

PLIX Conversation Starter

Week 3 || Tienya & Lydia

Michelle: Welcome to Week 3 of our Facilitating Creative Learning Course and our third PLIX Conversation Starter. chat. We are joined this week by Tienya and Lydia. Would you like to introduce yourselves, please? Tienya?

Tienya: Hi, everyone! My name is Tienya Smith. I'm a community library manager at Queens Public Library. I started working there about 13 years ago. And I started working in STEM probably 8 years ago.

Lydia: Hi, everyone! My name is Lydia Guterman, and I'm the library engagement coordinator at PLIX. Tienya, it's been great over the past year to get to know you and work with you, and I'm wondering: how did you get involved with creative learning?

Tienya: So I started creative learning about eight years ago, when I got involved with a network called Hive NYC. That's a group of after-school practitioners that get together and talk about their maker or STEM experience. So that's how I got started.

Lydia: Tienya, at the Queens Public Library in New York you provide a wide array of programming for your patrons, including adult education, lessons for English speakers of other languages, homeless and re-entry services, STEM literacy programming, and digital innovation programming. How have you been able to use PLIX in your program offerings?

Tienya: So we've mostly used PLIX during our STEM after-school program. We most recently used it in a sustainability program where we were trying to show people how to recycle materials that they have at home. It's called the Hunter's Point Environmental Education Project. We did three series where we showed people how to use potato chip bags and recycled paper to make inflatables.

Lydia: Tienya, I love this sense of play in all of your programming, as well as you know, peer learning: in creative learning you don't want to be the sage

on the stage, but more the guide on the side. I'd love to hear about how you let your patrons—the learners—really take charge.

Tienya: So for starters, we don't refer to our patrons as “patrons”. We call them “customers”. So just like you would walk into a library, and you can go and freely borrow a book or do whatever you want in that space, the same thing goes for our program: the customers are in charge.

It changes your mind frame. When I went in for my interview, that was the first thing they told me. They told me that we don't refer to the people that come to the library as patrons. They're customers. We don't interfere when customers are browsing the shelves. They can decide whatever it is that they want to do when they walk through the doors.

It reminds us that it's all about their experience. It's not about us—it's about them. We try to make sure that experience—their customer experience—is a positive one. There isn't really an equivalent to a patron experience. When a patron visits your library, they're patronizing your services, so it highlights the service, instead of the customer.

They decide what we're going to do. We could have planned a name game and somebody wanted to do something else? That's what we would do. So our customers are in charge of that experience.

Lydia: That's great. That reminds me of one of our facilitation techniques: “celebrating the learning process and not just the finished product”. In a way you're bringing that facilitation technique to life in this process. You'd have a proposal for what you can imagine your customers are going to be working on that day, but it definitely involves a lot of flexibility, which is a skill that you have to develop and it's great that you encourage and let this happen for customers: to choose their own path for the program!

One of the workshops you've told us about before, the Future Humans program that you did with the Beam Center: Let's look at one from start to finish.

Tienya: Last summer we expressed that we were interested in doing something with coding and robotics and wearables and Beam Center said,

“Hey, we have this opportunity called Future Humans.”

An event during that program could go one of two ways we either have a demonstration session, or it's a work day. And on a work day we would meet with the kids on a Zoom call. Sometimes we made avatars, sometimes we played games. During that work day, we asked them what they worked on before they got to the session. Everybody takes a turn talking about what they did, what worked, what didn't work. They share pictures or videos of what they worked on. And that's what a session looked like. Then we would open up at the end, asking them if they had any questions or needed clarity and during that time, everybody would... was welcome to answer those questions. The facilitators or mentors in the space didn't serve as the experts. We made everyone feel like they were expert, because everybody was working on their projects.

Lydia: Your Future Humans workshop is such a great example of so many different creative learning facilitation practices. We can't all be content experts on every piece of content, and librarians are experts at identifying great partners and collaborators to bring to their patrons or customers.

By not emphasizing at all that the facilitators were any kind of expert, you're really reducing the amount of technical jargon that you would be sharing with patrons which can sometimes be a barrier to feeling safe and comfortable and playful in the learning environment. You're really putting the patrons—or the customers—in charge.

One thing we're talking about this week is celebrating the learning process and not just the finished product. When patrons did have a finished project, how did they share these with each other and continue this collaboration? I remember you showing us the Giphy site, and I'd love to hear a bit more about that.

Tienya: After we finished a session or a project, we would have like a slideshow of what the students did. That could be a completed version of whatever their project was or they could tell us about the story they created or what they learned along the

way. Whatever was on that slide represented whatever they accomplished. It all worked!

Like, for instance, one student spent the session going over their journal, and all the interesting parts of their badge that they worked on. It depicted the process of how they created that badge, and that helped everybody else on the call because it gave them another way of going about creating something.

It could be anything that they shared out. When you saw all the Giphys you saw all the completed wearables that they created, but it was everything under the sun that happened during that experience. We just captured the finished products. It's a really uplifting experience, because you see all these different perspectives on the same project.

Lydia: Tienya, thanks for sharing that! All I knew about that Giphy site until now was just those polished gifs, and it's such a joy to look at the site, but hearing that story and having the customers celebrate this process is even more enriching. What did you and the customers do with *unfinished* projects? How did you share and celebrate those?

Tienya: So for the unfinished projects, we had a channel called Rocket.chat. And that's where the slides went for the unfinished projects. The students had an opportunity to talk about those slides that they shared. Sometimes the students just lost interest in the project, because there were four different projects that they could work on. We just gave them space to talk about why or why they didn't decide to finish that project. The other participants also got to ask them questions, and it was just another way of just investigating what their process was. So it wasn't that it was a punishment or anything like that, it was just us trying to figure out why they decided to work / spend more time on something.

Lydia: Part of the learning process involves getting stuck. When patrons get stuck—one of the things we're talking about this week is “don't touch the tools” which can, I know, in my experience as a facilitator can sometimes be really challenging. In both virtual and physical settings: what do you do when patrons get stuck?

Tienya: Now we're doing a code & create program where we're using both, about, 12 different sensors, and Scratch to design different tools. We had 10 weeks, and in week 9 and 8, they were to come up with something that they created—it was entirely up to them! We got hesitation in week 8, when it came time for them to create. They were just like, “What are we going to do?!” And we just talked through it. We said “So, what did you like? Let's start there. How could you remix that? Maybe it's not recreating something at this moment, maybe you can just remix something! And as you're re-mixing it, maybe you'll come up with another idea!”

So that's how we work through a situation where a customer gets stuck. We remind them that they're working in a team, and we remind them of the resources that they learned, but we make sure that that they understand that this is *their* project.

Sometimes silence is good. Sometimes when folks get stuck, we ask them what they think about the first step, and, sometimes, it's okay just to be quiet. And the best things happen in those instances where we just step back and wait—they come up with the best ideas when we're patient and we're silent.

Lydia: In my own experience as a facilitator, when I was just getting started, Katherine McConachie had reminded me multiple times at the beginning of a few of our different workshops that it's okay if I ask a question and there's silence. That does not mean necessarily that you've set up a bad question or that people are not engaged. People just need to think sometimes.

In what you've been telling me throughout this conversation reminds me of a quote, that we at PLIX often share from Seymour Papert: “The role of the teacher is to create the conditions for invention, rather than provide ready-made knowledge”, and it seems like in your work you have really put a lot of effort into creating these conditions. You really have this commitment to creating a wonderful environment for people to explore and create their own paths for learning.

I also know that you *do* have a lot of knowledge and interest in data analytics and AI. In instances

where you have a lot of content-matter expertise, how do you keep the language of your workshops friendly for newbies? Do you change the language you use to introduce the activities, depending on who your audience is?

Tienya: We do! We have many different segments in our program base. We have ESOL learners, different age groups that have different needs. We have groups that have learning disabilities and specifically reading disabilities. So we shape our programs based on that. When we're introducing a new technology, we keep that in mind.

For instance, when we think of our audience, when we were doing our computer vision and AR program, we said—and sensing technology—we said to our after school program crowd, we said, “When you walk into a supermarket and the sliding doors open, What do you think that is?” And then I would say to them, “That's sensing technology, computer vision, so let's talk about how we can incorporate that into our project!”

In our library, we have lights that go on and off in the bathroom as you walk in, and so I'll use that as an example: “When you walked into the restroom what happened?” and someone would say, “Oh, the lights came on!” And I said, “Well, *how* did that happen?!” and they'll say, “Oh, it knew when I walked in, because of the motion.” “Okay, so a *motion* sensor!” They have an intimate sense with that technology and that kind of breaks down the barrier when we say, “Okay, you're going to be creating something that uses this technology” so it doesn't feel like it's out of reach. We definitely lower the floor when it comes to new technology by making it more relevant to them.

Lydia: Tienya, I think that is such a wonderful strategy, and I will definitely be putting that in my pocket of facilitation techniques.

Can you talk about how you adjust and respond to each community's needs? Or how do you even decide what to offer in the first place?

Tienya: We crowdsource a lot of our programs. We'll bring the custodian in, we bring in our clerk staff, our youth counselors—anybody that we can squeeze at the table to talk about this program.

And then we go out to our partners—that could be our after school program or the community center that we're working with, and we bring *them* into the conversation. And *then* ...we ask the *kids*.

After we do a program we have a post-it survey—we actually learned this at MIT. We'll ask them about their experience in the program. We'll ask them, you know what type of programs they want to see, and all this is anonymous. They post it on the wall, or the bulletin board, or wherever the survey's taking place. And we get a lot of feedback that way.

I had a slime program that I thought was wonderful! And [*laughs*] the kids seemed like they were engaged, and then we gave the survey, and we learned that that's not what they wanted to do. That's when we started using crowdsourcing to get information from all these different parties to create programs.

When we run programs, we run the same program all week for all the different groups that we have scheduled throughout the week so by the end of the week, we have this pristine product. Let's say we're working with a school that has a lot of kids that have difficulty with reading so we shape the program—going in—based on those needs. Then after getting feedback from the participants, that helps us for the next iteration of the program that's happening on Tuesday, so we incorporate all *that*. We also make sure that we have a conversation with the facilitators from the day before, so that we can incorporate *that*. All that goes into the next iteration of the program.

So we repeat that each day that we go along during that week, so that by the end of the day on Friday, we have this nicely packaged program. So whoever is on Friday—and people fight for Friday—it's an awesome program.

Lydia: Thank you for sharing that anecdote of your customers, perhaps, not enjoying as much in a program that you planned. I think that is always really helpful to hear and validating for other facilitators.

Michelle: Tienya, I hear you talking about how you hear from your customers and your customers at the library to sculpt and shape the future of the

programming you run. Maybe you can turn it around, and each of you could—just as we close out—share some advice for other library professionals. What advice would you share with them as they get started in this domain?

Tienya: I would like to reiterate that, you know, a program can come from anywhere. I have teenagers that come in and say “He-ey! We would like to have you know this type of club.” It's really important for you to create an opportunity for people—or for customers—to make those recommendations. And it's important for it to be anonymous, so that people feel comfortable sharing that freely. I think it's really important to have that channel for program ideas.

Lydia: Along the lines of Tienya's piece of advice—that inspiration for a program can come from anywhere—really make an effort at collaborating with your colleagues, both right in your library network and more broadly. There's so much we can learn from one another to improve our facilitation practice. That's more valuable than any other sole piece of advice we could give. Collaborating and sharing our ideas with one another, is a crucial way to improve our offerings and improve our roles as facilitators.

Michelle: Well, Lydia, that's a great way to end! Today really exemplified that kind of collaboration. It's just such a joy to work through these ideas with the two of you, and I really appreciate the both of you being here today. So thanks so much, Tienya, thanks Lydia, for sharing your insight!

Tienya: It was an honor to be here. Thank you.

Lydia: Thanks, Tienya!

Note: This transcript has been edited slightly from the audio. Some pause words have been deleted for clarity.