

# Learning Lab at WHYY

## Planning Study Synopsis

*Picture the Learning Lab at WHYY, a place where community organizations and individuals come to learn the latest in digital production from broadcast professionals. The lobby, whose walls are covered with giant screens showcasing cutting-edge digital art, opens onto a studio stage, where a piano virtuoso is preparing for a master class before a live audience. Surrounding the stage, technicians ready equipment for a live datacast to area schools, where students will be able to view the performance and remotely participate in a discussion with the musician. In a classroom beyond the studio, a media producer teaches hands-on video production to outreach staff from community development organizations. Nearby, in the Project Shop, representatives of local not-for-profits work with experts to sort through the digital technologies that will enable a multi-site, region-wide, issues-oriented town meeting. It is a place alive with creativity, invention, and energy, connecting the region through digital technology.*

In April 2002, under a planning grant from the William Penn Foundation, WHYY began to sharpen its vision for a new digital Learning Lab. The Lab would be a *physical* place, a building where organizations throughout the region could learn to use digital communications technology to enhance and expand the work they do every day. It would also be *virtual*, a digital connectivity service that would link people and organizations across the region in ways never before possible. Spurred by a renewed community focus and the federal mandate to transfer from analog to digital broadcast technology, the station has set aside land to build the new facility on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, behind its Technology Center in Philadelphia. The foundation grant provided the opportunity to consult with the community and investigate how the new facility and connectivity service could advance the region.

Over the course the study, the Learning Lab concept was introduced to and shaped by the community during meetings with representatives of approximately 150 organizations and interviews with community leaders. The project team researched the existing learning lab marketplace, including the neighborhood and populations that the Learning Lab will serve and similar experiments conducted by other public broadcasters. Market needs were further assessed through a series of focus groups with WHYY members and early-adopter teachers. The team also listened to the station's concerns in a presentation before WHYY's board and WHYY staff members. Finally the team analyzed this research and recommended Lab facilities, core products and services, and the pilot projects that will launch the Lab.

The following summarizes the findings and recommendations of the planning study:

- The mission of the Learning Lab should be *to share the power of digital technology to foster a more connected and informed community in southeastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey, and Delaware.*

- There is a great regional interest in digital technology. Local cultural groups, public-interest organizations, corporations, and educational institutions have all expressed a desire to explore digital projects but lack the training, and often the resources, to begin.
- The Learning Lab will benefit the regional economy by bringing technology to underserved areas, by efficiently providing high-quality training materials to job seekers and local employees, and by expanding the reach of the region's cultural resources.
- The Lab will serve five markets: *School Learners*, especially K-12 teachers and universities; *Career Learners*, including welfare-to-work, in-service training, and professional development; *Recreational Learners*, including cultural patrons and active seniors; *Public Information Learners*, those who want or need to stay abreast of public affairs; and *WHYY members*, who, while they fall within these categories, deserve special attention.
- Taken together, these markets represent the full range of sectors within the community. Each incorporates organizations and individuals with a range of access to and sophistication with digital technology.
- Because WHYY has access to all five of these markets, the Learning Lab can facilitate cross-sector collaborations. This region is full of groups who need content, such as schools and senior centers, and groups who have content, such as performing-arts organizations and museums. WHYY is in a unique position to bring these groups together. As the Learning Lab grows, a network of the region's cultural organizations, cause-related groups, educational institutions, and businesses will grow with it.
- The school market is of special interest to WHYY. With this in mind, the planning study included a focus group with early adopter teachers. This focus group showed teachers were eager to incorporate technology into their classrooms but lacked the training to do so. Technology in schools is often old or broken and is rarely used to its full potential. The Learning Lab will become a source of professional development credits for teachers, helping them to integrate technology into their lessons.
- The Learning Lab's mission can best be achieved if its core products and services represent what the above markets say they want and need. Through community meetings, interviews, and focus groups, the project team identified three core products and services:
  1. **Training:** The Learning Lab at WHYY's competitive advantage is that it will be an authentic production studio where organizations and individuals learn hands-on digital production from production experts.
  2. **Production and Repurposing Content:** A center for new-media production, the Lab will help organizations create content. It will also re-package and re-purpose WHYY's own programming in a variety of formats for a wide array of uses.
  3. **Connectivity:** The Learning Lab will connect people and organizations in ways never before possible. Using the full range of new technologies, including webcasts, datacasts, and videoconferencing, the Learning Lab will connect organiza-

tions with each other, organizations with their constituents, and central organizations with their branches. This connectivity function will be the centerpiece of the virtual Learning Lab.

- The Learning Lab building will be designed with maximum flexibility to accommodate changes in technology and function over time. It will include five spaces:
  1. **Studio Stage:** Small studio stage, wired for broadcast, datacast, and webcast, where lectures, performances, and town meetings will be held for live audiences and home participants.
  2. **Project Shop:** Creative space where community partners and Lab staffers will meet to brainstorm around new concepts, explore projects, and create productions.
  3. **Training Space:** Sixteen-person classroom where experts provide community members with hands-on project-based training in the art of digital production.
  4. **Connectivity Hub:** Place where digital connections between geographically separated community members are booked and implemented.
  5. **Digital Showcase:** Lobby area where large panel screens will present digital art, productions, school curricula, and products developed in the Learning Lab itself.
- Since parking is top on the minds of many potential users, the Lab should help visitors locate parking or consider constructing a revenue-producing lot under the building.
- The Learning Lab will be launched with a series of pilot projects:

**Digital Arts in Education Series:** Music, drama, and dance performances are held on the Learning Lab studio stage on a regular schedule before an audience of school students. Schools throughout the region experience the performance through a datacast, which features a live moderator; pre-recorded behind-the-scenes video; and interaction between the classes, moderators, and performers via email, chat, and call-in. Pre- and post-program activities are prepared for teachers and students.

**Professional Development Courses:** The Learning Lab serves as a distributor of continuing education courses for a range of professionals. The courses are presented before a live audience at the Learning Lab, streamed via the Web or datacast, and archived for later use on home and office computers. Commercial or not-for-profit partners provide the content.

**Electronic Field Trips for Schools:** On a regular basis, the Learning Lab offers electronic field trips to K-12 classrooms. The experiences feature videoconferencing with knowledgeable tour guides at historic or cultural sites, a “tour” of the site, and a chat room on the Learning Lab website.

**Digital Training and Production Partnerships:** These partnerships will train community groups to produce their own content using WHYY equipment. Productions may be distributed through datacasts, the Learning Lab’s website, or one of WHYY’s current distribution platforms. This pilot is already underway using WHYY’s Local Access Unit.

**Digital Town Meetings:** Digital town meetings allow viewers in remote locations to participate in events held on the Learning Lab’s Studio Stage. Meetings employ a range of technologies, including videoconferencing, datacasting, and collaborative webcasting. Digital town meetings are designed to enable an organization to interact long-distance with its branches, other organizations, its constituents, or its members.

**Digital Production Training for Broadcast Professionals:** The Learning Lab creates courses for local and national public radio and television professionals. Each course comprises three days of hands-on training.

**Training for K-12 Digital Trainers:** The Lab trains the technology staff of regional media centers serving local school districts. The training course combines video production and editing with integration of content into classrooms. Once trained, these “K-12 Digital Trainers” will be equipped to train teachers in their districts.

**Digital Camp for Kids:** The summer camp will be a week-long experience featuring hands-on digital video and editing training for children.

**Course on Amateur Video Production:** This is a course for Learning Lab members in three sessions: how to shoot video, how to edit video, and a screening of productions. The productions may be distributed on WHY Y’s secondary digital channel, the Lab’s website, or displayed in the Lab’s digital showcase. In the future, the course can be offered to the general public.

**Exhibition of Digital Art:** In collaboration with local art schools and arts events, the Learning Lab presents juried exhibitions of digital artwork. Exhibitions will enliven the space for Learning Lab visitors and will be open to the general public.

- Foundations, corporations, and government agencies are funding digital projects like those envisioned for the Learning Lab. Funding sources for Learning Lab operating costs have been researched and identified. Because one of the greatest challenges is keeping the technology current, the Lab should seek out technology partners.
- There are a number of policy issues related to creating the Learning Lab that lay beyond the scope of this study. These include governance, fee structure, and the relationship between WHY Y and the Lab.
- In the immediate future, WHY Y should secure start-up funding, hire a core staff, and continue to pursue the ten pilots listed above. It should begin building the Learning Lab when it has attained a critical mass of successful projects and the remaining capital has been raised. A core of successful projects will permit the community to gain familiarity with digital technology and permit the technology to mature to more user-friendly formats.

Anyone interested in a complete planning study report should contact Craig Santoro, Learning Lab Project Associate, at (215) 351-3318 or [csantoro@why.org](mailto:csantoro@why.org).