

Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums Executive Summary

The Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums program is a joint effort of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to support the creation of innovative teen spaces at libraries and museums and to unite these sites in a national network.

How did Learning Labs emerge?

Learning Labs emerged from—and continue to influence—a rich body of research that began with a three-year study of young people’s media practices in everyday settings. Mizuko (Mimi) Ito, anthropology professor at the University of California, Irvine, found that teens in digital spaces circulate between casual social engagement or “hanging out” (such as spending time on Facebook or texting), tinkering or “messing around” (posting and editing photographs, trying new apps), and deeper “geeking out” (designing games, building robots) to develop abilities around their interests. These modes of engagement are collectively called “HOMAGO.” The 24 Learning Labs funded by IMLS and the MacArthur Foundation, and earlier sites such as YOUmedia at the Chicago Public Library, ARTLAB+ at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, YOUmedia at the Miami Dade Public Library System, and Dreamyard in New York City, used HOMAGO as a guiding principle.

In Learning Labs, youth are able to discover and pursue their passions while being introduced to new opportunities they might never have encountered elsewhere. Teens from diverse backgrounds are connecting with, learning from, and inspiring each other. With guidance from adult mentors, they are exploring topics they feel are meaningful. They are experimenting and creating with digital and traditional media. They are engaging in interest-driven learning and honing skills that matter to them.

New Models, Practices, and Impacts

While museums and libraries have approached the planning and design of these labs in a variety of ways, they have all employed a set of new models and practices.

Teen Engagement—Direct involvement of teens in the planning and design process is a signature characteristic of the Learning Labs. Learning Lab evalu-



Youth at Las Vegas Clark County Library District set up for a video recording session. Photo by Las Vegas Clark County Library District.

ations indicate that youth involved in these spaces show increased persistence, greater civic participation, and a more positive sense of the future.

Mentors—Mentors are integral to Learning Labs. Often experts in their own fields—poets, engineers, musicians, filmmakers, geographers, librarians, and museum educators—mentors are trusted adults who help teens identify new interests, encourage them to expand their horizons, and offer them access to experts and resources. Learning Lab sites have confirmed that the mentoring role is indeed a cornerstone to success in engaging teens.

Physical Space—Teens talk about needing spaces that are “teen only,” safe, flexible, and which provide opportunities for youth voice as well as public display of work.

Participating museums and libraries recognize key impacts resulting from their Learning Labs work: Their institutions are being transformed in unexpected ways; their teens are gaining critical 21st century skills; and they are building networks that include other organizations engaged in youth development.

Institutional Transformation—Learning Labs are transformative for the institutions that create them, and for the youth and adults who learn and work within them. Labs are catalysts for reimagining learning experiences that capitalize on the power of “Connected Learning,” learning that engages teens and their peers around their interests and is connected to real-world opportunities.

Fostering 21st Century Skills—Learning Labs offer the kind of learning experiences that help teens develop problem-solving skills and encourage collaboration and persistence. These behaviors are important for success in a highly competitive and rapidly changing workforce.

Building Learning Ecosystems—Learning becomes meaningful and relevant for youth when they can dive into their passions through multiple entry-points and locations. For many of the Learning Labs teams, the planning and design process was the impetus for developing new learning ecosystems, transforming entire communities into landscapes for learning.

What is the Future of Learning Labs?

An important goal of the IMLS/MacArthur Foundation investment in Learning Labs was to foster the development of a dynamic community of practice. Two professional associations, the Urban Libraries Council and the Association of Science-Technology Centers, provided technical assistance and support for the early growth of this community. A national network of practitioners has emerged that shares resources and best practices, and spreads new examples of Connected Learning. This community connects through meet-ups, professional learning opportunities, and new digital spaces.

IMLS and the MacArthur Foundation are committed to fostering continued professional development

Learning Labs Are

Through work with early YOUmedia sites, Ito and her team of researchers have begun to point toward collective outcomes resulting from Connected Learning experiences and spaces such as Learning Labs.

Outcomes point to:

- A supportive and safe environment for developing interests and expertise
 - Intergenerational relationships centered on shared interests, identity, and mutual respect
 - A safe peer culture that values intellectual and creative excellence
- Exposure to a breadth and depth of interests
 - Discovery of new interests
 - Deepening and extending existing interests
- Connecting interests to opportunity in the wider world
 - Publicity and recognition in the wider world
 - Orientation toward academics and career

through collaborative work. New digital spaces for this work will include the public website, youmedia.org, hosted by the National Writing Project, and a new online open community site that will launch in 2015. The combined YOUmedia Learning Lab network is poised to usher new practitioners into a nationwide community of practice committed to engaging youth in learning that leads to the 21st century skills they need to thrive.

Find Out More

For more information about the program, please see *Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Transformative Spaces for Teens*, available at www.youmedia.org.

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