LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY

Youth Programming and Data: Los Angeles Public Library

Los Angeles Public Library's 73 locations serve the largest population of any public library system in the United States (3.9 million people in the library's service area). People borrow items from the LAPL collection more than 15 million times a year and more than 18,000 public programs are offered annually. Many of those programs are targeted at encouraging a lifelong love of reading and learning for children and young adults.

Los Angeles Public Library staff responsible for programming for children and young adults seek to use data to answer important questions, including: "How do we share the impact of our work?;" "How do we extend our programs effectively to underserved communities?;" and, "How do we ensure that our programs remain relevant?"

Eva Mitnick, Director of the Engagement and Learning Division for the Los Angeles Public Library, recently shared some of the challenges and opportunities that are involved in evaluation and youth programming.

Q. Could you share examples of the work you (and others at your library) have done to gather and analyze data from youth?

Eva Mitnick

"We collect (and to a certain extent analyze) data from youth for the following:

- *Summer Reading -- We use the CLA survey, plus output data like registration, attendance at programs, etc.*
- *Summer Lunch -- Again, we use the CLA survey and attendance data.*
- *Student Zones (afterschool homework centers) -- Surveys and output data*
- *All of our STEM/STEAM programs and workshops -- Surveys, observation, and output data"*

Q. How have you encouraged youth to complete surveys (for example, have you offered any incentives)?

"For all the programs I listed in my response to the first question (Summer Reading, Summer Lunch, Student Zones, and STEM/STEAM programs), we have kids fill out their own surveys. It's been pretty successful. Our kids are getting very used to the process (and pretty bored with it, too, most likely).

For several years, surveys have been a feature of every single STEAM program, so we just make sure kids and teens fill them out before they get up from the tables (although we recently ended this requirement and are revamping our method of evaluating this program).

Summer Reading is a bit different, as librarians have different methods of getting the surveys filled out - at programs, when kids come to collect a prize, or both. We have tried to build it into the Summer Reading game board, giving points for completing the survey or making it a requirement. This year, everyone who registered received a link to the survey so that they could complete it online.

At Summer Lunch, it's a captive audience (they're eating!), plus their parents are usually there filling out their own surveys.

We offer incentives sometimes, like bookmarks or pencils. But the main thing is to emphasize that we want their feedback and to make the survey as short and simple as possible. For SRC and Summer Lunch, the surveys are a bit longer than we would prefer (we use the CLA surveys), but on the other hand, kids only have to fill them out once."

Q. Have you conducted surveys, focus groups, or interviews with <u>teens</u>? If so, please describe. Are there any things you did to adapt to more successfully gather data from teens?

"Often! Including all the programs mentioned earlier.

Currently, several of our branches are also serving as pilot sites for an [IMLS grant-funded project](#) with Mimi Ito and UC Irvine to test more effective methods of assessing learning outcomes. The main evaluation method, a "Talkback Board," involves one or more giant pieces of paper containing questions; teens put colored sticker dots on them to indicate their answers. It's easier and more fun than filling out a survey, but may be harder (or at least more time consuming) to analyze."
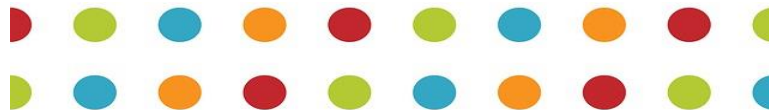
Q. What challenges or obstacles have you encountered as you've worked to gather and analyze this data?

"The main challenges are:

1. Design of surveys -- Figuring out what we want to know and then how to get that information. Keeping the survey short and simple. Avoiding "leading" the survey-takers. Not falling into the trap of just asking questions that we know will elicit the response we want.

2. Getting kids and youth to fill out surveys (more on that below).

3. Analyzing the data – We'd like to get better at gleaning important and surprising information from the meshing/crunching of survey data with output data.

4. Using the data not just to write reports for donors but to change and improve programs."

Q. What have you learned from your research? (and how have you used those lessons to change or improve?)

"Because of the challenge with analyzing data that I mentioned earlier, we have mostly learned very simple things. For example, most kids and teens love Summer Reading (no big surprise). More girls than boys register for Summer Reading, and many more girls than boys fill out the Summer Reading surveys. Kids and teens love our STEAM programs.

What I'd like to do is dig deeper and find out, for example, if there is a correlation between kids who DIDN'T like Summer Reading as much and, say, their age or the branch they attend or any other factor.

Here's an example of something surprising we learned that I will certainly use to plan future programs. A series of STEAM workshops (for example, 4 weekly programs on different sorts of simple robots) doesn't seem to lead to any more growth of knowledge or enjoyment of STEAM topics than single session workshops do. We thought that each lesson would reinforce and build on the next, but it didn't work like that. What I don't know is whether this has to do with the curriculum, or because the same kids didn't attend every workshop, or both."

Eva Mitnick has been the Director of the Engagement and Learning Division for the Los Angeles Public Library since early 2016. She has also been a children's librarian, branch manager, coordinator of youth services, and the director of Central Library at LAPL. When she's not pondering library program data, she enjoys reading, dining out, hanging out with other librarians, and being a gym rat.