Leadership Brief:
Libraries Igniting Learning
Summer 2014

About this Leadership Brief

Libraries and learning have always been connected. The activities they offer and the resources they provide contribute to and support successful learning. Today, however, contributing to and supporting learning may not be enough. Libraries can serve a more central role in designing and delivering high-quality programs that lead to learning outcomes that are purposeful and intentional rather than assumed or implied.

A more powerful library role in learning is essential because:

- Traditional education cannot meet today's learning needs alone.

- Succeeding in today's rapidly changing world requires a higher order of skills and continuous learning.

- Libraries have a wealth of learning assets including databases, technology tools, meeting rooms, business centers, and more.

- Libraries already are trusted, inclusive, welcoming places for learners of all ages where people can get the personalized learning and support that they need.

- Libraries can connect the dots between what people learn at school, at home, and from their peers.

Becoming more powerful learning institutions requires a recommitment to innovation, a willingness to redefine how libraries think and operate, a deeper understanding of 21st century learning approaches, and strong partnerships with formal and informal learning institutions to share resources and create new learning pathways.

This Leadership Brief highlights how libraries can leverage their capacities, assets, connections, and stature to ignite learning in the communities they serve.

21st Century Learning

Research shows that a comprehensive and continuous approach to learning that begins early, draws on a variety of resources, extends beyond traditional classrooms and is participatory and interest-driven helps children, youth, adults, and seniors succeed in school, careers, and life. The following sections highlight learning principles that are guiding, shaping, and influencing library roles in learning.

Learning may occur at any time, any place, any path and any pace. While schools and homes are important learning places, libraries, museums, science centers, parks, afterschool programs, and technology centers are becoming equally as important.

Young people respond more positively to learning that is personal, interest-driven, informal, and supported by peers and mentors. Interest-driven learning asks "what is the experience you want youth to have as a pathway to learning' versus "what do you want youth to learn."

Well-designed networks that connect diverse resources improve learning outcomes. Networks convert isolated events into continuous learning by linking school, home, community resources, mentors, and peers while providing multiple entry points into a learning experience based on interest.

Quality afterschool and summer learning programs improve outcomes, reduce out-of-school learning loss, and support families and communities. With students spending only about 20 percent of their time in traditional classrooms, making the best use of the remaining 80 percent for sustained learning is essential to long-term success.

Technology is a catalyst for learning. Digital media facilitates a different kind of learning, that engages learners in new ways, provides connections for lifelong learning, and changes the way people manage information and knowledge.

Well-designed, easily accessible, and welcoming spaces contribute to active participation and successful learning outcomes. Learners of all ages are attracted to places where they feel comfortable, can find and do what they choose, and are able to take ownership of their learning activities.

Libraries Igniting Learning

Libraries are already at the center of lifelong learning. They are places where people of all ages learn and create rather than consume and check out. [2] Broadening their roles as community leaders and resources for 21st century learning requires change in how libraries think, operate, and engage in the community. Six strategies for libraries to ignite learning are:

Connected Learning and Learning Labs

Connected learning is a research-based approach that makes learning relevant to young people, to real life, to work, and to the realities of the digital age. It emphasizes the vital connection among three learning spheres: interests, peer interaction, and academic studies, and is based on four learning principles:

- Everyone can participate.
- Learning happens by doing.
- Challenge is constant.
- Everything is interconnected.[1]

Inspired by YouMedia, a digital initiative for teens developed at the Chicago Public Library, Learning Labs are programs and spaces in libraries and museums where connected learning happens. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Institute of Museums and Library Services are funding expansion of learning labs in 24 libraries and museums.

- Understanding and embracing the library's role as a learning institution.
- Offering high-quality learning experiences based on research about what works.
- Building strategic partnerships to form learning networks that broaden impact.
- Increasing staff capacity to support learning strategies.
- Designing spaces around learners' priorities.
- Raising the library's profile as a community learning leader.

1. Understanding and embracing the library's role as a learning institution.

Schools are no longer solely responsible for educating the public. The "any time, any place, any path, any pace" model broadens learning opportunities and fits well with library capacity, resources, assets, audience, and community stature. Embracing the library's role as a learning institution involves:

- Understanding and communicating why learning is a key library priority.
- Maximizing staff capacity to make learning happen.
- Identifying and measuring relevant learning outcomes rather than materials used and program attendance.
- Creating internal connections among library learning programs and external links with programs offered by other community learning institutions.
- Placing the learner at the center when planning and designing learning experiences.
- Aligning library resources, tools, staff, and facilities to achieve learning outcomes.

2. Offering high-quality learning programs based on research about what works.

Libraries are making great strides to ignite learning by developing programs that engage diverse learners and measuring learning outcomes rather than just participation rates. Examples of new library learning programs include:

- Learning Labs for teens that blend skilled adult mentors with digital tools and traditional media to make learning relevant, develop lifelong learners, and empower and motivate learners to identify and pursue their true passions.
- Year-round reading programs that engage readers of all ages and connect seamlessly to school reading programs and other community literacy efforts.

- New learning models such as science cafes that support science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills for teens and adults and makerspace programs that encourage independent thinking, initiative, and do-it-yourself creativity.
- Gaming activities which teach critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and design skills.

3. Building strategic partnerships to form learning networks that broaden impact.

Libraries understand the value of partnerships to deliver successful programs and build powerful relationships. Drawing on that experience, libraries can become community learning hubs by:

- Identifying community needs and embracing a shared purpose.
- Knowing the community landscape including the organizations that are involved in learning, the programs they deliver, the audiences they serve, the capacities they have, and the opportunities for collaboration.
- Building stronger networks by identifying intersections between library learning programs and those offered by other learning institutions.
- Initiating and leading learning networks by using the library's track record as a community anchor institution.
- Coordinating online systems that support learning and the exchange of information.
- Building sustained partnerships with school systems that connect outcomes from library learning programs with school curricula, recognize and support school priorities, and promote constant information sharing.

4. Increasing staff capacity to support shared learning strategies.

Long-term success as a community learning institution may require new or different staff skills. In a recent Urban Libraries Council member survey, 41 percent of library directors identified having staff with the right skills to meet today's needs as one of their top three challenges. Library directors say they need staff who are outwardly focused, able to build and sustain relationships, and willing to push learners to pursue new ideas and opportunities. Libraries can begin to meet new staffing needs by:

- Looking for employees with learner-focused skills when filling vacancies.

- Creating new staffing structures that make carrying out the library's learning role an essential senior staff/managerial responsibility.
- Providing professional development opportunities for current staff to help develop new skills, assume new roles, and increase understanding of new learning research and outcomes.
- Leveraging partnerships to draw on other organizations' staff capacity to support learners in new ways.
- Seeking public/private partnerships and grants to carry out new programs and provide funds to fill staff needs.
- Working to transform library and information science degree programs to meet new staffing needs.

5. Designing space around learners' priorities.

Libraries designed for learning are organized around people, technology, and connections in addition to books. Learning cafes, information commons, and makerspaces support participatory learning. Designing library spaces for learning initially requires rethinking more than rebuilding and can be implemented incrementally beginning with the question "what do we want to happen in this space" rather than "what do we want to put in this space."[3] Examples of how libraries are designing spaces to meet learning priorities include:

- Creating a small business incubator with work stations, meeting rooms, and business resources to meet both the learning and operating needs of a growing independent business sector.
- Converting a traditional general service library branch into an e-skills and job learning center to address high unemployment.
- Designing learning labs that provide opportunities for young people where they are supported by adult mentors and can build on their own interests, use diverse media, and interact with peers.
- Integrating library branches into schools, where appropriate, to provide high-quality learning resources in schools that might not otherwise be available because of tight budgets.

Libraries have a unique edge when it comes to maximizing learning space because they already are trusted, welcoming places. When they take the next step of becoming trusted, welcoming *learning* places, they can ignite participatory learning that will support users in a rapidly changing world.

6. Raising the library's profile as a community learning leader.

Despite their broad learning credentials, libraries often are not thought of as learning leaders. A report on the roles of New York City's three public library systems as "branches of opportunity" found that library learning programs are often seen as add-ons rather than components of a learning system.[4] Many community leaders, citizens, users, and even library staff still think of libraries as book repositories. Libraries can raise their profiles as learning leaders by:

- Thinking more like educators than service providers.
- Reporting on learning experiences, priorities, and outcomes rather than attendance and circulation.
- Being at the table during conversations that address community education needs and goals.
- Connecting regularly with other learning institutions and organizations that serve the community.
- Identifying all library programs by their learning purpose.
- Aligning library programs for young learners with school programs to build on learning that occurs in schools and fill gaps.
- Making learning a component of all library messages.
- Engaging partners to help spread the word about the library's role in learning.

Becoming Learning Leaders

Education in America needs to be more powerful to prepare people of all ages to meet the challenges of today's global economy and to succeed throughout life. Elected officials, educators, researchers, parents, and learners alike recognize that schools are no longer the exclusive learning place, and successful learning can and should occur outside the school. The failure to achieve in school need not be a lifelong failure to learn. A wide range of cradle-through-career learning strategies is essential to ensure individual and community success.

Libraries have a unique opportunity to become more relevant and valued by providing effective learning opportunities in their communities, building on both existing strengths and new learning tools. It is hard NOT to see libraries as learning hubs because of their experience, capacity, assets, and community stature. But, becoming respected learning institutions requires library leaders to be more deliberate about how they define and communicate library priorities and more systematic about how they design and deliver learning programs and measure outcomes.

Improving education is a vital national priority, and libraries can be at the center of achieving that goal. Libraries provide a bridge to the future, and that bridge to a brighter learning future is needed now more than ever.

Learning Resources

Branches of Opportunity (New York: Center for an Urban Future, 2013).

Future Ready Columbus: Assuring Student Success for the Workforce of Tomorrow (Columbus, Ohio: Columbus Education Commission, April 30, 2013).

Ito, Mizuko, et. al. *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design.* (Chicago, IL: The MacArthur Foundation, 2013).

*Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills (*Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2009).

Peterson, Terry K., PhD, editor. *Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success* (Washington, DC: Collaborative Communications Group, Inc., 2013).

*A Place to Grow and Learn: A Citywide Approach to Building and Sustaining Out-of-School Time Learning Opportunities (*New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2008).

Picturing Success: The Transformative Power of Afterschool (Flint, Michigan: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 2011).

http://afterschoolalliance.org/
http://chicagosummeroflearning.org/
http://connectedlearning.tv/
http://www.edutopia.org/
http://hivelearningnetwork.org/
http://remakelearning.org/
http://youmedia.org/

Endnotes

[1] Ito, Mizuko, et. al. *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design.* (Chicago, IL: The MacArthur Foundation, 2013). http:///clm.dmlhub.net/.

[2] Breitkopf, Mia. *A Makerspace Takes Over a Local Library."* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University School of Information Studies, December, 2011).

[3] Bennett, Scott. *Libraries and Learning: A History of Paradigm Change* (Urbana, IL, 2003).

[4] *Branches of Opportunity* (New York: Center for an Urban Future, 2013).