

Ready To Learn Transmedia Demonstration Station Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REPORT TO THE CPB-PBS *READY TO LEARN* INITIATIVE



September 2012

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CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

The CPB-PBS *Ready To Learn initiative*, funded by the U. S. Department of Education, brings engaging, high-quality media to young children who may be at risk for academic difficulties due to economic and social disadvantages. The initiative aims to deliver early mathematics and literacy resources on new and emerging digital platforms such as tablet computers, interactive whiteboards, and smartphones, as well as better-established technologies such as computers, video displays, and gaming consoles, and to create learning experiences that leverage the unique capabilities of these various technology platforms.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The purpose of this context study by Education Development Center, Inc., (EDC) and SRI International (SRI) is to better understand how national and local public media organizations, together with their local partners, are implementing educational outreach activities in communities across the country where children, educators, and families are using PBS KIDS transmedia content. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education created the *Ready To Learn* Transmedia Demonstration Stations program to enhance early learning opportunities for children from low-income families, in part by providing training and support for their families, teachers, and other adult caregivers such as children's librarians and afterschool providers. This study aims to observe and assess the successes and challenges faced by a sample of community outreach programs being developed and implemented by stations and their partners under *Ready To Learn*.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

After reviewing the proposals and plans for all participating public media stations in winter 2012, EDC and SRI conducted studies of five of the 11 stations selected by CPB and PBS to participate in the Transmedia Demonstration Stations program.

With these five stations, we conducted telephone interviews with the staff charged with leading and carrying out *Ready To Learn* outreach work. We also conducted interviews with several of *Ready To Learn's* national partners and with CPB and PBS project leaders to document their understanding, expectations, and goals for the program. Based on phone interviews, station implementation

schedules, and close consultation with CPB, we selected three stations to be studied more deeply and featured in the final phase of the study, with 2- to 3-day site visits to those stations. During these visits, we interviewed station staff involved in CPB-PBS *Ready To Learn* work, station leaders, and staff and leaders at partner organizations. We also observed *Ready To Learn* outreach and dissemination events. In total, we conducted 30 interviews and eight hour-long program observations.

FINDINGS

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

- Stations collaborated with many different partners to provide *Ready To Learn* programs and services to children from low-income families and the adults who care for them.
- Stations organized their projects so they acted as supporters and organizers for their partners, often working jointly with partners to provide services to children and families.

SERVING CHILDREN, FAMILIES, TEACHERS, AND CAREGIVERS

- Station partners offered two types of programs for children: those with higher structure and adult mediation, and those that were more casual and free-play oriented that allowed children to create their own experiences.
- Study stations and their partners believed that adult engagement would enhance benefits for children and families as a whole.
- Stations worked successfully with some elementary and preschool teachers, though the timing and duration of the contract and restrictions on teachers' schedules made it difficult to collaborate as much or as well as originally envisioned.

REPORTED IMPACTS

- Reflecting on their PBS KIDS transmedia outreach activities, stations and their partners saw high excitement and lasting enthusiasm as evidence of activities' value.
- Station staff believed children were developing specific math and literacy skills; likewise children's attitudes and behavior improved after engaging in outreach activities.
- Stations and their partners appreciated the "packaged" supplementary materials provided by producers of *The Electric Company* and *FETCH! With Ruff Ruffman* because they were engaging to children, required few adaptations, and were of high quality.
- Some stations and their partners had positive responses to the math focus of the current PBS KIDS transmedia games, and some favored a continued commitment to literacy.

SOME IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED IN FUTURE PBS KIDS TRANSMEDIA CONTENT

- Navigation within PBS KIDS games was often difficult for preschool children and was sometimes more challenging when partners were using more than one type of device because navigation modes were different from one device to the next.
- Understanding the purpose of the game was sometimes challenging for children without adult guidance, even when there were spoken instructions. Hearing and understanding spoken instructions were also sometimes difficult, as was getting the game to repeat instructions.
- Stations and their partners said it would be helpful to have guidance (such as a guide on the PBS KIDS Lab site) on how individual games and suites could function as a more complete set, so they could sequence or schedule a set of digital experiences and match digital experiences with nondigital ones.
- Some station partners expressed concern that the PBS KIDS games did not engage children in more complex problem-solving activities.

EVALUATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALE

- Stations and their partners were concerned about the cost and difficulty of assessing how or whether their programs have a measurable impact on children.
- Because stations were confident in the benefits of PBS KIDS transmedia resources, they focused on sustaining and/or scaling transmedia outreach activities through new development and fundraising efforts.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

PUBLIC MEDIA STATIONS AND STATEWIDE NETWORKS

- Partner with community organizations that are prepared and well positioned to engage members of the target community.
- Consider partnering with fewer organizations; having a large number of partners or a large service area can be appealing, but focus and depth, as opposed to breadth and reach, make for more successful and less diffuse outreach projects.
- Prepare to get on public school calendars well in advance. Consider ways to work with school accountability pressures and fixed curricular approaches that may make it difficult to work together.
- Help partners to make connections between long and abiding commitments to supporting literacy learning and newer transmedia focused on mathematics, science, and other content areas.

CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

- Reconsider the timing and duration of outreach contracts. Yearlong contracts have a significant influence on the sorts of collaborations that are possible at the local level, especially with formal education partners.
- Consider lessening the number of required partners.
- Make clear the path it is hoped PBS KIDS transmedia resources will take from developers, to stations acting as intermediaries, to the direct service providers who will enact them with children. Stations need further support on how to ensure PBS KIDS transmedia resources are used in beneficial ways in homes, schools, and other settings.

PBS AND PUBLIC MEDIA PRODUCERS

- Package or bundle PBS KIDS transmedia materials so as to facilitate sustained engagements. Increasingly, partners may look to content producers to provide the support and structure needed to help guide extended engagements that take advantage of resources across properties, platforms, and settings.
- Make PBS KIDS Lab website navigation child-friendly.
- Develop game introductions that better support children, especially children playing on their own, in understanding the purpose of games they are playing.
- Offer more PBS KIDS resources, games, videos, and print materials in Spanish and other languages spoken by children, families, and community members in the *Ready To Learn* audience.

About EDC/CCT

Education Development Center, Inc. is a global nonprofit organization that develops, delivers, and evaluates innovative programs to address urgent challenges in education, health, and economic development. EDC manages more than 300 projects in 35 countries. For more than 25 years, EDC's Center for Children and Technology has been at the forefront of creating and researching new ways to foster learning and improve teaching through the development and thoughtful implementation of new educational technologies.

About SRI/CTL

SRI International is an independent, nonprofit research institute conducting client-sponsored research and development for government agencies, commercial businesses, foundations, and other organizations. SRI's Center for Technology in Learning (CTL) evaluates large-scale technology innovations, designs assessments that enhance teaching and learning, develops tools to help students master complex ideas, builds online communities of learners, and offers strategic learning consulting services.

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