

## PLIX Conversation Starter

### Week 1 / Claudia & Avery

**Michelle:** Welcome to our first Plix Conversation Starter! In today's conversation we are joined by two very imaginative and active members of the Plix Community of Practice. They're going to get us started thinking about creative learning and how to facilitate creative learning in libraries. Let's take a listen.

**Avery:** My name is Avery Normandin. I am a member of the Plix team. My role revolves around developing activities for the Plix Community and with the Plix Community. Today I'm delighted that we've invited Claudia Haines to talk over some of the broad themes that Claudia explores in her work and how this intersects with the work that Plix is doing. Because Claudia has been a really thoughtful member of our Community! She's been engaged in these co-design processes, these Community calls. She always contributes remarkable ideas to the things that we're doing. She brings a unique perspective as a librarian from Homer, Alaska. Welcome, Claudia. Why don't you tell us who you are and tell us a little bit about what you do.

**Claudia:** I live and work in Homer, Alaska, which is a rural community of about 5,200 people that sits on the shores of Kachemak Bay. And I've worked with youth and families at the Homer Public Library, the Youth Services Librarian for more than 10 years. And the library really sits at the community's core on land cared for by our Dena'ina, Sugpiaq, and Alutiiq neighbors and their ancestors, and so we really are thankful for that. The library serves not only the population of Homer but another 7,000 people that live in even more remote villages 25 miles or so in all directions, including villages only accessible by small plane and boat across the bay. I also support literacy and learning on a bigger scale, so I facilitate trainings with and for other Librarians across the country. I serve on regional and national committees. I author articles, white papers, and blog posts about literacy and learning, including at my own blog [nevershushed.com](http://nevershushed.com).

**Avery:** Here at the MIT Media Lab, and not only just in the Plix team, we're really big fans of public libraries. We understand the critical roles that libraries play in communities. We understand that these institutions are much more than just books and circulations, but rather community hubs and, of course, as we've just learned a little bit about the library that you work in is definitely a community hub. So I'm wondering if you can touch on this a little bit and describe the role that your library plays in Homer.

**Claudia:** Last year, there was a group of teens that came to visit the library from the local alternative public high school. And one of the teens was kind of hanging back and I said to her, "You know, the cool thing about libraries is that while we're... all the libraries are different in so many ways, there are some commonalities. When you walk into a library, once you learn how they work, you can figure that out at the next one, so whether you're in Homer or you're out in Bristol Bay, there's a little library in the town of Dillingham that works in very much the same way. And it's meant to be comfortable. It's meant to be welcoming and supportive." And this person just kind of had that "aha!" moment. You know, libraries... We often talk about this idea of lifelong learning is really key to our mission, and it really is, whether you're two years old or 92 years old. Libraries—big and small, rural and urban—really try to provide the resources that whole families need and want to learn. Learn to read, learn how to build a house, learn how to grow a garden, learn the most recent City Council decisions, learn how to write an effective resume, right? Sometimes these resources are objects, and some are the experiences and support we as staff provide. Public libraries are really one of the few community spaces, as we all know, where everyone is welcome, and there's no cost of admission, no age requirement, or other restrictions and so on. Many of us are — as library staff — really looking at further removing other barriers and making the wealth of resources and opportunities more welcoming, relevant, and accessible to more families, and I think that fits really nicely with the work of Plix.

**Avery:** I think that's a really special quality about libraries and one of the reasons that we think of it as a great place to have people come and learn and express and explore their interests. I want to touch on the learning side a little bit. So within Plix, the way that we think about designing activities, the way that we think about creative learning, the way that we are framing Librarians as facilitators of creative learning experiences. I'm wondering how you can how you think of Plix as a good match for what your library is doing or for what libraries do in general

**Claudia:** Plix as an idea and, as a community really feeds that kind of lifelong learner side of ourselves. And I say that because, you know, it's building on that idea that there are commonalities that bring us together as library staff, Librarians, whatever title you want to call us. But it allows the space for us to kind of digest the ideas and contribute, based on what resonates or our worldviews, right? Whether that's myself here in Homer or someone in Chicago or Des Moines, Iowa, for example, just to throw that out there. That really intentional design and the content that's being introduced and shared amongst Librarians really mimics what happens in

libraries and I think that's why it's such a good fit. It's allowing that space for creativity, relevant experiences, content: that co-design idea where there's there's a task, where there's a problem, and people are coming together to kind of learn about that task learn about different tools around it and create solutions or ideas or opportunities as a result, and so I think that that really mirrors the experience of many libraries very well.

**Avery:** At PLIX, we engage in this co-design process wherein we work with public Librarians actually co-create activities, and I think that's one of the reasons that this process can be so successful is because of this shared way of thinking.

**Claudia:** The thread is, for me, is similar to the thread for a lot of librarians. We're looking for the way to connect research and what we know about families, youth, and learning and kind of that playful practice that we do day to day, and so that that really guides the parts I play in in both local and and bigger projects. And I think probably talking about how I first got connected to PLIX: I was part of a project called Ready to Code, sponsored by the American Library Association. There were 30 different libraries that were part of this project that were a very strong cohort who met very regularly to talk about the different ways they were supporting computer science and computational thinking in their very different communities, parsing out what was working, what wasn't, thinking about the iterations and the testing. And that kind of led me to PLIX and figuring out how I could integrate some of the ideas and projects that in those kind of early phases of PLIX into what I was doing, creating this culture of "Makers to Mentors" (that's what the initiative was called) kind of introducing these computational thinking ideas from preschool all the way through high school, which is not very supported in a community the size of Homer, right? There's no big tech companies. Up until very recently we had no computer science in our high school. And so I was looking at the library as a way to kind of fill a gap, but also provide entry points all through that continuum so that preschoolers could get those ideas but also high schoolers could get those ideas, because they didn't have access to it. But they were being expected to be able to navigate the world of new media, digital media, social media, all those pieces. That structure both led me to PLIX, but it also was very similar and I found it a great, great environment for me to learn and connect dots, so I could better support my community.

**Avery:** I'm really interested in this idea—to use your own words—of filling the gap and the way that libraries can sort of either act as this, like, nucleus for sparking and interest or serving as that piece of continuity for continuing to learn learn something for which, maybe, a

young learner and older learner doesn't have infrastructure for in other parts of their education. We really love this idea of developing activities and also thinking about ways for people to learn intergenerational and learn with peers, more generally, which could include family members. You are part of some of our different cohorts: You were in the co-design program. You are part of this broader Community of Practice at PLIX.

**Avery:** Within our own network we're trying to foster the spirit of community and dialogue among the Librarians that we work with so that all these ideas that you're experiencing and sharing can also be a point of discussion and reflection and inspiration for other folks in our Community. Underlying a lot of what PLIX does and all these things that Claudia's discussing is this idea of creative learning, that can be best described using something called the 4 Ps. The 4 Ps are projects, peers, passion, and play. People learn best when working on projects, about which they're super passionate, projects that are done in collaboration with peers and all of this taking place in an environment that is playful. By that I mean an environment in which people feel comfortable to take risks or to experiment or to engage with placing themselves into whatever they're learning. Part of the reason that we're launching this course is to engage with this peer element of the 4 Ps so if we can talk about creative learning a little bit Claudia I'm wondering how you think you think about creative learning

**Claudia:** Years ago, before I got introduced to PLIX and I was hosting after school kind of pop-up maker programs we don't we don't have a designated or a dedicated makerspace, and this is pop-up but these kind of programs really have always resonated with youth in my community and families in my community. I started to notice a pattern. Kids were flocking to these programs, but they didn't tolerate much introduction or talking at the beginning and so these were after-school and they were summer programs. I was having these projects that I would introduce with these tools and I could talk for maybe five minutes, and they already got their hands on everything and there, there was no formality to it. I could have gone one way and had everyone sit in chairs or kind of tighten down on some sort of structure but what I did instead was said okay I'm seeing this pattern, and these kids are flocking to these programs, and they're eager to jump in. So what if I reframed the way I thought about this learning experience and actually followed their lead, in some regards? I was still providing expertise and still guiding the experience, but I was acknowledging that they were done with that kind of learning for the day, right? They wanted to get their hands on. They were more than willing to figure it out, come back and ask questions. But they really wanted to guide their own learning and I

did take that opportunity to kind of capitalize that and run with those kind of experiences. But then I figure out: "Oh, someone is actually articulating what this is!" right? That's where it's this research and practice connection. Once I started figuring out that other people were actually writing and talking about this and researching this idea and acknowledging this on a bigger scale, I was really able to kind of use that to kind of better those programs. It was really comforting that what I was seeing was not this unusual experience or that I maybe wasn't doing something right. It was just reframing the way I was thinking about their learning. That's not only the case with young people, but it's the case with older people too, where they don't have to be there! They come to a program or to use the library's other kinds of resources because they need to learn something or they're passionate about something or it's in some way relevant to their life. I think that the play aspect of that is also really key so it's not just that passion, but the play. When we talk about play it's often kindergarten or preschool but if we, as Librarians, start thinking about how middle schoolers or high schoolers or adults like to play, I think we'll see that that's already happening in libraries. How can we, how can we capitalize on that to kind of foster this learning as part of that? How can we use that I think PLIX and creative learning really help us help us do that.

**Avery:** My favorite P, is in fact PLAY. And I think this is because it can be hard and a lot of different topics to see where there are points of experimentation or points for creativity, especially in pure STEM learning experiences. And so, while it does take practice to learn about where these push and pull points are for experimentation or risk taking in STEM learning, that's also one of the most valuable components. You understand, or you're tuned to become accustomed to this ability to take risks or experiment, where you ordinarily can't do it. The other thing that I love that you mentioned is this idea of informality. We think of creative learning as a place that works really well in informal learning spaces as a contrast to other places where learning is taking place that are really rigid where there are determined outcomes. Thinking about how the outcomes of the learners will be as diverse as the interest coming in and everyone will come up with something different. That's really that magic sauce of creative learning experiences.

Another experience with a young person: we were making with paper circuits and we were kind of filling around these designs, and I couldn't get my circuit to work. I was sitting at a table with a bunch of kids kind of fifth/sixth grade. I said to someone, I just said out loud to the table, "Can someone help me figure this out? My circuit's not working." And [laughs] one of the kids said to me, "Is this a trick question, or do you really need help?"

**Avery:** [laughs]

**Claudia:** I think that's this really important part of modeling experimentation or tinkering or play. We, particularly in new media, things are happening and evolving so fast that we can't be the expert on how everything works.

But we can be we can be the expert on supporting these connections, supporting these kinds of learning, and providing these opportunities for young people or older people to provide expertise and to kind of guide their own learning, but the learning of their neighbors

**Avery:** You bring up a great point. This modeling where you don't need to be the expert in the room, but you can model how to ask thoughtful questions or model that it's okay to not have the answer, and seek feedback from peers and have questions and have uncertainty in the creative process. I'm really interested in how creative learning can be or adds synergy, or can be related to this idea of working in a rural setting or rural populations.

**Claudia:** Creative learning allows for the multiple worldviews to be acknowledged and brought in, as different kinds of experts and teachers and learners in that peer learning piece. This idea of projects or passions really fits nicely, because in my community, I see a lot of people learning for specific needs, right? It might be, maybe, a traditional need around survival or subsistence this idea of hunting or gathering food to sustain our families that doesn't have a commercial value. There's a lot of that happening in my area, right? And it's been happening for thousands of years. And so learning to create new technology or how to do something a different way, observing how a system works, big and small, is really key both to survival. But then, we live in a really small community, where we don't have access to a lot of stores or gadgets or, frankly, really excellent broadband, right? We're trying to figure out how to solve problems with the resources that we have and that means drawing on the knowledge of our neighbors or our family. But it also means creatively figuring out how to get things to work or to fix things with the resources that we have on hand, and using them in different ways than maybe they were intended. You see a lot of that in my community.

**Avery:** I think that's sympathetic to this idea that libraries can act as repositories for local expertise or local interests. Libraries don't— Librarians rather—don't need to be the experts because of all of these different community members that know or have these ways of knowing or have the skill sets or practices that they can bring into the library. We try to design our activities in a way, such that any number of these interests, regardless of commercial value or what is determined to be useful,

can inform and be the basis of creating new projects or creating new tools or technologies or helping to answer questions or maybe even just being a way to explore something they're passionate about.

**Claudia:** Really also at least my role as librarian is to find ways to amplify voices that may not be heard or found in the traditional idea of a library. They may not have a book on the shelf, they may not have a website, but how can I elevate that expertise and those voices so that families can access that, right? Youth can access that expertise in new ways to solve problems or just learn out of interest, right? I think that's kind of an important idea going forward in libraries.

**Avery:** Within the communities you work with I think you bring in this great experience of having worked with so many different people, so many different types of communities: I'm curious about this phrase "indigenous ways of knowing". Aside from this emphasis on peer to peer learning, creative learning starts with what you already know, or what you're passionate about so how this idea of starting with what you have, or what ties into this way of indigenous ways of knowing that may be, are prevalent or of interest in your community.

**Claudia:** The Homer Library—and the community of Homer—sits on land that has been cared for by at least three indigenous groups, the Dena'ina, Sugpiaq, and Alutiiq by their ancestors, and by our neighbors, right? We have very strong native communities within the state of Alaska, and this is indigenous land. For a long time, classical science or classical learning has in some ways discredited the traditional ways of knowing. There is so much information and value within these different ways of knowing, these different systems of knowledge, these different worldviews that can work in parallel to this kind of Western way of understanding to solve big problems and to know... to better understand our world. Connecting back to creative learning, if we think about creative learning as a way to bring multiple worldviews, multiple expertise, multiple ways of understanding together, I think we'll all be better off. And I would like to think that libraries are a really good place for that to happen, because there's so much intergenerational use, intergenerational learning, and because it is that community space where really everybody is welcome. How do we increase that access? Increase the expertise that's involved in what we do? How do we amplify these voices and support this sense of wonder and evolution of learning and understanding about the world?

**Avery:** You touch on a lot of interesting points about intergenerational learning, increasing access, and Claudia your work, I think engages this because you recently asked me about co-designing with young people. I'm

curious about why you were interested in this approach and how that idea of co-designing with you, maybe touches onto some of your interests and maybe some of the experiences or activities that PLIX is also developing.

**Claudia:** I've actually in the past few months kind of experimented with a couple projects and a few teens. One was developing a kids book club for third and fourth graders. A young person came to me and asked me if we could do that, and I said "Sure!" So she and I designed that project and it's ongoing—she and I are kind of the hosts of it—but now there are more kids in the book club and we're kind of practicing some of those co-design ideas. And then another couple teens who I've been doing some coding projects with. I am working with them to learn how micro:bits work and then have them help me figure out what might be a good learning experience for other teens. It's been a really good process. It takes more mental space, more energy, and more time, but their learning and their interest and then ultimately the learning and interest of others is really, really great and it's really rewarding. It creates this more democratized idea of the library that they too, maybe don't bring the expertise, always, but they bring the interest and they have something to contribute.

**Avery:** We think about designing facilitating creative learning experiences and when I am in the process of running a workshop or creating a new activity, I think of myself on the outside, whereas I think in this approach that you're doing, Claudia, you're really immersing yourself. You think of yourself as the "peers" part of the 4 Ps and that really contributes to the learning, because in some way helps to eliminate the boundary. There's maybe an adult in the room, that is, on equal footing, like you're all on the same horizontal axis in terms of knowledge and approaching the question in the same way. I think it can be really interesting to hear about things that are in action and maybe some of the insights that you're getting if there are ways that you're thinking about designing around that or designing for that.

**Claudia:** Recently there was a story on our local public radio about a local manufacturer that makes clothing. It makes these what they called brailer bags, which are what commercial fishermen use to get salmon from a fish-hold in a boat, craned, to a dock where the fish then get processed. They've been making these brailer bags forever. The story talks about how some folks at NASA heard about these bags, saw them and action, and asked them to make some for some testing. This bag that they eventually developed is probably going to be part of this project going to Mars. I started thinking about that, and then I was thinking about a PLIX project around Space Food. I was thinking, that would be interesting for those two to connect and it would also be interesting to find a

way to provide the materials for kids to make at home—multiple generations, adults different age youth—how do I keep them connected with the library and others? I made these to-go kits that provided an assortment of materials that PLIX suggested and I put prompts. I connected people to— this was right after the story aired on radio. Then I created this virtual space that linked families to different resources that they might want to make, but also an opportunity to share their projects with the library and each other. It was just testing out different ways to support connection, to provide more making opportunities. And, and this idea of different kinds of learning and connect to what they were hearing on the radio about a local business, so it was kind of interesting.

**Avery:** Thinking about from the start, how people can be sharing or reflecting on their work— I think that's a really interesting point.

**Claudia:** I think it's a good reflection on how a lot of people, young and old, use the library for learning. They might hear something on the radio and say oh I'm really interested in that where can I learn more. And so they're walking into the library—whether it's the website or the physical space with that idea—and so I think, for me, that was a really good experience to practice and model so that I could kind of better support families that way.

**Avery:** What we have to remember is you don't have to be an expert necessarily in all of these different elements and thinking through the process, but even just trying to model these ideas or values is a great way to sort of get started with thinking about creative learning.

**Michelle:** Well, thank you both I think this is a great way to kick off our time learning about how to facilitate creative learning from two key members of our Community. Thank you, Claudia for taking the time to talk with us, and thank you, Avery, for being part of it, too.

**Avery:** Thanks, Claudia.

**Claudia:** Thank you, Avery! Thanks, Michelle. It was great to be able to reflect.

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