

The Youth Literacy Network

The Youth Literacy Network:
Merging Literacy and Technology Into
A Mentoring After School Program

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Abstract

This qualitative research study focused on investigating the improvement of literacy and computer skills in five high school students participating in the Youth Literacy Network after school program located in a south side neighborhood of Tucson, Arizona. These students were trained as mentors to assist middle school students with homework and encourage them to create projects to develop literacy and computer skills. During the program duration, several strategies were used to educate the student mentors including: reflective writing, game play, and digital technology projects. The data collected consisted of: writings, gaming artifacts, digital technology projects, a focus group interview, a short survey and written observations by the researcher. The findings suggest that the Youth Literacy Network after school program did provide opportunities for high school and middle school students to increase both their literacy and computer skills. There was evidence that the skills they acquired and the relationships created during the program will fundamentally influence their teaching and learning experiences and perhaps their future social, educational and professional goals.

Key Words: after school program, literacy, computer skills, game play, and digital technology projects.

Introduction

This qualitative research study focused on the effects an after school program had on improving the literacy and computer skills of five high school students. The study also investigated if and how these skills transferred to their everyday home life, school environment or work place. John Dewey (1998) observed that the student has an inability to utilize what he learns outside of the school within the school day and on the other hand, he is unable to apply what he learns in school to his daily life (pp. 76-78). Is it possible for an after school program to build that necessary bridge between school and home life?

The Youth Literacy Network (YLN) was an after school program conducted in a south side neighborhood of Tucson, Arizona. The purpose of this program was to train five high school students as mentors in assisting middle school students with homework and projects to promote literacy and computer skills. This training was to enhance the teaching, literacy and computer skills of the high school students and to strengthen their abilities in working with middle school students. This training strategy will not only benefit the middle school students who receive help from the high school students, but will enrich the lives of the high school students as they take this knowledge back into their community. The Benton Foundation (<http://benton.org>), a private foundation bridging the worlds of philanthropy, public policy and community action states that almost half of young people with the lowest level of literacy and technical skills are living in poverty. There is overwhelming evidence that as literacy skills improve, so does success in school, breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion. Gaining new skills also makes young people more likely to volunteer, vote and engage in the larger community.

Literature Review

Implementation of after school programs has been on the rise in the United States since the mid 1990's (Apsler, 2009). The goals of after school programs can vary in many ways. Robert Apsler reviewed the after school literature in his article on after-school programs for adolescents, and identified six common goals for after school programs. These goals are to provide: 1) adult supervision and a safe environment, 2) a flexible, relaxed, homelike environment, 3) cultural or enrichment opportunities, 4) academic skill improvement, 5) ways to prevent behavior problems, and 6) recreational activities.

Other factors that have become apparently important in after school programs are daily program structure and student engagement. Hirsch (2005) recommends regular activities should comprise the after school programs. The programs should have some structure, but not be over structured. The programs desired outcomes should be clear, but if the structure is too rigid it could parallel the school environment and minimize students' interest and engagement. Hirsch states:

In classrooms and classroom-like environments, the focus is on covering more content, but in after-school settings research indicates that relationship development and student engagement is more important—if a conversation moves a bit off course, as long as students are engaged, it's more important to follow their lead. (pp. 136-137)

Student engagement becomes more important than structure in a successful after school program. Hirsch goes on to describe other factors of a successful after school program. These include: 1) the presence of skilled and caring adults, 2) resourceful and enduring relationships and 3) peers who are involved in the programming.

Introducing mentoring into an after school program can have an effect upon both

The Youth Literacy Network

the mentors and the mentees. Mentoring is when there is a regular meeting between two people with one person providing guidance, support, or special attention over a period of time. Mentoring is a relevant strategy that can promote student engagement and help to overcome academic failure (Rhodes, 2008). Each year in the United States approximately 2.5 million students participate in mentoring programs (Karcher, 2005). In a meta-analysis conducted by DuBois, Holloway, Valentine and Cooper (2002) on youth mentoring they found favorable effects upon the benefits of mentoring appeared to extend a year or more beyond the program, however the magnitude of these effects on the average youth participate was modest. They found five best practices that contribute to an effective mentoring program: 1) monitoring program implementation, 2) on going training for mentors, 3) parental involvement, 4) structured activities and 5) clear expectation and goals. Basically, a structured program with clear expectation and a focus on instrumental goals and on going support from facilitators yielded the strongest effects upon the youth.

The facilitation of a mentor program in an after school environment can have a meaningful and lasting influence on the students, but only if the interaction goes beyond being one-dimensional (Grineski, 2003). The connections need to be nurtured and made on different levels throughout the program, so students feel safe and open to engaging in the learning environment with the both the facilitators and mentors. These connections can be defined as “bridging” relationships, which expose students to potential life-enhancing people, resources and opportunities that might have been unavailable to them (Miller, 2012). With these thoughts in mind, the research questions were constructed to identify if the YLN had an impact upon the high school students, in regard to improving and transferring their literacy and computer skills into everyday life.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study focused on the effects the Youth Literacy Network (YLN) after school program had on improving the literacy and computer skills with five high school student mentors and if these skills transferred into their everyday lives. The three research questions addressed are:

- 1) How did serving as a mentor in an after school program increase the mentor's literacy and computer skills?
- 2) How did digital technology projects and game play assist in building community while increasing literacy and computer skills?
- 3) How did these skills transfer over to school, work and home life?

Theoretical Framework

Three theories were used as a framework for this research study. The first is the Ethnography of Communication. This theory takes a sociolinguistic perspective on literacy and learning. Anthropologist and linguists come together to look beyond the traditional schooling environments and explore the family and communities for learning practices. They were looking for patterns of life that bound social group and were passed down from one generation to the next. This prompted exploration of outside setting to understand patterns of success and failure in groups of students (Hull, 2002). From this perspective Dell Hymes (1964) proposed the concept of the ethnography of communication focusing on comparing patterns of communication across communities, both in written and oral literacies. This framework allows for noticing the resources students bring to the learning environment and encourages educators to change their ways of teaching, instead of changing the ways that students learn. The YLN was based on this framework, allowing

The Youth Literacy Network

student mentors to guide the facilitator toward project-based activities leading toward enhancement of their own literacy and computer skills.

The second theory used to support the framework of this study is Activity Theory. This theory helps to examine literacy as an integrated part of everyday life activities, to look beyond school and discover what motivates humans to become literate. Vygotsky (1978) believed semiotics (sign systems) had a significant influence over how we think and how we interact with the world. Scribner and Cole (1997) took this idea and demonstrated through research that particular sign systems do foster particular forms of thinking. They were looking at thinking as part of activity. These activities serve a larger purpose rather than being an end in of themselves. This theory helps to frame thinking as a part of a dominate life activity, not only in a school environment, but in an after school play/work situation. With the YLN, activity theory helped to frame the whole learning environment with the goal of capturing “human mental functioning and development in the full richness of its social and artifactual texture” (Cole, Engestrom & Vasquez, 1997, p. 13).

The last theoretical structure used is the New Literacies Studies (NLS). The NLS is a newer tradition that views the nature of literacy as a social practice, instead of viewing literacy as an acquisition of skills (Street, 1997). According to Gee (1996) literacy must be studied in its social, cultural, historical, economic and political contexts, both in school and out. At the YLN, social game play was used as an instrument to increase literacy skills. Each session began by playing a game that tied into a literacy skill. The play was very social in nature and enhanced the learning, but it also brought about a communication connection between the students. This theory helps to shift attention from formal learning

The Youth Literacy Network

environments to informal ones where literacy practices and identities can be distinctly constructed among the participants.

The merging of these three theories assisted in framing the research conducted at the Youth Literacy Network. Keeping all of these theoretical perspectives in mind enriched the study and helped to support the students in questioning and reshaping their world through the learning process of an after school program.

Methodology

Research Setting

The Youth Literacy Network (YLN) after school program is located in a Southside neighborhood in Tucson, Arizona. The YLN is being conducted at the South Park Literacy Center, an annex of the Quincie Douglas Library, a part of the Tucson Public Library system. The point of using this location was to target the youth at two of the neighborhood middle schools. This neighborhood is urban, with low-income households, and a mixed educational background including high school degrees and some college courses (http://www.zillow.com/local-info/AZ-Tucson/South-Park-people/r_275451/).

Approximately, 38% of the families living in South Park speak English, while 68% of families living in this neighborhood speak Spanish (<http://www.areavibes.com/tucson-az/south+park/demographics/>). Two local groups, Good Neighbor Ventures and Literacy Connects supported and funded this program through a grant opportunity. The program was sponsored and developed by the College of Education at the University of Arizona.

The South Park Literacy Center is located within walking distance of the middle schools that the Youth Literacy Network (YLN) was targeting. The center consists of two buildings with several rooms, an outdoor courtyard and two apartments. The YNL utilized

The Youth Literacy Network

two rooms at the center. The main room had six desktop computers and a couple of tables for meeting and working. This space was smaller and shared with another after school program. There was a wall between the two programs, but the noise level was kept to a minimum. The other room was a larger room where the group gathered for bigger, louder, more physical projects.

We had access to six laptops, a projector and a printer. There were supplies for writing, drawing and project creation. The two facilitators brought board games for the participants to play and books for them to read. The center is equipped with Internet access for both the desktop and laptop computers. The high school students and the facilitators each had their own mobile device with Internet capabilities.

There was a security guard on the premise. She is located in the main room with the computers. All buildings were locked and secured during our time at the center. We provided snacks and drinks for the all students who participated in YLN.

Participants

The five high school students were recruited for the Youth Literacy Network by one of the facilitators. The high school students were paid for both their training and mentoring time. The high school students spend approximately 10 to 16 hours a month working for the Youth Literacy Network (YLN).

Four of the students attend local public high schools, and one attended a local charter school focused on the arts. There were four females and one male in the group. The students were all in their second year of high school and between the ages of 14 and 15. All of the students were in good academic standing at their respective schools.

The Youth Literacy Network

Each student had a different cultural background with the exception of the twins. The group consisted of two female twins, who were Caucasian (Alice and Lisa*), one female African American (Kelly*) and one Hispanic male (Jose*). The last female student (Rita*) was from El Salvador and Spanish is her first language, although she was fluent in English. Two of the students, Rita and Jose were dating, however the other students with the exception of the twins, do not associate outside of the YLN.

* Names have been changed.

Data Collection

The YLN program was started in the fall of 2012 and concluded in spring of 2013. Two facilitators conducted training with the high school students from October to December. Starting in January the high school mentors began working with the middle school students. Unfortunately, the program only attracted three middle school students. The high school mentors did work with these three students throughout the spring. To fill extra time the high school students worked with the facilitators on advancing their literacy, computer and life skills.

The data collected throughout the duration of the program consisted of the following: 1) the student's journal writings and blogs, 2) the artifacts created during our game play, 3) digital technology projects, 4) a focus group interview, 5) a short online survey and 6) written observations by the researcher. This data was analyzed to search for specific lessons learned by the students and if the knowledge gained in these lessons transitioned over to their everyday lives.

The Youth Literacy Network

Data Analysis

In the analysis phase of this research, the data was examined to discover patterns, themes and categories as opposed to deductive analysis, where the categories are created beforehand in relationship to an existing framework (Patton, 2002). The first step used was open coding of the data to identify emerging themes. This process helped to question the data and reflect upon the theoretical framework, engaging in the ideas that were revealed in order to contribute to the intellectual body of work. This also allowed themes to emerge from the data that were accurately reflective on the students' responses. Through the technique of clustering diagrams and axial coding, the data was scrutinized to find the relationships of categories and make connections between them (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The resulting themes were extracted to various levels of abstraction, then reconstructed and interpreted into an authentic narrative format. This is based upon Patton's (2002) quote, "Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings and otherwise imposing order." (p. 480)

To provide credibility to the data, triangulation was used to in the coordination of multiple data sets. Through the triangulation process the different data sets were analyzed to corroborate, elaborate and illuminate student responses in reference to the research questions (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The final outcome of this analysis process led to findings that gave insight into the research questions, leading to ways for improving the YLN program and teaching better methods for conducting this after school program. These results will be discussed in the following section of findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

Results

The results of this research are organized and guided by the three research questions. The first question relates to serving as a mentor in an after school program and if there was an increase in the mentor's literacy and computer skills. This question was the most difficult to assess as we only had three middle school students attend the Youth Literacy Network (YLN). However, the high school students did learn from the mentor training they obtained during the program. The biggest impact upon them appears to be learning patience when working with others and the knowledge that people learn in different ways. An interesting observation was they did not feel prepared to help with some of the homework presented by the middle school students.

The second question asked if digital technology projects and game play assist in building community while increasing literacy and computer skills. This was by far the most successful part of the YLN. At the beginning of each session we played games based around literacy. All of the students liked playing the games and learning from them. One student said, "You've Been Sentenced helps improve your sentence structure." Another student added, "It (You've Been Sentenced) helps you think right on the spot, because it is timed, much like taking a big test." They even created their own version of the game "Apples to Apple" called "Youth to Youth". Most of the games were board or homemade games. This helped in building community as one student commented, "I am more engaged with people in board games."

There was one game we played digitally on Facebook called "Collegeology". In this game, one explores the steps to getting accepted to college through gameplay. All of the

The Youth Literacy Network

students who played this game liked it and thought it gave them insight on how complicated it is to get accepted to into college. The game really made them aware of all the prep work and time it takes to apply to college.

We also introduced many Web 2.0 technologies into projects and the daily activity of the YLN. Web 2.0 technologies are free applications and software available via the Internet. The students liked learning about Google Drive. They learned how to keep a timesheet and share documents in this technology. For projects, we explored writing on blogs and sites like Cowbird. Other technologies like VoiceThread were used in story telling, discussions around books and question prompts around various topics.

These Web 2.0 technology help to answer the last question asking if these skills transfer over to school, work and home life. Most of the student thought they would use the Google tools for school projects. One comment was, "...so if we had to do an assignment as a group, but did not have time in class, we could share on Google Drive." They also thought VoiceThread was fun and easy to use for presentations. A student made this comment, "I would definitely use VoiceThread, because personally I am very shy and get stage fright when I presenting..." He also liked being able to record until you "get it right".

Another activity likely to be shared more at home than at school were the games we played to teach literacy and build community. The homegrown games where we build stories and drew pictures were the ones all of the students said would be fun to play with their families. Two of the students thought it would be a good exercise for the classroom, however none of the students have shared this games with their teachers.

Overall, the YLN was successful in building community among the high school students for improving both literacy and computer skills. One area appearing in the data

The Youth Literacy Network

that was not expected were the soft skills the students requested to learn. The two big areas of interest were interviewing skills and career path information. Some of the best sessions were casual conversations leading to deeper discussions around life skills and choices.

Discussion

In addressing the theoretical framework used for this research, the Youth Literacy Network was right on target with the findings in the literature of after school programs. The ethnography of communication points to the educator being guided by what the students want to learn. This was apparent in the discussions that happened around the soft skills of interviewing and career choices. The conversations and relationships of all participants went beyond one-dimensional. Even after the program has ended we are staying in contact via Facebook and through text messaging. One student has made contact to ask advice on interviewing for a summer job.

Within this context the New Literacies Studies came to life through learning in game play. The students were engaged in learning and playing to the point of flow. We tried to limit the game play to the first 30 minutes of the session, only to lose track of time or have the students begging for just one more round. The students became more comfortable with the facilitators as we played the games. One student made the comment, "...you see if they are silly or serious (while playing games), like seeing the fun side of everyone...". We were all learning while engaged with each other and the content.

Finally we look to Activity Theory as a way for the students to apply the learning at the YLN to everyday life. This was achieved when we showed them how to use technologies like Google Drive for keeping records and sharing files or VoiceThread for

The Youth Literacy Network

visual discussions and story telling. The students took these technologies and started to apply them in other areas of their lives. As an example, instead of discussing a book we were reading, we decided to conduct the discussion in VoiceThread with visuals, text and voice. This made for deeper reflective comments, as the students were not just talking in the moment of the discussion.

Conclusion and Implications

As we look at after school programs and the importance of young people learning outside of the traditional school environment, we must start to understand more about and explore the potential for community based education programs. We need to investigate ideas around the significance in building community, and listen to what students want to learn and need to learn in order to be successful citizens of their community and help them to transition the learning from one environment to another.

One exercise that might benefit the transfer of knowledge from the after school program to their personal lives is a written reflection about the knowledge gained that day with a brief discussion among the group before they leave the center of how this knowledge could be put to use in other arenas. As the students get more familiar with this practice, create a visual concept map with themes of ideas learned at the center. Continue the practice each week by adding to the concept map, demonstrating where and how to relate these themes to life, work and home. This could have easily been implemented with many of the sessions, from learning about how to be patience, to forming and asking questions, to playing literacy games.

This research is just the tip of the iceberg, when it comes to the need for studying new ideas around conducting mentoring programs in after school programs.

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The Youth Literacy Network

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