

LEARNING BY DOING: Connecting With Youth Through Technology

Computer-aided learning

According to a 2005 report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, young people are more connected than ever before to the high-tech world. Using advanced software, the Internet, and instant messaging, the 87 percent of American youth who are wired can communicate, gather information, and build skills that translate into job opportunities down the road.

For the 13 percent who don't have regular access to computers or the Internet, however, job opportunities are increasingly limited. By offering technology-based programs, youth workers can introduce at-risk young people to new skills while reinforcing the basics—reading, writing, math, and teamwork.

In Baltimore, Maryland, at-risk young people at the Urban Video Game Academy (www.uvga.org) throw themselves into a 5-week course in video game development. They learn not only programming and other technical skills needed to break in to the multibillion dollar video game industry, but also the writing and math basics crucial to getting their ideas off the ground.

At the Chabot Space & Science Center (www.chabotspace.org) in Oakland, California, young people participate in the Galaxy Explorers program, where they learn the concepts of astronomy, space, technology, and science in hands-on enrichment classes. They also serve as volunteers and interns for the science center, explaining scientific concepts to visitors and conducting outreach to local schools and community centers.

When programs like these put technology in the hands of at-risk young people, they do their small part in lessening the digital divide.

Tips for engaging youth in technology

- Get youth from your school or community involved in planning the project. The curriculum needs to be broad enough that both girls and boys from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and educational strengths will be interested.
- Assess how much young people already know. It's a good idea to start simple and gradually increase the level of difficulty. At the same time, don't bore youth with projects that are too easy in the beginning, or they may lose interest.
- Create a lesson about more than technology alone. Incorporate technology into a larger plan that includes opportunities for communication, teamwork, and basic skill-building, such as reading, writing, and science.
- Let young people learn new technology by trial and error in pairs or small groups. That way, peers with more knowledge can guide those with less.

- Learn along with the youth. They will be empowered by the opportunity to teach you a thing or two.
- Trying to keep up with the latest technology can be expensive. Solicit donations of computer hardware and software from individuals and businesses, or get low-cost equipment from a computer refurbisher. Also, recruit tech-savvy volunteers to help maintain equipment or teach young people what they know. Libraries often offer free Internet for young people to practice their new skills.

Resources

Publications

E-Learning: Putting a World-Class Education at the Fingertips of All Children. Author: U.S. Department of Education. 2000. Available at www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/technology/reports/e-learning.pdf

A Creative Approach to Working With Youth and Technology. Author: Morino Institute. 2001. Available from the Education Development Center, Inc., at www.youthlearn.org

Tools to get connected

The Global Schoolhouse
www.globalschoolnet.org/index.html

International Education and Resource Network (iEARN)
www.learn.org

SchoolForge
www.schoolforge.net

Tech Soup
www.techsoup.org

Youth Net: Interactive Projects for Grades K-12
www.youth.net

Learning by Doing was developed for the Family and Youth Services Bureau; Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, by the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth (NCFY). For more information on ways to engage young people, please go to ncfy.acf.hhs.gov, or contact NCFY at (301) 608-8098.