University-Community Links: Collaborative Engagement in Extended Learning

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Introduction to the Main Topic

While it has become accepted that quality after-school programs for young people promote academic achievement and social development (Eccles/Gootman 2013; Pierce/Augur/Vandell 2013), it remains a major challenge to provide such programming in ways that both meet accepted standards of high quality and serve the students who need it most. For many programs providing underserved students with extended learning activities, collaboration between institutions is important. In many cases, because the school problems of many young people are symptomatic of much broader societal problems they face, no single institution can alone provide all the physical, educational, and personnel resources necessary to establish and maintain a viable extended education program that adequately addresses the range of cognitive and social needs of the young people it serves (Underwood/Frye, 1997). This special issue of IJREE presents several articles about University-Community Links (UC Links), an international network of extended education programs in which universities and local community organizations collaborate to provide extended learning opportunities for underserved young people in their respective localities.

Members of this network, which encompasses Fifth Dimension (5thD) and La Clase Mágica (LCM) program sites (see below) throughout the United States and other nations, together with the statewide UC Links network of sites in California, draw on similar theoretical and practical issues and collaborate in both programmatic and research efforts. Thus, this 5thD/LCM/UC Links collaboration represents not only an international network of locally based programs but also a dispersed community of university and community partners who interact digitally to share ideas about implementing innovations and responding to challenges. Much of the work of providing engaging educational activities for underserved youth takes place in local schools or communities, but the interaction of key UC Links partners across local sites is an important element in the creation of a sustainable international community of learners.

Common Elements

Since its beginnings, the goal of the international 5thD/LCM/UC Links network has been to increase the educational experiences of children in historically underserved communities while at the same time enriching the educational experiences of undergraduates engaged in discipline-based university courses. To accomplish this dual mission, participating faculty teach courses that place their students in practicum field training experiences in after-school programs at local schools or community-based organizations. There, the university students guide children through innovative learning activities designed to promote literacy and digital skills, as well as collaborative behavior and college-going identities. The university students receive credit for academic courses that integrate theory and practice, while the P-12 (pre-school through 12th grade) students take part in innovative, fun activities that steer them toward academic pursuits.

The name UC Links refers to certain basic elements that all the programs in the network share. Primary among these is the collaboration between institutions of higher learning (colleges or universities) and local community organizations (schools, youth clubs, churches, etc.). The name also refers to the coordinated network of programs and to the connections and interactions that each program creates through collaborative learning activities between university students and local P-12 students. This multiple meaning of "University-Community Links" resonates among all the programs in the international network and connects them theoretically, pragmatically, and pedagogically as a community of practice.

In practice, each UC Links site constructs a local activity system in which both community and university collaborators feel intensely invested. Cole (1996) has examined after-school youth programs closely as activity systems in which individual and small-group learning takes place as a process of distributed cognition. In this context, he has investigated the development of activities using mediational tools – e.g., computer games, new digital media, and other hands-on materials – as a cultural system that frames the collaborative engagement of young people and sets up multiple opportunities for "the zone of proximal development," in which youth learn together to accomplish tasks that they could not have completed individually (Vygotsky 1978). This programmatic framework for linking undergraduate and P-12 participants in constellations of informal collaborative tasks is based on a cultural historical view of human cognitive experience, approaching individual and small-group learning in the context of activity systems that transcend and extend the limits of formal education, become culturally mediated and institutionally sustained over time (Cole 1996; Cole/The Distributed Literacy Consortium 2006; Vásques 2003).

As the international network has developed over time, it has also drawn on related socio-cultural theoretical approaches. The specific definition of learning as changing participation in the sociocultural activities of everyday life (Lave 1996) is crucial to this approach to informal learning, in that it impels us to look for the tangible evidence of learning in changing practice in the context of real-world activities, such that we look for learning not simply within the minds of individual students in classrooms and schools, but also in the interactions between teachers and students and among students themselves, in everyday situations both in and out of school. This approach to learning as socially and culturally situated in practice, complemented by Rogoff's (1995) focus on learning as participatory appropriation

– encompassing how individual understanding of and responsibility for activities is transformed through their participation over time – enables us to situate informal learning in complementary relation to formal learning practices. While the latter generally represent an externally mandated system of activity which creates an encapsulated environment, a closed system that functions according to its own internal logic, informal learning represents a negotiated system, worked out among participants in the course of ongoing socio-cultural activity. Viewed in this way, learning both in and out of school clearly involves mixtures of formal and informal learning strategies, although one or the other may be emphasized in different settings.

From the outset, the Fifth Dimension and La Clase Mágica programs drew on the local knowledge of the community and school partners, in order to adapt the program to the special interests and needs of local children and their families. Parents and other members of the community played a key role as equal partners in the collaboration, taking part in defining themes and activities that were culturally and linguistically appropriate for their children. University faculty, staff, and students brought to the equation extensive multi-disciplinary knowledge and experience in building meaningful learning activities and in using technology and other educational resources to serve those themes and activities. In this way, for each of the programs in the network, the practicum course served to establish relationships of participatory appropriation between university and community partners, between university students and faculty, between university and P-12 students, and among the P-12 youth themselves. Linking community service to coursework in this way has allowed faculty to integrate their community-service interests with their teaching responsibilities. It also enabled them to pursue their research interests, thus making it possible for them to be institutionally rewarded for their participation – that is, making it possible for their participation to complement their research programs, rather than taking away from the research work that represents the prime activity for which their institution rewards them. It has also enabled community and university partners to pool their resources in joint activity and draw on each other's support in securing additional resources to build and sustain their local efforts.

Brief History of the International Network

Cole designed the original Fifth Dimension after-school programs as a pragmatic implementation of his theoretical approach to learning in socio-cultural context, and it has now been adapted and implemented widely (Cole 1996; Cole/The Distributed Literacy Consortium 2006). Drawing on the experience of the 5thD programs in San Diego, the La Clase Mágica program has designed and developed approaches to after-school programming based on the collaborative learning that takes place in the context of family and community life, especially among Latino communities (Vásquez 2003). Flores, Vásquez, and Clark (2014) have further explored the key role of La Clase Mágica's transformational pedagogies, linking local knowledge and culture with informal learning activities using new digital media to engage young people in transformative explorations that enable them to find their place and their voice in the world around them. Scholars, extended education practitioners, and community leaders through the world have found the Fifth Dimension and La Clase Mágica perspectives relevant to their local collaborative efforts. Programs following

these models have been developed over the last 20 or more years in the United States (including Colorado, Delaware, Florida, North Carolina), Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Uruguay, and other nations.

In California, the statewide UC Links network grew out of the work at UC San Diego, as a means to institutionalize this activity system as a broad-based, long-term strategy for collaborative development of sustainable after-school programming for diverse underserved youth throughout the state (Underwood/Parker 2011). For the past 18 years, UC Links in California has been active as a collaborative network of university and community partners that provide quality after school programs and activities for P-12 youth from underserved communities throughout California, while also preparing undergraduate students for higher level professional training and graduate studies.

One key aspect of the collaboration among the programs in the international UC Links network can be seen in the movement of individuals across programs. The network has created a framework within which individuals transitioning in their careers have moved from site to site and even established new university-community partnerships in new localities. One student began taking the practicum class as a community college student in San Diego, and found the work so engaging that he continued as a site coordinator throughout his bachelors' degree, which he continued at UC San Diego. Upon graduation, he entered the Ph.D. program in Education at UC Santa Barbara, and as a graduate student, has continued his active participation with the UC Links sites there. Students at UCLA and UC Santa Cruz have coordinated sites during their doctoral and post doctoral studies; later, after securing academic appointments as professors at California State University, Sacramento and at University of Delaware, they established new partnerships in the communities near their campuses. Two graduate students who participated in their local UC Links programs in California later secured appointments at universities in Canada and Germany, where they have developed and operated new sites.

A number of programs, on the basis of initial successes, have expanded into both local and international clusters of program sites. Two programs at UC Berkeley, locally called Space2cre8 and Y-Plan, have grown by linking with multiple community partners locally and with university and community partners in other nations, including India, Japan, and South Africa. Annual UC Links conferences and listserv communications continue to foster the sharing of ideas and strategies across sites. In this way, new approaches pioneered at various sites have been shared and appropriated by other partnerships in other cities and nations. In recent years, the activity of multimedia story telling has spread to a number of sites, after the activity was presented at an annual UC Links conference. Similarly, UC Links programs focusing on the empowerment of children through engagement in community development projects have locally adapted their local approaches in sites associated with UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz, UC San Diego, California State University, Sacramento, Universität Augsburg (Germany), and Ritsumeikan University (Japan). The network has also promoted collaborative research and publication among its members.

The cross-disciplinary, multi-site effort of the international UC Links network which we present in this volume was based on the recognition that the educational problems that many low-income children (from all backgrounds) face are symptomatic of much broader economic, social, and political problems. All the programs in this network have sought to address explicitly the issues of educational equity in

public education from the early elementary grades through college and addressed the interrelated problems of access to excellent after-school care and to quality digital resources for the education of youth from underserved communities.

Overview of the Articles in this Issue

The four articles in this special issue present research by university faculty involved in this international network/consortium who address these issues by building on local university-community-school collaborations to create long-term, community-driven, information technology-based activities for low-income youth and their families in the after-school hours. These articles examine relevant topics in collaborative program development, in the pedagogical approaches used in program activities, and in the nature of both undergraduate and P-12 student participation in programs in the larger international network.

Lecusay illustrates the relationship between an undergraduate and a fifth-grade student taking part in collaborative game play at a La Clase Mágica site in San Diego, California. Their interaction over time is transformative for both as they engage in playful problem-oriented activities shaped by La Clase Mágica's culture of collaborative learning. In this context, both undergraduate and fifth grader, one with expertise in academic culture and the other with expertise in local culture, learn to pool their knowledge as peer experts in the joint construction of knowledge. Flores, Claeys, Fraga, and Schuetze describe how the sociocultural framework of la Clase Mágica (in this case, in San Antonio, Texas) establishes a community-based context for expansive learning in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education. The authors document the bidirectional benefits in self-efficacy and the development of new career aspirations and STEM content knowledge for both young students and their older undergraduate mentors in robotic activities that promote the development of math and science literacies through non-hierarchical peer collaborations. Prádos, Sánchez-Busqués, Lalueza, and Crespo describe the Shere Rom Program, a cultural adaptation of the Fifth Dimension and La Clase Mágica programs designed to address the social and educational exclusion of local gypsy and Latino young people in Barcelona, Spain. The authors describe how this program confronts the specific sociocultural and institutional challenges faced by this diverse population. Gomez-Estern, Vasquez, and Martinez-Lozano discuss how La Clase Mágica provides for the transformation of service learning through university-community engagement framed as a catalyst for social change. The authors describe the impact on the learning processes and identities of undergraduate mentors of participating in a La Clase Mágica program in Seville, Spain. In this context, through activities engaging these students with young people from a marginalized Gypsy community, the undergraduates experience service learning as "real learning" – boundary crossing experiences within a community of practice that challenge students' cultural assumptions and bring about identity development.

As the articles in this special issue suggest, the partners in this international network have learned much, both from the implementation of their local programs and from each other. The collaborative construction of viable programs is as much a process of participatory appropriation as are the programmatic activities for young people that these programs put in place. Further study of the socio-cultural dimensions

of mutual engagement from this perspective can increase our abilities to understand and improve the process of inter-institutional (i.e., cross-cultural) collaboration. The articles that follow in this issue, address some of the key questions of research and practice in extended learning and contribute to our growing understanding of how best to create, implement, and sustain programs that extend education beyond the classroom and the school day. This research is relevant both locally and internationally to questions about the complex venture of collaboratively developing, implementing, adapting, and sustaining these programs over time. The findings of these articles, we hope, will be useful to researchers and practitioners engaged in the difficult long-term task of collaborating across institutions to create sustainable extended learning programs for young people in communities throughout the world.

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