DIGITAL CREATOR

From Curiosity to Confidence Through Digital Creator North: A Decade of Creativity, Connections, and Digital Arts Education for Northern Ontario Youth

2025

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ABSTRACT

This report spans ten years of **Digital Creator North** (DCN): a series of six digital and media arts hubs in community centres across Northern Ontario, which offered free structured and unstructured arts education for teens. Topics of this report include prior research leading to the formation of DCN, its first three years of operation, the turn to online programming during the COVID-19 pandemic, network building, and the next steps for the program. Organized chronologically, this document also outlines the program's methodological approach to youth digital and media arts programming, discussions of successes and failures, and provides links to resources and toolkits that may interest educators, artists, or anyone curious about digital and media arts programming in general. Each learning is outlined in the table of contents in order to be easily found.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report reflects on a decade of Digital Creator North (DCN), an initiative by Near North Mobile Media Lab (N2M2L), which started with the goal of establishing six digital and media arts hubs across Northern Ontario. DCN's mission was to bridge youth digital and media arts education gaps by providing accessible, creative spaces in community centres and libraries stocked with technology, artistic tools, and creative, editing, and post-production software. These hubs served as low-barrier environments for teens to develop skills, creativity, and social connections through both structured and unstructured programming tailored to local participants' interests. This report traces DCN's journey from early research in 2013 to its launch in 2017, through to its shift to online programming during the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally toward experimenting with community-run and network models. Initially focused on youth aged 14-19, DCN expanded to include younger participants due to large demand. DCN's learning model, based on the "HOMAGO" framework (Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out), allowed teens to progress from casual engagement to advanced skills in digital media arts. By providing space for youth to just be themselves, staff quickly observed the remarkable importance of youth-dedicated spaces, which then, in turn, created learning opportunities.

During its first three years, DCN faced challenges, from slow initial adoption in communities to staffing and retention issues due to geographic isolation. Fortunately, Digital Creator North also saw remarkable success in the large number of participants, in anecdotes of the program's positive impact shared by youth, and in the launch of careers for several staff involved in DCN. Ultimately, DCN's impact extended beyond skills training, as it provided a safe, inclusive environment for youth, leading to notable improvements in social skills, confidence, and leadership. The pivot to online programming amid the pandemic brought new accessibility to remote youth, although it was met with challenges like digital fatigue and low engagement.

The final phase focused on transitioning to a sustainable network model in partnership with local communities, aiming to expand the reach of DCN's mission. It also marked the opening of a new Digital Creator North space in the Near North Mobile Media Lab's home community of North Bay. Recommendations and resources, including a toolkit on program development, were developed to support local communities in establishing DCN spaces independently. Our future steps aim to maintain DCN's impact by leveraging collaborative networks both locally in North Bay and elsewhere in the North, continued advocacy for digital literacy, and cultivating local partnerships to sustain the program.

INTRODUCTION
THE PROBLEM DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH SET OUT TO SOLVE

Digital Creator North (DCN) opened to the public in 2017 as the brainchild of then-N2M2L Executive Director Holly Cunningham after years of planning and research. The program was modelled on the successes of the YOUmedia program in Chicago Public Libraries: designated teen digital learning spaces much like maker spaces. After Cunningham's robust scan of digital and media learning opportunities for youth across Northern Ontario, clear gaps in access, education, and opportunities for youth emerged and were identified as inroads that needed support. Digital Creator North was born to create dedicated spaces for teens, as these spaces were a missing resource in their own right for small Northern communities. These spaces allowed teens to explore digital and media arts in comfortable, free, and low-barrier environments. DCN was also conceived for youth to build skills that would better position them to enter post-secondary programs and, subsequently, the workforce in the ever-growing creative sector of Northern Ontario in such a way that decidedly, secondary schools were not sufficiently providing. The spirit of the program ultimately served to empower youth to not just be consumers of media but to become active producers of media, expanding the future horizons and opportunities in the North in the face of the youth out-migration and youth retention challenges of Northern Ontario.

Media and digital arts have been highly conducive to social change and impact, given their higher capacity for dissemination and allowing youth to access a world beyond their communities. Further, the social format of DCN spaces naturally cultivated leadership, communication, and social skills for youth. By encouraging youth to critically and creatively engage with digital media and by fostering digital literacy, it was our hope that DCN would empower youth to realize that, even if they're from Northern Ontario, they could become the next generation of filmmakers, designers, and artists. We wanted to show them that there was more out there than just the trades that are so heavily encouraged in the education system.

WHAT IS DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH?

Digital Creator North encourages youth and emerging artists to explore digital technologies at partnering locations, focusing on creating positive change through technology and creativity. These sites have been located in easy-to-access public spaces including storefronts, libraries, galleries, and museums. The original Digital Creator Program built a three-year legacy of success. It operated as a drop-in, out-of-school learning environment for youth to develop skills in digital media using a participatory culture model and was staffed by full-time mentors. This project aimed to have a positive cultural impact on Northern Ontario by increasing participation in the media arts sector.

In 2016, N2M2L partnered with community organizations across the North, including the Sault Ste. Marie, Kenora, Temiskaming Shores, Timmins, and Sioux Lookout Public Libraries, the Timmins Museum, and the Lester B. Pearson Civic Centre in Elliot Lake to open DCN spaces for youth. Each of the 6 spaces was fully equipped with media and digital arts equipment and software for youth to explore any and all related interests. Additionally, each space was staffed with a full-time, on-site artist mentor who could help youth experiment with and learn to use the equipment in the DCN spaces. Programming was offered in structured and unstructured formats; based on youth input, specific workshops would be developed and scheduled in advance as dedicated learning time to a specific skill, whereas the rest of the time functioned as an open studio for youth to learn and experiment at their own pace.

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2. WHAT IS THE NEAR NORTH MOBILE MEDIA LAB?

Near North Mobile Media Lab (N2M2L) is a non-profit, artist-run centre based in North Bay that provides the tools media artists, students, filmmakers, and audiences in Northern Ontario need to produce, present, and enjoy contemporary media arts in all forms. This includes but is not limited to: media installations, filmmaking, video art, animation, documentary arts, and sound production. We provide rental service of industry-standard equipment at low prices, run workshops, hold screenings and events, and foster a growing community of media artists in our region. Our programming includes, but is not restricted to, North Bay Film, the North Bay Film Festival, the Ice Follies Biennial, and our flagship program, Digital Creator North.

3. WHAT ARE "MEDIA ARTS"?

Media arts are a disciplinary facet of contemporary art made distinct by time-based projects that usually incorporate digital technology (with some exceptions, such as analogue moving pictures). Within the artistic and cultural context of Canada, national and provincial funding bodies set specific definitions surrounding artistic disciplines that then accordingly discern rubrics for eligible programming activities, thus prompting artist-run organizations to operate in relation to such artistic silos. For example, the Canada Council for the Arts defines media arts as the following:

" **Northern communities aspired to be part of larger sectoral, provincial, and national dialogues in media and digital arts** "

"For the Canada Council, media arts are understood as new media and moving images (film and video) practices. These practices are considered broadly; for example, moving image works may be single or multi-channel, expanded cinema, or installation based. New media art includes practices that involve digital art, social media art, interactive installation, immersive and interactive environment, web-based art, database art, bio art, and robotics. For any artwork to be considered a media artwork, the work must have a significant portion that is media arts."

Within this report, we've included the word "digital" in close proximity to "media" as a signal that the programming offered by DCN also incorporated elements such as digital photography and digital painting, which are not technically considered under the fold of media art. While our funders and N2M2L as an organization are specifically focused on media arts, youth do not need to know the distinction in nomenclature.

In an early survey of the Northern Ontario artistic landscape conducted by N2M2L in 2013, staff promptly noticed an eagerness to embrace the artistic and professional opportunities offered by digital and media arts and that Northern communities aspired to be part of larger sectoral, provincial, and national dialogues in media and digital arts that they otherwise often felt isolated from. For example, film festivals, independent and big-budget films, gallery exhibitions, and media arts education for youth all have since been thriving in the North and contribute to both the cultural and economic fabric of Northern Ontario.

4. CONTEXT OF NORTHERN ONTARIO

Northern Ontario is enormous! Just the Northern part of the province alone is larger than the state of Texas, and takes 2-3 days to drive across. This massive geographic expanse includes many rural communities – and some smaller urban centres – that are often quite isolated. At the time of writing (2024), there are only three designated artist-run centre presenters in North Bay, Sault Ste Marie, and Thunder Bay respectively.

A few other unique factors of the North also impacted Digital Creator North programming, such as snow days and inclement weather, as well as lacking, minimal, or unreliable public transportation.

Otherwise, Northern Ontario generally struggles in the retention of youth and arts workers for myriad socioeconomic and sociocultural reasons. At the time of DCN's inception, youth in Northern Ontario did not have equal levels of exposure to digital and media arts as their peers in the Southern part of the province. Subsequently, many did not consider digital and media art as a career option in Northern Ontario and perceived that these opportunities required moving South.
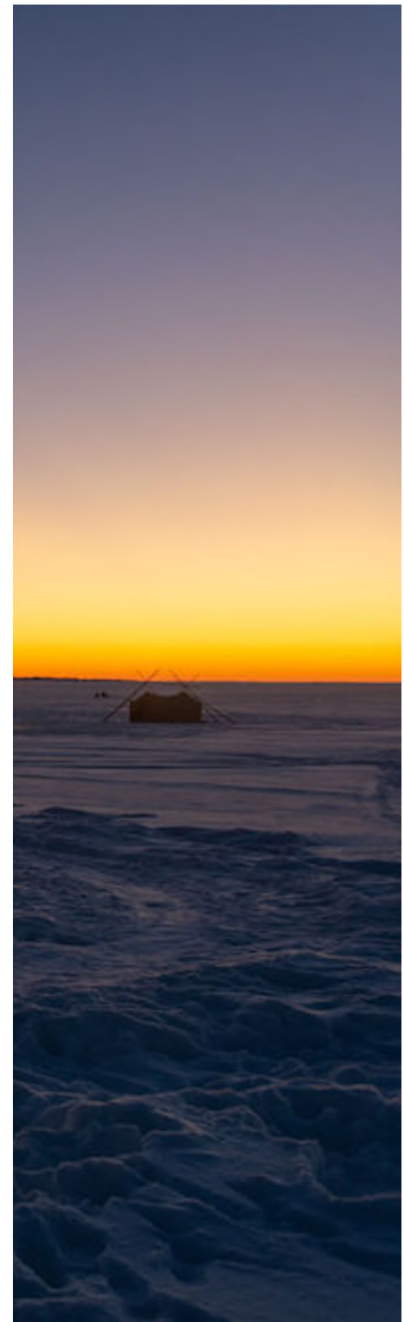
2. PRIOR RESEARCH TO THE LAUNCH OF DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH SPACES

Digital Creator North adopted youth "connected learning" research, which allowed youth to steer learning directions based on their interests. This created more organic and dynamic learning outcomes. We borrowed from youth learning researcher Mimi Ito's "HOMAGO" framework: 'HOMAGO' stands for "hanging out, messing around, and geeking out" – pillars of a proven youth engagement and learning model that yielded higher results precisely because they are interest-driven and youth-led. As a youth-specific program for the age range of 14-19, a HOMAGO philosophy underpinning the Digital Creator North space allowed participating youth to progress from interests into educational and artistic practices. For example, video games were often an access point that attracted youth into the space, prompting the first stage of 'hanging out.' When provided access to tools and mentorship, youth quickly moved on to the 'messing around' phase and experimented with video game character design using graphic and digital design software. Eventually, this interest-driven curiosity led to the final phase of 'geeking out', wherein the youth developed the skills required to more concretely explore and develop opportunities accordingly. In frequent ideal scenarios, the geeking out phase also empowered the youth to teach their peers in a skill-sharing exchange, tacking on the added growth in leadership and communication skills.

As noted above, N2M2L's 2013 environmental scan was instrumental in determining which communities to open Digital Creator North spaces in. As the first three years of DCN were a pilot research project, having a diverse range of spaces was important, which led DCN to sprinkle them across Northwestern and Northeastern communities. The smallest community we worked with had a population of 5,000, and the largest had a population of 75,000, with some spaces hosted in libraries and others in community centres. Perhaps the most important work of the environmental scan was in creating solid relationships with the organizations and community memberships that would eventually become the partners of DCN.
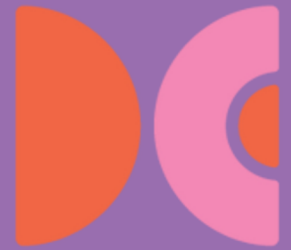
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3. METHODOLOGY

Digital Creator North opened six spaces across Northern Ontario in 2017. These spaces were opened in collaboration with host organizations such as libraries, museums, and community centres. Each space was staffed with a full-time, on-site mentor. We hired practicing artists and encouraged them to bring their own specific interests (for some filmmaking, others recording music, or even graphic design) into their DCN spaces to lead by example. Otherwise, host organizations provided space and on-site supervision, meanwhile, N2M2L provided all the equipment, software, and even comfortable lounge furniture, as well as off-site supervision, coaching, and mentorship of staff. Notably, DCN preceded TikTok's prominence by four years – this was a time before the production of short-form digital content was imagined to be immediate and easily accessible to youth.

Digital Creator North offered a mix of structured and unstructured programming, all with the overarching goal that programming should be fun, free, and as low-barrier as possible. Importantly, the spaces were meant to feel like they were expressly designed for youth and that they had authorship over the space. Youth were encouraged to determine their own code of conduct, hang their artwork on the walls, pick the music, and even determine the directive of the day. Structured programming was scheduled in advance and determined based on youth interests and requests, which ranged from video editing, stop motion, and even working raspberry pies (micro-computers, not the delicious treat) and as frequently as felt necessary — sometimes weekly, biweekly, or monthly. Aside from structured workshops, the remainder of DCN programming remained unstructured, open-studio time, allowing youth to lead the learning and project outcomes. During this time, youth sometimes did homework, played video games, worked together on films, or worked independently on digital drawings or animations. Again, the genius of the unstructured approach centred on connected learning and the HOMAGO framework. By not making the space feel forced or authoritative like school, youth could develop their unique talents, which felt special for them.

4. GETTING STARTED

Once the framework was established, N2M2L set itself in motion to prepare for the opening of six separate spaces across the North. This included drafting memorandums of understanding (MOU) with each partnering organization, purchasing digital equipment and software for each space, and furniture such as couches and tables for the teens to use. Our first three-year phase was generously funded through the Ontario Trillium Foundation's "Grow" grant – notably, the funding sources for the initial three-year launch of the program have changed since the grant was awarded in 2016. Finally, full-time staff were hired to operate each of the spaces through the financial support of grants, such as the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) Workforce Development program.

ERA 1: THE LAUNCH AND FIRST THREE YEARS OF DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH 2017–2020

CONTEXT

The first three years of operations for Digital Creator North across its six programming sites were an astounding success. Importantly, DCN also had many challenges to overcome, with each presenting various learnings for the overall betterment of the program. A discussion of the varying challenges and opportunities will follow below. First, it is important to note that each of the original six communities where DCN operated had varying cultural, economic, and geographic circumstances, and ranged from 5,000 to 75,000 residents in population size, subsequently adding unique opportunities and challenges to each of the six spaces. We also found that teens in each of the communities had different interests. From the beginning, it was clear that each DCN space would have to consider each community's unique needs, aspirations, and interests to fully realize its potential.

From the opening of the first space in April 2017, through to the pandemic, DCN recorded a total of 8,602 visits from 3,069 unique visitors across all six spaces. A unique visitor signifies one individual person, meaning 3,069 youth attended Digital Creator North Programming. Many youth made regular visits, totalling 8,602 times that youth came to DCN.

1. OPENING A NEW SPACE – THE FIRST THREE MONTHS

Consistently, with the opening of each new space (which was staggered according to the hiring of staff that sometimes needed to relocate, varying timelines incorporated into MOU agreements, etc.), we noticed a very slow first three months or so. This was partly due to Digital Creator North starting from the ground up as a brand-new program. It was also important to gain the community's trust as a safe, responsible, and reliable brand where youth felt comfortable and their guardians felt secure with their participation at DCN as parents and guardians were discouraged from being on-site to maintain the teen-centred atmosphere. A large part of building this trust was done by patterning with existing public-facing partners, such as libraries that were already trusted organizations within their respective communities. The first three months saw heavy marketing efforts across social media, radio talks, and school visits. We quickly identified that strong, on-the-ground champions in our partnering organizations were among the most important factors in building participation in DCN programming.

Once youth began attending DCN, one of the most successful means of increasing attendance was through word of mouth, whereby youth would tell their siblings, cousins, and friends about the program and eventually bring them, too. Youth often felt excited to show their friends, siblings, or cousins all that DCN had to offer.

It was important not to get discouraged during the first three months, as building trust and developing awareness and visibility takes time, particularly with a demographic like teens.

2. PARTICIPANT AGE RANGES

After Digital Creator North had established roots across the North and programming was underway, we received immediate and immense interest from youth aged 10-13 and even some interest from adults and seniors. In Northern Ontario, most age demographics remain under-serviced, so this was to be expected. The difficulty in working outside of the 14-19 age range was that our original funding was very specifically allocated for programming with youth aged 14-19, and we were unsure if having younger and/or older participants in the program would make the teens feel less like DCN was their space. As we originally set out to serve the 14-19 age range but attracted an overwhelming response from 10-13-year-olds, we met with our funders to propose possibly expanding our demographic in reasonable ways. After negotiating with our funders, we settled on an 80/20 split whereby 80% of programming would be dedicated to youth aged 14-19 and 20% to youth aged 11-13. This typically meant one night of the week was dedicated to the 11-13 demographic for open studio usage. There were occasions where older teens and the younger preteens overlapped, which posed much less deterrence to the older teens' participation than anticipated. Still, having a space that was distinctly for the upper age range of 14-19 was – and remains – its own uniquely important endeavour and the primary focus of DCN.

PROGRAMING **80%** AGES 14-19 **20%** AGES 10-13

3. STAFFING

Each Digital Creator North space had one full-time, on-site staff person to facilitate the space and provide workshops (in addition to other duties such as marketing and minor administrative work). Our first rounds of hires were artists working with varying mediums and expertise, who were all in their twenties or early thirties. The decision to specifically hire artists reflected the mandate of DCN by transferring knowledge and skills that could be used in both professional and creative ventures and subsequently positioned the staff as role models for youth. Each of our facilitators – with the job title of Program Lead – were encouraged to bring their own personal artistic interests and skills to the space and to openly work on projects of their own if they were able to do so during open studio time. Because Program Leads led by example and worked on their own projects, youth were able to envision the outcome of gaining skills further stimulating their interests in developing talents and learning new programs, tools, and software in the DCN spaces.

We also initially prioritized hiring younger artists as, at the time, many of the grants available for hiring staff had parameters that required hiring recent graduates. This had the added benefit of having facilitators in the space who felt less "teacherly" as it was important that the DCN environment felt teen-oriented and not like a traditional classroom setting. Lastly, the successful candidate would ideally be from or already living in the community they were hired to work in because of their familiarity and existing networks of communications within their community.

Around two years into the program, funding stipulations changed, widening eligible candidates' ages. We then hired two Program Leads who were older than previous staff, and we were pleased to see that a wider range of ages did not have any notable impact on the use of the spaces. It is notable, however, that, even with reduced eligibility criteria, most applications were still submitted by younger, emerging artists and professionals as the compensation we could offer was not very competitive.

In Sault Ste. Marie, we also experimented by hiring a Program Lead who was not an artist, but had a strong background in educational leadership and was eager to learn digital and media arts skills. This particular Program Lead was ultimately successful in her role and managed to transfer all the skills she taught herself to the youth.

One of the largest staffing challenges was in relocation and retention. As many of the communities we worked with were rural and some were also isolated, it was frequently not possible to hire from within the respective communities we worked with given the specificity of the Program Lead role and its required skill set. Unfortunately, we were unable to assist with relocation stipends nor offer particularly competitive wages as a non-profit endeavour, which also made it difficult to find candidates willing to relocate. Hiring could sometimes take up to two months to find the right candidate and allow for relocation if necessary. In these scenarios, we saw slow uptake in programming once a new Program Lead re-opened spaces after pauses longer than a month as they had to advertise

the space's reopening and build trusting relationships with participants. We also experienced high turnover around the one year of employment mark as many younger staff expressed they found it quite isolating to move from larger urban centres to smaller rural communities where they did not know anyone. Some of our community partners went above and beyond to welcome Program Leads and introduce them to the broader communities in their towns, significantly increasing the quality of life and work for Program Leads, which aided in retention. Overall, youth retention was – and continues to be – a challenge that Northern Ontario struggles with.

N2M2L also hired a Program Coordinator to oversee the continuously evolving needs of the program from the early opening stages to the roll-out of Digital Creator North Online (more on that below). In collaboration with management from our community partners, the Program Coordinator oversaw staff hiring, provided onboarding training, and served as a middle point-person between community partners and N2M2L, as well as many other administrative duties.

Twice a month, each Program Lead would meet via video conferencing with the Digital Creator North Programming Coordinator, who was based out of North Bay at the Near North Mobile Media Lab office. These meetings were used to get updates from staff, assist with any specific challenges or programming questions, and keep close tabs on each of the spaces, which were all still quite new. As the on-site supervisors in the libraries frequently

did not have digital media skills, the off-site supervision of the Program Coordinator (and additional support of other N2M2L staff when necessary) allowed Program Leads to brainstorm workshop plans and tend to any maintenance needs of equipment in the DCN spaces. Once a month, the Programming Coordinator would facilitate a larger team meeting with all six Program Leads gathered over video conference. These meetings were invaluable as they reminded each of the Program Leads that, although they were working in silos, they were not alone and that they were part of a larger team all tackling this project together. Program Leads often shared feelings of disconnection amongst each other, given the vast geographical span of the program, and emphasized a strong desire to meet in person to get to know each other and feel more connected.

On two occasions, we gathered all the Program Leads together to meet at conferences. We had extremely limited funding available for travel, and we were therefore limited to only two opportunities to do so, but bringing the Program Leads together clearly energized them and helped them feel empowered and excited to return to their respective community spaces. As they built relationships with each other, they also gained support networks and peers to collaborate with on workshop development.

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4. UNEXPECTED DISCOVERIES

One of the most important and unexpected discoveries of this project was the benefits of the highly social nature of the Digital Creator North spaces. By following the HOMAGO methodology and allowing youth to really have ownership of the space, we observed remarkable and natural development of soft skills not necessarily intrinsic to the work of media and digital arts education. Youth frequently taught each other how to use equipment and software, worked collaboratively, developed communication and leadership skills, and increased sociability over time. In our periodic anonymous surveys (which were designed to help us improve DCN operations – more on this below), youth shared heartwarming anecdotes that participating at Digital Creator North helped with things like social anxiety, feelings of isolation, or not feeling like they had anyone to share their passions with. One youth even submitted a survey response sharing that DCN taught them how to be a good friend.

Over time, it became clear that the key to running a successful Digital Creator North media and digital arts lab was to create an environment that was friendly, mostly unstructured, responsive to youth feedback, welcoming, and safe. Without these elements, teens would not have gained their social, technical, or artistic skills. Ultimately, Digital Creator North became something more than digital arts and media education; its magic was in how it functioned as a space.

5. PROGRAM LEAD CAREER DEVELOPMENT

A similarly unexpected outcome was found in the professional development of the Program Lead staff members, who were able to use their role with Digital Creator North as a springboard to advance their careers. Professional arts jobs have always been few and far between in Northern Ontario, so Program Leads were able to get invaluable professional experience in their sector where, previously, there might not have been professional, non-freelance artistic roles in some communities. Additionally, Digital Creator North also inspired academic interests, with four former staff members currently working towards their Ph.D. in arts-related research. Program Leads gained valuable leadership, organizational, communication, and facilitation skills in this role and frequently reported finding fulfillment and feeling proud of their work.

6. YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Program Lead staff frequently reported youth confiding struggles varying from mental health, family issues, or myriad other challenges they were facing in their personal lives. As arts and culture workers, the Program Lead staff often did not have the knowledge and resources to be able to assist youth with many of these situations. This phenomenon has been well documented by many scholars of public arts programming, pointing to a general lack of services in rural communities, leading to expectations that public-facing arts programming can also serve as a form of social service as "therapeutic" arts spaces. While this may be true of some very specific public arts programs in rural areas, most are unequipped to provide additional social services beyond arts programming. We provided our Program Leads with Mental Health First Aid training to help better equip them for possible challenging scenarios, but ultimately, Program Leads were also given information for locally relevant services and advised to point youth towards these qualified services with the proper knowledge and resources for aid.

7. LEARNINGS FROM ELLIOT LAKE

In the particularly snowy winter of 2019, the Elliot Lake Digital Creator North space, which was housed in a local community civic centre that functioned as a hub with municipal administrative offices and a local art gallery and theatre, was necessarily closed after the roof collapsed. After an approximately two-month programming pause, the City of Elliot Lake (our partner in this particular community) rented a vacant storefront space with street visibility to be the new replacement site for DCN. This was our first storefront space, and we were unsure how this new style of space would impact DCN attendance. Delightfully, after a strong marketing push to announce DCN's reopening, we saw the highest attendance levels at the Elliot Lake Digital Creator North space. Youth cited liking how the new DCN location was entirely its own space – they only had to walk through the DCN front door whereas, previously, they sometimes felt perhaps intimidated or out of place walking through a municipal building before arriving at their DCN destination. Otherwise, one of the largest challenges in moving was the loss of on-site supervision of our DCN Programming Lead, which meant increased off-site, remote support.

Some of our concerns about establishing spaces outside of community partnerships and in existing community centres from the outset included prolonging the time it would take to gain the community's trust before seeing a steady flow of participants. In this particular case, these issues were circumvented as the previous iteration of the DCN space had already been operating in the Elliot Lake community civic centre for nearly two years, giving DCN ample time to establish itself as a trusted youth centre in the community. Regardless, this unexpected move underscored the importance of having a distinctly teen-oriented space and not overly authoritative.

" Youth cited liking how the new DCN location was entirely its own space "

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8. COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS, LAYOUTS, AND LEARNINGS IN SAULT STE MARIE

As the largest community to host a Digital Creator North space, Sault Ste. Marie proved to be one of our most successful and amongst our highest attended (but so, too, was our smallest space in Sioux Lookout). Of particular note in Sault Ste. Marie were the many fruitful community partnerships with other local organizations and groups such as homeschool groups, Koach Katrina (a club for queer youth), Shaw TV, and Algoma Public Health, among others. Being situated in the largest community, DCN Sault Ste. Marie had inherently more prospective complementary organizations to form partnerships with than some of our smaller communities. These partnerships were excellent opportunities for resource sharing, cross-promotion, and expanding participation amongst all groups. By working together through partnerships, DCN Sault Ste. Marie was better able to serve its teen participants by providing access to other community resources that teens might not have otherwise engaged with if not for these partnerships. For example, DCN Sault Ste. Marie partnered with Algoma Public Health for the "Algoma Public Health Youth Night".

The Sault Ste. Marie DCN space also had a unique design as the only site to not have its own space in a designated room. Rather, DCN Sault Ste. Marie was held in the media centre, which was an open space in the main library area. The library's decision to place DCN in a highly visible spot was out of necessity, but also points to a philosophical positioning that having an exciting, lively library with teens hanging out would not be an issue. This mindset varied throughout all the libraries that partnered with DCN. The added bonus of having the DCN space in the open was the increased visibility whereby onlooking parents, guardians, or teachers might come to ask questions out of curiosity and relay information about the space back to youth, or even youth themselves stumbling into the DCN space interested in learning more. While having a separate room for youth to call their own is ideal, the excellent leadership and warm hospitality of both library staff and the two folks who served in the Programming Lead role at SSM ultimately allowed youth to indeed feel like they had agency in the space, and like they belonged.

9. LEARNINGS FROM SIOUX LOOKOUT

Although Sioux Lookout was the smallest community to host a Digital Creator North space, it was also one of our highest-attended and most successful spaces. During the school year, teenage youth from many remote, often fly-in-only First Nation communities are relocated to Sioux Lookout to attend high school. These youth typically did not have family in Sioux Lookout and sometimes did not know anyone upon their arrival. We quickly saw Indigenous youth who were relocated for high school embrace the Digital Creator North site in Sioux Lookout as it provided a unique space to hang out and make friends in a more organic way. Around two years into programming in Sioux Lookout, a former grocery store was converted into a youth space called W.I.N.K.S — an interagency wellness program for First Nations youth who have been relocated to Sioux Lookout for high school. W.I.N.K.S. is a collaborative undertaking between Keewaytoonik Okimakanak, Shibogama First Nations Council, Windigo First Nations Council, Independent First Nations Alliance, and the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, and offers myriad programming including but not limited to: cooking classes, cultural practices, languages, and arts. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Digital Creator North Sioux Lookout frequently brought

equipment from the DCN space to W.I.N.K.S. for off-site programming given the shared overlap between our missions and participants, and to assist W.I.N.K.S. in getting started as the respective success of DCN and W.I.N.K.S. was mutually beneficial and not seen as competitive.

As a small, isolated town where many youth were only attending school and were unfamiliar with the community, many teens cited that they found Sioux Lookout to be boring. The respective introductions of Digital Creator North and W.I.N.K.S. certainly were much appreciated by youth and, we suspect, positively influenced their mental health (especially for youth not from this community).

Each DCN site was unique and had different trends and tendencies for youth interests. For example, in Sioux Lookout, we noticed a lot of interest in music, with youth bringing their own instruments, which also helped youth feel like the space was theirs. Additionally, youth in Sioux Lookout were also very interested in short 2-3 minute films and even produced a short horror film, and comedic drag sketches.

10. QUEER ORGANIZING IN TEMISKAMING SHORES

Several youth attending the Digital Creator North space in Temiskaming Shores self-identified as queer, trans, and/or two-spirit and clearly articulated a deep appreciation for DCN as a space where they could authentically be themselves and feel respected by their peers. Having a newfound sense of importance and appreciation for a safe place to gather, the queer teens organized together at DCN to successfully propose the inception of a Gay Straight Alliance at their high school. Moments like these demonstrated how important it was to simply have space for teens to just be themselves, which allowed their innate leadership potential as teen community organizers to blossom.

> **Program Leads were remarkably generous in sharing knowledge, resources, and trading skills amongst each other as most had their own unique skillsets**

Generally, teens mostly preferred open studio time over structured workshops. The open studio HOMAGO format was more conducive to teen interests and learning, whereas workshops tended to more closely approximate a learning model similar to school settings. However, workshops could also be popular if well-timed and marketed, and if the workshop's focus aligned with youth interests and their feedback. Workshops were also generally easier to market as a predetermined activity with clear outcomes and added incentives given that they were time-specific, thus instilling FOMO (the fear of missing out). Sault Ste. Marie, for example, was a Digital Creator North space that thrived on workshops, and this approach tended to work best in that particular site, further underscoring that no two spaces were alike and the importance of being adaptive to whatever each community responded best to.

The workshop format could also be done unannounced in an organic fashion whereby a Program Lead could propose an activity that was seemingly spontaneous but already pre-planned and organized. Many short films produced by youth at DCN were essentially workshops, though not presented as such. Instead, they were created in DCN spaces with the simple prompt of a suggestion by the Program Lead. Sometimes, a simple "Hey everyone! Do we want to make a film?" generates more interest than a workshop flyer.

More recently, we have been experimenting with using different language and fielding reactions to other ways of presenting workshops as instead, for example, the less formal synonym of "sessions". This remains an ongoing undertaking at the time of writing, so there is no outcome on the varied use of language yet.

Additionally, Program Leads created video tutorials and uploaded them to YouTube and/or Basecamp (a co-working software used by DCN and N2M2L staff) for both youth and other Program Leads. Program Leads were remarkably generous in sharing knowledge, resources, and trading skills amongst each other as most had unique skill sets; some staff's artistic backgrounds were in video, while others might have been in graphic design or animation. Their openness to teach each other skills went a long way in transmitting knowledge and skills to youth and building team bonds among Program Leads.

12. DATA COLLECTION

As Digital Creator North was originally funded as a proof-of-concept project through the Ontario Trillium Foundation, data collection became an essential practice that we needed to establish early on to report our findings to our funders. We also started collecting data to better understand who engages with our digital and media arts access hubs and learning maker spaces. The decision to collect data was not a corporate marketing initiative or a scientific study, but rather a practical approach to ensure our program remained responsive to the needs of rural youth and teens. We gathered information on participant demographics, including age and gender identity, as well as their access to similar tools (like tech and software) at home or in school. We also tracked interest in post-secondary education and careers in art or media, along with feedback on how well participants felt the program was serving them. This data helped us in multiple ways: it provided insight into who we were reaching and, just as importantly, who we weren't; it guided program development by highlighting gaps in access or areas of interest that required more support; and it allowed us to refine and strengthen our grant applications by providing tangible numbers to demonstrate impacts. Rather than relying on anecdotal evidence alone, we could show funders concrete engagement metrics, reinforcing the importance of sustained investment in creative access for rural youth. Ultimately, our approach to data collection was about making informed, thoughtful decisions to foster a more inclusive, accessible, and responsive creative learning environment. There were no specific trends in gender-based participation. However, we learned early on that there was significantly more ease in attracting younger participants (11-13) to the program than the 14-19 age range.

We initially collected data through pen-and-paper sign-in sheets and period surveys, then transitioned to a digital data collection service called Jotform for increased efficiency in collecting and archiving information and identifying patterns therein. Additionally, Program Leads kept daily journals and shared anecdotes of their day with observations on anything they felt was relevant to the program, such as successes, challenges, activity outcomes, and learning moments. We also conducted exit interviews with staff once they completed their contracts, as these also provided valuable, on-the-ground perspectives on the program's operations.

DIGITAL CREATOR

13. KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

- Proximity to high schools

- Strong on the ground champion in the partner organization

- A Program Lead staff person familiar with the area, or outgoing enough to develop local connections

- Cultivating a good, teen-centred "vibe" to the space

- Allowing teens to set the pace, and creating adaptive, interest-based programming using the HOMAGO connected learning model

- Keeping it fun and welcoming

- Having snacks, water and juice, and frequent pizza nights (teens love free food!)

- Letting teens decorate the space with their work, and playing the music they want to listen to

- Collection of data (ages, participation numbers, workshop numbers, skills learned, etc.) for grant writing support

- Video Game tournament nights were a huge draw-in and were often the entry point for many teens who first came for video games, and stayed for the other offerings of DCN. Video Game nights varied in frequency in each of the spaces.

14. FREQUENT CHALLENGES

- Lack of public transportation if not within walking distance from high schools

- Certain school districts did not allow outreach directly to the schools

- Overly institutional-feeling spaces

- Staff retention and youth needed time to get comfortable with new hires

- Ever-changing funding landscapes

- Usually, slower summers while schools were out

- Snow days or inclement Northern Ontario weather sometimes deterred youth participation
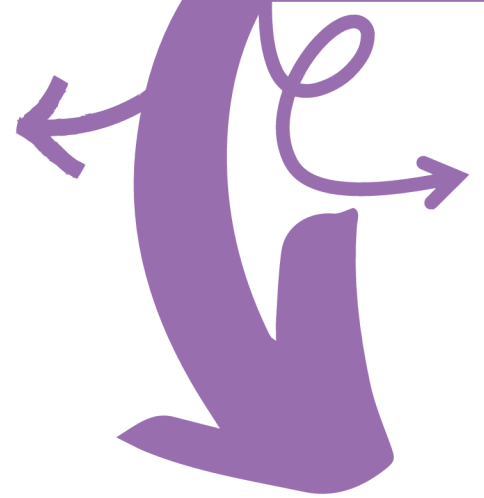
15. ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

- Youth cycle in and out as they age into the program and eventually leave for college. Every year, this changed the spaces somewhat, as a different group often meant different interests

- Asking teens to draft a code of conduct for the space was a great way to help them develop a sense of authorship in the formation of the space and equally a great way for everyone to remain accountable to each other. While these codes of conduct typically closely resembled what staff would otherwise draft, having youth produce it instead shifted the feeling of "rules" and authority of the space towards a social dynamic they established together and had agency in co-creating

- If a middle school was close to a DCN space, it tended to attract the younger youth – the same applied to high schools and teens. School proximity was a large factor in shaping both the attendance demographics and overall participation in DCN spaces

- Each space had a different suggested "maximum" amount of participants, which varied according to the space's size, the youth's behaviour, and the facilitator's comfort levels. This could also change with time

- Community size did not intrinsically impact participation numbers. For example, our two most attended DCN sites were in Sault Ste. Marie and Sioux Lookout: our largest and smallest space.

16. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Overall, the first three-year iteration of Digital Creator North proved to be a massive but equally rewarding undertaking. The program provided tangible digital and media skills and literacy to youth who frequently expressed not having access to these tools and teachings at home or school in a pre-TikTok time. The hang-out, mess-around, geek-out formula of HOMAGO proved to be an excellent methodological approach to teaching youth in both workshop and open studio settings. This connected learning — the interest-driven approach to learning — had the added benefit of creating organic opportunities for youth to develop leadership, communication, and teamwork skills by sharing and even teaching their passions to their peers and working on projects together.

Perhaps one of the biggest learnings of this three-year pilot program was the sheer importance — and lack — of teen spaces that simply let teens be teenagers together. Digital Creator North was a place for teens to be themselves and have their interests celebrated. At DCN, youth could make friends, feel seen and heard, develop confidence and self-esteem, and explore their passions and interests all while learning soft and hard skills. The educational and practical side of Digital Creator North was only made possible after first developing trust with teens, allowing them to have authorship in the space, and making sure they felt comfortable, heard, and safe. In retrospect, it's clear that the magic of DCN is not in what it does but, what it is.

DIGITAL CREATOR

ERA 2: DIGITAL CREATOR ONLINE
2020 — 2022

BRIEF CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19
IMPACT ON DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH:

The second era of Digital Creator North was formed in response to the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic. During this time, in-person, on-site gatherings were suspended for two years, prompting the Digital Creator North team to think through new forms of engagements during trying times. In the spring of 2020, all six DCN spaces were suspended indefinitely – just like the rest of the world. After much uncertainty and brainstorming, the DCN and N2M2L team decided to take programming online. An immediate challenge in doing so was in the very driving force that led to the inception of DCN in the first place: access to equipment, tools, and software. Another central aspect in the previous in-person success of DCN was the social, collaborative, and collective feeling offered by the spatial aspects of the DCN sites themselves — a difficult thing to replicate online. Before launching fully into an online modality of programming delivery, the DCN team did a lot of research, culled through different online services and platforms available to explore, and approached this challenge with curiosity and enthusiasm: the strange silver lining here was that an online version of DCN could actually increase accessibility for youth in remote and rural areas where DCN wasn't based, or for youth facing barriers that prevented them from attending in-person programming. It quickly became clear that, yes, the pivot to online programming was out of necessity, but it might also open up a world of new possibilities. As the duration of lockdowns and disruptions from the pandemic were difficult to estimate and unpredictable, the decision to pivot entirely to an online version of DCN came comparatively late into the pandemic.

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

In keeping with the central tenet of access in the original formulation of Digital Creator North, it was important to build an online DCN community using free web-based software to mirror the low-barrier and free participation model of the founding DCN spaces. It was important that the communal clubhouse feel of the original spaces transfer into the online programming – a very difficult undertaking. After much research considering several possible free online platforms, the team eventually agreed upon using "Gather.town": an interactive, online virtual space that replicates and simulates in-person activities. A large part of the appeal for Gather.town was in its beautiful, 8-bit video game aesthetic and design – not dissimilar to the nostalgia of older Pokémon games. While not only aesthetically pleasing, the 8-bit design also required less bandwidth than other similar platforms, in turn decreasing barriers for youth in rural areas with very limited Internet capacities. Gather.town was inherently deeply collaborative as users would spawn (a video game term for when the player's avatar or character has activated in the world of the game or, in this case, the online hub within Gather.town) in an online hub that resembled the original DCN clubhouses that the kids already enjoyed. This included a central gathering space that connected to other rooms with designated purposes. The central gathering space was designed with the same principles in creating the physical Digital Creator North labs: to look appealing to teens, feel 'artsy', and inspire creativity and exploration. In this central hub, participants could find posted announcements, chat with other users, ask questions to the Program Leads, see their artwork posted to the digital walls of virtual galleries, and break out into attached rooms for specific workshops and activities. Given the period of social isolation, programming selection prioritized collaborative social activities while ensuring there were also some independent solo options. Occasionally, some workshops took place through Zoom if needed. A similar hybrid approach between workshop and drop-in programming from the original DCN model was used. Importantly, Gather.town was chosen because it was also specifically compatible with mobile phone or tablet use, decreasing barriers for youth participation in case participants only had access to mobile devices as some other platform options were for laptop or desktop use only. Gather.town is a web-based system, which also helped remove barriers as many other options required downloading software to operate. Occasionally, some skill-based workshops that were facilitated through Gather.town (or sometimes Zoom) required the use of apps (as was the case in a music-creation activity, for example); in these scenarios, the DCN team ensured that any necessary apps were always free for participants. A tour of Gather.town can be found linked here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vY-4za6q_Ww

LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES IN ONLINE WORKSHOPS

Some logistical complications in delivering online workshops, like in the aforementioned music-creation activity, arose and typically had to be problem-solved on a case-by-case basis. In the music-creation activity, the workshop was facilitated over Zoom; however, as the tool for this workshop was a free music-making app, this meant that both participants and facilitators needed to multi-task with several tabs or even several devices as instructions were provided over Zoom. Still, the activity itself took place in the music app. Creative solutions included third-party mirroring apps for the instructors to use while teaching workshops or for participants needing additional guidance, the simple but effective approach of bringing the tablet or mobile phone close to the computer webcam to point out exactly where they needed help and to talk it out accordingly. Otherwise, the 'share screen' feature in Zoom helped with tutorials. Also, it allowed youth to show their facilitators what challenges they were facing and to get step-by-step guidance made possible only by sharing their screens. Many of these sometimes awkward logistical challenges are intrinsic to the synchronous flow of online work and programming that many of us experienced during the pandemic, so these little hiccups were always met with sympathy.

Otherwise, an unexpected challenge of online programming presented itself in the registration process for online workshops. The first rounds of workshop registrations were flooded with 'bots' that would create fake sign-ups, rapidly capping out registration forms with fake users who would never attend. This was particularly prevalent if raffle prizes were included to incentivize participation during the slower periods of the digital burnout era of the pandemic. While very annoying at first, this was simply resolved by using CAPTCHA (the grid images that ask you to click all images with, for example, a stop sign in order to differentiate humans from non-human digital users).

ONLINE SAFETY

The singular most pressing area of focus in the development and operation of DCN Online was online safety for youth. As mentioned in the section on the first three pilot years of onsite DCN programming, the partnerships with trusted organizations helped establish a clear sense of safety and trust for youth and their families. In the physical spaces, it is very easy to keep a close eye on who is coming into the DCN labs; however, online programming is inherently less immediately visible as users spawned as avatars. The DCN and N2M2L team agreed that the site would not open for use by youth until there was absolute certainty in the safety parameters. The use of avatars (a digital character that a user is able to control and navigate a digital world through) was a double-edged sword: youth expressed comfort in being able to navigate pseudo-anonymously off-camera as many spent all schooldays looking at their own reflections on screen in Zoom, while it also meant that, in theory, anyone could be behind the wheel of the avatar. Thus, safety protocols to ensure appropriate use – and appropriate users – of the space included:

- **Specified Hours of Operation:** Doing so ensured that a staff person was always present to facilitate and moderate the DCN Online Gather.town hub and be readily available to respond to things like cyberbullying or any other code of conduct violations.

- **Invitations and Passwords:** Once operational, the first round of invitations to use the DCN Online Gather.town platform were sent via email to pre-existing Digital Creator North participants across all six spaces. A secure link and password were also sent to ensure that not just anyone could gain entry access.

- **Video Sign-ins:** A tertiary security measure to enter the online space was the use of video sign-ins wherein participants had to turn their cameras on just long enough to prove to the facilitator that, indeed, they were who they claimed to be.

- **Forms and Policies:** Much like in the physical DCN spaces, Gather.town users also had to fill out registration information in order to participate with DCN online. Youth under 13 were required to have their parents and guardians complete approval forms before participating online. There were also incident reports readily available online that youth could fill out anonymously to share any issues they might have experienced while using their space. Much like our physical DCN hubs, a participant code of conduct also applied to online use.

Combined, the above safety measures and precautions successfully yielded no incidents during the operation of DCN Online.

NAVIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS ONLINE

With no certainty in future timelines nor any realistic expectations in returning to "normal", maintaining healthy relationships with our partner organizations that we established before the pandemic remained a key priority. As we were all navigating the same – though still individualized – challenging circumstances, taking a collaborative approach with our programming partners was a key factor in moving forward. Once the Digital Creator North Online Gather.town was fully operational and ready for youth participation, we first reached out to our trusted community partners to spread the word. This allowed us to not only cross-promote DCN Online, but it also aided our community partners (particularly applicable to the case with the public libraries that were similarly dedicated to public engagement through programming) to continue offering the free programming that was once housed within their walls. Notably, DCN Online saw considerably higher engagement for workshops where participants registered through our partner organizations, who then sent youth to Gather.town, than in programming where DCN Online was the sole host. During this time, we were also able to expand our network with other libraries and community organizations across the North, as on-site equipment and staff were no longer a factor in co-presenting programming and workshops.

To assist and better navigate the transition to online programming, DCN and N2M2L staff were also able to provide train-the-trainer style teachings: a model that focuses training on a point-person in a specific place, community or institution who can then become a trainer themselves on the skills in question. This approach helped keep knowledge in communities.

STUDENT LINKS MENTORING

In October 2021, Near North Mobile Media Lab was approached to field interest in mentorship partnerships with Student Links Mentoring, a program offered by Community Living Ontario for youth with intellectual disabilities to explore their futures after high school. In this case, the youth participant was interested in making music and met weekly (over a two-month period) with a DCN staff person who taught electronic music. Although Zoom could have worked, Gather.town operated marvellously by creating a much more dynamic, immersive experience as it allowed for DCN staff to use the music-creation software directly through the interface of Gather.town. This partnership between DCN and Student Links proved very successful and was an entirely unexpected use of the online space.

OVERVIEW OF HAPPENINGS

The Digital Creator North Online Gather.town hub operated from September 17th 2021 to May 9th, 2022. During this time, DCN Online offered:

- 71 events spanning workshops, one-on-one mentoring, game nights, social events, and even digital escape rooms, all revolving around digital and media art.

- 47 of these events were offered directly to Northern Ontario youth without institutional partnerships.

- 24 of these happenings were presented through partnerships in collaboration with regional community partners (both pre-pandemic partners and new partners we found during this time).

- We reached out to 50+ different organizations for knowledge-sharing and partnership activities. Of these over fifty points of contact, ten became collaborators.

- In total, DCN Online had 44 participants: 9 of which came through the already existing entry point of DCN, and 35 participants engaged with DCN Online by way of our community partners, underscoring the importance of strong relationship building, especially during difficult times.

RESEARCH

Research was one of the driving forces in the development of Digital Creator North Online. N2M2L hired Maggie Greyson – an internationally recognized, award-winning futurist and designer – as a research lead for the development of Digital Creator North Online. Greyson (along with assistance from Rebecca Watson) was also tasked with producing a research report on online youth media and digital arts programming while in the design process for DCN Online.

Additionally, two Programming Research Facilitators were hired (Rebecca Watson and Tyler Cunningham) to build Gather.town and put Greyson's research into motion in the Digital Creator North Online roll out. The Programming Research Facilitators developed creative and engaging programming to be offered to all ages through DCN Online. As this was not our area of expertise, a large part of their role included research into Internet safety for youth, successful online pedagogical models, and video-game design principles.

The conditions of this project were inherently unique under the circumstances of the global pandemic; however, there was also much potential in using this time and energy to develop and chronicle possible strategies that could be used to reach youth interested in DCN-style programming, but without physical spaces to attend themselves. The research report produced by Greyson and Watson can be found online at digitalcreator.ca/resources/online-makerspace-tutorials-and-resources or upon request by email: **info@n2m2l.ca**

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION NUMBERS

Overall, DCN Online struggled with low participation numbers. While there are several compounding factors that may have been the cause of low turnout, we suspected the largest was timing: by the time the DCN Online Gather.town hub was fully operational and equipped with thoughtful safety measures, many youth were in the peak of digital burnout and screen time exhaustion. A year and a half into the pandemic, many of us were tired of being tethered to our screens for work, school, and even our social lives. To go online to DCN Gather.town after a long day of Zoom schooling was often just too much for youth, and we could certainly sympathize. Ultimately, drop-in-style programming was much less common, and most participants came for pre-scheduled workshops.

Although DCN Online meant youth could participate from home for the first time, there were also other barriers, such as some youth not having computers or smartphones to participate, or needing to share these with siblings, or even some youth in more rural areas with very poor Internet access at home.

We also had far too few funds available for marketing, which would have proved extremely beneficial as the DCN Online hub in Gather.town was otherwise 'unknown and invisible', unlike its predecessor counterparts that were very visible in high-traffic community centres and libraries.

LEARNINGS FROM ONLINE PARTICIPATION MODELS

Social networks are their own enclosed portals in the digital realm, and many are available for youth. For example, Snapchat has many similar social capacities to those built into Gather.town, prompting the question: Why would youth go to the DCN Gather.town if they could hang out through Snapchat instead? If it was to learn, why would they not just turn to YouTube to find tutorials? These long-standing, monolithic mainstream platforms certainly come to mind for their social and educational use before the newly launched DCN Gather.town. They are also much more passive platforms to use and do not require sign-ins nor other safety protocols.

Creating a vibe that youth would appreciate and feel excited to be a part of was certainly much more difficult to produce online than in the physical spaces, making it harder for youth to determine if they felt they belonged. Unlike the physical spaces in community organizations like public libraries, DCN Online had very little visibility, meaning that, by comparison, there were no incidental foot traffic participants who wandered into the space with curiosity from seeing others enjoying themselves and using cool and exciting technology. At the peak of digital burnout, having a cool place to hang out online was simply not enough. Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out (HOMAGO) felt like a thing of the past, and a hope for the future.
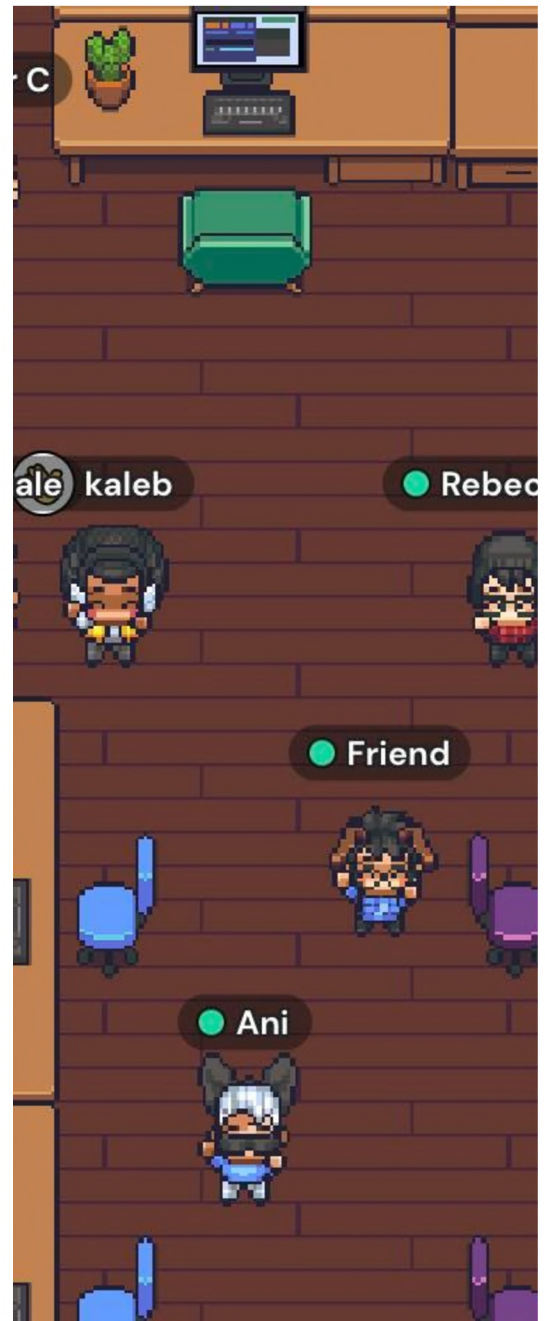
2022 CONNECTED LEARNING SUMMIT PRESENTATION

Rebecca Watson, who was previously a Research Facilitator for the development of Digital Creator North Online, was a presenter at the 2022 Connected Learning Summit – a California-based conference (offered hybridly) focused on the intersections of technology and participatory, creative learning. This was an excellent opportunity to put DCN under a spotlight, network, and learn from other organizations doing similar work in (mostly) the United States, and brainstorm shared challenges. A video of Watson's presentation at the Connected Learning Summit can be found here: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWbcO3q85lU**

POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR DCN ONLINE

Digital Creator North has since returned to in-person programming at its new North Bay location, reopened the Sault Ste. Marie space, and opened new spaces at the Wawa Public Library and Dokis First Nation Museum at the time of writing. There is less need at the moment for DCN Online. Perhaps one day in the future, a specific context for need may emerge, such as one-on-one youth mentorship with folks who cannot attend in-person programming for myriad reasons, or even for youth onsite at a DCN space curious to meet other like-minded peers in other communities. There is also the potential to use DCN Online to bring in experts to facilitate workshops across all spaces at once.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The DCN Online Gather.town programming space was the right idea with the right features, but suffered from arriving too late into the pandemic. DCN Online yielded many successes, including the development of a cool and dynamic online learning hub, protocols for youth safety in online educational spaces, and championing new modalities for workshop delivery outside of standard and limited interfaces such as Zoom.

Otherwise, maintaining staff for Digital Creator North was inherently precarious as we relied on the continuous application and approval of funding and grants. These are not guaranteed, and take several months from application to result. Many staffing grants also have a cap of one year of funding, meaning that, regrettably, we also had to cycle through new staff every year leading to institutional memory loss and extensive training.

Ultimately, DCN Online struggled with attendance and participation due to its poor timing and minimal marketing capacity. Still, it was also a project that included a lot of research, thoughtfulness, creative problem-solving, and the development of youth safety protocols.

ERA 3: THE DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH NETWORK & OPENING TWO NEW DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH SPACES, 2022-23

CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

This concluding phase focused on looking outwards across Northern Ontario to assess the viability and interest levels in shifting towards a Network model for Digital Creator North. The transition towards a network model would open myriad inroads to possibly establishing a more sustainable approach to the long-term operations of Digital Creator North (DCN). Many key funding sources that Digital Creator North relied on for operations have been terminated since the program's inception, making it too financially difficult for Near North Mobile Media Lab (N2M2L) to operate on all fronts. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, N2M2L covered nearly all operating costs of the six DCN spaces in Northern Ontario through funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation, FedNor, and the Digital Strategy Fund from the Canada Council for the Arts (although the latter would start just before the world-changing pandemic, subsequently shifting our originally proposed project and its context). A network model wherein community partners would instead each independently apply for funding themselves, with bracketed operational support (in terms of programming development, marketing, etc.) from N2M2L could lead to the autonomous delivery of DCN programming that was tailored to the respective needs that are unique to each community. To do so, we had many conversations with previous and prospective community partners across Northern Ontario to determine interest levels in pivoting to a network model.

Simultaneously, we opened a fully operational and very successful Digital Creator North space in North Bay, which we continue to run ourselves. This space not only served the local community in North Bay, but it also served as a training ground and proof of concept for the Network.

Lastly, we developed myriad resources such as toolkits, tutorials and guides, lists of funding sources, and programmatic pillars of DCN-style programming to be housed on the DCN website (digitalcreator.ca) for any interested parties.

Our overall findings exceeded expectations of potential; however, there was a resounding sense that this was the right idea at the wrong time. Simply put, too many community partner organizations weren't yet ready to move towards these conversations and were struggling to reestablish their pre-pandemic levels of operation as these conversations started in the summer of 2022 – just as the pandemic lockdown restrictions of two years were lifted. The first six months of the network phase were quite discouraging, but the energy of our new North Bay Digital Creator North space fueled our motivation. The last three months of this phase – approximately ten months after the end of lockdowns – saw a dramatic uptake in partner capacity, activity, and dreaming.

GOAL

Our goal was to have a stronger understanding of the capacity, needs, and aspirations of our pre-pandemic partners in delivering digital and media arts programming and education through access, as well as take stock of any new groups who had emerged or developed an interest in the work of DCN. Moreover, we wanted to assess the feasibility and interest levels of developing a network model for DCN. Additionally, we endeavoured to offer DCN programming again by opening our own space in North Bay.

ASSUMPTIONS

1 Consulting with community partners would reveal a strong interest and yield high engagement in the network approach to reopen or open new DCN spaces across the North.

2 Opening our own DCN space would support strong community building and enhance youth digital and media literacy, skills, and creativity in North Bay.

3 DCN would emerge from the pandemic with a renewed capacity to assist many communities across Northern Ontario in opening or reopening DCN spaces.

REKINDLING RELATIONSHIPS

We knew that the most important task on our hands was to develop and redevelop strong relationships with community partners across Northern Ontario. Although DCN as a program had excellent historical relationships with our community partner organizations, many organizations experienced large staffing turnover during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that many point-persons of our community partners had no previous experience with DCN nor knowledge of who and what N2M2L is. In many cases, we had to start building relationships from scratch.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Broadly, our approach was to first undertake an informal environmental scan by identifying organizations, collectives, individuals, and groups working in media arts and/or digital programming for youth. Importantly, we also made note of some communities that were not providing such programming, but had subtle glimmers or hints of interest in doing such work. The pandemic greatly impacted operations and programming capacity across the North, therefore prompting two important points of reflection in our environmental scan: 1) that online advertising or archiving of such activities would not accurately reflect digital and media arts activities nor aspirations given operational and capacity impacts during the pandemic and; 2) that any such recent or forthcoming activities would be of higher importance than they were in our first environmental scan of 2014 precisely because of shrinking capacities. Our original goal was to focus on six communities that most stood out from this process as our starting point, while continuing dialogue with other prospective collaborations thereafter.
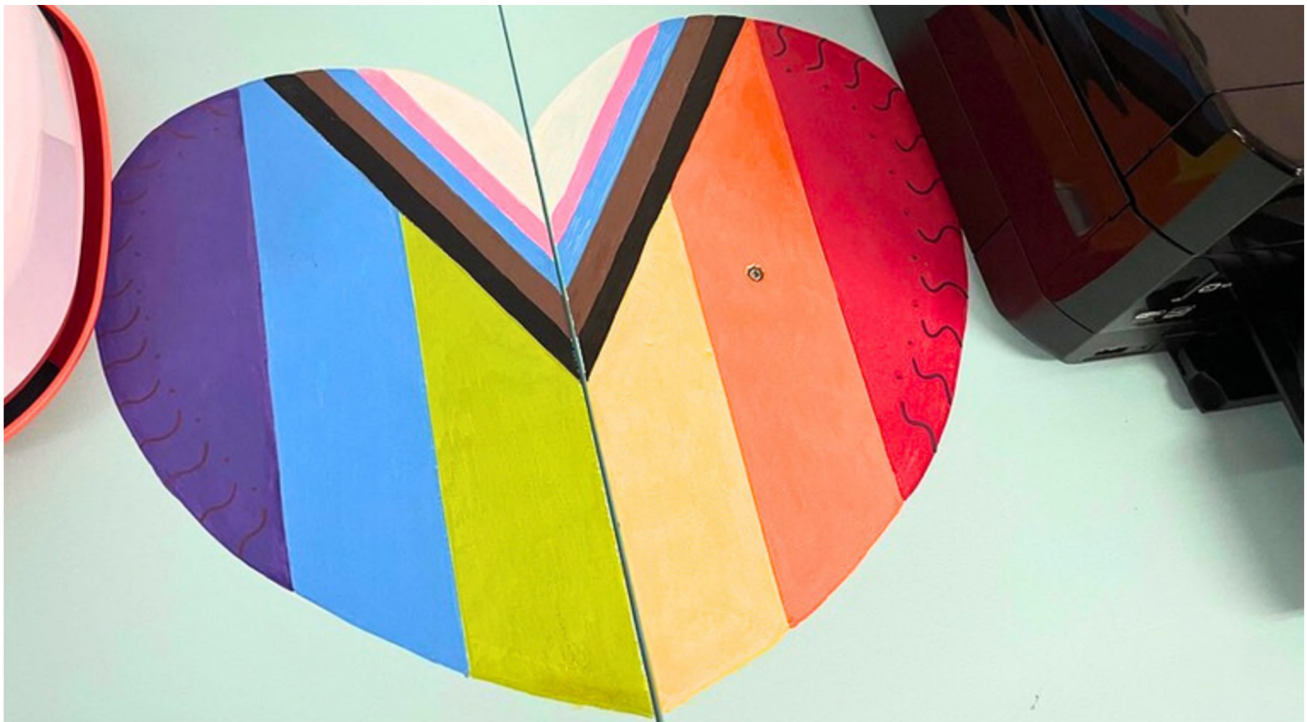
PUTTING OUT FEELERS: COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS AND INTEREST GAUGING

For each community, we needed to outline what specific interest levels were for something like DCN, which resources were and were not already available both within their organizations and communities, what current youth programming was or was not being offered, what knowledge in-house staff did and did not have around media and digital arts, and what might reasonably be within the capacity and expectations to further conversations around DCN Network participation and collaboration. We approached each community with open-mindedness and attention to nuance to avoid flattening assumptions of a pan-Northern sameness: each of these communities was unique in their geographic location and proximity or distance to other nearby communities, varying population sizes, localized economic factors such as industry or sectoral employment opportunities (or lack thereof), and seasonal tourism (or lack thereof). We were also mindful to remember that terms like "media arts" might seem unfamiliar to non-arts practitioners and to avoid any jargon or technological terms that would be inaccessible insofar that one of the driving forces of DCN has always been to bridge the gap between community-based arts programming and professional practice. Consistent and clear findings emerged: all organizations had staff capacity challenges in the form of people-power (either not enough and overworked staff or no staff with existing knowledge capable of delivering DCN programming); youth aged 13-19 were the hardest demographic to reach; all were struggling with resuming operations after lockdowns lifted and most experienced major staffing turnover.

Our goal was to identify six communities interested in a DCN Network; however, we are overjoyed to report that, at the time of writing, Sault Ste. Marie reopened its Digital Creator North space, and a new partner that emerged during this process, the Wawa Public Library, has also opened a brand new Digital Creator North-style space, which they are running as an after-school program.

WHAT WE LEARNED – DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH LEGACY

Although youth participants from the first three years aged out of the original DCN program, the folks in the communities that homed DCN still remember the program fondly and reported hearing from the younger siblings, cousins, and friends of previous participants wanting to bring back the program. We also heard from several libraries that they could not engage youth through programming since DCN stopped during the pandemic.

We also appreciated the prospective flexibility of DCN and its potential adaptability – in some communities, DCN might not need to be a fully fledged media arts space. In Timmins, a relatively new organization called the Timmins Youth Hub created an incredible space for youth, so donating our equipment to them was a much more viable way of carrying forward the work of DCN. Sioux Lookout-based media artist Nadine Arpin helped remind us that sometimes, all it takes is one person to catalyze activity, and that an individual artist with a strong connection to their community can also be a fully realized actant within a network.

OPENING A NEW DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH SPACE IN NORTH BAY

In August of 2022, N2M2L undertook the opening of a brand new Digital Creator North space in North Bay, which offered new learnings for DCN operations. The space was unique insofar as it was the first time N2M2L operated its own DCN space! Previously, all other DCN spaces were in communities across Northern Ontario, wherein we worked closely with partners to provide programming in their communities, so it has been an immense pleasure and joy to watch firsthand the magic of Digital Creator North in real-time with our own eyes here in North Bay. Like all other previous spaces, we had a slow start for the first couple of months (which we had previously identified as a pattern – each DCN space took a few months to establish a local reputation as being fun, safe, and inclusive before seeing steady engagement) and has been quite consistently attended by regulars since a very successful Open House event in November 2022. For its first two and a half years, the North Bay space was located in the basement of the Capitol Centre (a local arts hub). We learned from teens that the basement space was ideal for them because it felt like they had their own (very open) secret clubhouse that was truly reflective of their interests and comforts: bean bag chairs, cozy string lighting, a living mural of their designs, and VR, music recording, design, filming, and gaming equipment and software all collectively contributing to making a dynamic and accessible learning environment. At the time of this report, we have had 231 youth register for the space, making a total of 1753 visits during the 408 days we have been open to the public. Most of the youth who attend are aged 11-14.

Unlike the other communities we've worked with, we started paying the rent for our DCN North Bay space, which meant that we could staff it for half of the week. Consistent feedback from DCN staff (pre-pandemic) was to, ideally, have two facilitators available as the spaces could sometimes be too busy for just one person to fully tend to all youth questions and needs. We had two Programming Facilitators co-leading the space for the first six months of our DCN North Bay space to test this proposition. We ultimately paired back to one artist facilitator in order to extend our financial ability to staff the space, but we did confirm that, indeed, two artist facilitators would be our blue sky scenario.

As it was specifically run by N2M2L – and perhaps also as North Bay is one of the larger communities to host DCN – we observed a keen interest from other local arts groups, including the White Water Gallery (our local artist-run centre presenter), Silver Linings Press (an ad hoc, grassroots publishing collective), Endaayaan Awejaa (a local Indigenous non-profit established during the pandemic to support [mainly but not exclusively Indigenous] youth and young adults up to 35 with wellness resources such as traditional teachings, cooking classes, hygiene products, etc.), and Art Fix (a collective of artists living with mental health and addiction challenges). Each of these organizations had similar needs for access to both space and equipment, so we established partnerships with each for resource and space sharing – particularly apt for our North Bay space as it was only operating part-time – which varied from equipment and workshop facilitating bartering, splitting costs together, and cross-promoting.

OPENING A NEW DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH SITE IN DOKIS FIRST NATION

The Dokis First Nation space, housed in their community's museum, is in the smallest community we've connected with so far (with a residential population of around 200) and the first organization to fully absorb DCN in-house whereby the existing staff folded DCN into their roles whereas, comparatively, all other spaces required the hiring of a staff artist to facilitate DCN programming. The space in Dokis also decided on a community-engaged approach by developing programming that was goal rather than workshop-oriented, such as the digital archiving of their oral histories. This undertaking was originally meant to happen in the summer of 2020, but was necessarily pushed back several years due to the pandemic. At the time of writing, it is still too early to provide concrete observations on how the scale of the community will impact engagement and gleamings of how project-goal rather than workshop-oriented programming shapes participation. We eagerly look forward to seeing the results of their multi-year community arts project!

TOOLKITS

Concurrently, we produced a suite of toolkits made available on our website – digitalcreator.ca/resources – that cover a wide range of DCN-related resources, including video tutorials and workshops (for both youth and facilitators alike), open-source software and programs that are free for artists to use, funding opportunities that institutions, collectives, and artists can apply to in realizing their own DCN space or DCN programming, and even recommended items for a Digital Creator North lab. The content of these toolkits was determined based on many conversations and our most frequently asked questions about running Digital Creator North from interested parties. The toolkits are living documents and will continue to expand over time.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION, LOOKING FORWARD

KEY LEARNINGS

Throughout the many years and ever-evolving timeline of Digital Creator North, our successes and failures amassed into key learnings and takeaways that will continue to shape not only Digital Creator North itself, but also the organization behind it: the Near North Mobile Media Lab. The world has changed dramatically during the course of DCN's lifespan, requiring a self-reflexive ability to adapt to the changing needs of youth and emerging digital and media artists. For example: TikTok has revolutionized the accessibility of producing short-form video content, simultaneously expanding youths' abilities to understand media and its creative possibilities; the COVID-19 global pandemic underscored the importance of having strong digital skills; and the changing of elected provincial governments demonstrated the inherent precarity of non-profit organizations' reliance on increasingly competitive and smaller grants.

Perhaps above all else, the Digital Creator North program taught us that youth in Northern Ontario are remarkably talented, innovative, and bursting with potential and skill that just need a little nurturing and access to mentorship, equipment, and space to be themselves. Almost more than the digital and media arts education, the physical space that DCN provided as a designated space for youth quickly became the driving force for the program's success. Equally, this key factor in the success of the space evidenced a clear lack of other similar youth gathering spaces outside of their school settings. By using the HOMAGO (hang-out, mess-around, geek-out) framework within a space where youth felt comfortable being their true selves, we saw a clear progression from curiosity to skill. After a long process of establishing trust within our partner communities and extensive outreach efforts, video games and the novelty of a teen space proved to be an excellent entry point to spark further creativity and interest in learning skills.

During this program, we observed many other developments among youth, including social, collaborative, and leadership skills. Throughout our periodic surveys and data collection, youth often articulated the social benefits of the DCN space on equal par with their enjoyment of accessing and learning to use new technologies. Youth expressed that, by participating in DCN, they gained confidence, found something they were passionate about, and made new friends. One of our largest lessons learned throughout this process was the importance of the environment and its ability to lend itself to our workshops and open studio time for youth to feel comfortable expanding their knowledge and skills.

NEXT STEPS FOR DIGITAL CREATOR NORTH

Whereas Digital Creator North and the Near North Mobile Media Lab previously assumed the majority of the work in securing funding, purchasing equipment, hiring, and training staff to launch its six inaugural DCN hubs, the focus will now shift towards the continued operation of our local space in North Bay, and providing support for other organizations who have recently reopened (or newly opened) a DCN space, or organizations interested in reopening or establishing a new Digital Creator North space. A substantial reason for this decreased capacity is the increasingly precarious funding landscape for non-profit organizations; two of the largest grants that were DCN's financial life force no longer exist. Instead, it is now more efficient for organizations to individually apply for the resources they need to operate the space, which is largely funding to hire a staff person and, secondarily, capital funds to replace or purchase new equipment as needed. In the last two years, N2M2L/DCN has provided grant-writing support to two public libraries in Northern Ontario to successfully receive funding for hiring staff to operate two DCN spaces: one new and one reopening. We welcome inquiries from interested parties looking for assistance in grant writing to reopen or open a new DCN space, but caution of N2M2L's own limited capacity, which changes seasonally with our many different projects, including festivals, exhibitions and other organizational partnership projects.

N2M2L is also excited to continue fostering the communal potential of our own Digital Creator North Bay space, which opened in August of 2022. Our funding has only allowed us to staff (and subsequently operate) the space for three days a week; however, there are other arts organizations and youth organizations that could all equally benefit from the resources, equipment, and software in our North Bay DCN space during the other four nights of the week.

TALEWEAVERS GRASSROOTS ALLIANCE

As mentioned in a previous section, the Digital Creator North project had the additional outcome of springboarding the careers of many digital and media artists who gained valuable skills and work experience during their time with Digital Creator North. One such – and at the time of writing, very recent – example is Katya Serré, who first worked as a Program Lead facilitating the North Bay DCN space and, after graduating with her Bachelor of Fine Arts, returned to work at the Near North Mobile Media Lab as the Network Facilitator through a one-year employment grant funded by the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC). Towards the end of her tenure as DCN Network Facilitator, Serré submitted and successfully received a Youth Opportunities Fund Grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) for a proposed project to be undertaken as the Taleweavers Grassroots Alliance. As the founding member of the Taleweavers Grassroots Alliance, Serré formed a team of eight collaborators and proposed a three-year project to produce a visual-novel-style video game in collaboration with youth. With a focus on queer Indigenous youth aged 15-25 in Nipissing First Nation and North Bay, the project invited youth to share their voices (while being compensated for their time and efforts) and to be active story-tellers in a multi-year project that will ultimately allow these otherwise underrepresented voices to have a platform to hear and have their stories heard whilst exercising creativity and developing valuable digital skills. Bi-weekly video game design workshops will be offered to help realize the project. The Taleweavers Grassroots Alliance will be using the North Bay DCN space and its equipment to realize their project, and is an excellent example of the branching possibilities of Digital Creator North spaces, particularly when creating space for multi-organizational use and lateral resource sharing. While Digital Creator North first started by creating locally focused satellite spaces in six communities across the North, the emergence of the Taleweavers Grassroots Alliance is an excellent example of the return on investment in youth and seeing their leadership and technical skills evolving in real-time, impacting their communities for the better. Taleweavers Grassroots Alliance represents a specifically localized approach to address community needs that DCN didn't have the capacity to undertake but, in some way, otherwise made possible.

NEAR NORTH MAKERSPACE

Our initial small-scale experiments of shared use of space with other organizations in the original DCN site proved successful, thus prompting further funding applications as we believe DCN can adapt to a more collaborative model, potentially strengthening several non-profits and ad hoc collectives, as well as individual artists working in the Nipissing First Nation and North Bay area. N2M2L has successfully received a Canada Council for the Arts Strategic Funds Initiatives: Cultivate Grant to pilot a maker space with DCN as one of the primary programming partners. This grant (which has since been discontinued – yet another funding source DCN has outlived) was received in collaboration with another North Bay collective of artists with lived experience of mental health or substance use called Art Fix. This funding will be used to better meet the needs of DCN participants, adult makers, and other arts-related organizations (and enhance the tools available to youth).

The pivot to a more community-oriented operational model for our North Bay DCN space required relocation to a rental site that was more receptive to several keyholders in a shared, multi-organizational hub, as this was not possible under our initial DCN space lease agreement. With more organizations came more needs, so DCN found a larger, street-level storefront space to suit all parties better while also increasing visibility. This is a recent development at the time of writing, so there are no concrete observations learned from the new space to report back at present.

The evolution of this particular DCN site in North Bay demonstrates the need for access to creative spaces and tools across all age demographics and builds from the success of the community-oriented model. In doing so, this question emerged: Could DCN point to a solution that might help several arts organizations, collectives, and individual creatives in addition to youth? Once this question is answered through proof of the shared maker space concept, N2M2L will apply for an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant to develop this direction further.

ARTIST RESIDENCIES

In late 2021, Digital Creator North offered its first professional artist residency, funded through the Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA) residency program called Digital Skills For Youth. In February 2025, we were pleased to welcome Jacqueline Blaikie as our fourth Digital Creator North Bay artist in residence. Artists Lily Zhang, Casey McGee, and Heran Genene preceded Lily. During residencies with DCN, artists were on-site (with the exception of Heran Genene, who did a remote residency as per COVID-19 public health guidelines at that time) and encouraged to take full advantage of all the equipment and software available to them in the DCN space. Artists had a mix of alone time in the space and time spent working on their projects during open studio nights with youth in the space. It was important for the youth to see a professional artist working in the space as this allowed them to see what a successful career in the arts could look like. The artist in residence inherently functioned as a role model, and working on their projects helped encourage inspiration and aspirations for youth. The artists in residence each had unique practices, meaning that, naturally, they tended to have different skill sets than our Program Leads, allowing youth access to increased mentorship opportunities and a wider field of knowledge. After an extended period of time in the DCN space and getting to know the youth, the artist in residence was asked to prepare and deliver a workshop based on their skill set and youth interests. Artists were ultimately selected because of their artistic practice and proposed use of the space during their residency and not their teaching potential. Thus, many artists did not have pedagogical or teaching backgrounds, meaning that we often provided artists with mentorship and advice on developing and facilitating workshops, which became an added, unique facet of growth for artists undertaking a residency in DCN North Bay. Artists in residence have expressed receiving surprisingly helpful feedback on their projects from the youth themselves who engaged with the artists during their residencies, yielding a mutually beneficial creative environment. To conclude their residencies, the artists gave a public artist talk to share their practice and what they worked on throughout their residencies.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The past ten years have been a long and difficult journey filled with ups and downs, successes and failures, but above all else, many learnings. Since DCN's inception, we feel that Northern Ontarians – and the world more broadly – have a much better sense of what digital and media arts are. We are proud to see the next generation of emerging artists, arts educators, arts administrators, researchers, and community facilitators emerge! The conditions of their emergence have been fraught and difficult as the last few years have been unpredictable and precarious. While digital and media art technologies are more accessible than ever, it is increasingly important for youth to understand that they are not only consumers of media, but can also be active producers of digital media; their stories are important, and we can't wait to keep listening.

RESOURCES

As we conclude this chapter and prepare for the next chapter of Digital Creator North, we encourage readers to visit the numerous resources and toolkits developed during the Digital Creator North project, which can be found hyperlinked here or by visiting digitalcreator.ca/resources.

GET IN TOUCH

Have a specific question about Digital Creator North, or are you interested in fielding potential collaborations? Get in touch! We can be reached at northbay@digitalcreator.ca. Additionally, The Near North Mobile Media Lab website is www.n2m2l.ca, and our Digital Creator North website is digitalcreator.ca – take a look! The respective N2M2L and DCN social media accounts can also be found linked on our website.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND IMPORTANT THANK-YOUS

There are far too many incredible artists, facilitators, community organizers, and partners to recognize and thank for their generous contributions to Digital Creator North!

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We would also like to extend a warm thank you to our artists in residence who have inspired our youth by serving as professional artist role models:

Heran Genene, Casey McGee, Lily Zhang, and **Jacqueline Blaikie**.

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Lastly, we would like to thank all the **Near North Mobile Media Lab** board members who served during the tenure of Digital Creator North for their enthusiasm for this program, for supporting staff to continue its development, and for the many thoughtful and helpful ideas and guidance along the way.

To all the above: your dedication and thoughtful contributions have greatly enriched this work, and we are truly grateful for the time, energy, and creativity each of you has shared. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND IMPORTANT THANK-YOUS

Extra Special Thank You to Holly Cunningham

We must extend our deepest, biggest thank you to Holly Cunningham, whose vision, drive, creativity, leadership, and insistence on a better future for Northern Ontario youth has catalyzed this entire project. Holly first thought of adapting the Chicago Public Library's YOUMedia program as a model that could benefit Northern Ontario communities and quickly assembled a team around her to bring this vision to life. Not only did Holly's vision ultimately develop into a program that would connect digital and media arts to thousands of youth in the North, her impact was also felt in the creation of nearly a dozen jobs and subsequently launching the careers of many emerging artists, researchers, and arts administrators. Holly, your mark is indelible, and this endeavour worked precisely because you led from a place of care, compassion, and resilience – thank you.

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