**Connected Learning Handout 5: Connected Learning Principles in Action: A Case Study**

**YOUmedia**

YOUmedia is a teen learning space in various libraries, museums, and afterschool spaces throughout the country. This Case Study focuses on the flagship in the Chicago Public Library’s downtown Harold Washington Library Center. YOUmedia is dedicated to the interests of young people, and supported by librarians and mentors with expertise in digital media production. There is also an online social network, iRemix, where young people can share their work and communicate with peers and mentors. YOUmedia exemplifies the principles of connected learning by welcoming young people to engage in casual social “hanging out” with friends, as well as offering workshops and mentoring in interest areas that stretch knowledge and expertise and the connection to academic achievement and career opportunities.

Supported by the MacArthur Foundation’s Digital Media and Learning Initiative, YOUmedia represents a collaboration between the Chicago Public Library and Digital Youth Network, a digital media literacy and mentoring program. It was designed from the ground up as a new space within the library, and thus represents an educator-led connected learning environment. At the same time, the librarians, mentors, and leadership in the space have been highly responsive to the interests and initiative that the youth bring to the space, as well as insights emerging from research being conducted at the space. Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) and the Learning Networks, Ecologies and Pathways Project at NYU have been conducting research on YOUmedia since the first learning lab opened in the fall of 2009. This case study was developed with the assistance of both of these research teams and YOUmedia staff, mentors, and youth, drawing from examples of the experiences of some of the most active teens.

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5 This case study is a reprint of the website copied from https://thecurrent.educatorinnovator.org/resource/youmedia-at-the-harold-washington-library-creating-pathways-from-interests-to-opportunities for the explicit purpose of use in this training.
YOUmedia programs and mentorship are centered on specific digital media specialties taught in the partner program, Digital Youth Network. These programs include music, spoken word, electronic gaming, writing, and design. The specialties were chosen to appeal directly to diverse youth interests and identities. Mentors are chosen for their expertise as artists in these interest areas and their ability to connect with youth. In other words, they embody the culture and identity of the core interests supported in the space. The staff at the site have also actively adapted their programming to respond to the interests that young people bring to the space. *For example, after noticing a group of young gamers' interest in reviewing games, a librarian developed an implemented a game review podcast.*
Although the structured activities of the space are centered on geeking out around media production interests, the majority of the space is designed to invite unstructured socializing—in other words, hanging out and messing around. On any given afternoon, dozens of young people are sitting on the comfortable sofas socializing with their friends, eating, and casually playing games with one another. The space welcomes all teens and allows them to bring their own peer activity and diverse interests into the space.

While supporting informal peer interaction, the presence of caring adults in the space insures that young people feel protected from the more negative aspects of their peer relationships. iRemix is similarly a safe space for young people to communicate with one another and adult mentors. Taken together, the space supports a peer culture that young people describe as different from what they experience in their schools and neighborhoods. One participant notes that YOUmedia is “a place for me to hang out with the people that I relate to – nerds.” Another notes that her peers in YOUmedia are “a little smarter, a little nicer, a little more accepting... they are more accepting of who you are. They’re better at communicating. They’re into the same things you are. They like the same things you do” (from the CCSR study to be released in 2013).
Academically Oriented

YOUmedia mentors are professional and practicing artists who are passionate about their areas of expertise and interest, and make efforts to expose YOUmedia participants to the broader world of activity associated with their interest areas. In order to forge these broader connections, mentors bring in others from their field into the YOUmedia site to give performances and presentations, and support young people in shared projects and competitions that connect them to peers and experts outside of the space. For example, YOUmedia participants have written for the Huffington Post Teen and worked on design for Lady Gaga’s Born This Way Foundation. While many young people pursue interests in areas such as hip hop and video games, only a small minority are able to connect these interests to achievement and opportunity in the ways that YOUmedia seeks to enable.

Mentors also function as role models and provide support for academic achievement and career mentoring, including helping young people consider pathways to college with an eye towards longer term career aspirations in their areas of interest and aptitude. One young woman describes how she talks about future plans with the staff at YOUmedia, things like “college essays and prom. [...] They help me in how to make my college essay more stronger, and you know, they picked out what should be taken out, what should be put in, and stuff like that” (CCSR). Another young person notes that YOUmedia was a key factor in the decision to aspire for college. “I wouldn’t have been getting ready for this college opportunity if it had not been for YOUmedia really.[...] I’m going to the Art Institute for audio production. And I was not thinking about audio production eight months ago” (CCSR).
In YOUmedia, all of the interest areas are mobilized periodically in "signature projects" that bring mentors and the most active teens together to do shared productions. These include ongoing projects such as the video game podcast and blog series Library of Games, and the weekly Lyricist Loft open mic sessions. In addition, YOUmedia produces a literary magazine and record label where teen music artists and graphic designers collaboratively publish their work. Mentors also support participation in competitions and projects sponsored in the city such as Chicago's bi-annual One Book, One Chicago program and slam poetry competitions such as Louder Than a Bomb. YOUmedia teens have also mobilized politically, such as when the city was proposing budget cuts to public libraries. All of these projects are moments when adults and teens come together in focused projects, centered on shared purpose that motivate their ongoing learning and inquiry.
The YOUmedia space has ample digital production equipment from a sound studio to video cameras to banks of computers with production software. All of the mentor-led activities at YOUmedia are oriented towards media production or performance. Although teens in the space are not always actively engaged in production and performance, there are abundant opportunities and invitations for them to engage. Workshops related to production skills are advertised throughout the space, and both the signature projects and the online site showcase the work of the teens and mentors. The space also provides tools and resources for production, performance, and circulation. These include online instructional context as well as the digital media hardware and software available on site.

**Openly Networked**

YOUmedia’s location in the public library means that it has an open-door policy and is guided by the library’s mission of providing open access to information. Within the walls of YOUmedia, activities of young people who are in workshops or deeply engaged in media production are visible to other participants who are hanging out with friends, thus facilitating exposure to new interests. In addition, YOUmedia mentors create opportunities to showcase the achievements of the youth. They feature good work on the iRemix and display it in prominent places in the physical space.
Outside of the walls of the library, the iRemix social network is beginning to help youth stay connected with their YOUmedia peers and mentors from home and school. The site also makes use of Facebook and Tumblr as a way of expanding the visibility and accessibility of its programs. Signature projects also make use of online publishing opportunities to achieve broader visibility. For example, the YOUlit literary magazine has gradually been growing a national readership. “We do have readers from outside Chicago and outside YOUmedia. [...] Yeah like, we got a ton of page views. It’s amazing” (CCSR). The efforts to connect with programs and opportunities in Chicago and nationally are also examples of YOUmedia’s openly networked approach.

Challenges and Opportunities
The YOUmedia space at the Harold Washington Library is a demonstration of how cultural and informal learning institutions can provide a safe space for drawing together youth and adults in shared purpose that integrates peer culture, achievement, and interests. As it continues to evolve, the YOUmedia effort has garnered the attention of educators, youth, and media around the country, and even internationally, for providing a living laboratory where the public library is reimaged as a space that is welcoming and engaging to teens, and where opportunities that digital media have to offer for learning are leveraged. Other libraries, museums, community and cultural institutions are beginning to develop digital media centers that are informed by the YOUmedia model, and the MacArthur Foundation has partnered with the Institute for Museum and Library services to support the design of YOUmedia inspired learning labs in other parts of the country.

The uptake and adaptation of aspects of the YOUmedia model in different locales and institutions will offer new challenges as well as opportunities. While the Harold Washington Library version of YOUmedia is well endowed with a dedicated space and mentors, not all YOUmedia labs will have these kinds of resources. For example, in Chicago, YOUmedia centers have opened in three other library branches during the afterschool hours, catering
to middle school aged youth. While these labs lack the dedicated space and mentors spend less time on site than at the Harold Washington library, the location in residential communities has meant they are able to serve younger children who lack the mobility to take part in the downtown library. As the YOUmedia effort continues to grow, the challenge will be to hold onto the crucial learning dynamics and culture of YOUmedia while also adapting to the unique needs of diverse institutions, youth and their communities.