

2nd Draft Focus Group Findings & Recommendations

Context

At the time of this draft ten focus groups with children and teens between the ages of 8 and 18 have been held. Between five and 15 students attended each focus group for a total of 90 participants.

Overarching Themes

- Tweens and teens are **comfortable and feel successful** in the ways they currently use the web to find information for homework and leisure pursuits.
- **Creating a web-based resource** that takes students outside of their current traditional methods of information gathering **will not work** unless it **integrates the current information gathering techniques** of tweens and teens.
- In order for a web-based homework resource for students to be successful, **teachers have to play an integral role** in the advertising and use of the site. Showing and telling teens that a website is available to them for homework help and support will not have an impact on their research methods.
- If teens and tweens find homework support **within the tools that they already use** they may give it a try.
- Tweens and teens **need to be involved** in the implementation of any web-based research tools created for them to use.
- **The library is not in the minds** of tweens or teens as a place – physical or virtual – that they can go to receive homework support.
- **The library is a place** – specifically in terms of physical access - that students think of using in order to find resources for leisure reading and activities.

Tween/Teen Information Gathering Techniques

- **Google and Wikipedia** have saturated the tween and teen information gathering mindset. A majority of tween and teen participants in the focus groups mentioned using one of these two sites as their **primary source** for homework information.
- **Librarians are a non-entity** when it comes to looking for homework help. Most of those interviewed stated that if they asked a librarian for help it was in order to find leisure reading materials. Similarly, a majority of participants stated that they never even thought about asking a librarian for homework help. It's important to note two things in relation to this. First, this finding spans all three library systems that are involved in this project. Therefore, this lack of knowledge of a librarian's homework role is not just related to one system's structure of service. Second, those who participated in the focus groups are library users. They have good relationships with the librarians and for the most part feel comfortable with at least one person on the local library staff. In other words, these participants know that at least some librarians are friendly.
- If they need help with homework, students are most likely to **ask a parent** for help first and second they will ask a friend.
- **Teachers have an important role** in how tweens and teens go about finding homework information. If a teacher provides a web-based resource for students to use in order to complete homework, at least some students appreciate it and use it. When students have

teachers that provide suggestions about homework resources - verbally or in writing - the students will, at least some times, use those resources before going to Google or Wikipedia.

- **Homework NYC is not used** for information gathering by students. While some students knew about the web site - they learned about it in school - the consensus was that it was easier to use Google, Wikipedia, or another similar tool than to use the Homework NYC site.
- **Databases were not used** at all by tweens or teens in order to find homework information. There was one teen, enrolled in a charter school in the Bronx, who did use the databases. His school librarian gave out a sheet with information on how to use the databases. This teen carried that sheet of paper with him in his wallet. Other students did not know about the databases or care to use them. The students were focused on what was going to get them to the information they needed quickly and easily.
- **Tutor.com is a resource** with which teens and tweens are familiar. Those teens that have used Tutor.com have **positive reactions** to their experiences. This is in comparison to those that have used **Ask a Librarian and Dial a Teacher**. When asked about these tools, students who had used them remarked that it **took too long** to get useful information.
- There are **mixed messages** about student interest and use of **IM** to obtain homework help from teachers and/or librarians. While many students couldn't understand why this would be useful, others thought that if it available they would use it. Some said they would only use it if they knew the librarian on the other end of the IM. Others said they would use it if they had nowhere else to go.

Online Behaviors/Interests

- When hanging out online, not for homework purposes. teens and tweens mentioned using **AIM, music sites for making playlists and listening to music, gaming sites, sports sites, and social networking** sites such as MySpace and Facebook. AIM was the most common online tool students mentioned while MySpace and Facebook were used to varying degree. Several students of all ages mentioned using **avatar creation** sites such as Zwinky and Meez. While virtual environments such as Second Life weren't mentioned, younger students were actively involved in **Millsbury.com**
- The online behaviors and interests of tweens and teens is noticeably different. Tweens are much more interested in **educational games** while teens are more interested in **IM and social networking** sites. Tweens did not mention music sites at all whereas every group of teens had at least one focus group participant who said a favorite site was a music site.
- **Access to technology varies** with a pretty even split between those students that have access at home and those that do not have access at home.
- **Cell phones and text messaging were prevalent** amongst a majority of tweens and teens.
- Tweens and teens are strongly/primarily **drawn to sites that allow them to customize** the content, look, feel, and behaviors, and actions in multiple ways. The customization that they look for has to provide an expanded experience and that go beyond cosmetics.
- **Collaboration** in an online environment **was not something** that the students were **familiar with**, only one participant mentioned using Google Docs in a classroom construct. Other than this one teen, no others had ever heard of Google Docs. While the tweens and teens were familiar with how Wikipedia works, only one had ever made a change or addition to an entry. The overarching theme is that **teachers are not familiar with online collaboration** and this hinders how students are exposed to and interested in collaboration possibilities. It is difficult for the students to comprehend how this might work since they have as yet not been exposed to it.

The Project

- When presented with possibilities for online homework support, participant's ideas varied based on their age. **Tweens** were more **interested in access to educational games** that provide them with opportunities for learning math, science, etc. **Teens** were more **interested in customizable content** and opportunities to **connect** with their peers.
- When asked straight-out if they thought New York City libraries should provide online homework support, **tweens and teens said "yes."** However, they were unanimous in also stating that they would need to be **drawn into the tools/help** through **something other than homework** support. For example, music downloads/uploads, gaming resources, an application within another web tool/site, movies, etc. When asked what would draw them to a site if they already could access the same content other places, the tweens and teens were not able to provide simple or easy answers.
- It is important to note that **Homework NYC is not readily used by staff** of the tri-li systems. Librarians tend to use the same methods for information gathering as tweens and teens. When helping tweens and teens find information library staff do not make Homework NYC their first stop.

Recommendations

- Because of the role teachers play in connecting students to homework resources, **it's essential** that any homework project of the tri-li libraries focuses a good deal of attention on **working with teachers**. A concerted training and education effort that goes beyond previous efforts for this group is required. **Any grant funds** applied for should take into account that this training and support is required and fairly large sums of money need to be dedicated to this part of the project.
- A **separate resource** or set of tools that makes it easy for teacher to create collaborative experiences for students along with the ability to link to resources should prove helpful for teachers to learn about and use the technology.
- Because of the different needs and expectations of tweens and teens, **creating two separate sets of homework help tools/resources** for the different age groups is necessary. By doing this the libraries participating in this project will be able to target more specifically the needs and interests of the different age groups. This also makes it possible to create customizable options for teens that take into account current COPA regulations.
- While tweens and teens did state that under certain circumstances they would be interested in using a library sponsored homework web site, it's important to acknowledge that a **homework site for tweens and a homework site for teens is not a solution in itself. A primary question** that needs to be addressed **is if a traditional web presence is needed at all** for the tween and teen audience. Library staff should **consider if a web site is the best way** to spend staff time and money.
- Facebook applications, MySpace features and applications, Google's Open Social, teacher web sites, Wikipedia, del.icio.us, Club Penguin, and so on are some of the web-based sites and tools on which library sponsored homework help should be available. This will **help to guarantee** that the **libraries meet the teens where they are** as opposed to requiring the teens to come to where the library is.
- **Customization is key for teens** and to their interest in using a homework help resource provided by the library. The tri-li resource that teens use for homework should **provide iGoogle like functionality** in which teens can import content that is important to them for a specific assignment or recreational interest. For example, a teens might insert links to

homework resources onto her iLibrary page as well as insert links to the latest music or gaming news. An iLibrary user's page should also be customizable in look. Content should move around based on where the user wants to place it. Users should be able to create avatars that represent their current sense of self.

- **Collaboration**, at least in the beginning, by tweens and teens should take the form of **exchanging information on resources** of use in a homework and an entertainment construct. For example, teens working on an American history project could submit links (perhaps in a del.icio.us fashion) for other teens assigned similar homework to access and use. Students said they would be interested in **rating and reviewing web content** so that other students would be able to judge quality and use for their own homework needs. (This might provide Digg like functionality for the iLibrary resource.)
- Tweens and teens need to have **continued involvement in the planning and implementation process** for the revised homework help virtual presence. Tweens would like to continue to provide feedback on content and design. Teens are interested in providing that same feedback and also would like involvement in setting up the content of the newly designed resource.
- **Librarians need to have the ability to customize** the homework resource for the needs of the tweens and teens with whom they work. An iLibrary interface for each library branch in which the youth librarians could easily add information about local homework, photos of librarians with information about when they are online and how to contact them, and so on, will help to expand the use of the resources by educators and librarians.
- Analyzing the **elements of success** that the tri-li libraries developed, related to leisure use by tweens and teens. should prove effective in order to make decisions about an online presence that incorporates leisure interests with homework support.