

LINKING YOUTH TO PROFESSIONAL WORLDS THROUGH INFORMAL DIGITAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

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AUDIENCE

Informal Educators

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WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Many digital production, tech, and computing-oriented informal learning organizations see part of their work as being bridges to professional worlds that youth otherwise wouldn't be able to access. For afterschool programs, community groups, museums, and libraries interested in preparing youth for futures that relate to tech, computing, and digital production, the work isn't just about changing *what youth know* by fostering skills, but also changing *whom youth know* by changing what their social networks look like.

In this brief, we talk about how informal learning organizations can build youth's professional social capital — helping them develop relationships to people and institutions that they can learn from and leverage down the line. In doing so, we can play a key role in opening up professional opportunity and developing youth knowledge about possible futures.

CHALLENGES

For many high school and college-aged youth, the transition into professional life can be rocky. A bad work experience can turn youth off to an emerging interest. Many city-wide summer youth employment programs vary widely when it comes to connecting youth to something they're actually passionate about. Beyond that, many youth coming from marginalized communities have had negative experiences with institutions and might have what sociologist Ricardo Stanton-Salazar, calls a negative “network orientation,” or a disinclination to reach out to their networks to seek assistance or resources. Finally, many industries linked to digital media, tech, and computing have limited connections to non-dominant communities, which can sometimes mean that they don't have a good sense of how to support them or even know how to reach them in the first place. Informal learning organizations that have specialized capacity around both technology and youth development can play a critical role in addressing these challenges and in creating supportive settings where youth can explore a range of professional worlds.

ATTENDING TO EQUITY

In order to support youth well, especially those from low-income African-American and Latinx communities that are underrepresented in technology and creative industries, it's especially important to attend explicitly to issues of equity. Internship and fellowship experiences should pay attention to what kind of pay or stipend youth receive, given that if it's too little or non-existent, the current inequitable system of unpaid internships will continue to favor those from higher-income backgrounds. Attend to whether and how the professional institutions you're connecting youth to — be they for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, or municipal agencies — are committed to and experienced with youth development approaches. Consider how diverse their staff are in terms of race, class, gender, ability, and other identities that are often under-represented in the creative, media, and technology sectors. Finally, a key role of informal educators in supporting professional connections is to attend to the experiences youth are having in new settings, helping them make sense of them, and, importantly, to navigate complicated dynamics linked to non-dominant identities and backgrounds. Ensuring that you're creating space for reflection and sense-making is critical to fostering productive learning and goal-setting around professional futures.

APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

Informal learning organizations use many different approaches to fostering linkages to professional worlds. Some are more intensive and are full-fledged program models in and of themselves; others are more lightweight and are integrated into other programmatic offerings.

- **Guest speakers in out-of-school programs** — a common and “low touch” way to connect youth to professionals is to have a guest speaker come and visit existing programs to talk about their work and give feedback on youth projects. This can result not only in youth having increased knowledge about a given field but potentially a new relationship with someone in that field whom they can then reach out to down the line.
- **Site visits and Shadowing Events** — bringing youth that are part of informal learning programs to professional offices can give a concrete view into these settings and make them seem less distant and more possible to see themselves in. For example, The Knowledge House's (theknowledgehouse.org) CITYSaturdays program brought youth participants to a new professional context each week for a tour and workshop, including diverse professional settings like a local educational media company, a university center focused on media and games, a major technology company, and a museum experimenting with emerging technologies in its exhibits.
- **Youth/Professional networking sessions** — this approach brings many youth together with groups of professionals from different industries to meet in one place where they can ask questions, learn about what professionals do, and better understand how people got into their chosen fields. At Emoti-con (emoti-con.org), an NYC-based youth technology showcase, a networking hour in the morning has youth rotating among tables where they connect with professionals from different technology- and design-related sectors.
- **Internship and Fellowship Programs** — more intensive models like these involve work-based placements that an informal learning organization facilitates. Scope of Work (scopeofwork.org), an organization focused on creating equity in New York's creative industries, runs a fellowship model where youth do work placements in design, music, fashion, and other creative sectors for four days a week, and then come back together as a cohort for one day a week. Importantly, the program creates space outside the worksites for the fellows to reflect, get advice, and make sense of these early work experiences.



- **Client-based Work Models** — in these social enterprise models, informal digital learning organizations act as “agencies” that other organizations hire to create some kind of digital production, with teams of youth from the organization developing and producing client-facing deliverables. Free Spirit Media (freespiritmedia.org), a youth development and workforce preparation organization in Chicago that is focused on film and media, runs the Free Spirit PRO enterprise, which produces social impact storytelling, documentaries and PSAs for industry, non-profit, and government-based clients.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Which approaches and associated outcomes related to connecting to professional worlds are appropriate given the mission of my organization and our overall programmatic offerings?
- Which are appropriate given who our youth are and what their interests and expertise looks like?
- What kinds of networks and relationships does my organization need to develop to support these approaches?
- Are the organizations I'm connecting with supportive and attentive to the needs of youth from non-dominant groups?



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