



PARTNERING WITH FUTURE READY WITH THE LIBRARY

Lessons Learned from Working with
Rural and Small Public Library Staff



The Connected Learning Alliance Report Series
on Connected Learning in Practice



By the Capturing Connected
Learning in Libraries Team:

[Anna-Ruth Allen](#)
[Amanda Wortman](#)
[Sari Widman](#)
[Vera Michalchik](#)
[William Penuel](#)



This work is generously supported
by the Institute of Museum and
Library Services.



This digital edition of **PARTNERING WITH FUTURE READY WITH THE LIBRARY** is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License (CC BY 3.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>



Published by the Connected Learning Alliance. Irvine, CA. October 2020.

A full-text PDF of this report is available as a free download from <https://clalliance.org/publications>

Suggested citation:

Allen, Anna-Ruth, Amanda Wortman, Sari Widman, Vera Michalchik, and William Penuel. 2020. *Partnering with Future Ready with the Library*. Irvine, CA: Connected Learning Alliance.

CAPTURING CONNECTED LEARNING IN LIBRARIES



The Capturing Connected Learning in Libraries (CCLL) project—a research and practice collaboration between the Connected Learning Lab, CU Boulder, SRI International, Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL), YALSA, and YOUmedia—enables libraries to better assess learning outcomes for their connected learning programs and spaces, and it boosts their ability to use evaluation data to improve their programs. It is focused on identifying challenges that connected learning programs face and helpful ways of addressing those challenges. This project is generously funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

INTRODUCTION

In the final year of our research+practice partnership grant, researchers from the *Capturing Connected Learning in Libraries* (CCLL) project partnered with the IMLS-funded *Future Ready with the Library* (FRwtL) project to support public library staff serving middle school-aged youth in rural libraries. The partnership focused on assessment and evaluation for new **connected learning programs**, which these staff are designing and leading in their efforts to promote learning opportunities that tap into young people's interests and aspirations.

The research team brainstormed a variety of tools and methods that the library staff could use to assess their programs. The team also devised more data collection plans than would be practical to implement, as a way to imagine the possibilities. Ultimately, the evaluation plans were not taken up in full, due to limited time and capacity in these partnering rural and small libraries, but the collaboration process allowed the research team to learn best practices about research+practice partnerships with small and rural libraries, and how to better integrate assessment and data analysis tools into these spaces. In this case study, we share with other researchers and evaluators lessons learned from our partnership and provide examples from small and rural libraries, in order to contribute to the literature around successful (and sometimes unsuccessful) research+practice partnerships.

*Note: The collaborations detailed here took place pre-COVID-19. Given the social distancing measures that have been put into place, there are new lessons to be learned about supporting programming in rural libraries. First, online collaborations among rural library staff are more important than ever. FRwtL cohort virtual discussions served as an essential support system for library staff as they figured out how to adapt to a new distanced world of providing services, resources, and programming. Second, the closing of library buildings and other community organizations has challenged and rearranged relationships across youth-serving organizations, which now need to be coordinated mainly remotely.

Lessons Learned

It's important to recognize that even when things don't turn out as expected or desired, there are still opportunities to learn. What did we learn from these collaborations with our dedicated and professional library staff partners, even though the plans didn't quite take off? Below, we detail some best practices for working with library partners to fully realize the potential of integrating assessment and evaluation methods into their youth-serving programs.

- 1. Build data collection and assessment into the program design from the beginning.** In our partnership, we began our discussions about assessment needs and methods when library staff were well into their program planning. While evaluation work can be usefully added after the program is underway, in our case, we believe that the practice of using evaluation methods did not gain momentum partly because it was not integrated into the initial program planning phase. The earlier that researchers can participate in, or observe, the planning of programs, the better. Ideally, evaluators would participate in the design of the library program, so that assessment and evaluation is baked into the process from the start.

- 2. Recognize the capacity of library staff (and researcher partners), and develop these capacities to better implement assessment methods.** Capacity to do “one more thing” is a challenge in all libraries, especially small and rural libraries. Financial resources can be limited or scarce, and staff who run programs wear many hats, including everything from building and supplies maintenance, to youth program management, to fundraising. Unlike formal education settings, libraries do not have the same degree of policy push to provide evidence of the effectiveness of programs. Regularly using assessment and evaluation methods is a new practice in the world of public libraries, which has its own history with and culture around data. Although the research team tried to offer manageable methods for documenting these innovative programs and measuring change over time, evaluation activities were sometimes too much to add to an already full plate for library staff. In an organizational and professional context where evaluation is neither an accountability requirement nor an established practice, other activities may take priority. Most common in libraries is to report numbers of participants served by programs, rather than use other methods to learn about the nature or value of the programming for participants, which could inform future programming. On the research partner side, while our project had the capacity to play a supporting role, with our researchers as thought-partners and instrument creators, the researchers did not have the capacity to travel and collect data in the library programs themselves. Evaluation methods in rural and small libraries need to be ones that library staff can incorporate into their regular workdays.

- 3. Build on surveys or instruments that library staff already use or data they already collect, and attune the analysis to purposes and audiences that may come up in the future.** Given the capacity challenges that exist, starting with what library staff already do makes good sense. In contexts like small libraries, where program evaluations are not typically expected unless requested by funders, there may not be an existing audience for evaluation, and formative assessment to improve programs may not be familiar to library staff. Finding ways to fit evidence, inquiry, and evaluation into library work with youth remains a challenge (thus, the good work of the FRwtL cohorts!). Determining which purposes and audiences are most important in a given context will help researchers to focus on the types of methods best suited to the task. Finding, creating, and adapting assessment tools that can be useful and usable by staff in small libraries should be an incremental and collaborative process.

INTRODUCING THE PARTNERS, PROGRAMS, AND EVALUATION METHODS

The Research Team

As part of the *Capturing Connected Learning in Libraries* (CCLL) project, Annie Allen and Sari Widman met with four library staff members in the Future Ready with the Library project (Cohort 3) to offer research and evaluation assistance. Both researchers have experience studying youth learning and working in libraries and other informal learning contexts. Our role was to co-design evaluation plans with library staff and to contribute or adapt instruments that might help staff learn from their programs along the way.

The researchers conducted focus groups with the FRwtL participants, and asked each library leader some questions to guide evaluation and design: What did they want to learn about their program? What did they want to measure or document? The library program leaders told us they wanted to collect data for three main purposes: 1) to document the knowledge and skills youth developed through participating in the program the library staff planned, 2) to record youth participants' interests and engagement with the program, and 3) to make young people's problem-solving and creativity visible to broader audiences of adults. While evaluation is not a regular part of their library work, the library staff all saw it as useful in terms of advocacy for programming, either for communicating within the local community or to funders of programs, or to justify new or continued support. Together, the research team and library partners brainstormed tools and methods that could be used to support their goals, as seen below.

The Library Staff Partners and Their Connected Learning Programs

Esports

Two library staff members decided to create esports programs, working through the North American Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF) and using their curriculum. In one library in North Texas, the Library Director, D., partnered with the local high school and liberal arts university, which already had an esports team. The idea was that the liberal arts college students could serve as mentors in a more informal esports program that fit the context of public libraries, with no try-outs and more tournament freestyle play in the library. D. did not have a background in gaming and there was a lot of learning needed to get involved in esports. D. took part in an online coaching camp through NASEF, made connections with the high school's program, and applied for a grant from the city council. In the past, the Library Director had run programs that youth didn't attend, and esports was appealing to her because "kids just get it." The challenge, D. felt, was in convincing adults that this was a worthy program for youth to take part in. She had some experience with evaluation methods, and she had created measurement plans in the past as part of writing grants. As part of her work with FRwtL, she used talkback boards and other methods from a collaborating library researcher who had been involved in training the FRwtL cohorts.

A second library partner in Iowa, T., also initiated an esports program in his role as the Youth and Special Services library staff in a rural library. Many households in the region did not have access to computers and even fewer had wifi in their homes. Satellite internet was hard to get, though there were plans for high speed fiber optic internet to come to town in the near future.

T. and D. collaborated remotely on their esports programs through the FRwtL community of practice. For T., this decision to pursue esports came out of several efforts to discover what youth and adults in the community felt was needed. He polled adults in the area to find out what soft skills were missing in the workforce (a kind of formative assessment that FRwtL cohort members often do as part of program planning). He talked to middle schoolers and learned they were enthusiastic about livestreamers and video games. He also reached out to a local community college and found that there were increasing numbers of jobs in IT in the local area. He decided to work with NASEF to create an official esports club one Thursday a month, where he would set up consoles and bring TVs in like an old-fashioned LAN party. Middle school-aged youth from the library program would compete with the video game design students at the local community college. T. was interested in supporting youth's learning of soft skills and conflict resolution through esports as well. A popular activity he planned was having youth make resumes of pop culture/video game characters to practice what they've learned about skill development. T. said there was not much available for local young people in terms of video games or digital technology in the community.

Evaluation Method: Documenting Observations

With the esports programs, both D. and T. said they were generally interested in whether their esports programs would take off and be sustainable. But they also wanted to understand and document what young people were learning through esports. Because they thought esports tended to be viewed skeptically by adults in the community, it was important to D. and T. that they find ways to collect *stories of learning* that they could share with key audiences like the city council, or use in grant proposals. The researchers, Sari and Annie, shared a resource called **“Crafting the Metagame”** by Kow, Young, and Salen Tekinbaş, which included a discussion of the learning that happens around playing esports, and proposed some ideas for how observations of play could be used as data. We explored several ways of documenting what youth in the programs were doing:

Option 1: *Written notes on esports sessions.* Take notes on what students are doing, whether this is something new for them, whether they are doing more designing or doing more leading, and how they say it relates to other activities they like to do.

Option 2: *Use a spreadsheet or Google survey* to document when and how many times during esports sessions you observe indicators of a particular outcome of interest, based on a Connected Learning framework: for example “interest development” or “deepening interest/leveling up.” What other Learning Principles would you be interested in documenting? What do you think your community (parents, educators, town council, library board) might value learning about?

Below is a template of how Option 2 observation documentation could be organized:

Template for Observing Youth Program

Date: _____

Program: _____

Number of Participants: _____

Activity: _____

Learning Principle (Outcome of Interest)	Indicator	# of Times Observed	Examples
Interest Development	Youth try something new, either during the program or outside of the program, but related to program activities.		Youth said they were inspired to try out for the wrestling team after participating in esports.
Deepening Interest/Leveling Up	Youth goes from participant or user to designer or creator.		Youth begin to design their own games. Youth started character design and storyboarding. Plans to create it using _____ program.

By organizing observations in terms of key principles embedded in program design, and jotting down observed examples for these principles during programming, the library staff members could generate evidence they could quantify, and/or develop illustrative stories to include in grant proposals or presentations to community stakeholders.

Evaluation Method: Multimedia Documentation

Another avenue we explored with T. and D. and their esports programs was how to do some screen capturing of youth play and design online. Screen captures could be used in a variety of ways: to inform programming improvement by seeing a range of types of play within esports, and also for use by youth themselves, who might explain their strategies or teach someone else. Using TikTok or creating Vlogs were appealing ideas. We also explored the possibility of using screen captures to make “digital portfolios,” which would document youth work and artifacts over time, drawing on resources like the [Maker ED Practical Guide to Open Portfolios](#) for ideas. The concept of “meta-principles” was useful for thinking about how reflecting on in-game situations and interactions with youth might help elucidate the learning that takes place through esports play, and also help youth explicitly translate these practices to other contexts or activities in their day to day lives.

Ideally, these esports programs would have built these assessment and evaluation methods into their program design from the outset to help create an understanding of the program's goals and how those goals were to be measured. Both partners engaged in some form of formative assessment by working to identify the interests of young people in their communities, and the opportunities that young people have available to them in the local job market. But with limited capacity, and without an established plan of when and how often to collect data, our partners often relied on quicker, off the shelf tools like talkback boards (detailed below) to quickly assess whether their new programming was hitting the mark with young people.

Community Job Fair

K. was our third library partner, the director of a small library in Pennsylvania. As part of her FRwtL project, K. planned to create a new program focused on developing a community job fair that was organized and led by young people. The program would bring together 7th and 8th graders with 11th graders and support them in conducting interviews with community business leaders in order to learn event planning skills. They would then put on a Job Fair in the spring. The goals of the project were to give students experience with event planning (which involves a set of skills that are useful for teens to learn) and to have students develop social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies and leadership skills in the process. The middle school identified a need for students to have more “entrepreneur opportunities” as part of the state’s college and career readiness goals. K. was looking to grow potential leaders among youth.

Evaluation Method:

Adapting surveys and other connected learning evaluation tools

For K.’s project on event planning a job fair with teens, the research team suggested the use of the **longitudinal survey of connected learning**. The survey is one that measures youth experiences of interest-related activities according to the principles of connected learning. Given that youth in K.’s program were meant to be learning about work from adults working in different areas of the local community, the survey could document changes from before and after the experience of researching jobs and creating the job fair.

K.’s program is an excellent example of lessons two and three, which have to do with capacity and the use of existing and familiar tools. K. is the only paid employee of a very small library and her time and capacity is split in many different ways. The longitudinal survey of connected learning that was recommended that K. use requires substantially more time to conduct and analyze than she was able to commit. The research team learned that a simpler method, such as talkback boards, would have worked better for K.’s situation and would have given her the confidence to try additional assessment methods in the future.

Early Childhood Care Provider Training Program

The 4th library partner was KT, who worked in a small rural library in Colorado. KT was interested in initiating partnerships with local businesses and organizations, but had trouble garnering interest. Local businesses were not used to collaborating or co-designing library programming. In the past, their role was mainly to donate money. Given limited funding for her small library, KT wanted to get community partners involved, in the hopes of making programs more sustainable. As in other small communities, the library is a main hub and one of the only places in town that provides free wifi. Given the size of the community, there were not many childcare options available to families, and so informal childcare networks were the norm. KT knew that social and emotional learning was important for children and youth and was aware that the school district was also using an SEL framework. KT decided to focus her FRwtL project on gathering data from youth participating in a one-day training in how to become an Early Childhood Care provider. Unfortunately, the program never launched due to time constraints and lack of commitment from community partners needed to support the project.

Evaluation Method: Interest/Relationship Mapping

The strategy of mapping came up in our initial collaborations as a way to document how youth's interest-related networks change or develop over time (see Figure 1 below). The idea is to ask youth to complete an interest map at the beginning of the program and then again after completion of the program (or, if it's an ongoing program, at a certain time interval, like after one year).

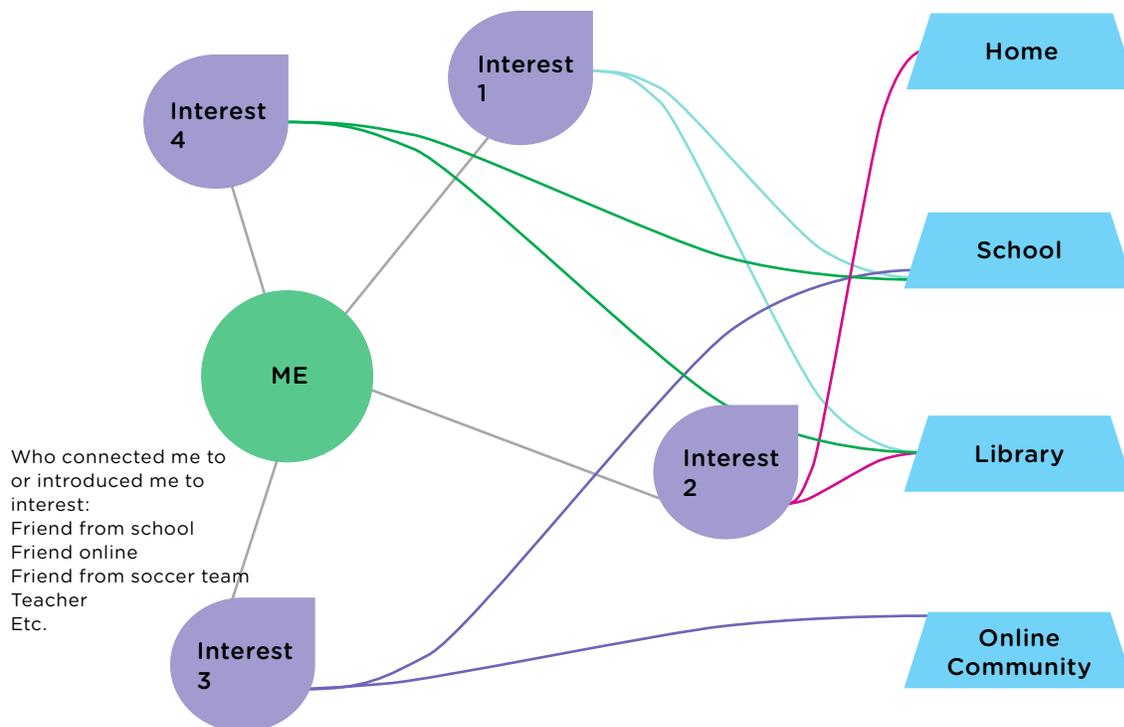


Figure 1. Example of a template that can be used for youth interest mapping

Additionally, mapping activities can be used to map relationships in the community, and may have been helpful for KT to determine if any community partners existed for her to work with. Relationship mapping can also illuminate cracks in the ecosystem that need to be filled.

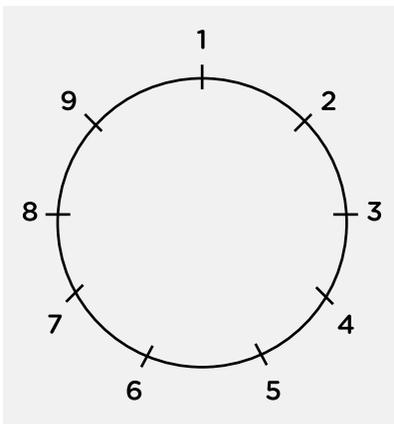


Figure 2. Diagram for use in relationship mapping

Create a list of organizations that offer youth programs to others in your neighborhood. Array the list around the edge of a circle like this.

Participants (yourself and/or other library staff) will draw links between organizations and staff through which information about youth and programs flows.

Draw a second map showing the same organizations and drawing links where there should be links, in order to foster youth development.

Compare the two maps. What would it take to get to your ideal map? Are there community leaders or organizations you haven't partnered with yet, but should?

Evaluation Method: Talkback Boards

At the end of the partnership, it became clear that talkback boards are the most nimble and flexible assessment tool available to small and rural libraries with limited time, capacity, and funding. All four library staff partners used Talkback boards as part of their work with the FRwtL cohort. They found them to be an easy entry point for starting assessment and evaluation, and an adaptive and useful tool. The fact that the prompts created for the talkback boards can be adapted for any situation or outcome make them convenient to use for even the most stretched library staff. In the future, T. planned to develop talkback board prompts to use with an online survey in [Kahoot](#), which he hoped would be more fun for youth to take than a traditional survey.

CONCLUSION



Not all programs that are planned can be implemented, and not all plans for using assessment and evaluation methods can be carried out. In this case study, we have outlined some lessons learned from working with our small and rural library staff partners, and illustrated these lessons learned with examples from our collaborations.

The lesson of **building data collection and assessment into program design from the beginning** was illustrated most by the esports programs created by D. and T. Building an understanding of their programs' goals and how those goals were to be measured from the outset would have allowed for these highly motivated library staff members to successfully and comprehensively appraise whether they were meeting the goals of their programs.

Our other library partners, like K. and KT, demonstrated the importance of **recognizing the capacity of library staff (and researcher partners), and developing these capacities to better implement assessment methods**, by showing us that library staff that wear many hats will do better and gain more confidence by using off-the-shelf, flexible assessment tools. The confidence gained from using nimble and adaptable tools could carry forward to more elaborate evaluation plans in the future.

Lastly, our work with our partners in small and rural libraries taught us the importance of evaluators **building on surveys or instruments that library staff already use or data they already collect, and attuning the analysis to purposes and audiences that may come up in the future**. Proceeding without a clear plan for how data will be analyzed and to what purposes that analysis will be used sets our library staff partners up for a less than successful outcome, and potentially a negative view of evaluation and assessment.

To help library staff integrate assessment and evaluation methods into the design of their youth library programming from the beginning, the CCLL team has created an evaluation toolkit to guide the process. The evaluation toolkit can be found at the Connected Learning Alliance website [here](#).