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Title: Encouraging a Virtual Community for Librarians: Program Delivery Choices that Impact Perceptions of Community

Abstract:

Project VIEWS2 is an IMLS National Leadership Research Grant initiative. We report findings from an innovative program delivery that afforded entrepreneurial opportunities for librarians to share experiences with the research instruments, gain knowledge of their practice, and reclaim early literacy-based storytime strategies and tips with fellow practitioners.

Extended abstract:

Project VIEWS 2, Valuable Initiatives in Early Learning that Work Successfully, is a three-year IMLS National Leadership Research Grant. The overall purpose of the research is to find valid and reliable means to measure the early literacy outcomes for children from birth to Kindergarten in public library programs and to leverage public library and school partnerships to improve early literacy practices. One component of the Project VIEWS2 study, unusual within LIS research, consisted of an experimental design with an intervention. Forty randomly selected Washington libraries (13 large, 13 medium, and 14 small) were included in the two-condition study: control and treatment. This design involved initiative and risks for both the researchers and the participants. The full paper expands on the design of the study and its inherent entrepreneurial aspects.

Intervention Goals / Research Questions

Our initial research question was simple: Would a series of webinars provide librarians with a better sense of how to expand and incorporate early literacy indicators into their storytimes to create stronger literacy environments? Throughout the development process, we uncovered another question about design and delivery: Can webinars stimulate a community among geographically diverse librarians, and give them the space to encourage each other, be leaders, and create a cooperative learning environment to foster professional development? We are reporting on findings from the design of the intervention, the culminating survey, and how these are related to educational entrepreneurship.

As part of the intervention, an innovative program delivery in the form of three webinars afforded an opportunity for the treatment group of librarians to share experiences with the research instruments, i.e., PET (to assess program delivery of early literacy skills) and BCPAF (to assess children's behaviors according to early literacy benchmarks). Through these webinars, a newly formed community of librarians discussed their practical knowledge and strategies as well as tips with fellow practitioners. The intervention also provided a way for isolated librarians, many of whom are in small rural areas to both learn from one another and achieve a sense of community. This is one of several 'profitable outcomes' for this model of entrepreneurial education even though it was not the main focus of the study.

Design Aspects of the Intervention

When it came time to design the intervention, the research team was committed to collaborating with the participating librarians by relying on their experience delivering storytimes. But this presented new challenges. Detailed design issues, as well as considerations that required the researchers and practitioners to creatively accommodate diverse working spaces across the libraries, will be expanded upon. For example, we looked at the range and number of library storytime program offerings available to accommodate developmental age differences of the children.

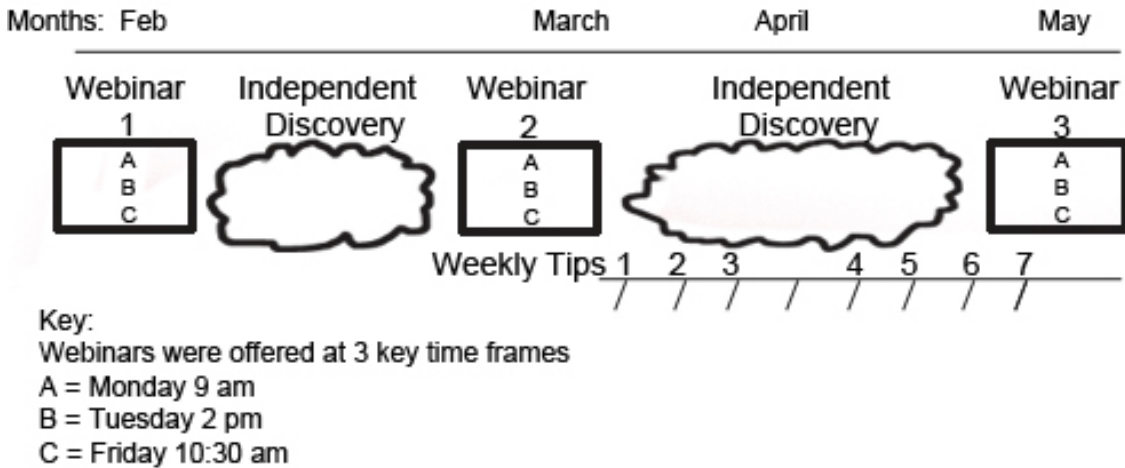


Figure 1 - Intervention Design Timeline

In addition to an intervention script and agenda, we purposefully allowed for discussion and participant collaboration. Though this approach presented risks--the librarians might not feel comfortable sharing and the synchronous delivery mode might prove uncomfortable--the team felt it was crucial that the librarians participate in the learning process and develop their own sense of expertise and leadership with the literacy tools. Furthermore, these webinars proved to be a new way for some of the librarians to engage in an education webinar. The full paper discusses our findings from the survey and an analysis of the webinar interaction. We also present details pertaining to an initial collaborative website created for the librarians and researchers and how we found that people were more comfortable sharing ideas through the webinar than on the website.

Group Dynamics

The survey yielded revelatory insights into participants' experiences with this innovative content delivery method. While some of the librarians in our study gained a sense of community when responding to the survey at the end of the intervention, some also said they felt that the community was short-lived. Still others reported feeling disjointed despite the presence of other librarians sharing resources. One librarian said "getting other people's [librarian's] strategies was invaluable," whereas others lamented the lack of face to face connections.

Inherent entrepreneurship

Some researchers attempt to delineate entrepreneurship into specific theoretical domains, e.g., institutional (Dorado, 2005; Pacheco, York, Dean, & Sarasvathy, 2010), cultural (Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2001), social (Dart, 2004; Mair & Marti, 2006); however, some argue that delineation is not required as traditional theoretical framework addresses a phenomena such as social entrepreneurship (Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010). Upon inspection of various existing assumptions, it is apparent that the use of online interactive webinars as an educational intervention blurs boundaries of existing framework approaches as defined within the entrepreneurship literature.

Research supporting the important role of public libraries in children's literacy development is expanding (Celano, D., & Neuman, 2001; Justice, Piasta, Capps, Levitt, & Columbus Metropolitan Library, in press). Early literacy programming within public libraries is generating positions at both a local and state level. For example, a July 2013 job posting in Denver seeks a full-time Senior Librarian in Early Literacy with a Master's degree in Library Science from an ALA accredited program. The creation of new early literacy library-affiliated positions increases LIS programs' responsibility to avail future practitioners with a curriculum that will prepare them both with core concepts and an understanding of the positive impacts early literacy skills may have on long-term reading achievement. However, early literacy and associated reading research is an active field that requires one to stay current. Our initial analysis reflects that having opportunities to connect with fellow practitioners to discuss early literacy provides an avenue to enhance understanding and generates motivation.

Motivation is a foundational characteristic of individual entrepreneurship (Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009; Hibbert, Hogg, & Quinn, 2005; Zhao, Seibert, & Lumpkin, 2010) and access to an early literacy practitioner community, such as the one we created (Figure 1) also provides motivational opportunities. Use of entrepreneurial motivational behavior by librarians may generate a benefit for specific disadvantaged groups such as children at risk of not developing necessary literacy skills. Additional characteristics of the webinar that create innovative educational solutions are expanded in the full paper.

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