

Public Youth Librarians Use Technology in Ways that Align with Connected Learning Principles but Face Challenges with Implementation

Subramaniam, M., Scaff, L., Kawas, S., Hoffman, K. M., & Davis, K. (2018). Using technology to support equity and inclusion in youth library programming: Current practices and future opportunities. *The Library Quarterly*, 88(4), 315–331. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699267>

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Evidence Summary

Public Youth Librarians Use Technology in Ways that Align with Connected Learning Principles but Face Challenges with Implementation

A Review of:

Subramaniam, M., Scaff, L., Kawas, S., Hoffman, K. M., & Davis, K. (2018). Using technology to support equity and inclusion in youth library programming: Current practices and future opportunities. *The Library Quarterly*, 88(4), 315–331. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699267>

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Abstract

Objective – To understand how public youth librarians use technology in their programming and what challenges and opportunities they face incorporating connected learning into their programming.

Design – Qualitative study

Setting – Phone calls and three library conferences (the Young Adult Library Services Association Symposium, the American Library Association Midwinter Meeting, and the Maryland/Delaware Library Association

Conference) in the United States. Phone calls; in-person interviews; focus groups at the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Symposium, the American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Meeting, and the Maryland/Delaware Library Association Conference.

Subjects – A total of 92 youth-serving librarians and library staff in rural, urban, and suburban public libraries across the United States.

Methods – Subjects were recruited via social media, partner librarians, the project website,

an association e-newsletter, and printed materials. The researchers conducted 66 semi-structured interviews between December 2015 and May 2016 and 3 focus groups between November 2015 and May 2016. The transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were coded using a thematic analysis approach informed by a connected learning framework.

Main Results – A total of 98% (65) of interview participants said they use technology in their youth programming; 69% (18) of focus group participants mentioned using technology in their youth programming. Many youth-serving librarians use technology in ways that align with connected learning. Youth-serving library workers are successful in finding community partners to help plan technology-enabled programming, they strive to develop connected learning programming based on the interests of their youth patrons, and they often take on the role of “media mentor” by exploring technology collaboratively with their patrons. Youth-serving library workers face several challenges in implementing connected learning. These include difficulties with openly networked infrastructures, struggling to create learning environments that align with the hanging out, messing around, and geeking out (HOMAGO) stages of connected learning, and lack of confidence and experience in mentoring youth patrons on how to use technology.

Conclusion – The authors recommend that library administrators improve access to openly networked technology both within and outside the library, and loosen overly-restrictive social media policies to give youth-serving library workers more flexibility and control. They also recommend that library administrators implement more training for library staff in skills relating to connected learning. The authors are creating a professional development toolkit to help public youth library workers to incorporate digital media and connected learning into their work with young patrons.

Commentary

This study builds on the work of Mizuko Ito and others on connected learning. Connected learning is an educational movement that “advocates for broadened access to learning that is *socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity*” (Ito et al., 2013). Central to connected learning is the idea that new media can be harnessed to create learning outcomes that promote equity and inclusion for young people from diverse and underserved backgrounds (Jenkins, 2009). Public libraries are particularly suited to be sites of connected learning because of their historic role and mission of providing technology, spaces, and programming to foster learning and exploration. Connected learning proponents argue that libraries can help bridge the digital knowledge divide by providing young people with opportunities to pursue hands-on, self-directed learning with digital and social media (Peyton, 2018). However, in order to support these efforts, library administrators must be willing to be flexible on policies and practices, such as the use of social media in the library (Ito & Martin, 2013).

The article was evaluated using the CASP Qualitative Checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). The aim of the research is clear, and the qualitative methods used are appropriate to investigate how youth-serving library workers use technology in their programming and what they perceive to be challenges and opportunities. Both the data collection and data analysis processes are clearly articulated, and the findings are discussed in detail. The authors acknowledge in the limitations section that there may be a self-selection bias in the sample, given that participation in the study was voluntary; however, both the size and geographic diversity of the sample is robust.

This study provides evidence that the majority of youth-serving library workers are using

technology in their programming, but that they need the support of their administrators to fully implement connected learning at their libraries. The authors give several specific recommendations that will be valuable both to library administrators who want to make sure their staff are getting the support they need, and to library workers who need specifics in making the case for this support. Further, the researchers plan to use their findings to develop a professional development toolkit for youth-serving public library workers, thus increasing the usefulness of the research for library practitioners.

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