Executive Summary
On-Ramps, Lane Changes, Detours and Destinations: Building Connected Learning Pathways in Hive NYC through Brokering Future Learning Opportunities

April 2015
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with active contribution by many Hive NYC members and stakeholders

Towards a ‘Network for Learning’
One of the original guiding visions for the Mozilla Hive NYC Learning Network was to create a ‘network for learning’ for the city’s youth. It suggested a Connected Learning ecosystem where youth may encounter a wide range of production-centered learning experiences and be supported by adults and peers in ways that could lead to future opportunities in personal, academic, professional, and civic realms (Ito et al., 2013; Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2012). And it is a vision that requires educators and organizations to think beyond the bounds of their own institutions to consider how collective action at the level of networks can provide opportunities and address inequalities in a way that more isolated efforts cannot.

When discussing how marginalized youth might thrive in such an ecosystem—and what sort of interventions we can develop to help all youth do so—the idea of pathways has been a useful metaphor that invites us to consider youths’ ‘learning lives’ (Erstad & Sefton-Green, 2012) over time and across the many contexts (home, school, community organizations, religious centers, etc.) where learning may occur (Barron, 2004, 2006). While there are many different ways to productively conceptualize such pathways, here we simply invoke pathways as a metaphor for thinking about ways to provide structure to youth experiences—how they might ‘connect to’ or ‘build upon’ one another and thus allow a young person to pursue goals that require extended engagement or persistence across multiple organizations, institutions and learning opportunities.

Within the context of thinking about pathways, it is critical to shed light on a familiar practice and concern among the Hive community and discusses how to amplify it so that the youth we serve in our programs gain valuable social, human, and cultural capital that will allow them to choose their futures. We focus on brokering future learning opportunities as a key part of the youth development and relationship building Hive educators already engage in. When we broker, we:

• Connect youth to meaningful future learning opportunities including events, programs, internships, individuals and institutions that will support youth in continuing their interest-driven learning.
• Enrich their social networks with adults, peers, and institutions that are connected to/have knowledge of future learning opportunities.

Over time, and with the right guidance, our hope is that we can support our youth to develop robust social networks and an orientation towards using the contacts in their networks to advance their identities as learners, professionals, and citizens. We bring the following assumption to these goals:

To help youth continue their engagement in an interest on their own terms, we must help them develop robust social networks that are rich with future learning opportunities and equip adults and peers to play active roles in brokering those opportunities.

Hive Research Lab is made possible through the support of the Hive Digital Media and Learning Fund in the New York Community Trust.
Conceptual model of social capital development through brokering

Based on existing literature as well as basic research we’ve conducted in Hive NYC, we propose a conceptual model for how brokering relates to social capital development that can lead to valued youth personal, academic, professional, and civic outcomes (see figure).

Brokering as an educator practice leading to increased youth social capital and uptake of learning opportunities.

This model highlights an important route to supporting increased youth uptake of learning opportunities. Key to this process is the relationship building that occurs between educators and youth typically in the context of Connected Learning informal learning programs run by Hive member organizations. We postulate that the environment afforded by these programs provides a promising context for two important outcomes necessary for effective brokering: the development of trusting, caring relationships between youth and educators (i.e., youth trust of educator) and a better understanding by educators of youths’ interests, needs, etc. (i.e., educator knowledge of youth). Also, when educators know their youth and have close relationships with them, it is more likely that youth will take up future learning opportunities that these educators recommend. This allows for successful enactment of various brokering practices leading to increased youth engagement in learning opportunities.

There are two important supporting components that play critical roles in the brokering process. The first is how a young person’s network orientation or help-seeking orientation may positively or negatively affect her ability to take up and navigate the opportunities brokered by high resource individuals. Secondly, educators’ ability to effectively broker relevant opportunities for youth is contingent on their knowledge of learning opportunities.
Recommendations
The following recommendations illustrate some ways in which individual organizations and networks can enhance this vision of brokering and youth social capital building. These recommendations are not exhaustive and should serve as the starting point for how to consider useful ways to increase our ability to broker future learning opportunities to youth. We are cognizant that many organizations already strive to emulate these practices amidst competing pressures and time constraints; we recognize and respect these efforts and hope we can continue to build upon and strengthen them.

Organization-level Recommendations
Organizations play a crucial role in the brokering process - they provide both the context for relationship building to occur as well as facilitate introduction to high resource individuals (i.e., educators, teaching artists, visiting guests, etc.). The issues raised in this paper suggest implications for organizations in terms of how we manage our program staff and teaching artists, what skills we continue to hone, and what we prioritize in our engagement with youth.

• Ensure that program educators and teaching artists receive adequate guidance and resources around active brokering. While those who see themselves as professionals in the youth development space are generally familiar with the value of relationship building and, to varying degrees, brokering learning opportunities¹, this perspective does not necessarily hold for other program staff such as teaching artists, many of whom self-identify as digital media and technology professionals and may not be familiar with general principles of youth development. Because these individuals are often interact with youth closely during the program and they represent a valuable connection for youth to certain digital media futures, we recommend articulating to them the importance of brokering future learning opportunities as well as providing ongoing support and guidance throughout the course of the program.

• Consider integrating activities at specific points in a program that support relationship building and brokering of future learning opportunities. The table on p. 7 represents a summary of common brokering practices that Hive educators have enacted in their programs. We hope that bringing these practices together in one place may help educators experiment with new forms of brokering and in general expand their repertoire of brokering practices. We also recognize that many of these activities may require extra planning and time, which could affect other goals of the program. We welcome more discussion in the community around how to alleviate such tensions.

• Consider how organizations might support a positive youth network orientation. Given what we know about youth network orientation and help-seeking orientation, it may be important to discuss with youth the importance of soliciting support from others who can provide valued opportunities, resources and references, as well as help them develop the skills and comfort with doing so.

Researchers at the Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring² have produced relevant resources in this area as part of their youth-initiated mentoring initiatives.³

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¹ See the Connected Mentor site: http://connectedmentor.com/
² http://www.umbmentoring.org/
³ http://chronicle.umbmentoring.org/tag/youth-initiated-mentoring/
• **Create or broker leveling-up opportunities for youth.** An important part of supporting youth pathways is to link young people to other opportunities, especially experiences that are slightly more challenging or offer more leadership responsibilities. Several larger institutions in Hive NYC such as New York Hall of Science and the Rubin Museum, who have “ladders of opportunities” within the organization where youth can start as program participants and then graduate to become interns and co-teachers, provide programmatic models worth examining.

• **Designate a “brokering point person” on staff.** As a means to coordinate information about relevant future learning opportunities, organizations and institutions, organizations should consider designating a staff person as a “brokering point person.” Depending on organizational capacity, a person in this position might organize and circulate information among front-line educators, run trainings on best practices for brokering, run internship placement programs within the organization, maintain a youth-facing listserv through which opportunities can be shared and generally be thinking about advancing organizational brokering strategies that support youth beyond individual programmatic opportunities.

**Network-level Recommendations**

Brokering can be a time intensive practice when done in isolation. As a networked community of educators, however, we have the opportunity to explore tools and routines that will allow for effective brokering practices to spread and achieve scale. Figuring out how to better leverage the trust and social connections between organizations in Hive networks is a key opportunity towards developing more impactful ways to broker future learning opportunities to our youth. Additionally, engaging in strategic partnerships with other youth-serving institutions will produce the kind of supportive connective tissue that will enable more youth in the city to build Connected Learning pathways utilizing a wider range of opportunities.

• **Develop efficient and timely ways for information about learning opportunities to circulate to brokers as well as be shared directly with youth.** In order for brokers to effectively connect youth to future learning opportunities, they must have knowledge of such opportunities in the first place. Currently, information is available, but is not always delivered or made available in ways that are timely, accessible, and/or comprehensive. Having access to a consistently updated repository of high quality information that would meet the general interests of a majority (if not all) Hive youth would be an extremely powerful lever for supporting Connected Learning pathways.

• **Create and deepen network-level infrastructure that is directly encountered by young people and can link them to future opportunities.** Hive participation platforms tend to focus on professional collaboration between organizations, but a range of network-level initiatives including pop-ups, Hive Youth Meet-ups and Emoti-con! put youth directly into contact with a range of organizations that they might then look to for future learning opportunities. Such cross-organizational youth-facing initiatives should continue to interrogate how well they’re operating as contexts for brokering. Additional infrastructure such as network-level youth mailing lists and youth-directed social media channels could be considered as means to directly link youth to opportunities within the network.

• **Create network convenings that bring together educators engaged in brokering to develop and share best practices.** In addition to creating cross-organizational contexts where Hive educators might learn about other organizations they can link their youth too, consider creating explicit
convenings targeted at educators that play a brokering role within their organizations as a means to build collective knowledge around the practice of brokering future learning opportunities to young people. Such educators might not only come from Hive organizations, but also from schools that have an active interest in linking their youth to informal learning opportunities.

- **Create strategic linkages between the Hive network and the school system that are targeted towards brokering future learning opportunities.** Schools represent a critical institutional context in young people’s lives, and are spaces where future learning opportunities should be shared. Many Hive organizations have strong individual relationships with specific schools, and Hive NYC has partnered with the NYC DOE through the Digital Ready and SummerQuest initiatives. There is potential to both expand and deepen this work to support goals around brokering that we’ve discussed in this paper. Engaging in network strategy here might mean systematically fostering more awareness among teachers and other potential brokers in schools such as guidance counselors about potential learning opportunities available within Hive network organizations. It could include holding coordinated multi-organizational events, like pop-ups or maker parties, within schools to expose youth to organizations and institutions that are linked to their interests. More robust collaborations might involve creating coordinated mechanisms whereby schools with specialist tracks can be linked to particular member organizations that are aligned with their focus.

**References**


