

# INTERNAL PATHWAYS: “LEVELING UP” YOUTH WITHIN AN INFORMAL LEARNING ORGANIZATION

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## AUDIENCE

Informal Educators and teaching Artists  
Program Managers and Leadership  
of Informal Learning Organisations.

## WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

We can think of brokering future learning opportunities as something that happens across institutions, but frequently in informal learning organizations we often “broker within.” That is, we try to connect youth that are already involved with our programs to new learning and leadership opportunities that we have on offer within our organizations. This could involve youth exploring new or different program offerings, engaging in special opportunities like speaking engagements, but can also involve more robust “leveling up” to new positions that promote deeper knowledge of, and commitment to, the organization’s pedagogies and mission. Through leveling up, we can take an approach to brokering that focuses on putting youth into positions of power, connecting to long-standing practices of youth leadership within positive youth development and out of school learning.

## CHALLENGES

Funding approaches rarely support the kind of alignment and consistency in program offerings that's necessary to create a program ecology where youth can level up across an organization's offerings. More often, funders focus on supporting one specific program, resulting in a set of independent programs that might be strong in their own right, but aren't coordinated, and maybe don't happen with regularity.

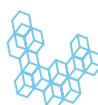
- Facilitating handoffs across programs is hard! It's not a small thing to get youth finishing one program to enroll in one that builds on it. This is heightened by the reality that the final weeks of a program, when it might be best to help youth think about how to build on their experience, often involves 'sprinting' to finish projects, leaving time for little else.
- How do we know which youth are right for another program? Without mechanisms to understand where youth interest and expertise are at, it's hard to identify a good next step within available programs.
- Educators running one program in an institution might not know about which other programs are good fits for the youth finishing their program.

## CASE EXAMPLE: A "LADDER PROGRAM" AT THE KNOWLEDGE HOUSE

At The Knowledge House, a non-profit technology education organization in the South Bronx with a focus on career development, programs are organized into tiers of introductory, intermediate and advanced. In their introductory programs that target high school students, youth learn digital fluency and computational thinking skills, and develop an initial portfolio of digital artifacts that they create over the course of the program. The intermediate programs, targeting youth ages 16-24, teach more fundamental skills around web design and user experience, combined with socio-emotional learning and career readiness. This feeds into a variety of advanced programs that each target robust, career-oriented skillsets — full stack web development, data science and user experience/user interface design. For each, the organization aims to feed a majority of youth that complete one level into the next. To do this, they utilize different strategies. First, they actively communicate the "program ladder" to youth, and help them understand where they are in the trajectory. Then, they actively reach out to youth to about upcoming opportunities, making recommendations based on learner data and educator knowledge of young people. Data about where and how students advance, or don't, is then used to help iterate programs to make them better aligned.

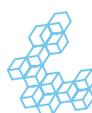
## ATTENDING TO EQUITY

When it comes to leveling up youth within informal learning organizations, it can be easy to rely on youth that are "superstars", and have the same youth ending up with leadership opportunities over and over again. This creates what's known as the Matthew Effect — opportunities going to those that already have opportunity, creating a reinforcing feedback loop that prevents youth that aren't natural "go-to's" from developing the skills and dispositions that might be needed for leadership. It can be helpful to examine how decisions are made within your organization about which youth should get to participate in special or more limited opportunities like public presentations, conference participation or advisory boards, and make explicit plans that prevent this reinforcing cycle from continuing. This might mean more explicitly tracking who has gotten what opportunity, creating more explicit criteria for "leveling up" youth so that it makes transparent how decisions are getting made, or even creating new opportunities that are not as high-stakes that can build more capacity among youth who aren't yet ready for more robust leadership opportunities.



## APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

- **Make explicit decisions about the what, where and when of programs that allow youth from one to level up to another.** This might mean:
  - ◊ Making extra effort to ensure that start and end points of different programs don't overlap.
  - ◊ Aiming for consistency in offerings so youth can rely on getting involved in a program down the line.
  - ◊ Designing "leveled" programming that creates tiers of participation based on expertise that allow youth to move up in terms of skill and level of challenge after participating in each program.
  - ◊ Creating explicit linkages at the end of one program that aim to create an "ladder of opportunity" across your programs.
- **Consider when a young person might be able to become an assistant facilitator or teaching artist within a program,** and create role descriptions and trainings that assist youth to engage well in this form of peer leadership.
- **Look for informal opportunities for peer to peer mentoring,** such as moments in a session when a more 'expert' youth finished what they're working on and might be able to help another youth with something.
- **Seek out and provide opportunities for youth to speak publicly** about work they've produced or projects they've been involved in in contexts like conferences, festivals, local meet-ups or community gatherings.
- **Create a Youth Advisory Board** that can provide opportunities for youth with deep relationships and understanding of your organization's mission and programs to help guide and shape future programming and engage in leadership around public facing events.
- If your organization is involved in more high-skilled media and technology production activities, **consider developing client-based programs** that involve youth working with an external client to develop real-world projects that fill a need the client has (e.g. a short film, a website, an app, screenprints, 3D prints, etc.) .
- As youth become more involved in leadership roles within your organization, **consider providing youth with an institutional e-mail address** associated with those roles, as appropriate.
- **Map the "opportunity ecosystem" within your organization** by using design thinking techniques like user-experience flows or persona maps that make clear what kinds of opportunities your organization has for what youth, and how youth might level up from one opportunity to another.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Are there natural “leveling up” opportunities that your organization can be engaging in that it isn’t yet? What would it take to make them possible?
- Are there places where programs could be shifted in small ways to make it more possible for youth to transition from one to another (e.g., shifts in content, timing, location, etc.)?
- Are there programs that already could easily “feed” from one to the other that don’t currently? What could it take to create more “connective tissue” between them?
- How are youth that are taking on more leadership positions in your organization (e.g. peer education and facilitation, representing the organization publicly, sitting on advisory boards) being supported as they take on those new roles?



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