

*Bringing Transmedia to
Expanded Learning Settings:*
EMERGING PRACTICES



THE COLLABORATIVE
for BUILDING
AFTER-SCHOOL
SYSTEMS



Introduction

With support from the United States Department of Education, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and Public Broadcasting System (PBS) are leading Ready To Learn, an initiative designed to develop and deploy dynamic new educational content to support math and literacy learning among children ages two to eight, especially those living in poverty. This approach, known as “transmedia storytelling,” or simply “transmedia,” utilizes the appeal of familiar characters and narratives across multiple platforms—including interactive games, television series, and websites—to create a coordinated and connected learning experience for children.

In 2012, CPB awarded funding to eleven PBS stations around the country to serve as transmedia “demonstration stations.”¹ Each demonstration station developed partnerships with schools and community-based out-of-school time programs to make Ready To Learn transmedia games and related resources available to children and their families during school and in “expanded learning settings” beyond the traditional school day.

To support the work with out-of-school time programs, CPB engaged the Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS) and the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) as outreach advisors that would provide content expertise on best practices in after-school and summer programs.² In an effort to identify challenges and emerging practices in the use and integration of Ready To Learn transmedia in expanded learning settings, we made site visits, reviewed progress reports, and conducted interviews with staff and partners from the demonstration stations. As the Ready To Learn initiative progresses in the coming years, these observations of emerging practices can provide valuable guideposts for stations and community partners implementing transmedia storytelling to support early math and literacy learning.

Challenges and Emerging Practices

Family and Community Engagement

Connecting to after-school and summer providers, family members and/or caregivers in local communities is essential to incorporating transmedia in out-of-school settings. Stations found that parental and caregiver involvement excites children and motivates them to use the digital materials, and also ensures that related learning and skills development will continue at home. However, engaging these stakeholders can be a challenge for a number of reasons: stations lack access, parents are unaware of the available resources or are facing competing priorities, and/or caregivers lack facility with transmedia tools.

The demonstration stations developed a number of strategies to address these challenges. One was simply to take an active role in informing parents about the community

Parental and caregiver involvement excites children and motivates them to use the digital materials.

¹The eleven PBS stations awarded funding in this capacity were: Detroit Public Television; Eight, Arizona PBS (Coconino/Phoenix); Iowa Public Television (Storm Lake/Waterloo); KBTC (Tacoma, WA); Maryland Public Television (Baltimore); Montana PBS (Flathead Reservation, MT); Vegas PBS (Las Vegas, NV); WFSU (Tallahassee, FL); WGBY (Springfield, MA); Thirteen/WNET (New York, NY); WVIZ/PBS ideastream (Cleveland, OH).

²See Appendix for additional information on CBASS and NSLA.

resources available to them, especially during the summer, when schools and parents communicate less frequently. For example, principals and teachers commonly send parents a year-end letter encouraging them to support students' reading during the summer. PBS stations and their partners can work with schools to include information about Ready To Learn resources in the letter—and particularly about specific summer programs at libraries, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, etc., where students can access the transmedia content.

Another strategy was to engage families and after-school providers by meeting them in established community settings. Incorporating transmedia activities and trainings into settings where kids, families and/or educators are already spending their time—a community services center, for example, or a previously scheduled day of professional development—facilitates their adoption of the materials without posing additional burdens on their time. It also enables parents and caregivers to be introduced to new content and activities alongside their children; this helps ensure that parents receive adequate training in the technology, as well as instruction on how to create engaging educational experiences for their children at home.

- *In New York, WNET piloted an innovative Mommy and Me program, in which preschool-age siblings of students enrolled at a local elementary school and their parents/caregivers met weekly to participate in language- and media-enriched play experiences. Mommy and Me strengthened the home-school relationship to learning, balanced technology with hands-on activities, connected parents to the PBS KIDS Lab website as a resource, and engaged them in incorporating related activities into their daily at-home routines.*
- *Arizona PBS (Eight) partnered with the Maricopa Integrated Health System (MIHS) to provide workshops at two family learning centers that provide a range of health, education and literacy services to diverse and underserved communities. Maricopa County children spend much of their school-break time at the centers, and parents can often be found waiting with them for a health service or accessing other resources provided by the center. Conducting on-site workshops on Ready To Learn at these sites enabled Eight to reach a target audience it may not otherwise have been able to capture, as well as to engage parents and children jointly.*
- *In the Hilltop community of Tacoma, WA, public media station KBTC carried out a 360-degree approach to reaching children and families with PBS transmedia content. Through a partnership with the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA), KBTC reached out to participants in the THA McCarver Elementary Special Housing Program, which provided housing vouchers and other services to local families. Together, KBTC and THA hosted parent training nights and piloted a Ready To Learn “Spring Break Camp,” which brought in community volunteers and leveraged in-kind community donations to support kids’ math, literacy, and computer activities. KBTC also engaged families in public settings, coordinating monthly activities at the Children’s Museum of Tacoma, for example, and hosting a mobile technology lab at a park twice a week during the summer and during a large cultural festival.*

Partnerships

Forming and leveraging strong partnerships with intermediaries, community-based organizations (CBOs) and school districts are crucial for stations to expand their reach. Working with partners that had been previously established as leading educational and out-of-school time providers in a given community was a particularly effective approach. In New York and Baltimore, out-of-school time intermediary organizations³ facilitated connections between local PBS stations and community-based organizations, helping stations identify strong organizations and facilitating entrée with a new community or demographic.

³Intermediaries support the development of out-of-school time systems by coordinating resources, services, and information across a community's multifaceted network of government, schools, funders, program providers, and families.

- *In New York, WNET partnered with The After-School Corporation (TASC), to pilot Ready To Learn transmedia in two public schools with expanded learning programs. TASC was instrumental in initially identifying the sites as strong partners for WNET, based on location and capacity to implement digital activities.*
- *In Baltimore, the Safe and Sound Campaign supported Maryland Public TV by identifying specific school and community partner sites for summer and after-school learning, and providing technical assistance as needed. As an organizing body for Baltimore's after-school strategy, Safe and Sound has strong infrastructure to assist Maryland Public TV in exploring ways to sustain the implementation of digital content with community partners.*

Strong partnerships with intermediaries, community-based organizations and school districts are crucial to expand reach.

In addition to identifying strong organizations with which to partner, stations should have a clear understanding of a community's needs and partner organizations' capacity and resources to meet those needs. Stations and partner organizations should also be clear about their expectations for each other. For example, WGBY had several primary partners in the North End neighborhood of Springfield, MA, where it focused its outreach. Near the beginning of the grant period, WGBY conducted a needs assessment of each partner, from which it learned that most were not using technology to support children's early learning in math and literacy. As a result, assisting with technology literacy and integration became a key component of WGBY's work.

In addition, WGBY leveraged a pre-existing relationship with the German Gerena Community School, which was advantageously located in a neighborhood through-way, to build a central hub for its activities. It transformed an underutilized room at the school into the North End Center for Literacy and Learning, which became a nucleus for community events, partner field trips, and technology demonstrations throughout the year.

Technology and Training

Lack of adequate technical equipment and infrastructure at program sites was a major hurdle and the primary cost for demonstration stations as they sought to increase the uptake of Ready To Learn transmedia content by teachers, after-school program staff, and families. Stations found that on-site equipment was often outdated or the wireless connection was intermittent, and many families lacked access to the Internet or devices to continue engaging with transmedia at home.

Stations were most successful when they had a clear understanding of what technology resources a school- or community-based site possessed, and whether/how they would be able to overcome limitations. Bringing a ready-to-use set of devices, resources and curricula directly to teachers and informal educators and training them in their use proved to be an effective strategy.

- *WNET (New York) developed a "transmedia kit" for partner sites and community centers that included games and curricula loaded onto a flash drive, The Electric Company Extended Learning Program, classroom activity sheets, tips for instruction, and other classroom and at-home materials. The kit was instrumental to providing teachers and other educators with initial structure, guidance and resources on the Ready to Learn initiative.*
- *Eight (Arizona PBS) partnered with the Flagstaff Unified School District to bring Ready to Learn transmedia to the summer KinderCamp™ program. KinderCamp™ is a four-week, tuition-free program*

run by the United Way of Northern Arizona to help prepare children and families with limited resources for kindergarten. The station trained KinderCamp™ facilitators in teaching cross-platform content and using related technology, and lent the program administrators a mobile technology “lab,” including iPads and a Verizon mi-fi stick to ensure Internet connectivity in rural areas. The lab was shared among various sites for the duration of the camps to reach as many pre-Kindergarten children as possible.

Where the technology was not mobile, it was important to remind families that they could continue their children’s learning at home even without access to expensive digital equipment. Physical media and “hands-on” activities, including toys, blocks, art supplies, and books, can complement online media and accommodate different students’ learning styles. The WNET kit described above, for example, also contained at-home activity flashcards, a list of suggested reading books aligned with the activities, and a pencil-and-ruler set.

Given limited financial and staff resources, another hurdle was the staff burden associated with training after-school and summer providers in the new educational content. Some strategies to mitigate this burden included adopting a train-the-trainer or hybrid model (a combination of face-to-face training and ongoing online support). In Maricopa County, for example, the family learning centers were spread out across rural parts of Arizona, requiring long travel times for station staff. And though there was a high demand for workshops on Ready To Learn, and they were held frequently, often only a few people attended at a time. It was a more effective use of station staff time, therefore, to train center employees to deliver the workshops themselves.

Pedagogy

Effective pedagogy around the Ready To Learn math- and literacy-based educational programming, especially in out-of-school settings, is not yet well-defined. However, developing suggestions for pedagogy would greatly assist teachers and informal educators as they seek to maximize the benefit from using the cross-platform content and related activities.

Experiences from demonstration stations over the past year offer some pedagogical insights. Continuity of activities and content across media and across settings—school, home, library, etc.—can extend students’ learning and facilitate retention of content. In particular, games can help children forge connections to books and thereby promote early literacy. An external evaluator of Montana PBS’ work during the demonstration period recommended that teachers use the Ready To Learn content and the well-known characters they feature to help children “build a bridge to a book.” The evaluator indicated that the greatest benefit occurs when children move from books featuring the PBS KIDS characters to the games and back again.

Playing Ready To Learn games can also teach children the value of collaborative and peer learning, as many of the games and devices used require, or at least allow for, teamwork and group problem-solving. At an after-school and summer camp in the Slavic Village neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio, students played and learned together through group work around an interactive whiteboard, in addition to doing individual and pair work on computers and tablets at their desks.

- *Iowa Public Television facilitated math mentorships in after-school programs in Waterloo and Storm Lake, whose district was labeled “in need of assistance” in math under No Child Left Behind guidelines. Under the guidance of an on-site program director, third- and fourth-grade students worked with kindergarteners on a one-on-one basis twice a week, alternating between online PBS KIDS LAB math games and hands-on activities like board games or blocks. The online games helped students strengthen concrete skills, and hands-on activities helped them understand the real-world applications of math concepts. Station staff reported that both the younger and older kids enjoyed learning and helping each other.*

Implications and Concluding Thoughts

The eleven local PBS stations piloting the implementation of Ready To Learn in expanded learning settings tested a range of strategies to engage educators, community partners, and families. Across the board, stations were enthusiastic about connecting to new populations and successfully reached children and families in new settings, but they also encountered challenges and setbacks. Their experiences throughout the year have important implications as they continue their work, as well as for other stations that may be just beginning this work:

- 1. Involving parents and caregivers is essential.** Parental involvement gets kids excited about using the transmedia content and continuing to learn in the home setting. It is especially important to train caregivers on how to use digital content in ways that create meaningful learning experiences for children, both with and without high-tech equipment. Using digital media as a jumping-off point to connect with books is of particularly high value.
- 2. Strong community partnerships help ensure success and sustainability.** By partnering with organizations that have a stake in the community, accurate understanding of community needs, capacity for meeting those needs, and belief in the importance of Ready To Learn, stations can expand their own capacity for delivering dynamic new educational content to high-risk populations. Local and/or statewide intermediaries can connect stations to trusted community providers and to other networks, helping them make inroads into new communities and build on existing efforts to create high-quality out-of-school time programs.
- 3. Partner organizations may lack adequate technology and equipment.** The purchase of technology and equipment that can support transmedia activities can be a large cost outlay for stations. Nonetheless, once they make the initial investment, stations can use the resources creatively to maximize access and educational benefit. For example, stations might create a mobile technology “lab” and lend it to diverse community partners, or house the lab in a community center and guide children and caregivers to continue engaging with the content through less high-tech media at home.
- 4. Teachers, informal educators, and community providers will use transmedia if it’s easy.** Making the resources accessible and offering straightforward curricula will facilitate their use in communities. In particular, educators and after-school providers who are eager to use transmedia content and games but have little time to plan a strategy for doing so can benefit from structured suggestions, for example in the form of “toolkits” with lesson plans and activity ideas.⁴

Out-of-school time and community-based settings offer a prime venue for extending and supporting the work of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS in increasing early math and literacy skills among underserved children through the Ready To Learn initiative. To fully tap this opportunity, public media stations must strategically engage partners to widen their reach, and support families and educators to maximize children’s learning.

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⁴A list of resources on Ready To Learn, transmedia, and expanded learning and summer opportunities is provided in the Appendix to this report.

Appendix

About CBASS and NSLA

The Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS) is a coalition of leading after-school intermediary organizations representing cities and regions across the country. CBASS's mission is to expand the availability of high-quality learning opportunities, including after-school and summer, that help children gain the skills, knowledge, and experiences they need to lead successful lives. CBASS does this by helping cities and regions employ coordinated approaches to increase the scale, quality and accountability of programs, and to leverage the combined power of community organizations and schools to create integrated, effective, and inspired learning systems for our children and youth. To learn more, [visit the CBASS website](#). You can follow CBASS on Twitter [@CBASS_National](#).

The mission of the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) is to connect and equip schools, providers, communities, and families to deliver high-quality summer learning opportunities to our nation's youth to help close the achievement gap and support healthy development. NSLA serves as a network hub for thousands of summer learning program providers and stakeholders, providing tools, resources, and expertise to improve program quality, generate support, and increase youth access and participation. Visit the [NSLA website](#) for more information. Follow NSLA on Twitter [@summerlearning](#).

Additional Resources

The following Ready To Learn resources may be useful for public media stations, teachers, and community partners across the country:

- [The Corporation for Public Broadcasting website](#)
- [PBS KIDS LAB](#), home of the newest PBS games, activities, and research
- [PBS LearningMedia](#), a repository of thousands of classroom-ready, digital resources
- [Virtual Pre-K](#) and [Virtual K](#) lessons and activities for teachers, parents, and community partners
- [Video of WVIZ/PBS ideastream activities](#) depicting individual and group digital learning in Cleveland, OH
- [WFSU Math Mentors Activity Log](#) for documenting activities between kindergarten mentees and upper-grade mentors
- Ready To Learn Research Studies:
 - Summative evaluations from the [Center for Children and Technology](#)
 - [WestED Research Overview: Year One Ready To Learn Grant](#) (2011)
 - [PBS KIDS pilot tests](#), initial evaluations of learning interventions and study methods
- The Electric Company [Extended Learning](#) and [Summer Learning](#) programs

The following websites offer resources on expanded and summer learning opportunities:

- The [Afterschool Alliance](#)
- The [Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project](#)
- The [Wallace Foundation Knowledge Center](#)