Hive Digital Media Learning Fund
in The New York Community Trust

Technology Transforms Learning
Collaboration at Work

How is digital technology impacting young people, learning, and youth culture? It makes learners the focus, connects them to one another, and gives them powerful tools to experiment, create, and design.

Founded in 2010, the Hive Digital Media Learning Fund in The New York Community Trust supported the use of digital technology to develop a new model for learning. This overview of the Fund examines how it helped young people, teachers, scientists, artists, technologists, and others use digital media and the web to design exciting ways to learn in and out of school.

Among its achievements, the Fund has:

• **Established partnerships and collaborations** to develop and promote innovative, technology-oriented learning tools and opportunities.

• **Developed effective strategies** for the scale and spread of digital learning, from prototyping a promising project to motivating other youth-serving agencies to replicate the work.

• **Helped educators understand** how to use technology to improve teaching and learning.

• **Worked to build** equitable access to learning opportunities.
Learning Anywhere, Anytime, Through Digital Media

Digital technologies have transformed the way that young people learn. A true 21st century education engages youth in active, interest-driven learning that prepares them to succeed today and tomorrow.

History of the Fund

In 2008 a group of the City’s cultural institutions joined together to form the New Youth City Learning Network, now known as the Hive NYC Learning Network (Hive NYC). The Network grew out of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s pioneering research in the emerging field of digital media and learning.

A second Hive Learning Network was launched in Chicago a few years later. The two networks offered opportunities for young people to learn and pursue their own interests while connecting with innovators and mentors: scientists, artists, and designers. They also provided an avenue for youth-serving nonprofits to tap into the educational potential of digital media and the web.

With support from the MacArthur Foundation, in 2010, The New York Community Trust established the Hive Digital Media Learning Fund (the Fund), a funder collaborative dedicated to helping Hive NYC expand learning through digital media. Donors to the Fund served on its Advisory Committee and oversaw grantmaking. Hive NYC’s staff participated actively—reviewing Requests for Proposals, evaluating grant applications, and providing feedback to applicants.

Back then, the technological landscape looked very different. Social media and smartphones were still novelties. Less than half of U.S. schools had modern broadband technology. Educators were learning about digital media themselves, and trying to understand how it could engage youth in learning.

To educate philanthropists, the Fund held briefings covering coding, makerspaces, digital badges, and other topics, even distributing vocabulary lists. Potential funders attended Hive meetings to witness the excitement of organizations coming together to solve problems. As grantmakers gained a greater understanding of this new field, they began incorporating digital media learning into their education, youth development, and workforce development portfolios.

The Fund’s grants helped Hive NYC grow into a committed network of museums, libraries, schools, colleges, zoos, public radio and television stations, and other youth-serving organizations. Originally housed in the Social Science Research Council, Hive NYC has been managed by the Mozilla Foundation since 2012. Mozilla is known internationally as a champion of open-source technology, equitable internet access, and digital skills and literacy, and has established Hive Learning Communities in other cities in the U.S. and around the world.

Lessons Learned

The Fund’s donors and Hive NYC members have brought many diverse groups together to share best practices and learn from each other. Building such a network takes time. Every activity, from planning meetings to structuring Requests for Proposals, must be intentional and support cohesion in the Hive NYC community. Innovation is not driven solely by funding, but also by providing the space and sense of common purpose needed for effective collaboration.

The Fund and Hive NYC learned that programming for young people requires careful planning that is predicated on a direct-to-youth approach. Young people need and want the input and guidance of adults, whether they are parents, teachers, or youth-serving professionals. The most successful programming involves committed adults who care deeply about young people’s learning experiences.

Strategies for Success

Hive NYC members are dedicated to helping youth create new digital content and tools, rather than just passively consuming information online. Through monthly “meetups” and conference calls, the Network gathers educators, youth development specialists, and technology experts together to create innovative digital learning experiences. Funded projects helped youth create products ranging from computer games and mobile apps to radio stories and short films—while connecting to subjects like the arts, science, math, history, and civics.

The Fund and Hive NYC established partnerships across City agencies to promote digital media learning activities. The funders sought new ideas and participants to bring more varied knowledge into the network.

In 2016, Mozilla’s Hive Learning Networks were featured prominently in the U.S. Department of Education’s National Education Technology Plan, a nod to their ability to “champion connected learning, digital skills, and web literacy in youth-serving organizations in urban centers around the world.”
In its early years, the Fund supported the development of innovative, new educational projects. It also emphasized collaboration among network members. Grantees were required to maintain active membership in Hive NYC, and engage regularly with other members. Over time, the strategy evolved to help members expand the reach and scope of their work.

Grants were given at different levels of funding, and grantees acquired specific skills on each level. Early-stage grants encouraged organizations to get together, develop an idea, and test it. If the project was successful, second-stage funding helped them test it on a larger scale. Once that phase was completed, the next levels of funding enabled grantees to scale out their projects.

Promising projects became sustainable in a variety of ways. Sometimes the projects expanded with other funding. Other times, practices developed by grantees were integrated into an organization’s regular programming, so connected learning became institutionalized. Programs also spread through partnerships with large organizations, like public libraries, with branches throughout the City, or the parks department or public school system.

These case studies illustrate a few great outcomes of Fund-supported projects.
Y–MVP Mobile Fitness App: YMCA of Greater New York

The YMCA of Greater New York developed an award-winning mobile app that lets young people improve fitness by creating digital “playlists” of physical activities.

The primary mission of the YMCA of Greater New York is to promote youth health and fitness. That’s not always easy. Young people spend more than 40 hours a week in front of screens: streaming movies and videos, playing games, texting, and using social media. Too much sedentary time can lead to obesity and a host of other health problems.

Can the power of the screen be harnessed to promote fitness, instead of inactivity? “We asked this question as we considered ways to use the same game mechanics that keep kids glued to the couch to get them off the couch,” says Lori Rose Benson, the Y’s former vice president of health and fitness.

With support from the Hive Fund, the YMCA envisioned a fitness program that uses digital badges to reward and incentivize young people for taking on different physical challenges. This program ultimately evolved into Y-MVP (which stands for “Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity”) and the YMCA’s first proprietary mobile fitness app.

Making Inspiration a Reality Through Scale and Spread. Y-MVP was developed in stages and provides a blueprint of how the Hive Fund encouraged innovation and collaboration to bring successful ideas to fruition.

The YMCA applied for first-level funding to launch an interactive fitness program. At two pilot sites, the Y installed kiosks where young people scrolled through a computerized menu of activities to accept missions and challenges. The Y evaluated the program and found that while kids gravitated to the kiosks, they were not enough. “Kids wanted more direction, support, and adult involvement,” states Benson. “We needed a curriculum and it had to be available on more than just a few kiosks.”

With the next level of funding, the Y developed a curriculum for the digital platform it had created. “As you go higher into the scaffolding of funding opportunities, you’re required to collaborate more formally with other Hive members,” explains Benson. “This was great for us because it brought technical expertise to the table that we didn’t have.”

The revised program included classes and formalized instruction, and it spread to 14 branches within two years. The YMCA then applied for a planning grant to grow the program. “We wanted to scale it out not just to our branches, but outside the walls of the YMCA, including our after school programs and summer sites, where there’s limited Wi-Fi connectivity,” says Benson.

With the highest level of funding the YMCA developed the Y-MVP mobile app, which launched in February 2016. That year the Y-MVP app won an Appy Award in the charity/nonprofit category. These awards recognize excellence in app design.

“Our app demonstrates that getting fit can be fun and we are grateful for our partners who helped make it possible,” says Benson.

Available for free at the iTunes store, Y-MVP was downloaded more than 3,400 times in the year after its launch. It’s gone global, too. Young people as far away as Canada, Great Britain, China, and Australia are using Y-MVP to improve fitness.

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C3: The New York Hall of Science

Collect, Construct, Change, or C3, gives middle-school students the tools and technology to study urban pollution right in their own neighborhoods and find solutions.

C3 sends young people into their communities to measure air quality and collect samples of water and soil, analyze them, and develop an action plan for a cleaner environment. The 30-hour program uses state-of-the-art educational technology and was designed by The New York Hall of Science (NYSCI), a Queens-based science and technology center, and collaborators. This ongoing program can be adapted for summer camps, afterschool programs, or weekend workshops.

Supported by the Hive Fund, NYSCI worked with Bank Street College of Education, City Lore, and Parsons School of Design to develop a mobile phone probe and app, with an accompanying curriculum. Participants go to Flushing Meadows Park and residential areas to collect and analyze environmental data and report their findings to the local community.

“The hands-on approach enables kids to better understand the sources of pollution and its connections to health and environmental issues,” says Anthony Negron, NYSCI’s manager of digital programming. “They communicate their findings via a range of technologies, including blogs, online videos, comic strips, or board games—whatever they’re passionate about.”

Growth Through Partnerships. NYSCI applied for several rounds of Hive funding to improve the probe technology and expand C3. “We developed partnerships with other Hive organizations, enabling us to scale C3 to five other organizations, including the Girl Scouts of Greater New York and the YMCA,” says Negron. NYSCI’s partnership with the Girl Scouts led to a second collaboration: the development of an entrepreneurial, three-week coding program. “This partnership built upon our prior collaboration on C3,” says Negron. “Being part of the Hive Network connects you with other organizations and great things happen.”

Learning Portfolio Project: DreamYard

A learning portfolio is an online, multimedia collection of an individual’s work, including finished pieces, works in progress and examples of others’ inspirational projects. It allows people to document their learning and accomplishments—and share their work with others.

With the ongoing support of the Hive Fund, DreamYard, a youth arts and social justice learning program in the Bronx, partnered with Parsons School of Design to bring the Learning Portfolio Project to schools throughout the City. “We’ve given young people the tools to make their work become part of their digital network,” says Jason Duchin, co-executive director of DreamYard. “It’s a way to show what you’ve learned. It is inexpensive and democratic, and anyone can create one.”

Say a student starts a learning portfolio in the 8th grade and adds to it over time. When that student reaches 12th grade, the portfolio will be an invaluable record of his or her learning path. “Learning portfolios can be used to find a job or internship, for admission to college, or to build an interest-driven community of friends and colleagues,” says Duchin. The portfolios are not just for young people going into the arts. A student can have a portfolio to document learning in engineering, algebra, history, chemistry, or other disciplines.

The portfolios, created using free online tools and documents, come in many digital forms, from blogs to websites to web-based slide through C3, almost 1,000 young people learned how to use technology to measure pollution in their environment and come up with ideas to reduce it.
shows. DreamYard has developed specialized training, called “exponential learning,” to teach students and educators how to build a learning portfolio. “Partnering with another Hive member, Mouse, we teach a group of students, and they go out and teach a few of their peers, who continue the process,” explains Duchin. “We also offer training for teachers.”

“The Hive Network gives us access to a wide array of organizations and resources, from one-person nonprofits to large universities and library systems,” adds Hillary Kolos, director of digital learning at DreamYard. “When we gain access so do the young people we work with, and that’s exciting.”

Students’ learning portfolios document their accomplishments.
Looking to the Future

Technology continues to change rapidly, and it is clear that Hive NYC’s work will have value and relevance for years to come. In 2016, the Fund’s advisory committee made plans to assure the network’s long-term growth and sustainability.

Given the Mozilla Foundation’s significant contributions both to the management of the network and the Fund’s grantmaking, the advisory committee decided to centralize the network’s oversight and transition the Hive Digital Media Learning Fund to Mozilla. In 2017, after making a final grant to Mozilla to create and lead the Fund, The Trust sunset its donor collaborative.

While support for educational technology has grown, there are few funding opportunities to help start new digital media learning projects. Mozilla’s grants program will seed funding for new projects to support learning in its Network. The Foundation will distribute grants focused on innovation and experimentation, professional development for educators, and capacity-building for organizations that are working creatively with digital media learning.