

Evaluation Report 2020-21

Youth Media Still Matters

Elevating the Voices and Identities of Young People in Disruptive Times



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These last two years have called our attention to the question of what truly matters. Individually, collectively, as a society and as organizations: We have heard, demanded and reflected on what matters most. This report recontextualizes Spy Hop's commitment to youth media through this lens. How have our priorities shifted, what has changed in our valuation of importance and what is most essential and worthy of our attention during a global pandemic?

Our research for this biannual 2020-21 evaluation report began in spring 2020, at the precise time that COVID-19 stay-at-home policies were unfolding across the country. As researchers, we soon realized that we would be challenged to employ previously used data collection strategies that relied on in-person methodologies, such as site visits and observations. So, we asked ourselves: What mattered most? The answer was clear: We needed to hear directly from the voices, stories and experiences of the people being impacted at Spy Hop—the students, staff and mentors.

A large swath of the data that led to the findings in this report came from focus groups and interviews conducted over Zoom. Because so many organizations had closed down, we had unprecedented access to youth and mentors, logging 10-plus hours of focus groups and interviews with students, four hours of observation of online events and 34 hours of interviews with mentors and community partners.

We are immensely grateful to Spy Hop's staff, mentors and extended community for sharing their experiences and perspectives with us over this two-year period. Our access to young people would not have been possible without the direct coordination of Spy Hop staff and mentors.

We want to express admiration and gratitude to the leadership and staff of Spy Hop for always heeding our incessant requests, sharing delightful anecdotes, being open and making our collaboration both fun and fulfilling. Most of all, we want to offer our deep appreciation for Spy Hop students who opened up to us and allowed themselves to be vulnerable, honest and generous as they shared their experiences.

We hope this report captures a faithful picture of their journey toward attaining creative confidence, authentic identity and public voice.

—The Convergence Design Lab Evaluation Team

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Convergence Design Lab (CDL) is an applied research center and learning design studio based in Chicago. CDL partners with educational institutions, networks and social impact enterprises to help them better understand the systems, relationships and components that allow programs to achieve and scale impact. CDL specializes in researching and designing participatory learning experiences that use digital media, civic spaces, online platforms and emerging technologies to involve learners in real-world engagement, play and collaborative design.

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FOREWORD



On behalf of Spy Hop's staff, Board of Directors, and the young people we serve, I am excited to present Spy Hop's 2020-2021 Evaluation Report, *Youth Media Still Matters: Elevating the Voices and Identities of Young People in Disruptive Times*, authored by Convergence Design Lab (CDL). Spy Hop has been evaluating the impact of its programs on youth learning and growing since 2004. We are grateful for the partnership we have had with CDL since 2017 and appreciate their level of deep engagement, analysis and reflection on our work. It enables us to deepen our own knowledge and draw upon their findings and recommendations for program design and strategic planning.

It is indisputable that over the past two years, our youth have endured emotional, cultural, and educational disruption, not experienced by our country's young people in decades. Like many youth development organizations, Spy Hop worked to respond to the needs of our students as best we could. Yet we too experienced our own disruption over that period of time. Due to the pandemic and resulting shut-down, we transferred as many of our programs online as possible. We also finished construction on a new 22,000 square foot media arts center and moved our entire operation to our new facility in September 2020. In June of 2021, our entire staff of 26 resumed in-person work schedules and we opened our doors for in-person programming for the first time in over a year.

What I am most proud of, and what you will read in this report, is by investing in full time mentor staff, facilities and equipment, and strong administrative and community support as key levers of change, the Spy Hop Way has held up and has enabled us (both youth and adults) to transcend the hardships and persevere through these tough times.

This report's overarching and salient theme - that youth media still matters - not only bolsters our commitment to this work, but it also provides us with a solid foundation that allows us to double-down on the Spy Hop Way and continue to provide the high impact arts experiences that we have been providing for over 20 years.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kasandra VerBruggen". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Kasandra VerBruggen
Executive Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When schools, colleges and youth organizations shut down en masse in March 2020 in response to the emerging pandemic, none of us had any idea what lay ahead. Amid all the uncertainty, one thing quickly became clear: With opportunities to meet in person sharply curtailed, teens and young adults needed new outlets to connect, collaborate and find their creative voice more than ever.

In pivoting online with purpose and presence during the pandemic, Spy Hop mentors and students applied the same creative spirit they routinely demonstrate in the media arts to figuring out how to sustain programming during COVID.

Using Zoom and other digital platforms, mentors delivered instruction remotely and students collaborated virtually on projects and performances. While the experience wasn't always the same, Spy Hop programming was able to reach a larger group of students who were no longer limited from participating by their geography.

During this tumultuous period, students still learned valuable skills not only in media arts creation but in future-ready competencies such as collaborative production, planning for success and self-management. Perhaps most importantly, students made critical connections with their peers and with caring adults at a time when the pandemic was taking a huge toll on everyone's social-emotional well-being.

Through surveys, interviews and focus groups with Spy Hop mentors and students, we have assembled a comprehensive picture of the outcomes from Spy Hop programming in 2020 and 2021. In the course of our evaluation, we have found that Spy Hop continues to play an invaluable role in youth development and media skills.

In particular, we observed that Spy Hop youth develop creative identity and agency by engaging in interest-driven, authentic learning experiences. In creating and producing digital media, they develop confidence in their own voice and value. By engaging in collaborative production experiences guided by professional artist-mentors, they learn responsibility and develop a sense of community.

While Spy Hop programming continues to have indelible and far-reaching effects on youth participants in Utah and beyond, we believe the organization can deepen its impact even further by following a few suggestions. These include supporting youth employment opportunities beyond high school, broadening access to Spy Hop for students with fewer resources and being more intentional about mentor development.



KEY FINDINGS

FINDINGS

- 1** Spy Hop youth develop creative identity and agency by engaging in deep, interest-driven learning experiences that authentically mirror real-world challenges.
- 2** Through the process of media production, Spy Hop youth develop confidence in their own voice and the value they can contribute to society.
- 3** By engaging in collaborative production experiences guided by professional artist-mentors, youth learn to take responsibility as members of a creative community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Formalize relationships, engage alumni and design systems to support young adult employment and entrepreneurship opportunities beyond high school.
- 2** Broaden access to Spy Hop for students who are less resourced—and build stronger connections to BIPOC youth and their communities.
- 3** Build a stronger culture of reflective practice and collaborative learning among mentors.





ABOUT SPY HOP

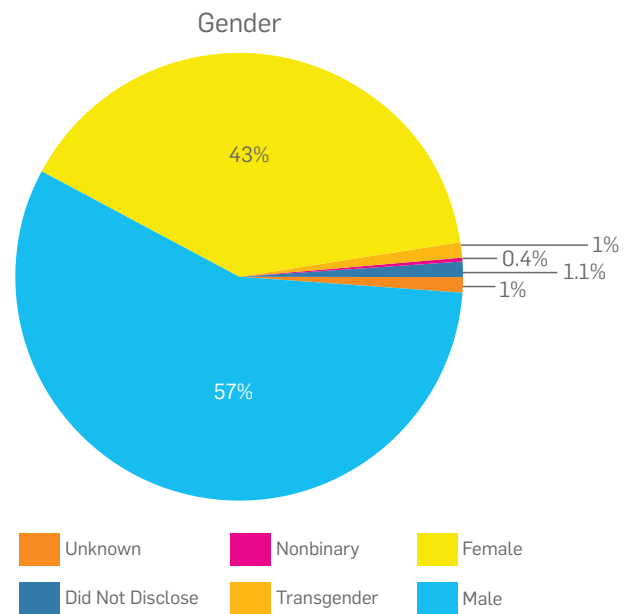
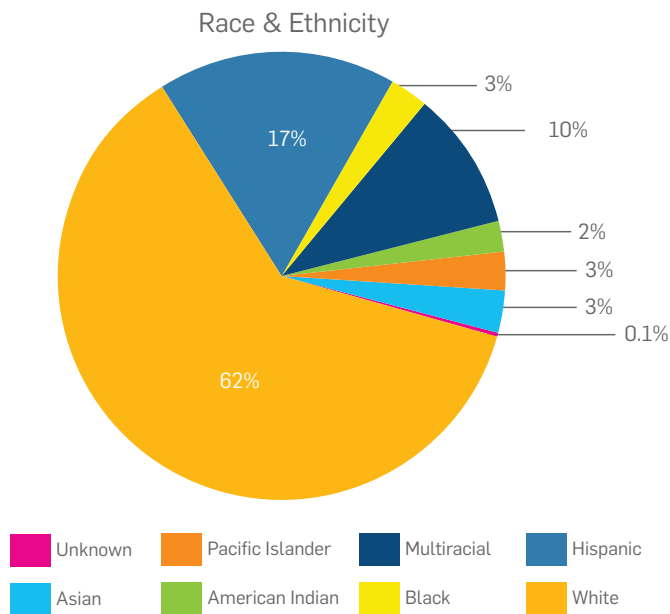
Spy Hop's mission is to mentor young people in the media arts to help them find their voice, tell their stories, and be empowered to affect positive change in their lives, their communities, and the world. Since its inception in 1999, Spy Hop has mentored more than 90,000 young people in the media arts as a vehicle for artistic expression, self-discovery, critical thinking, and skilled participation. Spy Hop currently offers scaffolded programming (introductory to advanced) in film, audio, music, and design to young people ages 9-19 across the state of Utah.

Spy Hop's downtown facility, the Kahlert Youth Media Arts Center, is located in the Central Ninth District in Salt Lake City, Utah, and serves as the organization's hub, allowing Spy Hop to offer its high-quality programming to young people across the Wasatch Front. Its expansive facility also allows the organization to scale its capacity to provide programming across the state of Utah through community partnerships, reaching students in rural communities.

Spy Hop has grown from its humble beginnings and is recognized as one of the largest and most diverse youth media organizations in the United States. This growth and success are the results of Spy Hop's ability to deliver an engaging portfolio of programming that is responsive and able to adapt to meet the complex needs of young people today.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Below is a two-year snapshot (2019-2021) of the demographics of Spy Hop students. During this timeframe, Spy Hop served a total of 2,229 students who participated in an in-school, afterschool, youth-in-care or summer camp program across the state of Utah. The data reflects both online and in-person programming.



SPY HOP PROGRAM GOALS

- **TO PROVIDE** a safe, engaging and youth-powered learning environment
- **TO CULTIVATE** creativity and artistic expression through professional training in the media arts
- **TO ENACT** learning experiences that help youth develop into media-critical participants engaged in civic life
- **TO MENTOR** youth in building meaningful relationships and cross-cultural connections across diverse communities
- **TO PREPARE** youth with the future-ready skills needed to pursue productive college and career pathways
- **TO AMPLIFY** youth stories and voices so audiences can gain new knowledge and more informed perspectives

PROGRAM GOALS FIDELITY MATRIX

This chart below indicates where we found fidelity between Spy Hop's stated program goals and the learning outcomes identified in this report. Overall, we found that Spy Hop excels most strongly at providing a youth-powered learning environment and preparing youth with future-ready skills.

PROGRAM GOALS	FINDING 1	FINDING 2	FINDING 3
	At Spy Hop, youth develop creative identity and agency by engaging in deep, interest-driven learning experiences that authentically mirror real-world challenges.	Through the process of media production, Spy Hop youth develop confidence in their own voice and the value they can contribute to society.	By engaging in collaborative production experiences guided by professional artist-mentors, youth learn to take responsibility as members of a creative community.
Provide youth-powered learning environment	●	●	●
Cultivate creativity and artistic expression	●		
*Develop media-critical participants engaged in civic life			
Build meaningful relationships and cross-cultural connections		●	●
Prepare youth with future-ready skills	●	●	●
Amplify youth stories and voices to inform audiences	●	●	

ABOUT THIS EVALUATION REPORT



Since 2017, Convergence Design Lab has served as the external independent evaluator for Spy Hop's youth media programs. This report is the third biannual evaluation report we have produced on Spy Hop's programs since 2017-18. Each report builds upon prior knowledge and evidence gathered from subsequent periods of study. The overall purpose of this evaluation is to better understand the outcomes and impact of Spy Hop programs on youth, communities and audiences. Using Spy Hop's logic model and its program goals as a guide, we seek to explore how Spy Hop programs and practices...

- Impact youth capacities and competencies on the proximal, intermediate and distal levels.
- Impact the local/global communities and audiences that interface with Spy Hop youth programs.

FOCUS OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

This evaluation reports on the impact of Spy Hop's after-school classes held at the Kahlert Youth Media Arts Center, as well as Sending Messages, a podcast program provided for youth within Utah's juvenile justice system.

While we recognize that Spy Hop operates in many contexts and faces unique challenges and opportunities specific to the populations it serves, we also posit that the findings described in this report can be generalized across Spy Hop's other programs.

These programs all share similar teaching artists, resources, pedagogies and approaches. Most importantly, they all adhere to The Spy Hop Way, a methodology for achieving deep levels of impact on youth and the audiences they serve—and the foregrounding of youth voices is a consistent area of focus across all Spy Hop programming.

“ we believe that young people are the best authorities on their own experiences ”

EVALUATION PROCESS AND QUESTIONS

Convergence Design Lab used a mixed-methods approach that included both qualitative and quantitative measures to help us gain a deeper understanding of what specific components of Spy Hop's model drive the greatest gains and to identify areas for growth.

In addition to this summative evaluation, we engaged with Spy Hop in various forms of process evaluation. We aimed to ensure that data collected in the moment could be shared, reflected upon and used expeditiously to drive decisions around program change. We provided this feedback in the form of analytic memos, conference calls, presentation slide decks and workshops.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As Spy Hop's evaluators, these two research questions guided our inquiry over a two-year time frame from 2020 through 2021:

How have youth experienced Spy Hop differently as a result of the disruptions caused by the COVID pandemic?

What impact does Spy Hop have on the lives of young people—and how might its program design and implementation better align with its intended impact?

ANALYSIS

Once we collected data, we synthesized the evidence using a process inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Through open coding, we aimed to notice the perspectives and concepts that repeated themselves. We then grouped those into themes, drawing upon inductive reasoning. Consistent with qualitative methods, our data collection used multiple sources in order to achieve triangulation (Creswell, 2008; Yin, 2013). These multiple sources of data allowed us to establish chains of evidence that supported our findings and confirmed the observed outcomes and impacts as predictable and consistent rather than outlying incidents.

In analyzing the data, we have sought to understand how Spy Hop's after-school programming affects not just youth, but also their local and global communities, taking into consideration best practices in youth development (Barron et al., 2014; Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2005) and education (Mehta, J. & Fine, S., 2015).

Our approach to data collection and analysis draws upon subjectivist theories of research, with a particular emphasis on standpoint theory, which asserts that meaning is constructed in part through the social positions we hold in relationship to the object of inquiry.¹ In short, **we believe that young people are the best authorities on their own experiences.**

At the same time, we also considered quantitative data from Spy Hop's internal assessments, as well as robust and nationally normed social-emotional learning data from a third-party research body, Hello Insight. (See complete findings from Hello Insight in Appendix B.)

¹www.britannica.com/topic/standpoint-theory

INTERPRETATION

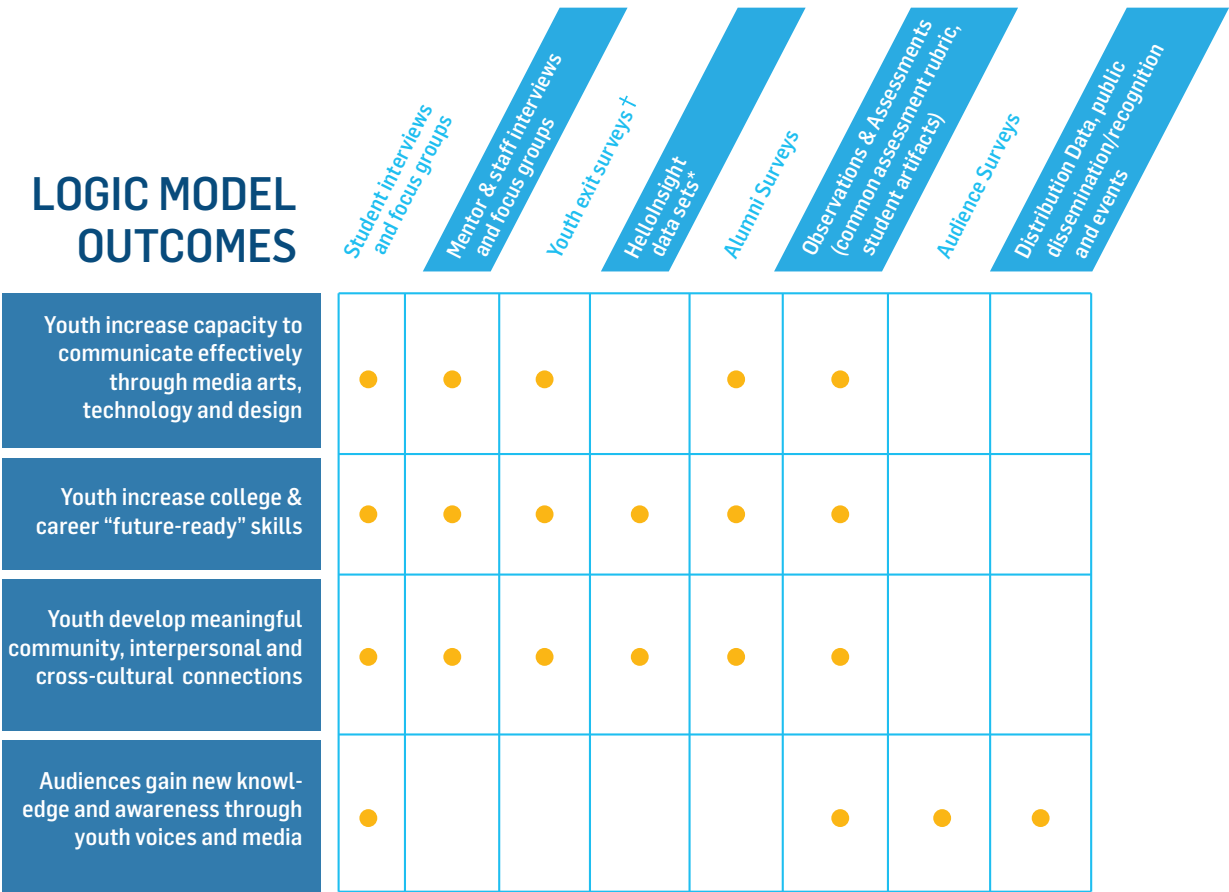
Our final step was to interpret the themes extracted from the previous stages within the context of established theories centered on social-emotional learning, non-cognitive skills, media arts competencies, digital literacies and connected learning theory. This process allowed us to gain insights into the intersections and gaps that exist between Spy Hop's core programs and its proximal, intermediate and distal goals as outlined in its logic model.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In this year's report, owing in part to the reduced capacity for in-person programming and related data collection methods such as surveys, rubrics and observation, we leaned more heavily than past years on first-person narrative data from interviews and focus groups.

This robust set of qualitative data draws on **nearly 50 hours of conversation with Spy Hop's most directly-impacted stakeholders: its students and staff.** We believe this shift allowed us to understand in a more nuanced way how students and staff experienced Spy Hop programming and the meaning they made from that experience.

This chart demonstrates the chains of evidence used to develop the findings in this report:



* Denotes measurement via Hello Insight SEL framework
† Denotes measurement via Spy Hop competency framework

EVALUATION PROCESS AND QUESTIONS

From mentors:

- Competency-based assessments using common scoring rubrics*
- Interviews with individual mentors (18 hours)
- Mentor workshops and assessment design sessions (6 hours)
- Focus groups conducted with mentors in after-school programs (3 hours)
- Focus groups and workshops with mentors in Youth in Care Programs (8 hours)

From youth:

- Focus groups (9 hours)
- Exit surveys of youth regarding their program experience
- Interviews with individual youth (2 hours)
- Youth media production artifacts (15+ works)
- Pre and post youth surveys measuring growth in social-emotional learning (Hello Insight)

From audiences and community members:

- Critiques of youth portfolios by professional media artists
- Audience surveys following public screening of youth media productions
- Survey reviews of Spy Hop alumni (2017-18)
- Observations of online events

(*Spy Hop's common scoring rubric is used by mentors to assess each individual student's performance across seven measures. See Appendix A)

Pre and post survey data on social-emotional capacities

Since 2019, Spy Hop has administered surveys from Hello Insight. These pre and post tools measure key social-emotional learning (SEL) capacities that have been well-researched and shown to be developmentally appropriate for young people. These capacities are proven to contribute to longer-term gains such as fewer negative behaviors and better academic performance. Hello Insight tools also examine the degree to which young people have experienced promising practices that have been shown to promote growth in these capacities.

Hello Insight data cited in this report was collected via statistically validated surveys from one or more Hello Insight tools. Young people take these surveys at the beginning and end of their participation in a program. Throughout each year, Spy Hop listens to youth through these surveys so the organization can better learn how young people are growing and which experiences are most beneficial to their success. Mentors draw upon the Hello Insight reports on their classes so they are well-equipped to tailor program activities and strategies to meet the needs of their students.

The Hello Insight Social and Emotional Learning (HI SEL) assessment system is based on the following research-based theory of change: If we ensure that all young people have caring adults (social capital) and high-quality programs that provide research-based positive youth development experiences, they will develop SEL skills proven to help them thrive, including academic success, college readiness, career and workforce readiness and civic engagement—as well as long-term health and well-being.



THE

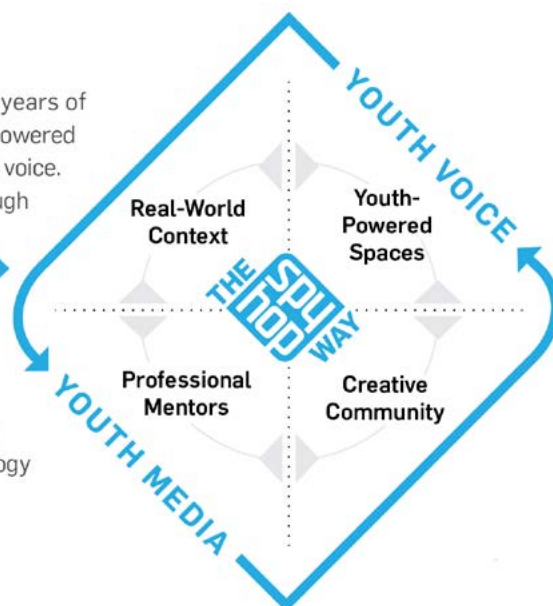
SPY HOP WAY

A THEORY OF CHANGE

Spy Hop delivers a consistent set of practices, values and resources that work together to elevate youth voices through youth media. As a theory of action, the following four components have come to be known as **The Spy Hop Way**. Survey data on youth experiences and perspectives shows strong evidence that these components are achieved across multiple indicators.

The evidence gathered over our multiple years of evaluation shows that Spy Hop's model is powered by quality youth media and authentic youth voice. These values are strongly reinforced through four intersecting components:

These four components work together to consistently generate significant gains in youth learning and development and keep Spy Hop's audiences and students coming back for more. Our insight—this is the ecology of the Spy Hop Way.



YOUTH-POWERED SPACES

Safe, inclusive learning environments foster youth ownership and belonging.

In previous reports, we have defined the first element, Youth-Powered Spaces, largely around the physical and spatial dimensions of Spy Hop's learning environment. We noted that a youth-powered space was one where youth were entrusted to use the same cutting-edge equipment and technologies that media arts professionals use.

In 2020-21, however, we saw that youth-powered spaces took on a whole new dimension, one that did not hinge on professionally equipped labs and studios. Rather, mentors expanded their toolbox to build safe, collaborative and inclusive online spaces, what we reframe later in this report as a "digital third space." Still 93% of students report that they had access to state-of-the art technologies and facilities in 2021 (Spy Hop class exit survey, 2021).

Key Indicators

Program satisfaction

- 99% of youth surveyed indicated satisfaction with the Spy Hop program and would recommend Spy Hop to a friend (Hello Insight data, 2020-21).

Youth ownership

- 86% of youth believe that Spy Hop creates opportunities for them to make choices and have a voice in the world (Hello Insight data, 2021).
- 96% share their thoughts and opinions and believe their ideas are valued (Hello Insight data, 2020-21).

Sense of belonging

- 100% of post-test respondents reported feeling safe and supported (Hello Insight data, 2021).
- 99% of participants said Spy Hop and its mentors make them feel

PROFESSIONAL MENTORS

Experienced artists deliver training in media arts and literacy grounded in best practices for youth development.

Spy Hop mentors are professional digital artists and youth learning specialists who model how to make transformative media. They average eight to 11 years of industry experience, have worked professionally in the industry of their discipline and have participated in professional training sessions at Spy Hop to learn more about youth development and media arts education. They are also creative and open-minded individuals who are uniquely positioned to understand and encourage the wide range of students who find their way to Spy Hop.

“I struggled in high school a lot. If you look around the Spy Hop staff, I think that a lot of the mentors probably also struggled with power dynamics and issues like that. And I think those are the types of [people] who make the best mentors.” — Liz Schulte, Spy Hop Mentor

Additionally, mentors are often Spy Hop alums who come to the organization already prepped in the “Spy Hop Way.” Spy Hop mentors use developmentally appropriate, research-based best practices in educating youth in an out-of-school context. They include a focus on relationship building and fostering personal connections; providing support in the moment as needed, while giving youth the space to figure things out for themselves; and cultivating students’ voice and passion.

KEY INDICATORS

Mentors are professional artists

- 99% of students report that their mentors are experts in the discipline they teach and challenge students to do their best work (Spy Hop class exit survey, 2021).

Mentors build social capital

- 24% of youth agreed that over the course of their Spy Hop class, they increased the number of supportive adults in their lives—adults who expected them to do their best and believed that they would succeed. (Hello Insight data, 2021).

CREATIVE COMMUNITY

A culture of collaborative media production offers the opportunity to cultivate the habits, mindsets and confidence that inspire creative risk-taking and the pursuit of mastery.

Spy Hop’s positive “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) cultivates a discipline-driven learning culture centered on developing skills and mastery in professional media arts practice using a professional set of tasks, tools, materials and products. These authentic tasks and experiences expose youth to the kinds of challenges they will encounter in actual professional settings. Reflecting the community-of-practice approach, learners at Spy Hop are treated as fully capable members. They have opportunities for leadership and feel supported and respected by mentors and other professionals. Learning experiences focus on youth-led interests, and students work collaboratively across all core classes.

Experimentation, risk-taking and personal media-making approaches are not only encouraged but expected. While Spy Hop fosters a safe-to-fail environment, media-making standards are high. Youth are expected to learn their craft and work within the domain of their chosen discipline. The Spy Hop Way also advances a code of conduct that stresses authentic voice, creativity and the need to use one’s voice responsibly.

Key Indicators

Youth feel supported as artists

- 100% of students believe that Spy Hop mentors care about them, their interests and their work (Spy Hop class exit survey, 2021).
- 88% have had opportunities to meet and connect with new people working in their chosen medium (Hello Insight data, 2021).

Youth interest in media arts has expanded

- 88% of participating youth report being encouraged to take a risk and try something new, even when it seems difficult to do so (Hello Insight data, 2021).
- 87% report experiencing opportunities to try new things they have never done before (Hello Insight data, 2021).

Youth feel challenged to grow

- 83% of participants say they learned about one another, both their similarities and their differences (Hello Insight data, 2021).
- 99% said mentors frequently reminded them that Spy Hop believed in them and their ability to succeed (Hello Insight data, 2021).

REAL-WORLD CONTEXT

Youth participate in a real-world process of creating professional-quality media projects that connect them to public venues and audiences.

The Spy Hop Way connects youth with opportunities to share their public voices and perspectives. Dedicated partners, organizations and volunteers support youth in the completion of projects and give them a platform to promote their work. In the process, youth participants learn important skills that go well beyond media creation, such as communication, collaboration, goal setting, problem solving and critical thinking.

Spy Hop enlists the support of dozens of businesses, community organizations and civic groups in a variety of capacities. For instance, more than two dozen artists and industry professionals serve as professional reviewers who give critical feedback to Spy Hop youth at the conclusion of their Apprenticeship workshops. This feedback is shared on the spot and in written form. Businesses and organizations also serve as clients for youth-produced works such as videos and graphics.

Giving youth participants an authentic audience for their work helps them learn valuable skills, such as how to interact with clients and listen to their needs—as well as how to produce work for a specific audience and an intended purpose.

KEY INDICATORS

Real-world skills

- 95% believe the class they completed helped them feel more prepared for future work opportunities in the field of media (Spy Hop class exit survey, 2021).
- 85% believe the class made them think more critically about media and how it is made (Spy Hop class exit survey, 2021).
- 92% indicated that their Spy Hop experience made them more interested in going to college to further their skills in media (Spy Hop class exit survey, 2021).

Youth-powered spaces, professional mentors, creative community and real-world context. That is The Spy Hop Way.



THE SPY HOP WAY HOLDS UP

In the last biannual report, “The Work Speaks for Itself: 2018-2019,” we reported on a two-year time period during which there was no pandemic. All of Spy Hop’s classes were held in person and on-site. In fact, Spy Hop’s board and leadership were quite busy working double time on a capital campaign to secure funding for a new and permanent home, a multimillion-dollar community media arts center that could serve as a vibrant youth cultural and learning center for decades to come.

At the same time Spy Hop was vigorously planning for its future and strengthening its infrastructure, it was also expanding programs to reach more vulnerable youth populations across the state, including rural, incarcerated, foster care and indigenous youth. In early 2020, Spy Hop was rapidly maturing into a geo-localized hub and community space, aiming to serve as a physical manifestation for youth voice, culture and learning in the state of Utah.

Then in March 2020, COVID-19 hit. Each of the core components of Spy Hop’s signature formula, The Spy Hop Way, was disrupted. Total system failure, it seemed. Until ... not. This description by a Spy Hop student provides a window into the experience on the ground:

“*It’s a lot. The protests, the Black Lives Matter movement, the pandemic and everybody being at home. And then also just the frustration that’s coming with everything, and how everybody’s sort of agitated. But then also, it’s a lot of unknown. We don’t know what’s happening. We don’t even know if [school is] happening for sure, which is supposed to start in a month. But we also don’t have any expectations. And I think that’s causing a lot of anxiety and stress.*”

— Reel Stories 2020 student

While hundreds of other youth development organizations across the nation suspended their programs during the pandemic, Spy Hop managed to buck up, knuckle down, perspire, innovate, empathize, improvise and—ultimately—show up for youth.

Amidst the backdrop of unprecedented disruption, social isolation, trauma and uncertainty about the future, does Spy Hop’s purpose—its commitment to youth media and voice—still matter?

What we learned, as conveyed in this report, is that not only does youth media still matter — but it matters now more than ever.

Spy Hop Logic Model for Youth Programs

II. LOGIC MODEL

DRAWING ON THE SPY HOP WAY	SPY HOP VALUES	IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THESE OUTCOMES	
		Proximal	Intermediate
Youth-powered spaces	FORMAL YOUTH PROGRAMS in MEDIA ARTS EDUCATION Site-based, community-based and statewide programs in media arts	YOUTH WILL: Communicate effectively through media arts, technology and design	ALUMS WILL: Attain career roles in media, communication, design and innovation
Professional mentors		Acquire college & career “future-ready” skills Develop community, interpersonal and cross-cultural connections	Lead productive lives and participate in democratic life as informed, media aware and engaged citizens
Creative community	AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNITY OUTREACH	AUDIENCES WILL: Gain new knowledge and awareness through youth voices and media projects	YOUTH MEDIA WILL: Communicate human stories that empower and transform communities
Real-world context			
AS A RESULT, SPY HOP GENERATES ENDURING IMPACT BY FOSTERING:			
A MORE CREATIVE AND VIBRANT WORKFORCE A MORE ROBUST AND INCLUSIVE CIVIC SOCIETY A VIBRANT MEDIA AND ARTS LANDSCAPE			



PERSEVERING IN A PANDEMIC

How Spy Hop Showed Up for Youth

Nearly two years ago, in spring 2020, Convergence Design Lab published a report in real time on Spy Hop's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. "We Are Spy Hop: Showing Up During COVID-19" tells the story of "how one youth media organization persisted in the face of an earthquake, a pandemic and a broken microphone."

That was only the first chapter. This 2020-21 biannual evaluation report builds on those findings and extends them through fall 2021, a period of time that seems—for many—to embody the notion that "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

But for Spy Hop, much has changed. In this section, we review our core findings from the "Showing Up" report and contextualize them in the broader narrative of how Spy Hop has continued to adapt to shifting contexts and an increasingly uncertain future.





LOOKING BACK ON 2020

In a singular way, during a time in which many youth-serving organizations closed their doors or threw up their hands in exasperation, Spy Hop flourished. How did this occur? First, and perhaps most importantly, Spy Hop was able to lean into its signature “Spy Hop Way” to invent authentic, youth-driven responses to the pandemic.

With the development of the coronavirus pandemic and stay-at-home mandates, Spy Hop quickly adapted its programming to ensure that students could stay connected and engage with a continuation of services via online programming. Students participated in virtual Zoom and Google Hangouts meetings with Spy Hop mentors and peers from the safety of their homes. When students began making and working from home, Spy Hop responded by lending out computers, cameras, and other gear to students, so they could successfully complete their projects.

DIGITAL ‘THIRD SPACES’

Rethinking ‘Youth Powered Space’

In our 2020 report, we described how Spy Hop relied on its creative community, its cadre of professional mentors, and its real-world contexts to meet the evolving needs of youth. The one ingredient of the “Spy Hop Way” that felt lacking was “youth-powered spaces.” Working without this key ingredient “just doesn’t feel the same,” veteran mentor Adam Sherlock told us. We agreed: Working without access to “the key ingredient of space” was, we believed, a significant obstacle for Spy Hop during this time.

‘ART THINGS ARE HERE’

“I think that they did really well,” a student told us in 2021, when we inquired about her experience with Spy Hop during the COVID pandemic. “I think that they did all they could. I personally prefer it in person, because my brain likes to be in a space ... that is meant for the [task]. You know, like it’s really hard for me to do my homework at home, really hard for me to do specific things that aren’t ‘home’ things at home. But art things are here. **So you sit here and you do art, and that’s what the place is for. I really like having the space. I really like being here.**”

This student is describing something that researchers call a “third place.” This theory suggests that societies depend on so-called “third places” (named for their separateness from home and work/school, places one and two) as informal gathering spots in which social capital can be built.² There are several hallmarks of a third place, according to social theorist Ray Oldenburg: It must be “neutral ground” (e.g., marked by voluntary participation), socially equalizing, accommodating, frequented by regulars, playful and possess feelings of warmth and belonging.

Oldenburg is talking about physical places: barbershops, cafes, churches and yes, by implication—media production centers like Spy Hop. His theory, however, is a social one. It refers less to the character of the place itself and more to the types of dynamics and interactions it fosters. Literacy researcher Kris Gutiérrez has built on this concept to define a broader concept of “third spaces” (substituting *space* for *place*), which allows for the consideration of “third place” culture in non-physical settings. Third spaces can be understood as any setting in which youth are able to blend their home and school cultures, and are often seen as transformative spaces in which traditional hierarchies (e.g., teacher-student) become destabilized.³

In retrospect, we realized that although Spy Hop lost access to its physical space, the concept of youth-powered spaces persisted. While students were not able to visit Spy Hop's physical space during this time, mentors were nonetheless able to create a sort of “digital third space,” which offered a unique and much-needed reprieve for young people who found themselves suddenly cut off from many of their familiar social connections.

BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE SPACE ACROSS DISTANCES

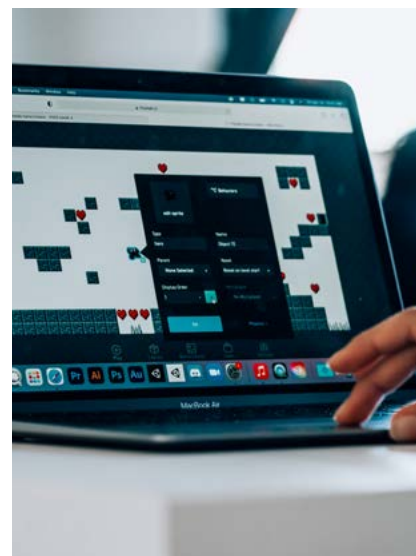
“It's kind of a gathering place,” one student remarked of Spy Hop's virtual Beatmaking class in 2020, “where everyone can get along with the same interests and just bounce ideas back and forth. It's literally a collaborative space, like there's actually a tab in the Discord channel so artists can go in and collaborate on a track. You can create an entire song with one of your classmates. And I think that's personally really cool.”

For this student, Beatmaking was “more than just a class”; it was a digital third space. Notably, participants in the online Beatmaking class included young people who never would have been able to participate otherwise, including teens from Kentucky, Mexico, Wyoming and rural Utah.

Another student told us that he actually appreciated “the opportunity to make his own music video,” as the shift from in-person to online necessitated more individualized learning. “But ... some things wouldn't work, and it would make it really hard. So the online aspect kind of made it worse for me.”

Gabby Huggins, a longtime former mentor and alumnus who taught filmmaking in Spy Hop's community programs, told us about the reaction of a student from rural Utah to a documentary another student made about drag history and LGBTQ+ issues. “I've had students in Voices of the West literally say things like, ‘Oh, there are no gay people in Blanding,’ and I'm like, ‘I don't think you know that.’” For Huggins, it's about “cross pollinating” across locations: She reminded us that her students from urban Salt Lake have plenty to learn from more rural communities as well.

As we'll see, despite its many challenges, Spy Hop's digital spaces became a lifeline for many students as they coped with the compounding challenges of the pandemic and attendant social upheavals of 2020.



“It's kind of a gathering place, where everyone can get along with the same interests and just bounce ideas back and forth.” - Spy Hop Student

² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_place

³ www.academia.edu/657873/Developing_a_Sociocritical_Literacy_In_the_Third_Space

RESPONDING IN REAL TIME

Another finding from our 2020 report was that the creative dispositions of Spy Hop staff and mentors allowed for a flexibility of practice to meet the real, emergent needs of youth in a time of crisis.

“Digging deeper,” we wrote, “it became clear that pivoting was just one of many skills and dispositions” that Spy Hop harnessed, alongside “flexibility, authenticity, emotional availability and willingness to forge ahead without concrete answers.”

Practically speaking, this looked like inventing new instructional practices—as well as trusting the autonomy of youth to self-manage their own learning (see *“Spotlight: Feeling Heard”*). “They have to look for it themselves a little bit more,” according to Pepe Manzo, a mentor. For mentors like Liz Schulte, online learning even unlocked some new opportunities for more autonomy and focused attention (see *“Spotlight: Power Up”*).

A CREATIVE OUTLET

Quickly pivoting to meet newly emerging youth needs also meant responding in real time to the persistent feelings of loneliness, isolation and loss brought on by the pandemic. An October 2021 statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics describes “soaring rates of mental health challenges among children, adolescents and their families over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating the situation that existed prior.”⁴

One student we spoke with from the Sending Messages program talked about how the creative work he produced with his Spy Hop mentor was a lifeline for his mental health:

“*I just feel like he gave us an outlet to write a letter or just write a song to, like, depression, past drug use, some anxiety, all of that stuff. So I just think that was really cool. Kind of like to give us kids an outlet because in Residential, you don't get a lot of outlets in here. And so I feel like that's pretty cool.*”

Spy Hop is located in Salt Lake City, Utah, but serves youth across the state. Salt Lake City has an overall poverty rate of 17.82%, and the majority of this statistic represents children living in poverty.

Youth suicide rates have tripled since 2007, and suicide is now the leading cause of death for teens in Utah ages 11-17. According to the Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah, Utah's child and youth mental health needs were increasing even before the pandemic. A fact sheet entitled **“Preparing for the Future: Potential Long-Term Impacts of COVID-19 on Utah's Child and Youth Mental Health”** states: “Reduced access to school-based services and supports and an increase in social isolation from school closures and stay-at-home directives may have contributed to increasing mental health needs among children during the pandemic.”

⁴ www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/

As a result, Spy Hop is highly focused on *risk and protective factor-focused prevention* (Hawkins & Catalano) as it bears witness each day to the multidimensional ways that young people struggle with identity development, anxiety disorders, lack of positive adult and community attachment and online adversity.

While the particular significance of this creative “outlet” functioned differently across Spy Hop programs, we saw that no matter the context, youth benefitted from the opportunity to give voice to the challenges they were experiencing. What’s more, audiences agreed (see “*Why Audience Still Matters: Audience Perspectives*”).

“*The reason why youth media matters is because it can move something, especially something like film. It can change somebody’s views, and it can impact them emotionally. It’s what I love so much about film, about this form of art.*” — A Spy Hop student

For youth in the Sending Messages program who were experiencing incarceration or foster care, Spy Hop programs were a lifeline. Students in more stable home situations, such as many of the students who attend the organization’s after-school programs, benefited in different ways: “I love Spy Hop and I am so grateful for its creative outlet, especially in these hard times,” wrote one student.

“We just miss each other” was a common theme. “This is the best thing my kid has done in weeks” was the feedback from one parent.

In our last full evaluation report, we highlighted the powerful youth-made film *Worried*, which was produced at Spy Hop as part of 2019’s summer Reel Stories program. In our interviews since then, we’ve heard many times over how Spy Hop provides an essential creative outlet for youth during increasingly difficult times. These mental health challenges have not gone away, even as in-person instruction has resumed. In fact, our previous research suggests that existing mental changes for many Spy Hop youth preceded the pandemic but were dramatically exacerbated during the COVID crisis.



“With the pandemic and everything that’s happened, they just haven’t had too much stability.

If I can provide this for two hours, then I’m doing my job.”

— Cathy Foy, Spy Hop Mentor

Finally, our 2020 report found that Spy Hop mentors practice what they teach by learning on the fly in a new medium. During the pandemic, they simplified their content, redefined success and found their way to students whose distance from Spy Hop’s physical location would have prohibited their participation in the past.

Spotlight:

Power Up — Gaming the System

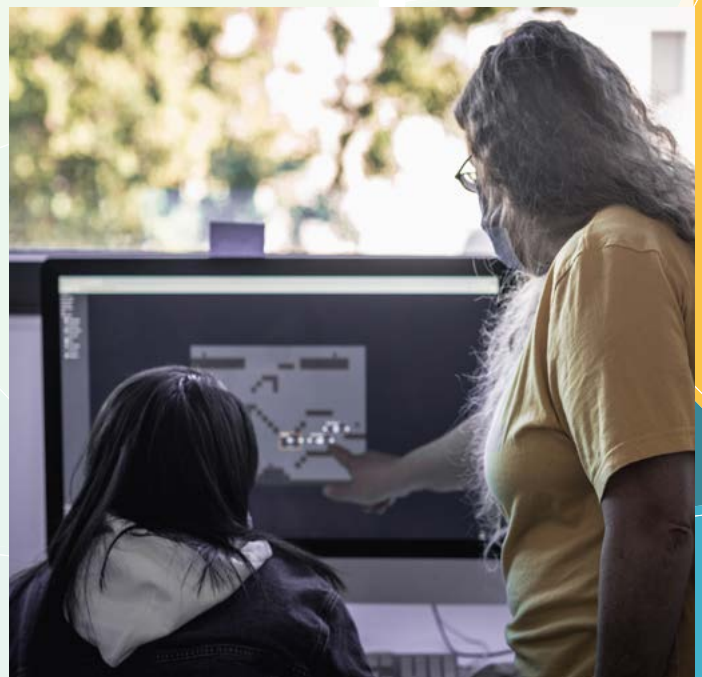
● **Power Up draws on game mechanics to teach youth key skills**

In a traditional school system, everyone completes the same tasks and advances at the same pace. But in a video game, players accumulate experience and “level up” when they’ve demonstrated competency. This model more closely resembles the world of work—and it’s a core component behind the success of Spy Hop’s innovative Power Up program.

Power Up is an advanced game design intensive taught by eight-year veteran mentor Liz Schulte. Participants form a creative team of designers, programmers and artists as they develop a video game that makes a positive impact in the world.

The program translates the mechanics of video game design into its pedagogical structure. Schulte provides a safe environment for students to learn, explore, grow and be creative. The learning is iterative, with students building resiliency and acquiring new skills through repeated attempts at the task. Perhaps most importantly, students have fun as they learn and progress.

This game-like model served students well when COVID forced them to participate online in 2020.



“ I created a whole section for memes. I put my own memes in there. I tried to make it so that they had this fun place to hang out with folks outside of class. We played games online together. I’d have a joke of the day. ... If you keep fun at the forefront, then all the pieces will fall together. ”

— Liz Schulte, Spy Hop Interactive Design Mentor

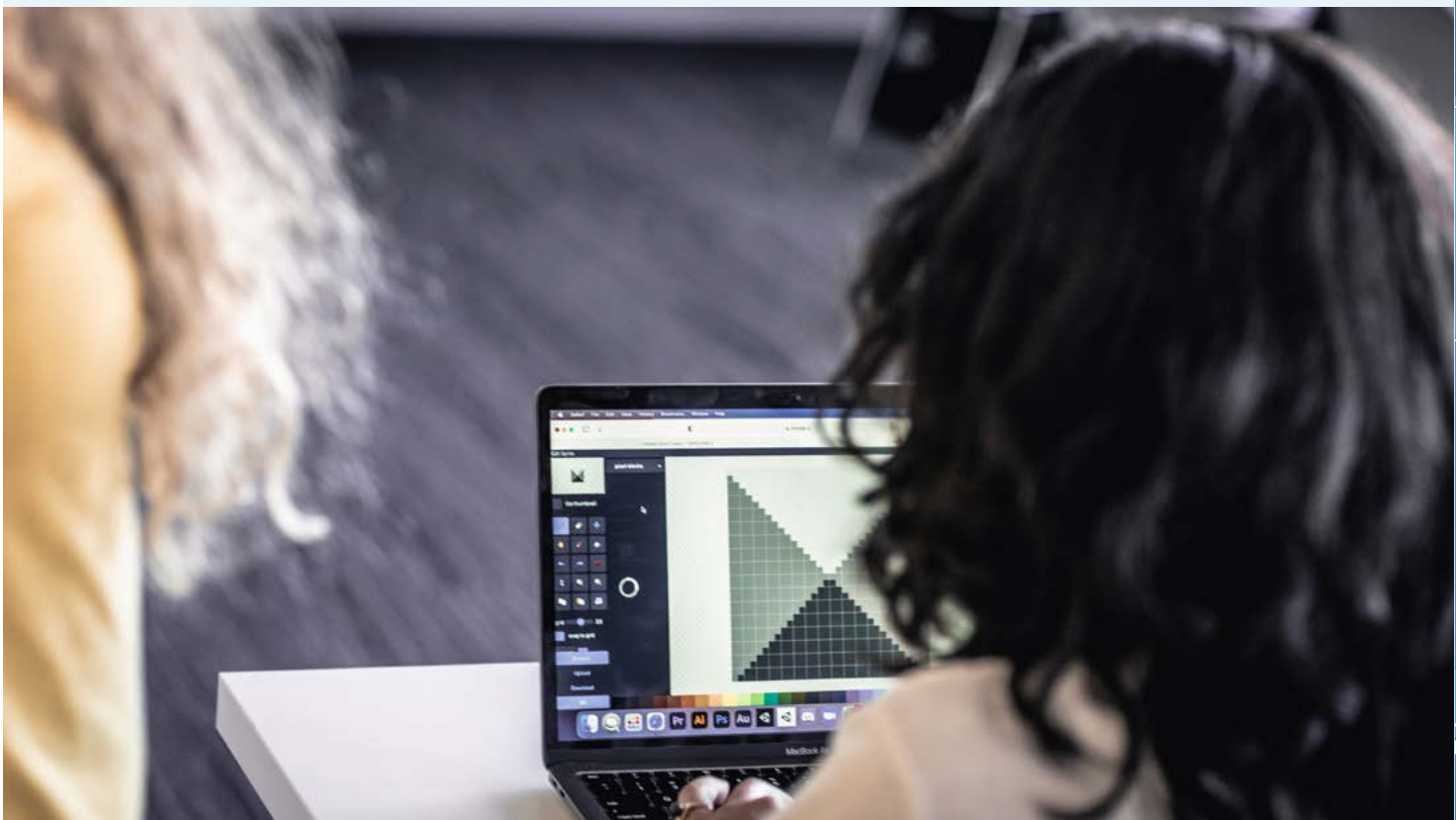
All In

Power Up demands the same technical ability and teamwork as the gaming industry. By the end of the program, students have pitched their game ideas to a professional panel and designed a fully functioning video game complete with all elements, including story, music, graphics and programming.

According to Schulte, Power Up students tend to be less outwardly social and more comfortable interacting with others through technology and game play. The collaborative design process is often divvied up among team members, allowing students to work independently on their roles and assignments even as they're jointly working on a single game design. Schulte uses this structure to foster independence while at the same time building collaborative skills.

Usually, Power Up is a 10-month program. During COVID, it was compressed into five months. As the class moved online, the first few weeks were rocky. "It wasn't working," says Schulte. Missing was the "social-emotional connection that happens when a team is working together." She explains:

“There is this really important thing that happens when any group of people go through a difficult experience together. It builds this deep-rooted [sense of] community. To build that close relationship over Zoom was really hard.”



Schulte compares the first few weeks of remote classes to “being thrown into the boss level” of a video game before you’re ready. “We had to find a way to navigate through,” she adds. Yet, five months later, students were presenting a working prototype of their game before a live audience at the Pixel Party at Spy Hop’s new facility.

While many of the youth in Spy Hop’s other after-school classes struggled to fully engage in online classes, Power Up students were all in.

“There are a lot of times when you have three or four people staring at the same computer screen, trying to solve a programming problem,” says Gary, a student in the Power Up program. “This continued as we went digital. A lot of our virtual meetings were spent diving into, ‘What’s the problem we’re facing? What possible solutions can we think of?’”

What happened in the Power Up class that allowed students to thrive? Despite the many challenges, Schulte did not abandon her core philosophy. Instead, she doubled down on the principles that have driven the program’s success in the past.

Fun, Play and Social Engagement

As Schulte observes, “When you’re playing a video game, if it isn’t fun, you don’t play any more, right?” Mindful that enjoyment is critical for engagement, Schulte says she “leaned into fun” as she looked for ways to engage students online.

When Schulte realized that students weren’t talking about gaming or having other conversations like they used to in the physical learning space, she let them use the online Discord channel they would use for live gaming to socialize and build community as well. As she explains:

“I created a whole section for memes. I put my own memes in there. I tried to make it so that they had this fun place to hang out with folks outside of class. We played games online together. I’d have a joke of the day. ... If you keep fun at the forefront, then all the pieces will fall together.”

Safe Spaces to Grow and Level Up

High-quality game design provides opportunities for scaffolded learning experiences in a relatively low-stakes environment, Schulte says. Players are confronted with a challenge at an appropriate level of complexity. Once they master that challenge, they are given a slightly harder one.

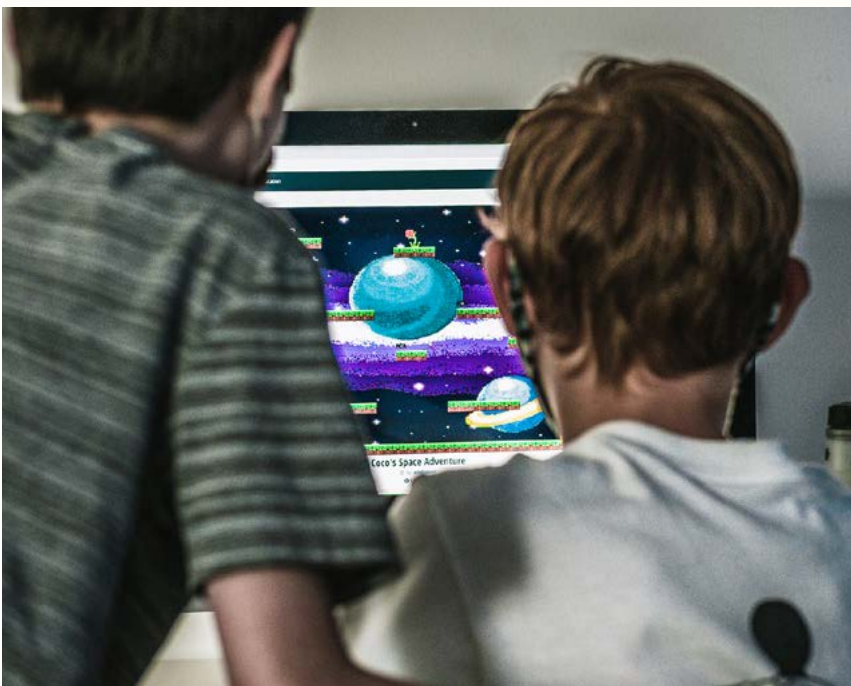
“That’s how you build successful levels,” she says—by adding further complexity as players advance. Schulte has taken this concept and applied it to the design of the Power Up class as well. When students struggled as the class first shifted online, she gave them “bite-sized assignments,” small challenges that produced quick wins. Students gradually gained more confidence and were able to handle successively larger tasks.

Iterative Learning: Building Resiliency Through Repeated Attempts

In a video game, players get multiple chances to master each level. If their character “dies” in the game, they simply try again; if the game ends, they can press “restart.” Contrast this to the traditional educational system, where students often get one chance to complete an assignment—and then it’s on to the next lesson.

Gaming “adds this level of resiliency,” Schulte says. *“I have some students who struggle with this at first, because they’ve come from the educational system [where they] need to answer these [questions] just the way that I want them answered. And I throw that completely out the window. What I want instead is exploration. I want attempts. I want constant iterations, and I want us to explore lots of different places to get to enlightenment.”*

This resilient mindset helped students stick with the program even after their initial struggles online.



Preparing for the World of Work

Power Up's game-like environment not only helped students persevere during the pandemic. It also prepares them effectively for the jobs they'll encounter in the future. Creative problem-solving, teamwork, self-directed learning and resilience are just some of the skills participants hone in the program—and these skills are valued in nearly every workplace today.

As Schulte notes:

There's this idea that you're here to learn video games and well, that's partially true. But what you're really here to do is learn project management skills and how to self-direct and all of these other skills that are going to get these kids to be awesome adults.

Says Gary of his time in the Power Up program: *“I'm definitely going to remember it fondly. I'm going to remember it as a time when I got to interact with other people who were passionate about games. I got to have the mentorship of someone who really cared about me succeeding and becoming the kind of developer that I want to be.”*

A Safe Space to Switch Gears

Schulte, who is also the mother of a child on the spectrum, is well educated on how the neurodivergent brain works. She intentionally applies this expertise to her mentoring, particularly when young people who think differently may need more support to build resilience in the face of chaos.

“There's this rigidity that exists ... where it's hard for folks [on the spectrum] to switch gears,” she observes. “And some folks might think that means you don't switch their gears. But I argue that's not what the world is. Instead, I give them a safe space to switch gears.”



LOOKING AHEAD 2021 AND BEYOND

SO, HOW DID SPY HOP DO IN THE EYES OF THE STUDENTS?

“I think they did a really good job with what they had. Like, they got on it and we were able to work through it and like, it happened, you know?” — A Spy Hop student

In the sections that follow, we build on these findings to illuminate how Spy Hop pivoted during this unusual time and found new ways to serve as an essential force in the lives of young people and their communities.

FINDING 1: Creative Identity

At Spy Hop, youth develop creative identity and agency by engaging in deep, interest-driven learning experiences that authentically mirror real-world challenges.

WHAT DOES LEARNING LOOK LIKE AT SPY HOP?

The easiest way to answer this question might be to state what youth believe Spy Hop is not like—school. “I hate school” was the response of one youth participant in Spy Hop’s Sending Messages program when the topic came up. “I like that [Spy Hop] gives me an outlet for things I want to learn how to do that I can’t do in school,” wrote another participant in an exit survey.

On the surface, it’s not hard to note the differences:

- Students come to Spy Hop voluntarily, usually motivated by their own passions.
- They work on more focused curricula with like-minded peers, as well as dedicated and highly specialized mentors
- They produce real media that gets distributed out into the world.

But the differences run deeper than that. While it’s true that students who come to Spy Hop gain access to more sophisticated gear and more niche course offerings than what they find in their traditional schools, in many cases they also find that the teaching itself is different. In other words, *it’s less about what is being learned than how.*

“In school, you don’t feel like you’re working for what you want to achieve in any way, you’re working for what needs to get done,” one student explained. “Because of that, the passion gets zapped for a lot of people. A lot of people come out of high school not really connecting with the creativity or critical thinking. Teachers say it, but the system doesn’t reward it.”

Others agreed. “It’s just easier [to learn] when you’re interested in something,” a student noted. At Spy Hop, students felt they were experiencing a “more open environment” in which participants were “more free to express ... opinions.”

These observations are consistent with research that finds deeper learning more frequently occurs at the “margins” of public education (e.g., extracurricular spaces) than in the so-called “core classes” like English and math.⁵

Why is that? One reason has to do with how extracurricular activities put their purpose front and center. Students know they have to be in school, but they might not always know why. Rather than organizing the learning around content coverage, extracurricular spaces are usually interest-driven and build strong communities of practice that allow for peer-to-peer learning. They also often involve work that is done collaboratively rather than individually.

⁵ www.gse.harvard.edu/news/ed/17/01/why-periphery-often-more-powerful-core



Spy Hop, like many of these extracurricular spaces, models its classes on apprenticeship-style learning (see our 2018-19 research report spotlight: “The Importance of Apprenticeship in Adolescence”), in which adults are present not just as educators but as mentors and professional role models who themselves study the very creative practices they are modeling.

“It really brought me into a music life,” one student told us, “instead of, ‘I just took a class.’ I live most of my life around bands now.” As we’ll see, this dimension of “completeness” and the authenticity of the craft are significant factors for young people as they identify what it is they value about their Spy Hop experiences.

IN THEIR WORDS: WHAT IS SPY HOP?

If Spy Hop isn’t like school; what is it like? These answers from youth participants provide some insights:

“Spy Hop is a safe place where I can explore my interests and identity. It’s a place where unconditional acceptance lets me embrace the growth that can only come through failure.”

“I feel like it is a place I can be free to express myself and learn. There is a good vibe here, so it feels like home and a safe place to practice my skills.”

“Spy Hop has grown to mean a lot to me, because I feel here I can learn the skills I need to pursue a career as an audio technician.”

“Spy Hop helped me feel that I could be an artist. It’s really inspiring and I’m sad, but at the same time excited to leave and move on.”

“Spy Hop has such amazing resources that make their programs very accessible. All the gear we got to use and the studio ... it’s really rewarding to learn in such a cool environment.”

“Spy Hop gave me the opportunity to explore my interests and understand what I want my future to be.”

“Spy Hop is a cool program that’s simply dedicated to helping people improve their lives. I really value how much effort they put into their programs.”

“I love Spy Hop because it is a space where my ideas and thoughts are accepted.”

“It means I have a safe space to be who I am, and that’s what I value about it. I can be me when I’m here.”

“I think it’s an amazing program that helps people find a realistic career path in these arts.”

PLAYING THE 'WHOLE GAME': AT SPY HOP YOU DO WHAT THE PROFESSIONALS DO

For students at Spy Hop, classes are more than just a place to learn new skills; they are mini workplaces. "The best part about Spy Hop is how the students are treated like they are already in a workplace environment," one alumnus wrote, adding:

“I did learn some new technical skills from Spy Hop, like using industry-standard software, but the most valuable thing I took away was the experience of working on creative projects with others, learning to overcome challenging situations and being confident I can shoot and edit a compelling video. Now as a full-time filmmaker, overcoming challenges, working with others and having confidence to take on new and challenging projects is all I do! ” — A Spy Hop student

Another student reflected on the audience feedback their film received: "They were expecting a school film, [but by] saying that it was professional and not what they expected, I think it shows that Spy Hop is successful in their motto—youth media matters."

While Spy Hop youth consistently describe their work as "professional," they were clear that it was the *fullness* of their work, not its difficulty, that made it feel that way. "I don't know if I'd necessarily describe PitchNic as 'challenging,'" one student told us, pushing back on our use of the word. "It's more 'complete,' if that makes sense. A lot of that is when they teach you some aspect of film theory, they'll tell you how the whole thing is, that it's more: 'This is the process. We're going to do the process, and we're going to make the movie the way that you're supposed to make a movie.'"

Education researcher David Perkins has a term for this type of learning: "playing the whole game at the junior level." In Little League, he explains, you don't learn how to pitch and how to run as separate activities; you *play baseball*, just like the pros. But you do it in a "junior" way, on a smaller diamond, with lower stakes and the opportunity to learn from dedicated mentors.⁶

Playing the whole game allows students to see the forest for the trees and to learn in deeper and more authentic ways. Of course, nobody wants to play a game that isn't fun—and Spy Hop students repeatedly emphasized that although they encountered high expectations for their work, the actual learning environment had an easy and relaxed quality.

We asked: Isn't it *rigorous* learning at such a high level? "Rigorous isn't really the word I'd use," one student told us, "because Loud and Clear really is like a chill and fun environment." Another student agreed: Spy Hop, to him, was "the same percent of pro and casual."

Still, students are proud of what they make at Spy Hop. Despite the casual atmosphere, high expectations abound.

“I think I'll remember this as the first moment I made a professional film with a group of people that is very real-worldesque, that's what I remember it as. ” — A Spy Hop student

⁶ www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/09/01/education-bat-seven-principles-educators



LEARNING THROUGH DOING

Another aspect of Perkins' theory of "making learning whole" is "playing the hidden game." To be good at baseball, for example, you need to understand some things that aren't obvious on the surface—like how batting averages and other statistical probabilities impact your likelihood of a win in different settings. These are the types of insights that go *beyond* the formal curriculum. Students pick them up not because they're explicitly taught, but because they're baked into the content—in other words, they're part of what it takes to excel at the task-at-hand.

Most people understand a "curriculum" as a planned sequence of experiences designed to teach a particular topic within a subject area or discipline. At Spy Hop, curricula are organized around media arts disciplines like filmmaking or music/audio production. Through their participation in Spy Hop's course offerings, youth gain powerful skills in these practices. (See "*Competencies gained by Spy Hop youth in 2021.*")

However, a growing number of learning theorists point to the idea of a "hidden curriculum," or the implicit lessons embedded in how a course is taught, which run far deeper than the topic of the course.⁷ If we understand this "hidden curriculum" as a means of socialization and the inculcation of a certain set of "values" that reinforces particular behaviors, mindsets and skills, we can see how Spy Hop's courses not only teach media arts skills but also evince a combination of social-emotional youth identity development and creative expression. This process of socialization communicates messages of collaboration, passion and purpose, agency and responsibility, problem solving and perseverance—all within an environment of fun and playful experimentation.

Spy Hop challenges youth to complete the circuit—go through the steps, the creative process and the journey of experience to arrive at the other side. These lessons stick with youth into adulthood. Consider this perspective from a Spy Hop alum surveyed in 2018 on how their mentor helped them work through a creative blockage:

⁷When examining how school-based learning is organized, educational researchers and theorists including Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, bell hooks and Jonathan Postman have posited that what schools are most accomplished at teaching is not the subjects of math, science, history and language arts, but something they deem "the hidden curriculum." Their use of this term is a critique intended to expose the implicit set of messages embedded into the design of schools, classrooms, instruction and pedagogy that serve to reinforce existing social inequalities according to race, gender, class, ability and social status. For example, grading systems teach competition. Student desks in rows facing the front of the room promote teacher-centered learning and discourage peer-to-peer collaborative learning. Tracking systems guide students toward different college or career pathways based on their race, gender and economic status.

“My mentor offered not only emotional support while I was dealing with some personal issues, but also offered honest, thoughtful, constructive criticism. I scrambled to piece together my project for Reel Stories, and after weeks of trying to develop a storyline, my mentor and I discussed the project and decided I should start from the beginning. I found I didn't have a narrative with the interviews and other footage I'd shot, so my mentor suggested that I go back to the location and take as many photographs as I could. He asked me to come back again with 500 photos (I ended up actually shooting somewhere around 484) and from that, we were able to construct a clear narrative and my film finally started to take shape. I was actually able to record some new interviews with fellow Spy Hop students/employees to strengthen the foundation of my newfound storyline, and the film turned out better than I ever could have imagined.” — A Spy Hop student

We heard the same thing from many other alumni. “I use the skills I learned at Spy Hop on a daily basis in my current job,” was a common response.

FROM PASSION TO PURPOSE

For many Spy Hop students, Spy Hop's pre-professional environment doesn't just serve them in the moment: It actively orients them toward potential pathways for their future. In a time when many youth are questioning the tenability of creative careers, this strikes us as a significant impact.

“Everyone's really gone through something,” Cathy Foy, a mentor, told us. She's seen students carrying “a heaviness they did not have before” and presenting with what another mentor, Liz Schulte, called a “trauma-mind.” Other mentors agreed: “I think people are definitely in a mode of ‘fight or flight,’ in a sense that they're hyper-focused on the future,” one said. “So my students are super serious about things like, ‘How do I make this, how do I make money?’”

According to one mentor, his students used to be more playful and explorative before the pandemic. Now, he says, “it's like, if they don't make it in their art, they don't know what they're going to do. So it feels like there's just this panic to figure out the future, which is really interesting.” He pauses before adding: “Understandable, also.”

It makes sense. Research indicates that, in a world shaken by the COVID pandemic, young people are far less certain about their futures. Concerns about safety and financial welfare have led to a much larger percentage of young people reconsidering the value of continued education. According to a survey from Equitable Futures, nearly one-fifth (19%) of young people were questioning the value of college—and more than 50% responded that COVID impacted their thinking about whether to pursue higher education.⁸ For these youth, Spy Hop might be regarded as a vital step on the path to a more stable future.

Here's how one student described their experience: “I really think it would stick with me in a way. I became really big into music, like as in, I focus a lot of my life right now on music. So I think that I might want to do this as a career or something. This has made me want to make music a career, not just a hobby. And I took more classes at Spy Hop for ... understanding how to set up concerts and stuff. It's really made ... this a passion for me instead of just a class and ... it's growing me towards what I want to do in my life.”

⁸ equitablefutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/BRIEF-Here-and-now.pdf

RECOMMENDATION 1: Formalize relationships, engage alumni and design systems to support young adult employment and entrepreneurship opportunities post-high school.

The last two years have seen alarming declines in college enrollment. More than ever, youth are concerned about their futures. Black, Latino, indigenous, refugee, female, LGBTQ+ and low-income youth in the state of Utah also face systemic barriers as they pursue career pathways, particularly in the media arts.

As Finding 1 details, teens are gaining real-world professional skills and occupational identities in the media arts in their after-school classes. However, there are few opportunities to support them after high school once youth “age out.” How might Spy Hop listen to alumni voices to learn from their needs and experiences and inform the design of new systems?

Spy Hop is well poised to build a robust pipeline from its core classes for teens to postsecondary pathways in the creative industries. During Spy Hop’s growth, it has cultivated relationships with hundreds of organizations, community colleges, industry partners and venues. We recommend expanding formalized relationships with these industry and college partners in order to build measurable pathways to success for Spy Hop alumni. To accomplish this goal, we encourage Spy Hop to invest in a paid staff position to design and carry out a plan with the input of alumni.

The move into the new Kahlert Youth Media Center provides the physical infrastructure to support new programs and events. Spy Hop’s Phase 2 program is already being restructured to leverage this infrastructure and support alumni through paid internships, work readiness events and on-the-job training. How might Spy Hop continue to help young adults develop networking skills, entrepreneurship experience, social capital and portfolios of work?

Portfolios are a staple of authentic assessment for both emerging and professional artists. They can be used not only to represent an artist’s finest work, but to document artistic growth over time, display a breadth of work, detail one’s approach to creative problem solving and demonstrate content knowledge of the discipline(s) in which they work. Artists use portfolios to advance their careers and are often asked to present their work via a portfolio to multiple audiences across various settings—academic, personal, professional and commercial. As Spy Hop students pursue opportunities beyond high school, they might be asked to present a portfolio as part of their college, internship or scholarship application process. The ability of a young person to showcase their skills and strengths with evidence is essential to unlocking doors of opportunity for their future. How might youth actively participate in their own portfolio development as a way to share their skills openly and transparently?

While we applaud Spy Hop for engaging audiences and industry professionals in students’ work through exhibitions, shows, reviews and screenings, Spy Hop lacks a cohesive overall strategy and philosophy to guide student skill sharing.

We recommend that Spy Hop intentionally redesign its pathways and systems with a focus on equity to meet the future college and career needs of Spy Hop’s most vulnerable young adults (ages 18-24).

[See 2018-19 Report Here](#)

What Is Youth Media?

The term youth media not only refers to what young people create using digital media tools (films, games, audio works, etc.). It also describes the several dozen national nonprofits that call themselves youth media organizations and are part of a field with its own shared history.

The first youth media organizations sprung up during the early 1970s and expanded in the 80s and 90s. They were seeded by the community film movement of the 60s and the advent of the first affordable home video camcorders in the early 80s. Community TV Network in Chicago (f. 1974), Educational Video Center in New York City (f. 1984), Appalachian Media Institute in Kentucky (f. 1988), Youth Radio Media in the Bay Area (f. 1990) and Spy Hop in Salt Lake City (f. 1999), alongside many others, all still operate today.

More broadly, youth media's origins are rooted in youth culture, a relatively new 20th-century phenomenon that arose, not coincidentally, with the advent of recording technologies and mass media platforms for dissemination, such as broadcast TV, photography, film, record albums, and radio.

Today, in our media-saturated and technology-centric landscape, youth media is one of the most important ways that teens can participate in youth culture as producers and not just consumers. When young people construct meaning through media, they often find themselves authoring their own identity development in the process, developing a level of personal and civic agency that lasts into adulthood. The tools for making media art are now affordable and accessible for anyone with a phone and a laptop. Yet, youth still need the kind of guidance best provided by youth media organizations, staffed by critical thinking caring adults and professional teaching artists.

The philanthropic sector largely categorizes youth media as part of the positive youth development sector. But some key differences exist. For example, like many other youth media organizations, Spy Hop positions teens not just as future adults but as makers, storytellers, creators and artists who have something to contribute to current-day culture and public discourse, even while recognizing that these voices may be critical of authority, institutions and society. It organizes resources so that youth can learn from practicing artists and gain professional skills in media arts. The perspectives and experiences of young people are valued, taken seriously and respected. This is demonstrated

by the commitment of time and effort to cultivating real-world audiences through public dissemination of youth works.

Since its founding, an increasing number of young people seek out Spy Hop because they want to write and perform music, make films and documentaries, design games, create graphics or animations, perform concerts and produce radio shows, podcasts and live events. The interest in Spy Hop will likely never go away because it is demand-driven; on some fundamental level, youth need to make media, music and art to learn who they are and what they can become.

Why does Spy Hop use the tagline, "Youth media matters?" The responses of Spy Hop youth participants on this matter say it best:

"If more people's stories are being put out there ... that's a good thing. That's inherently a good thing, because that way our society knows these stories and can learn to be better in the next couple years. So I think the reason why they're going so above and beyond ... is just to get these stories out there."

"I think what Spy Hop really tries to do is help us find that voice and ... give us confidence and give us the ability to be like, 'This is my work. This is going to have this impact. And I want to spread this.'"

"[Filmmaking] helps me feel like I'm doing something for the community, because even though I may not be like, I don't know, like Greta Thornburg as the face of the climate crisis or something, I feel like I'm giving voice to people. And I think that's very special and very powerful."

"I think Spy Hop is really focused on getting ... a younger generation's perspective out there. Right now all we have is like, you know, Martin Scorsese's 60th flick, more mob movies type of thing.... It's time for a new generation of filmmakers... to come along and share their voice. So I think that's definitely part of Spy Hop."

"We are soon going to be making decisions for our country... like helping influence others in our generation. I think things like film and music are super impactful. I think a lot of my world view has come from watching movies, you know, listening to documentaries and listening to people's perspectives and things like that. And I think film is one of the better ways to impact somebody."

FINDING 2: Self-Confidence

Through the process of media production, Spy Hop youth develop confidence in their own voice and the value they can contribute to society.

At Spy Hop, we found that these informal learnings that emerged from the creative process—the “hidden curriculum”—were a big part of what made the experience so valuable. In our focus groups and interviews, Spy Hop students regularly pointed to the ways in which their courses illuminated deeper understandings and helped them develop confidence in their own abilities, as this Musicology student explains:

“I already feel like I’ve taken a lot from the program and applied it to my life. I’ve learned to be a little more assertive in my decisions. And I’ve learned to speak up when it’s necessary. And I just got a job. So I feel it in a workplace environment, I use those skills where I take initiative and I am able to have confidence in my decisions. And I think I definitely learned that from Musicology ... through making decisions about songs and things like that. It’s what I take with me.”

It’s important to note that although these goals were named as a priority for Spy Hop’s artist mentors, they were embedded into the curriculum as authentic steps to producing media. In other words, you learn these skills because you have to in order to complete the task, not as an add-on. As mentor Amanda Madden puts it, “I’m not having those conversations in a classroom like, ‘Now we’re going to talk about, like, how to be an engaged human in the world,’ which is what I secretly think is the process of making a film. It’s cool to make a film, but really I feel like we’re teaching them how to be people.”

We wondered to what extent students are conscious of this “hidden curriculum,” so we asked youth participants: “What do you think your mentor is trying to teach you in this course?” The answers were revealing.

“First of all, to express yourself,” was the response we received from one student in the Sending Messages program. Another chimed in with, “how to channel your energy into positive stuff.” A third student said: “Being able to do everything [the mentor] does, but independently without his help.”





A 'MORE CONFIDENT ARTIST'

Gaining confidence was a common takeaway for many of the students we talked to. One student described how he became a “more confident artist” throughout his audio engineering courses at Spy Hop, after feeling like someone who “always held back a little bit.” Now, he says, “I second-guess myself way less, I’ve trained my ears, I’m confident about what I hear.” These findings aligned with the self-report survey data from Hello Insight (see *Appendix B, p. 60*), which found a 74% success rate for student growth within the construct of “Positive Identity” (defined as “A young person’s internal sense of who they are and confidence to explore the multiple facets of their identities”).

Another student reflected on “learning that I actually do like writing. I tend to write every day, even if it’s not something like a creative piece. And so I think just building that habit and finding that way and that confidence was probably my favorite thing [about Loud and Clear].”

Other students described feeling “scared and anxious” and having “a hard time talking to people” before coming to Spy Hop; over time, those feelings changed. “I feel like I’m more confident and more motivated to get myself up to do things,” as one student said of their Spy Hop experience. “When I was younger, I didn’t know that I had to connect to someone, like, I can’t just sit there and ask for the opportunity. So I have a better understanding of how to connect with people.”

Building confidence was a common theme among former Spy Hop students as well. “Without the space provided by Spy Hop, I wouldn’t have had a space to gain confidence in myself and the things that I wanted to make,” one alum said. “Spy Hop gave me a voice and helped me build myself into the person I am today.” Another said: “Spy Hop felt like a safe space to nurture a creativity that was starting to grow in myself as a teenager. It was an invaluable time to grow and gain self-confidence.”

Mentors also agreed. “The one underlying thing that I’m always trying to do is create people who are comfortable being themselves and know how to interact with people,” one mentor explained. “I think that’s super important in the music industry, but pretty much in any industry.”

Jeremy Chatelain, Spy Hop's Program Director, explained it like this: "You're teaching your skills in class on a piece of art that they can go ahead and utilize in real life and in the future. That's the reason why we try and get them to collaborate and show follow-through on projects and things like that. Hopefully when they go to do something in their lives, they can also utilize these skills that they've been using while creating art."

Many of these skills—collaboration, social skills, perseverance, problem solving—are ones that apply to future roles, regardless of the field of work.

These skills reflect the kind of social-emotional competencies measured in the Hello Insight pre and post test assessments (see Appendix B).

"A POSITIVE OCCUPATION"

Finally, we heard that for youth facing difficult circumstances—whether as a result of COVID or in general—Spy Hop offered a chance to develop themselves in a productive way. One student reflected:

“It's always a constant struggle, right? You know, it's hard to break habits, but coming here, it's giving me that experience I never had, something to lock in on, keep me concentrated. And a positive occupation, you know, like I said, we're going to find one regardless. And when I was on this one, though, this one was a positive one.”

It struck us that when we asked students what they most liked about Spy Hop, they would often point to gaining skills in the artistic practice they studied. Indeed, it's clear that an interest in media arts is the lure that draws students into the process and allows them to open up more fully. Once they're invested, however, they often find themselves getting more than they bargained for.

In the Sending Messages program, students are tasked to write a “letter you can never send.” The purpose of the assignment is to help them open up and use the creative process to explore more difficult thoughts and emotions. When we asked one student about his favorite part of the class, he first told us, “We done the beats. ... That's my favorite part ... because I like beats,” but then added: “I got to write a letter to drugs and alcohol ... you know, I never even thought about doing something like that in my life, but I had a good experience with all of this.”

'SOMEONE DOES CARE'

For other youth, making art at Spy Hop was an end in itself. These students described how creating art through Spy Hop's programs helped them to “release” some of the mental health challenges they were facing. “Art is one of the only things that I can do and not feel bad about,” one student commented. “So, having a spot where I could do those things and get better at those things was really nice for me.”

“In the very beginning, I wasn't really doing great mentally,” another student described. “And so I basically stopped coming to some of these classes for two weeks. I kind of dropped off the face of the planet. [When my peer mentor] reached out to me, I was like, oh yeah, someone does care about me.”

“When I first got to Odyssey House, I was so mean,” said a student in Spy Hop's Sending Messages program. “I was just an aggressive person coming into rehab, you know, and I didn't realize how mean I was. And then all of a sudden, I'm looking back, I'm like, ‘Damn, I wish I wasn't that mean,’ because I feel like that makes people look at me differently.”

For some youth, Spy Hop even provided a window into the kinds of practices they might employ with other young people in the future. "I want to go into psychology and work with children," one student explained. What will stick with her, she said, is "using writing as a way to cope with difficult emotions."

This response mirrored what we heard from Spy Hop staffers, many of whom had experienced the positive effects of mentorship as young people themselves. "Mentorship was there for me when I was a teenager," mentor Cathy Foy explained. "And so it was really natural for me to gravitate to wanting to be that [for others]."

"My mentor, Cathy, helped me a lot," one student told us of Foy. "Actually, she helped me even with trying to get a job. I talked to her about college. [Spy Hop] seemed like a kind of safe place, [where] I can talk to someone about what I want to do with my life. And I'd also say, just the opportunities you get here, like performance shows, you know, some shows can be really big. And without it, you probably wouldn't have those opportunities. And that definitely boosted my confidence."

For this student, the combination of a dedicated mentor and space for personal exploration and expression led her to develop greater confidence in her own voice and future potential.

ALUMNI QUOTES

"My experience at Spy Hop completely shaped who I am today. I learned skills that I still use today and was shown how to channel my creative energy into something productive. Spy Hop is the best. I'm so thankful to have been a part of it!"

"I was in the Loud and Clear program, and through that I was able to find a way to express myself that I didn't know I had the capability of. I'm a better speaker because of Spy Hop, and my mentor and I have been able to successfully go into the sales workforce with the voice I found at Spy Hop. I know if I didn't have that experience in my life, I wouldn't be as far as I am now."

"I value most the lasting friendships I made there. I come from an area in Utah that lacks diversity, and Spy Hop was my first experience being surrounded with people from different backgrounds. Spy Hop is where I truly 'found' myself. Without my experiences there, I would not be who I am today."



A SNAPSHOT OF YOUTH COMPETENCIES ACROSS AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS

In 2018, Convergence Design Lab collaborated with Spy Hop mentors to design a Competency Framework for its after-school programs held at the Kahlert Youth Media Arts Center in Salt Lake City.

These seven competencies—Creative Practice/Innovation in Media Arts, Collaborative Production, Planning for Success, Self-Management, Critical Media Analysis, Authentic Voice, Participation—align with Spy Hop's logic model and program outcomes, and they map to National Core Media Arts Standards, social-emotional learning skills as described by organizations like the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and future-ready skills as described by organizations like ISTE and MHA Labs.

Mentors use a rubric (see Appendix A) based on these seven competencies to authentically assess individual student learning outcomes across a scale of proficiency (Not Yet, Proficient or Accomplished). Because COVID prevented mentors from conducting direct in-person observations of student performance, only 35 students were assessed in 2021.

Despite using a holistic rubric that is detailed in its descriptors in order to mitigate bias and subjective evaluation, mentors in 2021 scored their students at notably higher rates of success in 2021 than in pre-pandemic years. This discrepancy reveals the limitations of a quantitative approach, as we believe it is unlikely that student gains in learning would exceed previous years so significantly.

There are many possible explanations for this. For instance, some mentors have less experience in using the scoring rubric, and there might be a disconnect about how "proficient" and "accomplished" are defined. Because of the shared isolation trauma experienced by so many young people, mentors might have lowered their expectations for success. Or, perhaps the students who completed classes and were assessed by the rubric are drawn from a skewed sample representing more accelerated youth in comparison to previous years.

Despite these mixed results, we believe the Competency Framework and scoring rubric hold great promise as consistent tools to measure the outcomes of Spy Hop programming. Per our third recommendation, we plan to continue working with Spy Hop mentors to enhance the clarity and reliability of how these instruments are utilized to provide accurate data on youth learning.

COMPETENCIES GAINED BY SPY HOP YOUTH IN 2021

COMMON ASSESSMENT FOR AFTER-SCHOOL CLASSES: SPY HOP COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

Based on respondents from Spring, Summer and Fall core classes from the Spy Hop Common Assessment Tool, developed and administered by Convergence Design Lab in collaboration with mentors

CRITERIA <i>Competencies Achieved</i>	2018-19 n.55	2021 n.35
CREATIVE PRACTICE IN MEDIA ARTS Demonstrated ability to generate and conceptualize ideas for media artworks. Applied creative and artistic processes to complete and refine media artworks. OR... INNOVATION DESIGN Applied a deliberate design process to generate ideas, test theories, develop prototypes and create innovative artifacts to solve authentic problems.	Accomplished: 54% Proficient: 38% Not Yet: 8%	Accomplished: 66% Proficient: 33% Not Yet: 1%
COLLABORATIVE PRODUCTION Worked as part of a team toward a common purpose, contributed to group productions and gave and received constructive criticism with peers in a respectful and appropriate manner.	Accomplished: 59% Proficient: 32% Not Yet: 8%	Accomplished: 55% Proficient: 44% Not Yet: 1%
PLANNING FOR SUCCESS Set and managed goals for projects, broke down big tasks into smaller steps and reflected on setbacks to adjust goals as necessary.	Accomplished: 46% Proficient: 41% Not Yet: 13%	Accomplished: 54% Proficient: 37% Not Yet: 1%
SELF-MANAGEMENT Kept emotions and behavior in check, took positive risks, managed time and persisted through challenges when creating projects.	Accomplished: 62% Proficient: 38% Not Yet: 8%	Accomplished: 79% Proficient: 20% Not Yet: 1%

CRITICAL MEDIA ANALYSIS Critically analyzed and reflected upon media, including works produced by themselves and peers as well as mainstream and indie media examples discussed in class.	Accomplished: 40% Proficient: 46% Not Yet: 4%	Accomplished: 54% Proficient: 47% Not Yet: 0%
AUTHENTIC VOICE Created media works true to their authentic identity, interests, perspectives and/or experiences. Experimented and took risks in order to develop original ideas and concepts.	Accomplished: 45% Proficient: 38% Not Yet: 17%	Accomplished: 79% Proficient: 20% Not Yet: 1%
PARTICIPATION⁹ Participated in class activities and projects, arrived on time ready to contribute, engaged with peers and made efforts to communicate personally and professionally with the class mentor.	Accomplished: 59% Proficient: 33% Not Yet: 8%	Accomplished: 66% Proficient: 33% Not Yet: 1%

(Rubric created by Convergence Design Lab in collaboration with Spy Hop.)

REEL STORIES SHOWS CONSISTENT GAINS:

A closer look at student growth across Spy Hop competencies

Reel Stories is a three-week intensive class that runs five days a week, four hours per day. The mentor, Amanda Madden, completed the common assessment rubric for each of the eight students at the end of each week in order to track skill growth and development.

As the table below shows, students made consistent gains over the three-week period across each of the competencies.

TIME PERIOD	PCT. OF STUDENTS AT "NOT YET"	PCT. OF STUDENTS AT "PROFICIENT"	PCT. OF STUDENTS AT "ACCOMPLISHED"
Week One	109%	0%	0%
Week Two	25%	75%	0%
Week Three	0%	38%	62%

(N.8 representing cumulative score across 7 competency areas)

⁹This construct was originally called "Contribution" on mentor-facing measurement instruments; we have relabeled it "Participation" here to avoid confusion with Hello Insight's construct of "Contribution," which is defined in an entirely different way.



100% of the students scored as "Not Yet" proficient at the end of Week One across all competency categories. By the end of Week Two, 75% of students had gained proficiency across all categories and 25% still weren't proficient. By the end of Week Three, 62% of students had become "Accomplished" and 38% were "Proficient" across all competency areas. All students made gains.

The data shows us that Madden's instructional practice and curriculum are well aligned to the outcomes listed in the Spy Hop Competency Framework. Students are making significant gains in all seven areas. We expect that these kinds of consistent gains are made by students across all of Spy Hop's after-school and Sending Messages classes, particularly those classes offering higher-dosage experiences.

YOUTH GAINS IN SEL: A Closer Look

Data from Hello Insight point to student gains in SEL skills as well. The data includes results for 111 students in Spy Hop after-school classes from fall 2020 to fall 2021 (which includes both fully online classes and the return to in-person learning).

At the time of pretest, 27% of Spy Hop youth were designated as "emerging" and 72% as "advanced." Hello Insight defines young people with emerging capacities as "those [who] are scoring low when compared to others in the national Hello Insight dataset and who have the most potential for growth."

In general, Spy Hop saw significant growth among its more advanced students across the board, which is consistent with what occurs at other youth-serving organizations. Most notable to us were the areas in which Spy Hop's emerging students either did or did not experience gains.

For example, the SEL capacity "contribution" had the largest percentage of students (40%) in the emerging category (Hello Insight data, 2020-21). Contribution is defined "as a young person's desire to engage with and contribute to family, community, and society." During the post-test one year later, less than half of these students (49%) experienced growth, with an overall success rate across both groups of 62%. These were the lowest gains for emerging students across all five capacities. By comparison, data from 2018-19 shows a 69% growth among emerging students in this construct.

Given the unusual circumstances of 2020-21 that seriously affected emerging youth in the area of contribution, more study is needed before we can assert conclusive findings around this very important construct in youth development.

In contrast, the category of "self-management," a construct with the second-largest percentage of students (26%) in the emerging category, saw growth of 72%—meaning that nearly three-fourths of all students who were labeled as emerging grew in their capacity for self-management from pre- to post-test. (Self-management is defined as "the ability of a young person to regulate their emotions and behavior, take positive risks and persist through life's challenges.")

While it's difficult to draw any conclusive insights from this disparity across constructs, it should be noted that 100% of students had growth in SEL capacities during their time at Spy Hop—with 64% of students showing growth in at least four of the five capacities. Another 24% grew in two or three SEL capacities, and 13% grew in at least one SEL capacity.

Recommendation 2: Broaden access to Spy Hop for students who are less resourced and build stronger connections to BIPOC communities and youth.

Youth who enroll in Spy Hop's after-school programs are often guided there by school counselors, parents, siblings or other allies who introduce them to the organization. The young people lucky enough to have these advocates and social networks benefit tremendously by connecting to a resource uniquely suited to their talents and interests. The majority of those participating in after-school programs live in and around Salt Lake City.

Other participants are introduced to Spy Hop through one its many community or state-wide programs, such as Voices of the West or the school-based POPS program, which serves many thousands of students across Utah. These programs, which are more accessible to rural and indigenous youth, are shorter and less intensive than the after-school programs.

Notably, however, Spy Hop's free online offerings during the pandemic allowed students not only from Utah, but from across the country and around the world, to participate in more in-depth courses. The online Beatmaking Challenge class, for example, diversified its enrollment by opening up access across geographies and providing home-delivered software, gear and laptops to the local youth who lacked equipment. In this class, we saw evidence that this new level of diversity broadened the perspectives of youth and deepened the overall learning experience for everyone.

Even while Spy Hop resumes in-person classes at its new state-of-the-art youth media center, we recommend that the organization continue to explore ways it can broaden access to rural, indigenous and BIPOC youth, build out opportunities for virtual participation and strengthen outreach to less-connected young people and their families.

We appreciate Spy Hop's commitment to undergoing a long-term strategic planning process specifically to expand its diversity, equity and inclusion goals and embrace active anti-racism policies, values and practices. We recommend that Spy Hop continue to create intentional spaces where students can develop agency, a sense of belonging and creative confidence, but also cultivate critical consciousness.

One of the important tasks that mentors and staff will undertake in the future is to design authentic ways to embed anti-racist pedagogy and gender/ethnic/racial equity values into media projects and learning experiences. This may require quite a bit of learning and unlearning along the way. We recommend that Spy Hop explore new ways to foster participation, growth, fun and play during this process—a powerful way to model liberatory mindsets and creative community for youth.





FROM AUDIENCE TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: What will the future hold?

Early on during the pandemic, Spy Hop launched the **Tech Liberation Project** with support from Salt Lake County. Through volunteer efforts, Spy Hop's community actively solicited donations of gently used computers, laptops and iPads to be refurbished and distributed to families in need. The Tech Liberation Project is an example of Spy Hop's expanded focus on serving as a geo-localized manifestation of youth voice and creative community.

With the opening of Kahlert to the public, Spy Hop also launched a new concept for community engagement: monthly neighborhood block parties. At these multichannel events, residents can opt to receive vaccinations, access free groceries, get refurbished computers through the Tech Liberation Project and experience youth-made media.

"It's an opportunity for the space to be open and for prospective students and families to come and have a tour," explains Mateus. "In one room, we screen Spy Hop student films. Sometimes our students perform live music. Our Loud and Clear students will DJ music live."

The future of Spy Hop is emerging as one that not only centers on youth learning in media arts but also cultivates local collective action, family support and community-building in deeper ways. Audience (and community) still matter.



Spotlight:

Audience Still Matters

In March 2020, Larissa Trout, Spy Hop's director of marketing and community relations, was excitedly preparing promotional materials for Spy Hop's Woodshedding showcase. In that event, scheduled to take place the following week, budding young songwriters from the Woodshedding class would premiere original works before a live audience, songs they had been working on for many weeks. But when the stay-at-home orders were issued, it became clear that the in-person Woodshedding performance wouldn't happen.

Still, Trout and her colleagues at Spy Hop were determined to devise a workaround. She recalls thinking, "We can do this. We've got to get it out there."

Less than two years later, Spy Hop's distribution and outreach efforts resulted in an estimated 22,000 people experiencing youth media by Spy Hop students through 66 live events, including 19 virtual performances and dozens of outdoor festivals held across Utah. Out of the thousands who attended the virtual venues, many tuned in from around the country and even across the globe—an extension of Spy Hop's reach made possible through online streaming.

How Did They Get There?

Vacted on the inspiration of Willie Nelson's Luck Reunion, a three-day music festival that was originally planned as an outdoor concert but transformed into a live streaming event with musicians performing at home.

Referring to the Luck Reunion, Trout says: "They were the first. I saw them right at the beginning of [the pandemic, when musicians and organizers were still wondering]: 'How do we gather? How do we still have music? How do we support artists?' They hosted this massive event. It was so raw and gritty. [I thought:] OK, we can do this. We are Spy Hop."

Spy Hop ended up adopting Twitch as its live streaming platform, which the organization had previously used only for live gaming. Cathy Foy, Spy Hop's mentor for the Woodshedding class, asked students to record themselves performing their songs on their cell phones. Spy Hop compiled the videos for streamcast and produced marketing materials to gather a virtual audience.

"We had the video," Trout says, "and we went live. It was super glitchy and awkward. And everybody loved it! It had a really positive response, and it felt very community-bonding."

Matt Mateus, Spy Hop's education director, recalls the first virtual film event Spy Hop hosted that he viewed with his family at home: "There was the scrolling sidebar of comments. ... It was really such a unique thing to do."



Celebrating Student Work Virtually

Thanks to the Woodshedding live streaming experiment, Spy Hop swiftly solved the problem of how to celebrate student work virtually. "That almost happened in lockstep with moving class programming online. We figured it out pretty quickly, and we kept going," Trout recalls.

Spy Hop organized 18 virtual events attended by 2,700 people, including two online film festivals of Reel Stories and PitchNic student films, screened in partnership with the Utah Film Center.

Among the more impactful events were the live listening parties for students in Spy Hop's music and audio classes, such as Musicology, Loud and Clear and Woodshedding.

"Normally, it's all about the performance, right? People showing up to a venue, a physical space and seeing those students on the stage," Trout says. In contrast, the online premiere of Musicology's *Mean Machine* album by the Blue Collar Lovers Band was structured as a deep listening party. "You know where you close your eyes and you're only listening to music, and there are no distractions?" Trout says. "I think that people heard what those students were emoting through their music in a different way than if it had been a live show. "

These 2020 virtual live streams might have had an even greater impact on audiences and youth than in-person events, precisely because of the social isolation and lack of cultural connection that so many people were experiencing at the time.

What Did it Mean to be 'Back in Person' Again?

In Spring 2021, Spy Hop staff, students and classes slowly began to return to in-person work. This time, however, they were in their new and permanent home, **the Kahlert Youth Media Center**. This state-of-the-art facility was the result of a multi-year and multimillion dollar capital campaign that centered on a vision to provide young people with a youth-powered media, tech and cultural space they could call their own. The center is a 22,000-square-foot, solar-powered facility with a recording studio, large classrooms, a student lounge, an equipment lab, community event space and outdoor hangout areas—all easily accessed by street-level proximity to a central public transportation station.

On a lovely spring evening in May, the Woodshedding students gathered on the outdoor patio of the Spy Hop rooftop for one of the organization's first in-person events since the start of the pandemic. Students performed their original songs to a small audience of family and friends. This event was a true milestone for the organization, as it was also the first event held in the Spy Hop rooftop area. "Those young people went through so much," says Mateus, "but they still persevered."



AUDIENCE

PERSPECTIVES

WHY YOUTH MEDIA STILL MATTERS TO SPY HOP AUDIENCES

Our evaluation of Spy Hop's impact on audiences over the last eight years consistently shows that audiences often connect the quality of student work to its depth of meaning. Audiences convey admiration for the ability of youth to understand, explore and tell diverse and often very personal stories. 2021 was no exception, with in-person responses from the Reel Stories and PitchNic premieres echoing this consistent finding. Here are some highlights:

REEL STORIES AUDIENCE SURVEY

When asked what themes stood out from the film content, audience members noted:

- "Having real experiences!"
- "Understanding how social media impacts young lives"
- "Mental health, fitness, passion, curiosity"
- "Issues facing kids—how they are perceived and what they think of themselves"
- "Social media, compassion, confronting depression, subcultures, perceptions"

One audience member wrote that before the screening, they expected to see "amateurish docs made by students." Instead, they were surprised to see "honesty about mental health issues."

Other responses as to what surprised audiences included:

- "The thought process behind each and every movie."
- "The consistent high quality of all the footage, coupled with strong narratives"
- "The scope and success of the storytelling"
- "The maturity level of these filmmakers"
- "How articulate and thoughtful all of the filmmakers are:
They each had a vision, and it was awesome to see it fulfilled"



There was universal agreement—and 88% of audience members “strongly” agreed—that the youth creators thought about how to construct a story through the art of documentary. Everyone agreed (and 85% strongly agreed) that the filmmakers examined their lives and community to deliver a story worth telling. There was also 100% agreement (and 93% strong agreement) that students told stories with an authentic voice about topics they had a personal connection to.

PITCHNIC AUDIENCE RESPONSE

All of the audience members surveyed strongly agreed that the youth creators thought about how to tell a story worth telling through the art of filmmaking. Nearly all (97%) also strongly agreed that their ideas and perspectives felt authentic and original, and 94% found the films to be engaging.

What impacted the PitchNic audience the most?

- “I was surprised to see ... the depth of topics. Level of commitment. The [quality] of the interviews. The points of view of teenagers.”
- “Making a somewhat simple story into a beautifully shot and intimate film.”
- “I was so surprised and touched by the stories, the quality of the films and the teamwork of the crews. Great and professional work.”
- “I was so emotionally moved. I loved being sucked in like I was. 10 out of 10!”

Many audience members recognized the effort and teamwork that went into the making of the films, particularly under a condensed timeline and other challenges as a result of COVID. Several people were impressed by the “passion” of the young filmmakers, saying the films would “stick with them” beyond the screening.

Finding 3: Responsibility and Sense of Community

By engaging in collaborative production experiences guided by professional artist-mentors, youth learn to take responsibility as members of a creative community.

TREATED LIKE AN ARTIST FROM DAY ONE

For many young people, coming to Spy Hop is their first encounter with a creative community of practice. But for the experienced staff of mentors, Spy Hop is more of a destination—a place to land after trying on many other roles and positions.

“I came to Spy Hop because it resonated deeply with what I was trying to do in my life,” Jared Gilmore, an audio mentor, told us. Another mentor, Amanda Madden, described how Spy Hop “kicked off” their career in filmmaking. When it was time for a shift back to Salt Lake, landing a position at Spy Hop was “the perfect fit.” For mentors like Gilmore and Madden—who were previously Spy Hop students themselves—coming back to teach felt like “literally giving back” to the place where they got started.

Conner Estes, another mentor who grew up in Spy Hop programs, pointed to the ways in which he was treated as an artist from “the first day [he] walked through the door” as a teenage student. “That feels like a huge asset,” he told us. “It’s something that often differentiates Spy Hop from all other after-school programs.”

Students noted that this was the attitude toward everyone—not just those who showed up with a wealth of creative skill already under their belt. “Cathy and everyone just made me feel comfortable, because the setting is kind of like, ‘You’re here to make music, and it doesn’t matter what level you’re at,’” one participant said. A former student observed:

“Spy Hop dramatically altered the course of my life for the better. Because of what I learned there as a kid, I was able to pursue creative goals with confidence and have landed a well-paying, full-time job because of it. I cannot overstate how important Spy Hop was, and continues to be, for me.”

‘TO GET SOMETHING DONE, YOU HAVE TO DO IT’

“Taking responsibility” was the phrase used by a student in the PitchNic program: “Paige [a former Spy Hop mentor] had this joke that I would pay her a dollar every time I said, ‘I don’t know.’ That has really stuck with me. I try really hard not to say ‘I don’t know’ as much anymore, because I realized it doesn’t get anything done. You have to take responsibility and you have to choose. At some point, even if you don’t want to choose, you just have to choose.”

“To get something done, you have to do it,” as one Spy Hopper succinctly put it. “Does that make sense? I’m ambitious and there’s a lot that I want to get done, right? But then—it sounds so dumb, but it’s like—if we didn’t make the movie, we wouldn’t have made the movie. You know, if there’s anything else in life that I want to do, I have to do it no matter how large-scale it is.”

MORE THAN AN INSTRUCTOR: The role of the professional mentor

The professional mentors who make up Spy Hop's staff are more than just instructors. They comprise a vital community of practice that plays a foundational role in Spy Hop's impact, the signature "Spy Hop Way."

Students recognized that although they learned a ton from their mentors, there was something different about the way they were being taught in Spy Hop classes. **"We are mentored,"** one student explained, **"but it's like, they make sure the ideas are ours, and they just help us achieve those goals."**

"She wasn't there to necessarily teach," another student qualified. "She was there to help us and give us suggestions. She did end up teaching us certain things."

When we reviewed the survey data in which students were asked to describe their mentors, one word that came up over and over again was "caring." Others were genuine, kind, energetic, passionate, helpful and nice.

"At first, I thought he was just trying to be another therapist," recalled one student from the Sending Messages program. "I was kind of skeptical. I went, hmmm." But then, he realized his mentor was "not so different from any of us. ... It's hard to trust. But after a while, [I realized] he's pretty cool. He's here to help us."

"I'm not here to judge," Myke Johnson, Community Programs Director, told students at Odyssey House during a recent focus group. **"I'm here to learn."**

Liz Schulte, another mentor, sums up her teaching philosophy as "the opposite of shame": **"I think when you shame people, you destroy creativity. The opposite of shaming is constantly building up creativity and invigorating."**

Schulte's approach to mentorship transcends the conventional constructs of teaching. As one of her students described what Schulte meant to her: "Maybe like a role model, but like I think what Dumbledore is to Harry Potter. She's a really important person to me."

We found that it's not just that mentors are supportive; it's that they're actively trying to cultivate a kind of self-determination in Spy Hop youth. As one mentor, Pepe Manzo, told us, "I love the term 'mentor,' because it speaks to me as something that goes beyond just teaching things."

In fact, 99% of Spy Hop students felt they were "frequently reminded that mentors believed in them and their ability to succeed" (Hello Insight data, 2020-21).

"I think he had a set plan of believing in us," said another student of their mentor, Conner Estes. "Even from the beginning, he's like, 'You can do it.'"

"Spy Hop was instrumental in shaping the path my life has taken. My mentor taught me not only the tactical skills of film-making, but **also broadened my world view and challenged me to think critically about all of the information I consumed. These are skills that I still utilize and value today. My career would be non-existent if I had not attended Spy Hop, and I am extremely grateful for the knowledge, friendships and skills that I gained during my time there."** —A Spy Hop alumnus

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

Whether they were described as friends, colleagues or mentors, students frequently named the creative community they found at Spy Hop as a highlight of their experience.

"I think I learned more from each person than I did from my guitar lessons or trying to study music [on my own]," one participant said. "Just getting the experience of learning from other people made me learn a lot more and be more confident."

Interestingly, the value of learning from others was reflected not just in student feedback, but in the perspectives of the mentors themselves: **"My biggest goal is just to ... teach these young people how to play with each other and how to collaborate. Like, really trying to step away from your individuality and see yourself in this whole, which is the band."** - Cathy Foy, Spy Hop Mentor

The lesson seems to have stuck: **"After you bring [your song] to the band, it's the band's song,"** a Musicology student explained. **"You don't say it's 'your' song. But you kind of start it off as yourself and then bring it into [the group]."**

Research shows that, in most areas of practice, expertise develops far more quickly in the presence of a like-minded community of practitioners.¹⁰ **"I think what's cool is all the kids [at Spy Hop] are passionate about film,"** one student told us. **"I go to high school and meet a lot of different kids, but there is not really a central thing that brings us all together. But I go to a PitchNic class and I know it's like, at the end of the day, we're all there to try to make the best films we can make. And we're all in this project together. And I think that's really cool bond that we all share."**

For some students, these friendships—forged in the act of collaboration—can be unexpected. One student told us about an unlikely connection with what he calls "a quiet kid":

"So at the beginning, I didn't really know him. And then we got into COVID and we worked a little bit on the set together. And he is someone who in my regular life, I probably would not have talked to that much, just because he's like a pretty shy kid. But as you get to know him, he's like a really cool kid, I think. And I'm really glad. I just made a new friend. I think ... we'll talk after the program."

Recommendation 3: Build a participatory culture of reflective practice and collaborative learning among mentors.

Mentorship is a key ingredient of the Spy Hop Way. Mentors at Spy Hop help youth to be seen—as young artists and as members of a shared creative culture. In our observations over the last two years, we noticed that Spy Hop mentors have an implicit understanding of how to approach the challenges that youth experience across varied contexts. Consider these different responses that experienced mentors gave to our focus group question: **"Why do you do what you do in the way that you do it?"**

"My ability is to get really excited about ideas and concepts like mixing styles and doing all these different things. ... I bring that passion and energy into the room, and that rubs off on people."

"I teach all of my classes vastly differently, based upon the quantity of time that I have with the students. In an introductory class, I want them to feel empowered. But [in longer classes] my focus and intention is vastly different. It could be that I am like helping a kid to smash his perfectionism. It could be that I'm just helping a kid to form relationships or bonds."

¹⁰ www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Surpassing-Ourselves%3A-An-Inquiry-into-the-Nature-of-Bereiter-Scardamalia/4391b8790df991577bbeb6014f2ee1c8242749f2

“My approach is to form a relaxed environment that doesn't feel like there's too much pressure to make something that is good. It's like a non-judgmental, positive environment. My biggest goal is to help the students develop creative confidence so they are authentic to what they're trying to make.”

“I feel like I try to approach classes with a pretty slow and steady energy. I also try to create a lot of clarity around what the goals are. I always try to ensure kids can actually be focused on their projects.”

Less-experienced mentors benefit from listening to and learning from these stories and experiences. By another measure, newer mentors—who are often closer in age to their students—bring new levels of expertise in emerging platforms, tools and youth culture. All mentors have much to learn from and contribute to shared discussions in ways that can help new knowledge “stick to practice.”

This leads us to the insight that while Spy Hop mentors are expected to work toward common learning outcomes, they do so in highly individualized and contextualized ways. Mentors appreciate this opportunity to structure their classes in ways that optimize their personal strengths and perspectives around teaching and learning. Yet, they also like being able to lean on their colleagues to solve problems that arise.

“The thing that I appreciate the most is ... this freedom with your class to formulate projects that you think are cool and interesting. But there's just a lot of support for when emotional situations come up with students. You never feel like you're totally alone in a situation. ... There's tons of support—everyone comes up with solutions.” —A Spy Hop mentor

We recommend that Spy Hop explore ways to make more room for mutual engagement around this joint enterprise of learning, so that a shared repertoire of practices and concepts can be negotiated by mentors collectively around topics and problems that concern them all. This collaboration is particularly important because mentors often teach alone even as they address similar real-classroom problems.

A shared community of practice (CoP) that is self-led by the mentors themselves can help them think together, share tacit knowledge and develop insights that can improve teaching and learning for everyone. This kind of collaborative learning can be helped along when mentors work from a place of joint inquiry using a common set of data/stories that ground their discovery and discussion process.

The Spy Hop Competency Framework, the Spy Hop Way or even something different such as a Youth Voice Portfolio Design could help provide this important frame of reference. Especially now with so many newer mentors, there is an opportunity to redesign a framework that cultivates more ownership and connection to program outcomes. Thinking through the artifacts that students produce as evidence of their learning and growth could also help all mentors clarify and codify intended learning outcomes across classes and programs, while sparking new ideas for best practices that achieve these outcomes.



Spotlight: **Feeling Heard**

● ***Sending Messages gives a public voice to incarcerated youth***

For youth who are incarcerated, learning how to build healthy relationships with others and take ownership over their lives is critical for success when they rejoin society. A Spy Hop program in which incarcerated youth produce their own podcasts is teaching them these essential skills — while empowering them in ways they haven't experienced before and helping them imagine a better future.

Sending Messages is a program conducted in partnership with the Utah Board of Juvenile Justice, Salt Lake County Youth Center and Utah State Board of Education. In this 10-week program, Spy Hop works with youth ages 14-21 who have been convicted of a wide array of offenses.

Participants craft authentic stories about their experiences and share them with real-world audiences through self-produced podcasts. In the course of these activities, they build self-confidence, community, and a strong self of purpose. Adam Sherlock, the co-developer of the program, describes it as a ten week process of transformation: "These kids change right there in the moment in front of you." These changes are a direct result of Sherlock's transformative teaching style, which draws on his past experience working with young people in custodial settings:

"It's about validation of experience. I think that so often getting these kids to talk about the things that they've gone through in their lives...helps them quantify those experiences. Using radio documentary as the real vehicle helps them to legitimize and validate the feelings that they have, the experiences that they've gone through... in a way that feels constructive. Like the catharsis through art, that process is really kind of handing over this new, really powerful tool to these kids."

Myke Johnson, Spy Hop's director of community programs and a mentor with years of experience teaching beatmaking and audio arts. **"The work that they're doing is really important—that's how I view it", he says. "It helps them find the desire to interpret themselves through that art form in that medium."**

Sherlock describes how mentors consistently message to the young people that mentors believe they can be artists: **"We tell them, this is your opportunity to get your voice out there and get it heard. The idea behind that has so much light and heat—it makes them feel a part of something."**

Youth participants agree. **"I feel like [this program] really does matter because adults can see where we come from, the youth, and having a whole different kind of story than adults."**

Building Trust

Sending Messages began in 2010 and is now one of the longest-running and most prolific media arts training programs for incarcerated youth in the country. It has won numerous local and national awards.

The sustainable impact achieved by Sending Messages is not by accident. **"We have systems in place that have been built over years and years and years,"** says Sherlock. Despite changes with instructors, facilities and youth over time, Sending Messages is organized around a single premise according to Sherlock: **"...knowing who these kids are and how you actually can connect with them and convince them to make these kinds of stories."**

SENDING

LOUD & CLEAR
YOUTH RADIO PRESENTS

MESSAGES

THE AWARD WINNING PODCAST

TRUE STORIES, POETRY AND INTERVIEWS FROM A SECURE CARE
YOUTH FACILITY IN SALT LAKE CITY.

A SPY HOP PRODUCTION

GO TO SENDINGMESSAGES.ORG

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ORIGINAL WATERCOLOR BY ADAM SHERLOCK

Johnson agrees that building trust and connection is the key. **"We're able to have these conversations with these young people because they see us as people that they can connect with, like kids will open up to me,"** even while he notes that he is not a licensed therapist.

Josh Keil, a supervisor at Decker Lake who oversees external partnerships, notes the significance of Spy Hop's mentors visiting the facility as young, BIPOC artists who are also working audio professionals. (Typical volunteers are often older and whiter.) **"Having people come in who look closer to them, I think, is a big deal and it adds some cachet."**

One young woman from Sending Messages explains how her sense of affinity with her mentor led her to trust him.

"You know, it's hard to trust. ...And then I realized, like, he's not so different than none of us. Like, we all been through the struggle like at our lowest lowest. it made me feel like I could trust him, you know."

'It Brings Them Together'

Spy Hop partners with juvenile justice facilities across Utah to deliver Sending Messages to dozens of participants each year. At Decker Lake in Salt Lake City, where Sending Messages has operated for the past decade, the program has made an indelible impact.

Keil says behavior improves noticeably on Spy Hop days because of the excitement among youth: **"Literally every kid gets excited about it, and the kids who aren't doing it are jealous of the ones who are. They either like it so much they don't want to lose it or they realize their peers like it so much that, even if they don't want to participate, they're trying not to lose it for everybody else because the social stigma of losing it for everyone would be so severe."**

Youth at Decker Lake look forward to their time with Spy Hop so much that things seem to run more smoothly at the facility. This benefits the staff as well, says, noting that the days when Spy Hop is on site are "like cherry shifts."

Keil notices that when youth are first given the chance to tell their stories, they first want to talk about subjects that are off limits according to the facility's strict rules around language and topics. However, Spy Hop helps guide them toward a different kind of expression:

"Once they get out of that mindset ... they almost always talk about their families, which is not what I would expect from some of these guys. But once they can't talk about their gang and they can't talk about drugs and they can't talk about guns, then they're like, 'Well, what do I have left?' And then it almost always comes back to family."

Keil describes how youth are able to be vulnerable in the Sending Messages space, investigating personal topics and giving voice to their authentic identity—something that is challenging to do in a context where they often have their guard up. He also observes how even youth who normally don't get along are brought together and sit at the same computer to make podcasts and give each other feedback. They're able to put their differences aside for a few hours as they engage in creative work: **"It kind of brings them together. ... Whatever annoying things have been happening, they can put it aside for a couple of hours."**

In fact, youth in the program continue working on their projects even after the mentor packs up all the equipment and carts it out of the facility, Keil notes. The program's impact continues to be felt beyond its scheduled period.

For incarcerated youth, if they form stronger bonds, help their peers, apply skills outside the program or develop new social habits, then this is strong evidence the program is having a lasting effect.

Leveling Up

On a more personal level, Keil describes how one young man in particular, "James," was able to level up into a peer mentoring and assistant teaching role when COVID prevented Spy Hop mentors from teaching in person.

James entered Decker Lake when he was 14 or 15 and is now 21 years old. He had been through the Sending Messages program multiple times, and so he knew how to use all of the audio equipment.

The program mentor at the time, Gabby Huggins, describes him as a quiet young man but "funny, very thoughtful [and] super creative." The opportunity to produce digital media helped bring him out of his shell.

Keil says that James had not only developed a close bond with Huggins but had also become deeply engaged in producing audio and extracurricular video works in the program. For example, he and another youth were asked by the director of Decker Lake to make a training video for internal purposes. Keil recalls:

“He was doing interviews and thinking of questions and having conversations and getting an opportunity to speak to grown-ups on a more level playing field. For him, that was a big deal to be able to have that sort of interaction with us as humans, instead of in an unequal power dynamic. ... He likes being treated like an adult.”

When the pandemic prevented Huggins from entering the facility during the summer of 2020, James assumed a leadership role in the program. Says Keil: **“He basically ran the show. ... He was in charge of getting everything hooked up with the computers and the microphones and all of that stuff.”**

“I would drop off the gear,” Huggins says. **“He was in charge of grabbing and locking up the gear, making sure it was functioning, and making sure everyone’s projects were getting saved onto the drives. Making sure that kids were working on their projects. ... He was definitely facilitating a process for kids. He would give feedback about students’ work. He made sure that stuff was organized. He was troubleshooting with people. He was able to do all that.”**

Keil saw this as a real leadership opportunity, allowing James to take on more responsibility and perform as a role model for other youth. The self-confidence he gained from his experience in the program enabled him to rise to this challenge.

A Gateway to Understanding

Sending Messages has not only had a big impact on youth participants; it has also shaped listeners’ perceptions and given them a window into the experiences of incarcerated youth.

While audiences for Sending Messages podcasts via iTunes and Soundcloud are public and nationwide, some of the most important people reached do not come from outside the care facility, but within it. Johnson says:

“If a student is excited enough about what they’re working on, that they share their work with other people within that system - a staff member, a therapist, another youth, it shows that there is a change happening between you as a teaching artist from a different organization and them as a youth within the system. When kids say, ‘look what I did’, those are the moments where you really know that what you’re doing is engaging.”

One program participant called the podcasts a “gateway” for staff to understand youth voices and perspectives.

Matt Mateus Education Director at Spy Hop, acknowledges that Sending Messages podcasts are helping to shift public perception of incarcerated youth: “One of the most powerful things that I’ve seen happening with Sending Messages is the potential for [the works that youth produce] to help re-humanize young people who are incarcerated through these shared experiences. It can help folks who are not incarcerated see these young people differently.”

The groundbreaking work produced by youth in Sending Messages has been recognized and supported by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for more than ten years. In 2022, Spy Hop was awarded an NEA Research Grant to conduct a project called “Podcasts, Prisons and Pedagogies: A Study on How Media Arts Spark New Possibilities for Incarcerated Youth.”

(See the Competency Framework for Sending Messages and other Youth in Care Programs in Appendix A.)



CONCLUSION

In this report, we sought to collect and analyze data amidst the backdrop of unprecedented disruption: soaring political division, decline in social trust, systemic racism and injustice, isolation, trauma and uncertainty about the future, all of this exacerbated by social media.

We began this evaluation process with a broad set of research questions focused on how young people have been impacted by Spy Hop programming over the course of two tumultuous years.

Within this broader context, we focused our evaluative lens on Spy Hop's intended purpose, asking how Spy Hop's commitment to youth media and voice aligns with the results we saw across programs.

As in our previous research reports, we found that there is powerful teaching, learning and youth impact happening at Spy Hop. What's more, these benefits continued even when in-person learning was disrupted during the pandemic—and they gave students an outlet for creativity and self-expression at a time when they needed it most.

We also recognized that Spy Hop could benefit by exploring more authentic and participatory approaches to collecting and reflecting on evidence of student learning and promising practices in pedagogy and instruction.

To achieve these goals, we recommend that Spy Hop think more intentionally about how it might foster a culture of shared inquiry. Here are a few examples of the types of questions that can drive this culture of inquiry:

HOW MIGHT WE ...

- Support participatory action research across the organization?
- Build a youth portfolio plan to capture authentic assessment of student learning?
- Build on individual and collective strengths of teaching artists?
- Innovate new ways to apply anti-racist values into everyday practice?
- Bring fun, joy, play and creativity to our work with students and each other?
- Openly reflect on successes, risks and failures in a supportive atmosphere?
- Create time and space for teaching artists to exercise their craft, renew and create their own work?

When we asked staff what drew them to Spy Hop, we were surprised at how similar their answers were to the ones we heard from youth—in a nutshell, **being part of a creative community**. Spy Hop's greatest strength may reside in how well it models the value of creative community within its own organizational culture. Imagine what more can be built by acting on this simple and powerful idea.

Appendix A

SPY HOP COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

CREATIVE PRACTICE IN MEDIA ARTS

Students can demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Generate and conceptualize ideas for media artworks
- Apply creative and artistic processes to complete and refine media artworks
- Apply a deliberate design process to generate ideas, test theories, develop prototypes
- Create innovative design to solve authentic problems

COLLABORATIVE PRODUCTION

Students can demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Work as part of a team toward a common purpose
- Contribute meaningfully to group productions
- Give and received constructive criticism with peers in a respectful and appropriate manner

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

Students can demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Set and manage goals for projects
- Break down big tasks into smaller steps
- Reflect on setbacks to adjust goals as necessary

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Students can demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Keep emotions and behavior in check
- Take positive creative risks
- Manage time effectively
- Persist through challenges when creating projects

CRITICAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

Students can demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Critically analyze and reflect upon media, including works produced by themselves and peers as well as mainstream and indie media examples presented in class
- Use the language of the discipline when responding critically to media

SPY HOP COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK (Continued)

AUTHENTIC VOICE

Students can demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Create media works true to their authentic identity, interests, perspectives and/or experiences
- Experiment, tinker and test ideas in order to develop original works and concepts

PARTICIPATION*

Students can demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Consistently participate in class activities and projects
- Arrive on time ready to contribute
- Engage with peers as members of a team
- Make effort to communicate personally and professionally with mentor

(Rubric created by Convergence Design Lab in collaboration with Spy Hop.)

*This construct was originally called "Contribution" on mentor-facing measurement instruments; we have relabeled it "Participation" here to avoid confusion with Hello Insight's construct of "Contribution," which is defined in an entirely different way.

The Spy Hop Competency Framework is derived from several national standards frameworks, including:

National Core Media Arts Standards is a narrative document that outlines the philosophy, primary goals, dynamic processes, structures and outcomes that shape student learning and achievement in dance, media arts, music, theater and visual arts, as articulated in the National Core Arts Standards.

MHA Labs 21st Century Skill Building Blocks. Intent on increasing success factors for youth, MHA Labs designed a common set of easy-to-understand, 21st-century skill targets known as The Building Blocks. The Building Blocks comprise 35 core social, emotional and cognitive skills deemed critical for college, career and life success.

Hello Insight SEL Capacities measures and reports on the development of six core social and emotional (SEL) capacities in young people ages ten to 23. These capacities are proven to contribute to longer-term gains such as thriving, decreased risk-taking behaviors and improved academic performance.

ISTE Student Standards. The ISTE Standards for Students are designed to empower student voice and ensure that learning is a student-driven process. ISTE is home to a passionate community of global educators who believe in the power of technology to transform teaching and learning, accelerate innovation and solve tough problems in education.

YOUTH IN CARE PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Spy Hop's Sending Messages class is part of its Youth in Care Programs rather than the after-school programs. A unique theory of action and logic model for Youth in Care was drafted in 2021 as research shows that youth in care face a variety of circumstantial challenges, which can be well-served through media arts programming. While many of these are shared across contexts, it's important to note that there are particular adversities unique to each setting.

Foster care

For instance, youth in foster care settings are more likely to experience disruptions to their home or schooling environments, which can create difficulties in the realm of mental wellbeing (Fawley-King et al., 2017). For these youth, providing a stable and trustworthy environment is key.

Prisons

Incarcerated youth may experience a different set of challenges related to negative self-perception, hopelessness and social isolation (Miner-Romanoff, 2016). In this setting, creating opportunities to reframe a more positive sense of self and support productive relationship-building is essential.

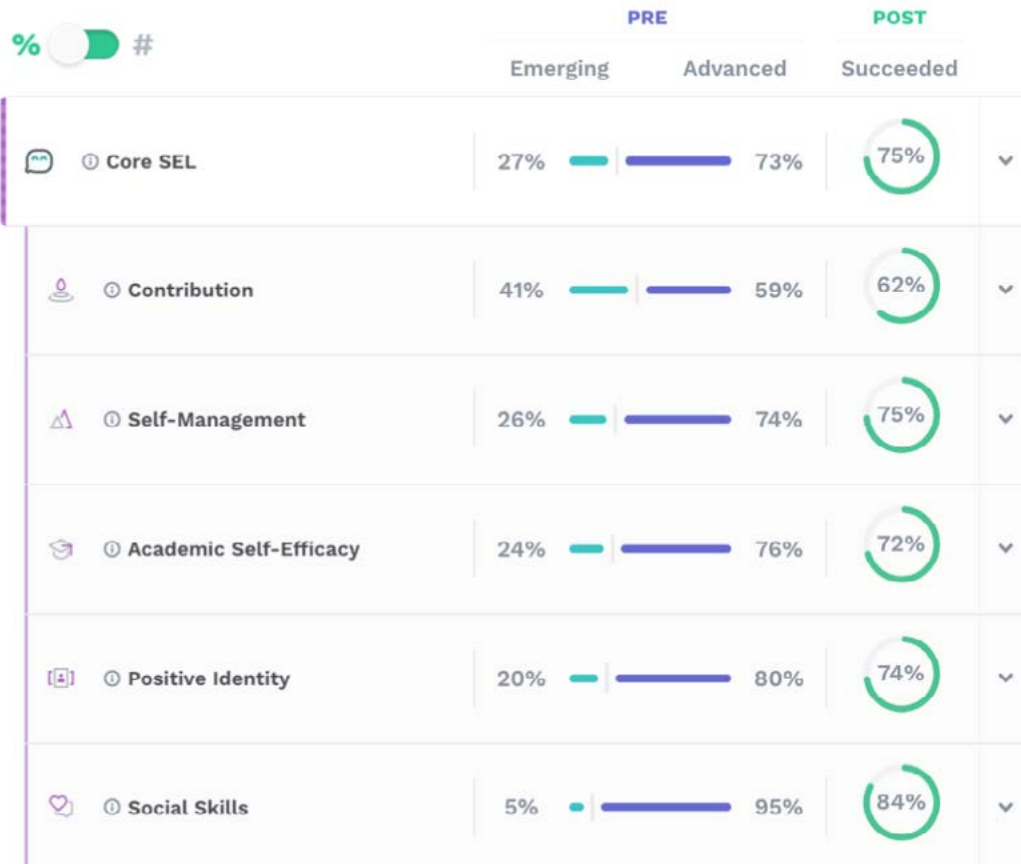
The following theory of action and logic model were developed by Convergence Design Lab by cross-referencing the existing research with data collected from Spy Hop mentors.

Theory of Action for Youth in Care

When we build healthy adult/youth relationships grounded in trust and positive expectations; show up authentically with youth and engage them in serious play; create space for self-authoring and self-expression in a choice-rich and low-barrier environment; and provide an artist-driven, production-centered community of practice with access to real-world audiences, then youth will develop positive self-concept, emotional resilience, purposefulness and belonging as they engage in the creation of t

YOUTH IN CARE OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK	
<p>TRUST AND RESPONSIBILITY</p> <p>Youth Will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feel safe and respected• Shift perception of adults based on mutual trust (trust yields trustworthiness)• Demonstrate responsibility and follow through (legitimate investment)• Improve ability to be in healthy relationships with adults <p>Audiences will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gain exposure to youth perspectives	<p>SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Express self-honesty• Experience "actual caring"• Able to express vulnerability
<p>CONNECTION AND COMMITMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Commitment to group process• Develop technical skills in media arts• Increased capacity for problem-solving• Curate the practice of listening and being listened to	<p>AGENCY AND PURPOSE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase positive self-esteem• Enhance self-understanding• Overcome stereotype threat• Sense of ownership over experience (narrative identity)• Redirect energy to positive actions

① CAPACITIES



EXPAND INTERESTS

RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES	YOUNG PEOPLE RECEIVED
① Ensure that young people have the opportunity to engage in activities they like to do.	 95%
① Encourage young people to take a risk and try something new, even when it seems difficult to do.	 88%
① Create opportunities for young people to try new things they have never done before.	 87%
① Provide opportunities for young people to meet and connect with new people.	 88%
① Create activities that reference or include things young people enjoy.	 78%
① Support young people to learn about one another, both their similarities and their differences.	 83%
① Provide opportunities for young people to explore their own passions, cultures, identities, and histories.	 68%

PROMOTE PEER BONDS

RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES	YOUNG PEOPLE RECEIVED
① Create opportunities for young people to work together and help one another.	 73%
① Create opportunities for young people to work in small groups to solve problems.	 72%
① Create a sense of team or group identity.	 87%
① Create an environment in which young people feel safe and supported by one another.	 95%
① Carve out time in your day to learn about and listen to young people.	 98%
① When young people share thoughts and opinions, let them know how much you value their ideas.	 96%
① Take the time to really understand young people and their lives outside the program.	 88%
① Help young people feel safe and supported by consistently and purposefully applying their recommendations.	 100%

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



Learning Preferences

[View Details](#)



Program Satisfaction

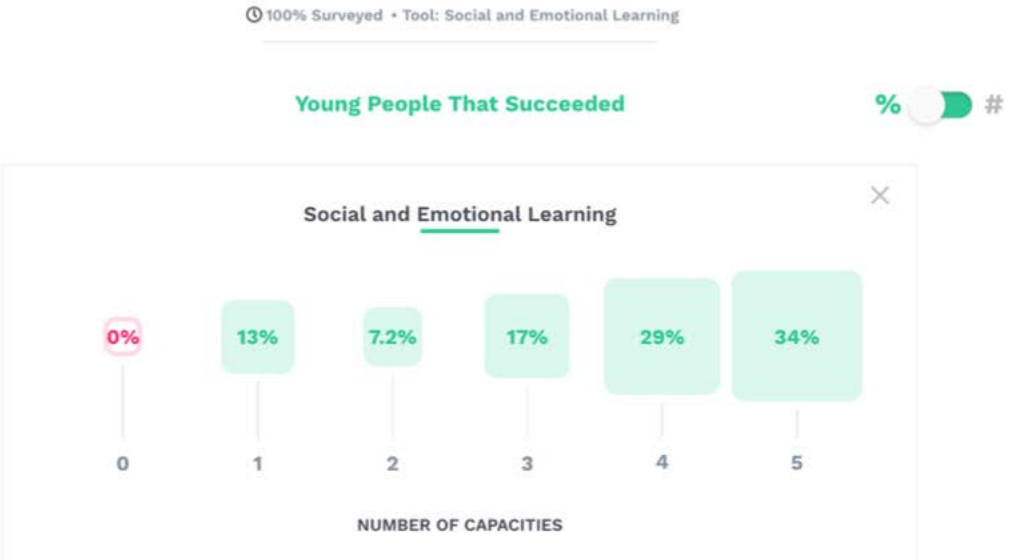
[View Details](#)

🕒 100% Surveyed • Tool: Social and Emotional Learning

RESULTSABOUT

Learning Preferences	ENJOY	ENJOY + EXPERIENCED	%	#
Hands-On Project/Activity	86%	86%	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Work with Peers	75%	64%	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Learning on Their Own	61%	60%	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Group Learning	58%	73%	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Work with Adult One-on-One	55%	52%	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Physical Activity/Sports	53%	5%	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Classroom Setting	49%	57%	<input type="checkbox"/>	

OVERALL IMPACT



Appendix C: Spy Hop Classes

OUT OF SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

Spy Hop Productions' Core Programs take place at its facility in Salt Lake City and are offered year-round. Working collaboratively with their peers and guided by professional media artists, students explore their creativity, identity and career and higher education interests. Hands-on, project-based learning experiences help students build valuable 21st Century skills while giving them a foundation in digital media technologies that prepares them for a future in the growing digital and creative economy. Each year, students create over 900 works of media that are shared with local, national and international audiences. The following classes comprise Spy Hop's Core Programs.

Resonate: Hip Hop Production – An alternative hip-hop production and performance program that pushes back against the negative stereotypes of the genre. In this intensive 2-month class, students are challenged to write music and lyrics that relate to their lives, their communities and the world. The program culminates in a live performance at a local all-ages venue.

Loud & Clear Youth Radio - Spy Hop Productions collaborates with Salt Lake City based community radio station KRCL 90.9FM to offer Utah's only youth-produced radio program. In this year-long program, participants learn audio production skills, radio history, the craft of storytelling, FCC rules and regulations, writing skills, interviewing, "DJing", voice training, and the importance and intricacies of media literacy. Every Saturday night, Loud and Clear youth host their own radio show on KRCL, playing music, interviewing guests, hosting live local bands, presenting radio documentaries, and highlighting calendar items pertinent to the youth community.

Musicology - Musicology gives young musicians the opportunity for a full-spectrum band experience that emphasizes creativity and individual expression. Over a ten-month period, participants write, rehearse and record their own musical material, which culminates in a record release and live performance on stage at a local Salt Lake City venue.

Open Studio - Every Friday from 3-7 pm, Spy Hop Productions opens its two state-of-the-art recording studios to any youth, age 14-19. Guided by a professional mentor and engineered by audio apprentices, young hip hop artists and other musicians converge and create with other artists, record, mix, and leave with a copy of their new creations burned to a CD totally free of charge.

Woodshedding – In this 2-month long program, students focus on the individual songwriting process to create songs that utilize concepts like writing in key, arranging, melody, dynamics, lyric writing, and finishing compositions. This class invites collaboration as well as allows for individual work time. All levels are welcome.

PitchNic - PitchNic was conceived in 2001 as an innovative way to unite young filmmakers with supporters of independent film. In this intensive year-long program, student writers, directors, and producers work in teams to create two fiction films and two documentary films (15-25 minutes each, in length). Through the guidance of a professional film mentor, students learn every aspect of the filmmaking process from pre-production and production to post-production and distribution. The four films are "pitched" at Spy Hop Productions' annual benefit where critical dollars are raised for production costs, giving students a budget from which to work. At the culmination of the program, the students' films are screened at a local theater to a 500-person audience. This premiere gives students the opportunity to discuss their creative process and to answer questions from members of the community. While PitchNic serves a total of 12 students per year, the program involves over 100 other youth on production, and numerous community partners. PitchNic films have gained local, national, and international recognition at numerous film festivals.

Reel Stories - Created in 2002 in collaboration with the Sundance Institute, Reel Stories is offered as a one-month, 30-hour per week intensive summer workshop that gives high school students

the opportunity to create their own documentaries. The class culminates in a community screening at a local theater in Salt Lake City.

Watch This! - Watch This! is a youth-produced, civic-minded, grass roots television show that airs on public television. Over the course of the year, students between the ages of 16 and 19 produce a series of short videos on community relevant topics of their choice, work with local TV stations, and learn to shoot with professional video cameras and edit with Final Cut Pro.

Media Labs - Spy Hop Productions offers 3-week introductory and intermediate classes in film-making, sound engineering, and interactive media. Students learn the basics of each discipline that prepares them for further Spy Hop classes or other multimedia experiences outside of Spy Hop.

Multimedia Apprenticeship Program (MAP) - is a 4 ½-month long program that provides 60 youth per year with project-based, professional experience in film, audio, and design. This vocational style program offers youth the unique opportunity to learn valuable creative and technical skills in the media arts while working with real clients on digital media projects. Apprentices also develop personal portfolios that are used to increase their college entry and employment opportunities.

No Static – Started in 2020, No Static is a radio podcast program that gives students the opportunity to address social issues and topics that are relevant to them. Students learn about different types of audio storytelling (vox pop, radio commentary, radio drama, and broadcast journalism) and work with other teens to record, interview, and edit two unique podcast episodes over a 4-month period.

801 Sessions - 801 Sessions is a 10-month music business apprenticeship offering opportunities to teens interested in learning about different facets of the music business while producing and recording live music performances. Each month students will plan, book, promote and film an event at a local all-ages club. The headlining act at each event will be featured on the 801 Sessions website in an exclusive video and downloadable songs from the performance produced by the apprentices.

PowerUp! – Power Up! is a 10-month long program where students develop a fully functional educational/civic-oriented game to highlight or explore a social issue of interest to them. Using the latest professional level hardware and software, students learn what it takes to produce a game, including story-development, coding/programming various game mechanics, 2D and 3D modeling, and designing the user interface.

Phase 2 Productions - Phase 2 Productions enables Spy Hop Productions graduates the chance to sharpen their skills, build their portfolios, and explore career opportunities, while earning income. Video production services provided by Phase 2 students assist businesses and nonprofits in creating visual impact while furthering the professional growth and development of emerging creatives in Salt Lake City. Income generated from Phase 2 directly supports Spy Hop's other media arts programs.

Summer Camps – Each summer Spy Hop offers week-long summer camps that are three hours per day for youth ages 10-12. Classes range from stop-motion animation and filmmaking to song-writing, game design, and 2D/3D animation. Spy Hop also partners with other organizations to provide full day camps.

Spy Hop Youth Prevention Coalition – The Spy Hop Youth Prevention Coalition is a collective impact initiative employing an evidence-based Communities That Care (CTC) model that works to foster youth wellbeing while strengthening prevention capacity and infrastructure within Salt Lake City and across the state. Formed in 2019, the Coalition is comprised of 15 public and non-profit organizations who work collectively to address urban young people's needs and challenges.

Tech Liberation Project (TLP) – Launched by the Spy Hop Youth Prevention Coalition during the

pandemic, the TLP is a digital equity project to ensure equal access to the technology and tools our youth and families need for future success. Spy Hop collects used computers from the public, then wipes and refurbishes them; and working with Coalition members, redistributes them to students and families in need.

COMMUNITY & STATEWIDE PROGRAMS

Spy Hop Productions' Community based programs are offered in partnership with schools, libraries, other youth service organizations and with the State of Utah's Juvenile Justice Services. Programs serve 18,000+ students each year across the State of Utah and fall under the following umbrella of services.

Sending Messages/ Youth-in-Care - These programs provide film, music, audio production and design classes to youth in the foster care system, residential treatment programs, secure facilities, and state's custody. Students are served on the continuum of prevention, intervention, and treatment.

Community Partnerships – Spy Hop partners with schools and libraries to provide in-school and afterschool media arts programs for a particular community.

Statewide In-school Outreach (POPS) - Inspiring digital arts curriculum delivered to students and teachers in-schools throughout Utah. Programs deliver concepts of media arts in film, audio, game design, and storytelling through creative use of image and sound, and are tailored to specific language arts curriculum themes.

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Spy Hop's **mission** is to mentor young people in the digital media arts to help them find their voice, tell their stories, and be empowered to affect positive change in their lives, their communities, and the world.

We **envision** a world in which all young people possess the skills and mindsets necessary for future success and that their voices are heard and valued in their communities.

spyhop | YOUTH
MEDIA
MATTERS

Connect with Us!

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