them to feel loved and cared for in this space, and to develop a sense of offering that to other people.”

The secret is that students are social beings, and social beings want to be part of the tribe. By enacting these practices that mark the Beam tribe as different from school or home, their own special tribe, they can trust the young people because they want to be valued and cared for by the new “us” in the room.



Ritual as Culture at DreamYard - Making Maps of Identity

DreamYard is a community-based organization focused on arts and social justice education, working in high schools and after-school spaces in the Bronx. Their approach centers on creating art that engages with issues of power, race, identity and democracy.

Working with diverse populations of both students and instructors, a challenge they have is to communicate this social justice culture to all. There are clues of their philosophy in every corner, from the naming of their rooms after notable creators of color to the joyful and unfetishized representations of black and brown people that are easy to encounter on walls of their center, through books on bookshelves and artwork dotting the space. Yet it is in their practices where social justice ideas become most clear.

In a two-day professional development session named “De-colonizing the Digital” at DreamYard, a group of educators attend to learn digital making strategies for teaching. Within the first day, members move from being timid and awkward to sharing ideas and working together. A number of practices, indeed, work to open them up and establish shared trust. For one, upon arrival they are asked to make a customized name tag, using arts and crafts supplies. The result - multiple idiosyncratic concoctions that look too large or have circuits or are fluffy and unique - conjures identity and personal expression from the get-go.

The session kicks off with a sort of ‘opening circle’ familiar to many activities at DreamYard. The group gathers around a number of totems, some meant to evoke learning, making, community, and a talking stick is presented - one can only talk at the circle while holding it. The facilitator shares the lore of the stick; it was created by students from several workshops, each adding something to it. Then, holding the stick, participants introduce themselves and ‘their people.’ One instructor states that she is Venezuelan and comes from the “people who make digital things, artists and nomads.” There is a reverence to the act of presenting oneself when done in this way, and it feels like the prompt conjures their identities and heritage as part of the work. Ritual and culture echo multiple ways throughout the day. The facilitators share about the overarching theme of this year at the learning space, which inspires all the

workshops; it is 'Ubuntu', a South African term that means both "I am because you are" and "humanity." Moreover, as part of the session on digital making practices, instead of talking solely about coding and fabrication, Melat Seyoum, the artist guiding the workshop, leads the group to discuss 'making' in the context of digital cartographies, and points to histories of mapping traditions in Africa which are interestingly connected to hairdressing and fashion. They use this frame to again have participants connect work and identity, by making maps that represent where our ancestors came from.

These exercises and reference points communicate a culture and a frame. There are rules which are clear (such as 'no spicy,' the idea of not using derogatory language with each other, and 'step up, step back,' encouraging both active participation as well as listening and receiving), and that are the same that would be used when interacting with youth. This makes it easy to instinctively understand, even after a few hours there, the values, norms and expectations in this community, and see what in our identity connects us to their culture.

Radical trust practices change the traditional framing of education

What Does it Lead to?

The kind of rituals and routines shared above are not a magic bullet that automatically produces trust and collaboration, but they can be used to encourage important educational outcomes. Radical trust practices change the traditional framing of education, where youth are, more often than not, under close control and supervision of adults and where there can be more mutual distrust. This has a number of outcomes:

- **Space and time for a learning experience.** The circle, the totems, the discussion, point to the uniqueness of the moment and of the community, bringing attention to the present. No one participating looks at their phone when these activities take place, since reverence commands one to be focused.
- **A sense of community.** They build a shared identity and underscore the social component of the work being done.
- **Communication of shared values.** Cleaning a space or standing around totems which represent ideas or ideals can communicate quickly to a group the culture of a space and potential directions for work - what is acceptable and appropriate, and what isn't. This understanding enables complex work to happen.
- **A focus on equity.** Most groups tend to underscore what makes members similar. An unintended effect of this is that those who happen to be 'more different' (racially, socially) can feel isolated and less valuable in the team. In contrast, when, for instance, participants are asked to state their people and present themselves, they share some of the things that make them unique. By celebrating difference from the onset, the rituals can indicate that uniqueness is a value to be shared with others.



Tensions and Challenges

Creating rituals is only one piece of the puzzle to create trust, buy-in and shared values. It must be woven into the larger set of attitudes and culture of a learning space. A ritual that encourages trust becomes hypocritical if it contradicts other attitudes and practices in the educational space, like, for example, excessive oversight. As educators, we may want to change this culture in ways, but should be aware that this is tricky, and requires buy-in and time.

Regarding practices of radical trust, putting youth in the driver's seat can come at a cost, and it can be anathema to the culture of many learning spaces. The practice of radical trust is accompanied by other processes such as interviewing and recruitment in ways that can encourage alignment between the youth and the educational space. This does not mean a process of selection of the 'best' or most orderly, but looking for students who will be a good fit and who can contribute to the team.