19. It's About Relationships

Examining Facilitation as a Relational Practice

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Abstract: In this paper, we focus on the experiences of facilitators in informal settings designed to engage families in creative computing, or making, designing, and tinkering with computing. Facilitators can play important roles in developing welcoming spaces that enable youth to create and to learn computational literacy skills; however, research is still needed to examine the practices that facilitators use to engage with families in these activities. In this study, we highlight the ways that new facilitators came to take on the role of facilitators and focus specifically on the role of relationship building in their development and practices as facilitators. We worked with 9 facilitators during 5 intergenerational computing workshops to examine the practices they used to develop relationships with participants and the ways they interpreted and reflected upon these relationships to deepen their development as facilitators. Our findings indicate that facilitators and families in these workshops built relationships by leveraging common language and learning practices, sharing family stories, and using space to influence interactions. Additionally, as facilitators recognized and reflected on these relationships, they also reported growing in their understanding of facilitation.

Introduction and Background

In this study, we focus on the experiences of adult facilitators in out-of-school settings designed to engage youth and families in creative computing, or making, designing, and tinkering with computing. Facilitators can play important roles in developing welcoming spaces that enable youth to create and to learn with computing (Barron, Gomez, Martin, & Pinkard, 2014; Vossoughi, Escude, Kong, & Hooper, 2013). Because facilitators may have varying experiences with computing, supporting youth, or facilitating technology-based learning, staff at informal learning spaces who recruit and train facilitators face challenges in supporting them to develop the practices that can meaningfully engage diverse learners.

While many studies have examined the experiences of youth in creative computing programs, relatively few studies have examined what kinds of supports facilitators need to engage learners of diverse backgrounds. Past studies have primarily focused on facilitation practices, such as surfacing learner interests, providing encouragement, guiding rather than directing, and deepening engagement (Gutwill, Hido, & Sindorf, 2015). Studies of caretakers highlight the different roles caretakers can play, such as teacher, collaborator, and learner (Barron, Martin, Takeuchi, & Fithian, 2009; Nacu, Martin, Pinkard, & Gray, 2016). The identification of these roles and practices are important to help define what facilitators can do, but how do students, professionals, and volunteers learn to take on these roles?

In our study, we examine the ways that facilitators came to take on the role of facilitators. We focus specifically on the role of relationship building in their development. We draw on education research, which is often grounded in the ways that relationships impact learning. Literature across settings tends to emphasize the need to create space for learners to build community, while supporting learners in bringing funds of knowledge to bear on learning goals (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Much of this literature also emphasizes relationships as central to learning (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Reyes, Da Silva Iddings, & Feller, 2016). The relationships described in this literature are often developed through mutual care (Noddings, 1984, 1996, 2005), acknowledgment of cultural practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017), mutual vulnerability (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), and pedagogies of critical love (Freire, 1970/2000). While much

of this literature has focused on formal learning, this study adds new perspectives on the ways that relationships are built within informal, intergenerational settings.

We studied the experiences of new facilitators in a family technology program called Family Creative Learning (FCL), which engages children and families from nondominant groups in computing (Roque, 2016). Our analysis of facilitators' experiences builds on sociocultural frameworks of learning, in which learning is embedded in shared activities and involves taking on practices and roles that change over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1984). We highlight the ways that facilitators and families interacted, particularly the ways they developed facilitation practices to build relationships. We examine how facilitators entered these relationships and explore themes to discuss facilitators' conceptualizations of relationships and how relationship building might be used to better support facilitator development.

Facilitation in Family Creative Learning

In this paper, we examine the experiences of new facilitators in Family Creative Learning (FCL), which invites families to design and learn together using creative technologies (Roque, 2016). FCL includes four to six workshops held in a community center once a week for two hours. Each workshop is divided into four parts: Eat, Meet, Make, and Share. In Eat, families and facilitators share a meal together. In Meet, facilitators check in separately with parents and children to talk about their experiences in the workshops. In Make, parents and children create stories using creative technologies, such as the ScratchJr programming environment. In Share, families talk about their projects and receive feedback.

The design of FCL draws on constructionist traditions of learning, which argue that people learn best when they are building things that are personally and socially meaningful (Papert, 1980; Kafai, 2006). Constructionism builds upon theories of knowledge as something actively constructed through experience (Piaget, 1976). As people build projects, they build ideas. The design of FCL also draws on learning theories that emphasize the social aspects of learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Families are encouraged to work together and build on their diverse "repertoires of practices" and "funds of knowledge" (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Before the workshops, facilitators met as a team to become familiar with the tools, activities, and practices. Both authors met with facilitators and highlighted the role they play in supporting families to engage in personally and socially meaningful experiences with computing. They shared the *Family Creative Learning Facilitator Guide* (Roque & Leggett, 2014), particularly the Facilitating Fundamentals, which included practices such as "build relationships and trust," "ask questions rather than giving answers," and "surface their interests." For example, to build trust, facilitators are encouraged to eat with families and focus on a few families rather than the whole room to build deeper connections. Additionally, the authors prepared some activities for new facilitators, such as what to do if someone asks a challenging question or what to do if someone becomes frustrated with the making process.

During the workshops, facilitators supported the workshop implementation and helped families with their projects. Immediately after a workshop session, facilitators debriefed for 30 minutes to discuss what went well, what questions they have, or things that could be improved or challenging interactions they witnessed. Between the workshops, the facilitators met again to consider their reflections from the previous workshops and to discuss changes or strategies to implement in the next workshop.

Methods

Participants

In this paper, we focus on the experiences of facilitators who participated across five FCL implementations held in community-based organizations that consisted of libraries and schools in urban and suburban contexts in the Western Mountain region of the United States. The facilitators were primarily recruited from the university of which the two authors are also members, through an online student jobs board with multiple job descriptions that were titled: "Community Outreach Assistant," "Spanish Interpreters," and "Video and Photo Production Interns." Nine facilitators engaged across the five workshop implementations held from Fall 2017 to Fall 2018, with varying participation. Two members participated in all five, four members participated in four, and others participated from one to three workshop implementations. One facilitator had prior experience with computer programming, but the remaining facilitators were new to programming. Experiences working with youth ranged from very little to helping with a daycare center and babysitting jobs.

About 40 families participated in workshops. Families were recruited through community organizations, with staff actively seeking families that had limited access to resources around computing. Youth ranged in age from 3.5 to 15 years and parents or adult caretakers ranged in age from 25 to 75 years.

Data Collection and Analysis

While the data collected and analyzed for this paper focused on facilitators, this paper is part of a larger qualitative study examining how families create and learn together in creative computing activities (Roque, 2016). To understand the experiences of facilitators from their perspective, we conducted 60–90 minute interviews with facilitators in May 2018 and again in December 2018. We also audio-recorded and transcribed facilitator debrief sessions that immediately happened after workshop sessions. Facilitators took field notes in three of the five FCL workshop implementations, one in Spring 2018 and two in Fall 2018. Before the interviews, we asked facilitators to reflect on three to five moments that mattered to their experience. In addition to asking questions about these moments, such as why they chose them and what they took away from those moments, we asked them questions to surface their motivations, their facilitation challenges, and the strategies they developed. These multiple methods of data collection before, during, and after the program allowed us to triangulate their experiences as well as capture their development as facilitators over time.

We examined data through an iterative process, analyzing data through first-cycle coding, employing deductive coding to identify the practices facilitators employed to build relationships, and then inductive coding to remain open to emerging thematic analysis. We looked for patterns using second-cycle coding, and then wrote analytic memos (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Much of our analysis focused on facilitators' reflections on their interactions between families and facilitators and among facilitators.

Findings

In our analysis, we recognized that themes around facilitator and participant relationship building emerged chronologically. Across five iterations of Family Creative Learning workshops from 2017 to 2018, we noted that

facilitators' entry points into the workshops impacted both the practices they used to establish relationships with participants and their interpretations of those relationships over time.

Entry Points

Entering relationships through shared backgrounds. While each of the facilitators we worked with during this study expressed an eagerness to connect with families, the ways that they approached these relationships differed. For example, Emilia, a facilitator who self-identified as Latina, explained that she joined FCL because she "wanted to interact with more diverse people." Emilia had grown up in a very diverse city and expressed that since moving to a majority-White college town, she began to feel out of place. In an interview, she elaborated, "I need to talk to people in Spanish'" (May 2018 interview). Emilia's desire to speak Spanish drove the ways that she approached relationships in the workshops. Even when she expressed feeling uncomfortable during the initial workshop sessions because she did not have previous experience supporting family learning, she continued to reference how much she valued speaking Spanish with participants. Emilia's experience was echoed by many of the other bilingual facilitators we worked with across these workshops. Armando, who was a recent immigrant from Mexico, would often find an instant connection with parents who had also immigrated. "It doesn't matter what kind of immigrant you are, it's just this connection, this emotional connection that you have with people."

While we expected facilitators to enter relationships with participants based on their shared languages, we found that shared backgrounds were extremely important, even for monolingual facilitators and those who did not speak Spanish. Daniel, a facilitator who self-identified as Latino and was not fluent in Spanish, repeatedly expressed how comforted he felt in being surrounded by people who reminded him of his family. While Daniel was not confident that he could connect with participants through Spanish, he reflected that their interactions were familiar and said that they reminded him of his family, which made him want to get to know them. Similarly, Quon, a facilitator whose primary language was Chinese, was initially nervous about facilitation because he feared that participants would not be able to understand his accent. Within the first workshop, however, he expressed a new appreciation for his ability to relate to participants because of his choice to come to the United States. He explained, "I told [the family I was working with] that I'm a nonnative speaker, and so if you don't get what I say, just let me repeat it again. Then they were curious about [me] because I think they were also not born in this country … they were not good at English [either]" (May 2018 interview). These experiences were echoed across other facilitator interviews. Facilitators who shared fluency in language with participants were able to find entry points through similar and shared experiences.

Entering relationships through learning experiences. Another way we observed facilitators building relationships with participants was through their own experiences as learners. As they prepared for these workshops, facilitators often framed their understanding of the relationships they were going to build with families by recounting their own learning experiences. Lacy, for example, explained that she was interested in participating in FCL because of her own participatory learning experiences in high school.

> In high school, I was always a really traditional student. … When I took Geometry in Construction [which engaged students in learning geometry through building and infrastructure] … I kind of fell in love with just the different aspects I saw in it and through that … it just grew [to be] something that I became really passionate about (May 2018 interview).

Lacy's desire to join FCL grew out of a personal learning experience and subsequent appreciation for learning through creating and making as opposed to what she termed "traditional" ways of learning. Lacy continued to explain that she relied on these past experiences to build her practices of facilitation, attempting to let families figure things out before "stepping in" to help (May 2018 interview).

Facilitation Practices

Throughout workshops, four themes emerged around the ways that facilitators and families built relationships; these themes included leveraging shared language practices, trading family stories, placing themselves within proximity of multiple family members, and using tools to broker conversations.

Leveraging language. Across the nine facilitators, field notes and interviews suggested that nearly all of them leveraged conversational practices from other parts of their lives in building relationships with families. Amy, a facilitator who self-identified as White, explained in a reflection that she intentionally spoke Spanish to participants as they entered the workshop for the first time. She wrote,

> I noticed that with multiple families, the kids began speaking English to us and then [the kids] were telling their parents what to do in Spanish until we started speaking Spanish to their parents. The kids would then move on and speak to each other when they did not have to translate for their parents. … [One father] saw me and exclaimed, '*no sabia que incluso las gueras hablan espanol aqui!*' (Translation: I didn't know that even the white ones speak Spanish here.) He then continued to joke about how he could not say anything behind my back and mentioned that the food was good and spicy (October 2018 field note).

Amy described how she felt that this moment "was important because he kept asking me questions and I felt as though it started to build a relationship with him and his family." While this is a poignant example of using shared languages to build relationships with families, we also noted that even facilitators who did not speak participants' primary languages used dialogue to build relationships. On more than one occasion, facilitators reported approaching participants with smiles and using hand gestures to begin establishing communication. Often, facilitators and participants reported realizing that they shared enough common vocabulary between English and Spanish to communicate effectively. Both Lacy and Jess reflected that the experience of struggling toward dialogue and discovering common communication practices resulted in feelings of closeness with and appreciation for participants.

Trading family stories. Another relationship-building practice that emerged in our data was the sharing of stories. This was reflected by Lacy, who explained sharing stories marked a meaningful connection.

> To me, when you can reach that moment of sharing the story, or sharing a personal experience, I think that signifies that something meaningful is taking place. I don't necessarily know what that meaningful interaction is, but it means the person is comfortable enough to share. Comfortable in the experience to share a part of themselves (May 2018 interview).

Jazmine, a facilitator who self-identified as LatinX, exemplified this practice. Throughout three workshops, Jazmine would recount stories of her 11-year-old twin brothers for participants, explaining that it was easy to relate to kids because of her relationship with them. On multiple occasions, we observed Jazmine telling stories about her brothers in order to build relationships with the young people she was facilitating. She would also rely on these stories when the children with whom she was working were performing in ways that she deemed "misbehaving." In a reflection after the one workshop, Jazmine explained that she used these stories to help her relate to what the families were experiencing and "be patient" when youth were acting in ways that she did not know how to support.

The trading of stories became a reciprocal practice between families and facilitators, as well as an indication for facilitators of successful relationship building. As the workshops progressed, facilitators described a moment when one mother, Alejandra, pulled out her phone and began showing them images of her family outside of the workshop. In field notes Amy described having the impression that "Alejandra seemed very proud showing me her family and seemed very happy when I told her how nice they looked" (November 2018 field notes). Alejandra had taken out her phone to share memories of her children with Amy, the facilitator, in order to deepen Amy's understanding of the family. For

Amy, this was a moment that indicated the family's desire to be known; she felt that the family had developed a trusting relationship with her if they were willing to share other memories from moments outside of the workshop.

Proximity. Across data sources, we observed facilitators using proximity to families to broker relationships. Lacy described this process as "stepping in" and "stepping back." During sections of the workshop, facilitators would use proximity to different family members as a means of encouraging collaboration, directing interactions, and allowing family members to navigate the technologies on their own. While each facilitator navigated proximity to participants differently, this process often involved kneeling next to families to explain an idea or to offer direction, standing behind families as they worked together and leaning in if instruction or clarification was needed, sitting between families and waiting to be engaged directly, and stepping away when families appeared to need to navigate ideas or disagreements on their own. In separate interviews, both Lacy and Daniel explained that they tried to make sure that families had the space they needed for discovery, but that they also wanted to be privy to the moments when families were learning something new. Jazmine explained that using space helped her navigate building relationships by giving her a nonverbal way for "getting their attention or making them want to listen to you" (May 2018 interview). She also explained that when she felt nervous about facilitation, she relied on stepping back and taking a moment to herself to make sure that she was being responsive to the family's needs. She explained that moving away from families occasionally made sense to her as moving toward them because as they learned "they didn't need us as much. Which I kind of like when they don't need us, because it means they're growing." For Jazmine, using space was a way to check in and make sure that the relationships she was trying to build with families felt mutual; she used physical closeness as a means to ensure that families felt cared for while also ensuring that they had the space they needed to work out struggles or frustrations without feeling as though she were interfering.

Conceptualizing Relationships

Across data sources, facilitators shared that relationships played a substantial role in helping them develop into their role. Facilitators highlighted connections with families—as Jazmine highlighted, of "being on the inside" rather than the "outside"—as instrumental in pushing them to think about how families learned together. Amy further described her realization that families are "receptive to talking and they want to connect." In recognizing that this desire for connection existed across workshop participants, facilitators reflected that they were more motivated to employ relationship-building practices and ultimately recognized that these practices supported them in developing into more skilled facilitators.

Facilitators shared how making these meaningful connections with families shifted how they saw their roles as facilitators. Emilia explained that it is "not just *working* [with families], it's actually *building relationships* with families." She continued to say that relationships make families' experiences better because they become familiar with facilitators and are not afraid to ask questions. Amy shared these perspectives and whenever she met new families, she would ask questions about their experiences in order to "get them talking right away so they feel comfortable talking to you and asking questions." Emilia hinted that their relationships with families also encouraged families to come again.

Making these connections with families helped to shift their relationships into a more level and equal relationship. One facilitator, Quon, shared how his prior experiences in learning environments often had an "authority figure" and students were expected to listen and follow their instructions. He found his experiences as a facilitator departed from this interaction and instead, this learning environment fostered a "more equal relationship." Lacy shared how in the past she might have been hesitant to open up to a facilitator because of their "superior" role. However, because of building relationships with families, she found it be more of a "partnership" that was powerful and where "new learning can take place."

Discussion

This study highlights the role of relationship building in the development and practices of facilitators. Within creative computing spaces in out-of-school settings, staff might be inclined to recruit new facilitators who have STEM or computing skills. Additionally, preparation of new facilitators might substantially focus on developing those STEM or computing skills in facilitators and how to cultivate those skills in participants. However, our study highlights the ways that encouraging and providing opportunities for relationship building can support both the development of facilitation practices and the learning experiences of participants. In FCL, opportunities for connection are inherent in the four-part structure of the FCL workshops: Eat, Meet, Make, Share. Three of the four parts (Eat, Meet, and Share) highlight social interaction. Even in Make, families and facilitators are encouraged to work together. Staff and informal learning educators might consider the ways that their activities and spaces create an environment that supports facilitators and participants to connect more meaningfully in their interactions.

While we recognize that not every setting can implement a program such as FCL, these facilitators' experiences hint at how these relationship-building practices and opportunities might be supported. As they entered, developed, and reflected on their relationships, facilitators drew on their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). While a significant body of literature has established that people learn by leveraging their cultural backgrounds (e.g., Moll et al., 1992; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), these facilitators were also leveraging their backgrounds and beliefs to support participant learning. Further, as facilitators engaged in these practices, our data analysis demonstrated that they were becoming increasingly metacognitive about the ways that relationships and learning intertwined.

Additionally, centering key facilitation practices around relationships can help to disrupt typical power dynamics within instructional and technology-based spaces. Power dynamics are inherent within relationships and every learning experience—especially where technology is involved—has the potential to be influenced by these dynamics because of the ways that learning and technology have historically been tied to privilege (Esmonde & Booker, 2017; Foucault, 1977; Vossoughi et al., 2013). Freire (1970/2000) describes learning as liberation that fosters love and therefore dialogical relationships. As facilitators noted, developing relationships with families created a leveling effect on their dynamic and countered their notions of facilitators as "authorities" or "superior figures." The FCL model has worked to acknowledge traditional power structures between institutions, facilitators, participants from historically marginalized backgrounds, and technological tools—and disrupt those structures by centering relationships. Our analysis demonstrates that as computing spaces and other making and tinkering spaces aim to engage more nondominant groups, there is a continued need to build understandings around facilitation practices centered on relationship building to support the engagement of diverse learners.

We aim to build on this work to continue understanding the network of relationships at play within creative computing environments in informal learning settings. Our analysis primarily focused on the direct social interactions between facilitators and families. However, facilitators' uses of space to build relationships hint at how other features in a learning environment can be used to broker relationships. For example, facilitators shared how valuable it was to witness families' shifting relationships with tools. As facilitators positioned parents to work with and build their confidence with the tools, parents were, in turn, able to work more meaningfully with their children and build their relationships with children in the context of computing. The FCL context allows us to examine a network of relationships—between parents and their kids, between families from the same neighborhood, between families and their local community-based organization, and between families and new technologies—and the role that these relationships play in fostering an inclusive, welcoming, and creative learning experience for nondominant groups to create and express themselves in computing.

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