



Feature Story
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Youth Policy Institute: Community Technology Yoga – A Lesson in Flexibility

By Emilio Flores

With the Community Technology field undergoing many funding changes and shifts in focus in recent years, it has been challenging for many organizations to adapt and expand their courses and build programs to meet new goals. How have CTCs managed to surmount the myriad of obstacles which are beyond their control and create relevant programming? Even the most prepared programs meet with surprises, and a CTC should be able to constantly assess the needs of its community and modify its program accordingly while remaining true to its mission. The Youth Policy Institute offers their story as an example of the necessity of flexibility when running a CTC program.

YPI - Youth Policy Institute

The Youth Policy Institute (YPI) is familiar with the complex world of education and technology. YPI has over 20 years of experience managing education, technology, and training programs nationwide. They have helped raise more than \$16 million for technology, education, and workforce development programs over the past 5 years.

In 2002, YPI created a CTC in Pacoima, California. Pacoima is one of the most impoverished urban Latino communities in Los Angeles, with a population of 77,137, 73% of which is Latino. More than half of the population speaks Spanish at home.

The Pacoima Community Technology Center (PCTC) opened in 2002, housing YPI's Valley Family Technology Project (VFTP). The VFTP has enjoyed high levels of success, especially in their ongoing quest to build community partnerships. Their buddy list reads like the Los Angeles

Yellow Pages, with well-known names like Microsoft, IBM, and Verizon composing only a humble piece of their networking pie.

Warming Up – Flexibility in program design

PCTC began with a hefty but familiar mission to those of us in the trenches of community education: to offer literacy and computer classes, workforce development opportunities, and secondary education to Pacoima adults. PCTC would also provide youth literacy and computer courses to elementary school students and their families.

To provide these services, the PCTC implemented a Workforce Development program, and a program at Pacoima Elementary School (PES). The Workforce Development program served 62 residents after six months, providing computer literacy training, job training, and job placement assistance. The elementary school program offered parents of PES 4th graders basic computer literacy classes as well as ESL and GED courses. PES teachers received support in how to structure in-class technology curriculum, and in some cases, were given teachers' assistants for their classes.



This year YPI expanded its program to focus on struggling high school students. The PCTC will continue its adult education initiatives while devoting the bulk of this year's CTC grant to after-school programs. While it was challenging to make such a shift, the high school program is now operating successfully, serving students from four Los Angeles high schools.

Jeff Caltabiano, Associate Director of YPI, attributes their success, in part, to the program's flexible attitude, and YPI's broad mission statement: To create opportunities for low-income families and communities through technology, education, and training services. "Be flexible, be able to adapt," he advises. Regarding the switch from adult and elementary students to high school students, he says, "We're still doing community technology; we're still doing computer literacy. We're excited about the prospect of working with high school kids. Five years down the road, you bring continuity to the program."

The different CTC programs experienced varying levels of difficulty, some going more or less as planned, and some requiring modification after a few months. YPI staff members dealt with each challenge as they encountered it, and were not afraid to restructure and reshape their courses based on the demands of the community.

Beginning Stretches – Flexibility within smaller programs



One example of a program that required a mid-course adjustment is the Pacoima Online Academy (POA). The POA is an online distance learning program where both high school and adult students can earn free high school and college credits by completing actual college coursework, with the help of POA instructors and tutors. In order to implement the Online Academy, YPI initially partnered with Cerritos College, and offered three classes, Mythology, Political Science, and Education Technology to POA students.

POA soon changed its target student body by allowing high school students to enroll, as the adult enrollment was lower than expected. The first semester 15 adults from the community and 17 high school students from the Soledad Enrichment Action School were enrolled. Adults were required to visit the CTC at least once a week for an hour, while high school students attended a two-hour class once each week. One tutor was available to high school students and one to adults, each for twenty hours a week.



After the first few months of operation, the POA found that students needed more tutoring time, and made two tutors available to every four students, for forty minutes a day. They also found that three classes were too many for high school students. Six months into the project, the POA began a partnership with Cerro Coso Community College to offer more course choices and increased flexibility. High school students would take only one class, for four days each week.

After one year of operation, the Pacoima Online Academy identified the following two challenges to their program, as outlined in their most recent proposal:

1. Students need a basic skills component to prepare them for the challenges of online college learning, or advanced programming like web design.
2. Personal contact and support is essential for the success of this program.

The POA addressed these challenges as an ongoing process and incorporated these lessons into the next grant's program, finding more tutors and forming a new partnership when it was deemed necessary.

Advanced Poses – Adapting to large changes

In 2003, YPI received a CTC grant and implemented an ambitious after-school program that “meshes with the in-school curriculum while meeting California State Standards in language arts, mathematics, and social studies.” Whitney Kasserman, the Pacoima Online Academy Coordinator, encouraged YPI to apply for the 2003 grant. “I was meeting a lot of students

[through the POA] with nothing to do,” she recalls. “Two or three new students a week were trying to join the POA and I was referring them to other programs.” Simply named ACE (Achieve, Create, Educate), the program has academic support workshops twice each week, uses integrated learning systems, and has SAT-preparation for 10th and 11th graders. The ACE program intends to serve 600 high school students from four different Los Angeles schools: Soledad Enrichment Action (SEA) Charter School, Discovery Charter Preparatory School, Van Nuys High School, and Sylmar High School.

In regard to the ACE program, Kasserman writes:



“Mentor and peer-tutoring programs guide these students, with an emphasis on basic reading, writing, and math skills, as well as time-management and study skills. The ACE program staff also uses "my e-coach," an online program that shows teachers how to incorporate technology into their curriculum through technology-based projects. The goal is to incorporate multiple education standards into one meaningful project. Using resources as online curriculum builders, the ability to collaborate on project development online, easy to use standards databases, and online storage of materials, teachers will be able to build a unique model of education that they can then share with other teachers intending to address the same standards.”

Originally YPI had intended for college undergraduates to tutor the high school students, but this plan was difficult to implement for a number of reasons. California State University at Northridge (CSUN) had allotted a certain amount of money to pay their students as tutors, but this funding source was lost shortly after the program began. UCLA students had difficulty getting to the Pacoima area, making them a less reliable source. YPI staff exhibited their usual quick thinking and implemented peer-tutoring programs at Van Nuys and Sylmar High Schools where highly-motivated students are trained to be tutors for low-achieving students. In addition, college work-study students from CSUN act as tutors.

Meditation

The Youth Policy Institute’s CTC has become a valuable asset to the Pacoima community, and thanks to YPI’s ability to adapt to an often erratic environment, they are constructing programs which fill Pacoima’s educational gaps one by one. Next year YPI will open the Bert Corona Charter School, a middle school to enable local students from the elementary school to transition more smoothly to YPI’s high school program. This constant attention to Pacoima’s needs and this willingness to re-evaluate, and if necessary to abandon, their initial strategies for meeting their goals, has positioned the Pacoima CTC to provide important programming to their community for many years to come.