Learning First

Over the past couple of years, I’ve had literally hundreds of conversations with library staff and educators about makerspaces, 3-D printers, DIY, STEM, and so on. More often than not, the people I talk with say things such as, “We aren’t going to do that in my library (or classroom or afterschool program) because it’s a fad,” or, “We don’t want to invest in that because in another year or so, it will no longer be relevant.” I think this happens because people get focused on the stuff rather than the educational potential of the stuff.

In a recent blog post (http://georgecouros.ca/blog/archives/5781) focused on five ideas for laying a groundwork for innovation, high school principal George Couros wrote under the heading Powerful Learning First, Technology Second, “When purchasing technology in our schools, there should be informed decisions on what is best for learning, not on what technology is cheapest or what people are most used to.” I would add that the focus should not just be on the tools that are the newest, most fun, and most exciting to use, either.

For library staff, the first thing to do when considering whether or not to invest in and then use that 3-D printer—or Makey Makey or even Legos—is to think about what youth need and want to learn and how staff are going to support that learning through programming. This happens through talking with community organizations, out-of-school-time providers, and teens. Once you know what the learning need is, then you can effectively figure out the tools you need to use to support that learning. Maybe you will need to use a 3-D printer or integrate a makerspace, or . . . maybe not.

I was reminded of this recently while working on a project that included providing staff with tools to develop and implement high quality STEM-based programming for tweens and teens; and, for older teens and young adults, helping those groups acquire and expand their college- and career-readiness skills. The project, called Make, Do, Share: Sustainable STEM Leadership in a Box, at the Kitsap Regional Library System (KRL), is part of an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant. The grant is an extension of another project, BiblioTEC, that KRL undertook a couple of years ago.

BiblioTEC, originally funded by the Paul Allen Foundation, provided technology training to teens and young adults. Along with the training, teens who took part in the BiblioTEC program also had the chance to help facilitate library programs. The training and facilitation opportunities supported teens’ and young adults’ acquisition of college- and career-readiness skills. The IMLS grant narrative states, “KRL’s project will empower librarians with the concrete tools and step-by-step instructions they need to make the shift from gatekeepers to co-explorers, from experts to community builders who facilitate inquiry-based learning in multiple settings.”

CONNECTING WITH TEEN INTERESTS

The staff-training piece of the project might have started with the development of step-by-step lesson plans for programs using, for example, Makey Makeys to teach about circuits or Audacity when supporting youth learning how to create podcasts. Such lesson plans can be important tools to have available. I’ve seen many well thought out versions that include things such as screenshots of how to set up a Makey Makey. After talking with the KRL staff managing the grant project (Shannon Peterson, the youth services manager at KRL, and Seth Ciotti, the BiblioTEC librarian at the system), however, we all agreed that first, it was important to make sure that library staff developed a focus on learning potential and success. Then attention could be paid to the technology how-to. We decided to start with development of a playbook.

WHAT’S A PLAYBOOK?

Over the past several months, I noticed that several education-focused organizations had published what they called a “playbook” as a resource for learning a new skill or to facilitate change within a community. For example, in 2015, Remake Learning published
their (http://remakelearning.org/playbook/) to organize and facilitate high-quality learning experiences for youth and families in their community.

I like the playbook idea when working with library staff because, just like a coach uses a playbook with a sports team, I think it’s useful for library staff to have a selection of “plays” to choose from in order to fit the varied learning needs of their specific communities. Depending on the needs of the staff using a given playbook, the resource could include a variety of icebreakers, information on how to scaffold youth learning, challenges for youth to take part in as a part of their learning, and plays to use in reflection and assessment. Any of these can be mixed and matched in order to create the best learning experience for a particular situation.

The playbook developed for the KRL project includes information about how to work with youth in an active learning environment. These plays center on a variety of engagement techniques, from using open-ended questions that help youth to think about what they are learning to plays that focus on ways for youth to showcase and celebrate their work during a program.

Plays can include giving youth the chance to talk about what they learned and the opportunity to demonstrate learning through visuals such as drawings or photos.

We decided it was also important to include reflection questions for library staff to answer so that they can assess how successful the program is in helping youth gain and expand STEM and 21st-century skills. The KRL Playbook also provides reflection questions to help staff determine how to revise a program if it were to be held again.

YOUTH VOICE

Another focus of the KRL IMLS grant project is youth voice. In our planning and research for the project, we held focus groups in a local high school, a junior high, and at a Boys and Girls Club near a KRL branch library. We asked the tweens and teens about their interests and how they spent their time when not in school. As could be expected, there were some frequent answers, such as listening to music, playing video games, hanging out with friends, and sleeping. Less common responses included cooking, dancing, and activities related to the visual arts. When we asked tweens and teens what they would like to learn more about, we discovered a lot of interest in STEM topics. These included programming, aeronautics, Minecraft, and car mechanics. We also noticed that there were tweens and teens who had put a lot of thought into college and careers. For example, one high school student told us that she wanted to be a band manager. When we asked why, she explained that she wasn’t good at playing an instrument or singing but loved music. She realized that because she was good at math, those skills, along with her musical interests, would be perfect for a band manager job.

I was reminded as I facilitated this series of focus groups how important it is to give teens opportunities to discuss their interests and then learn more about them. This realization is integrated into the playbook in a few different ways. One is that the document provides techniques for staff to use to discover what youth are passionate about and then develop, with youth, programs that support learning in those interest areas.

There are discussion activities for youth to take part in to explore what they are good at and what they want to learn more about, along with ideas on how to help teens integrate those skills and interests into design and implementation of a STEM-based and/or college- and career-focused project.

FIRST COMES LEARNING

It can be difficult to take time to focus on the ways in which learning can be accomplished when hosting learning-focused library programs. But, if you do take the time to do that, I think you’ll find it enables you to decide what tools will be best for achieving learning without getting caught up in what’s the new, cool tool people are talking about. Keep a “learning first” perspective.

Linda W. Braun is a Seattle-based learning consultant. She works with libraries and other educational institutions to find ways to best support youth informal and formal learning needs.
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