3-15-2019

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Recommended Citation
(2019) "Teen Investigators: Faculty Research Helps Teens Find Their Path," DePaul Magazine: Vol. 1 : Iss. 412024 , Article 6. Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine/vol1/iss412024/6

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Faculty research helps teens find their path.

By Kris Gallagher

Sometimes the best way to understand teens is to enable them to understand themselves. From video games to introspective research to field experiences, DePaul faculty members innovate new ways to help teens grow. Their techniques may surprise you.

Computer games have a reputation for numbing teen minds, but in reality most games teach players persistence, how to form and test hypotheses, and the importance of practice. The challenge is showing teens how to transfer those skills to the real world, says Doris Rusch, an associate professor in the College of Computing and Digital Media and creative director of DePaul’s Deep Games Lab.

“Inborn capacity is only a small portion of success. What is much more important is that you find new challenges for yourself, which we call having a ‘growth mindset.’ You seek help when you need it, you stretch yourself, you fail, you learn from that, you come back to it,” she explains. “Theoretically, games are the perfect tool to teach growth mindset because they are all about trial and failure and forming a new hypothesis and trying again. The difficulty, though, is if games were the answer, everybody who’s a gamer would already have growth mindset. We know for sure that’s not true.”

So, Rusch and her students, in partnership with not-for-profit Thrive Games, developed “Quilko’s Song.” Quilko is the teenage son of a rock star—and, because it’s a game, he’s also a planet—who thinks he shouldn’t need to practice to be a musical prodigy. He decides to give up when he doesn’t have immediate success. To win the game, players have to “teach” Quilko to be persistent. Games work because “it’s not you who is struggling, it’s somebody else, so it’s not personal,” Rusch says. “Once you spot growth mindset in others, it’s easier to spot in yourself and act accordingly.”

Games like “Quilko’s Song,” which is only available through Thrive, are used by staff in youth centers and high schools to spark conversations. Rusch stresses that a game alone can’t change thought patterns; teens need a support structure to convert their insights into daily habits. “But the game piece is incredibly good at allowing this first big ‘aha!’ moment,” Rusch says. “It sets the process in motion, and a workbook just can’t do that.”

Rusch and Thrive are now piloting programs in which teens design games around issues they care about. For example, one team of students designed a game to help other teens understand grief. Because games need characters and rules, the students dug deeply into roles and expectations, thereby exploring their own beliefs.

“We’re using the game design process to engage with adolescents, for us to understand them and for them to understand themselves,” says Susan Rivers, executive director and chief scientist at Thrive. “As they plotted the whole thing out, they more deeply understood what grieving is, what the rules are and how to disrupt the rules to get a better outcome.”

In a new app for mobile phones, teens tilt their screens to reroute negative trains of thought onto positive tracks by adding the word “yet,” underscoring the need to give oneself time to grow. “The negative sentences reinforce negative beliefs in the brain. By adding ‘yet,’ you build positive structures in your brain as you reroute the trains to new destinations,” Rusch explains. At the same time, not every sentence in the game can accept the “yet” caboose, a factor that goes well beyond grammar. “If you have to debate whether ‘yet’ is an option, it sheds light on your beliefs,” she says.
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It’s called the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Students who are jailed, whether for community-based infractions or through “zero tolerance” school policies, are at high risk of never returning to the classroom. Failure to graduate dramatically increases the chances of them becoming more serious offenders.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) administrators want to interrupt this cycle. However, despite programs and alternative schools dedicated to this population, thousands of formerly jailed students either don’t re-enroll or drop out. CPS reached out to Joby Gardner, an associate professor in the College of Education, for ideas on how to reverse the trend.

“Can we engage high school students in community-based research and have that be part of their science, social science and English classes?” Gardner wondered. Armed with a bag of doughnuts and assistance from CPS administrators and teachers, he went about recruiting students at several CPS alternative schools, including the Peace and Education Coalition High School in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood.

“I came for the doughnuts, but I stayed for the research,” says participant Rakeisha Harris. Unlike some of her high school assignments, Gardner’s project captured her interest.

“Reversing the prison pipeline is something I actually wanted to talk about. It showed that somebody was listening and paying attention to what was going on.”

—Rakeisha Harris, participant
INVESTIGATING MENTORING

Are youth mentoring programs affected by race, economic status and type of mentor? Bernadette Sanchez thinks so. Sanchez, a professor of community psychology at DePaul, researches the impact that these and other factors have on the teens who participate.

“I’ve studied both natural and volunteer mentoring relationships. Volunteer mentoring is when an adult is matched with a young person through a program to work together in some way. Natural mentoring happens organically,” she explains, when students connect with teachers, community members or people in their extended family. “I look at how these relationships work and the role they play in academic outcomes.”

For example, she studied Latino youth participating in a mentoring program through a CPS school. “These youth were low-income, and the family members they named as mentors had a lower educational level. These mentors had less impact on the students’ educational outcomes compared to youth whose mentors were more knowledgeable about the education system,” she says. “However, the family mentors are probably helping them in other ways, like providing emotional support and being their cheerleaders. … We’re finding that high-quality relationships are the most impactful.”

Sanchez wished to explore these issues more deeply, but she wanted to make sure she was asking the right questions. So, she applied for and received a William T. Grant Foundation fellowship that enabled her to spend 2017 as a youth mentor and 2018 providing technical assistance and training to mentoring programs.

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Beginning in 2013, she and other students spent two years interviewing each other, friends who dropped out, police officers, probation officers, school administrators and parents to identify issues and possible solutions. The students then analyzed their findings and made recommendations. “It was really gratifying to see how fired up the young people became,” Gardner says.

The program was a success on two levels. First, the initiative demonstrated that students were much more successful in meeting learning objectives when they were working on a project that resonated deeply with their personal experiences. Even more importantly, all but one of the project student leaders finished high school, and many of them are either in college or have taken college courses.

“I know I was on the verge of not graduating” before joining the program, Harris recalls. “He showed us what we were capable of doing.” Today, Harris has completed a year of college at Alabama State University and is currently earning money for her sophomore year by working for Chicago’s Department of Streets and Sanitation—a job she would not have qualified for without a high school diploma.

This innovative program also attracted the attention of the American Educational Research Association, which chose Gardner and his students as one of 11 international groups invited to present at the organization’s annual conference in 2015. The students shared experiences with peers from around the world, an experience that Gardner terms “transformative.”

“That was something awesome,” Harris agrees. “That was my first time interacting with people other than people from Chicago. I loved it.”
She gained experience with a traditional mentoring program through the Gads Hill Center, a social service agency in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood. She also began volunteering as a child advocate for unaccompanied teens through the Young Center for Immigrant Children’s Rights, an activity that she first thought was unrelated to her research. She soon changed her mind.

“The goal of being a child advocate is to build a relationship with the child and to learn their story so we can recommend to lawyers what would be in the child’s best interests. Building a relationship is also the goal in mentoring,” she says. The concepts were so well-aligned that Sanchez held a webinar for Young Center advocates on how to support immigrant youth in the community. She also helped the center create ethical guidelines for advocates that mirrored similar documents used by mentoring programs.

“As I’ve been working in these community settings, I’ve been thinking about trainings for volunteers and staff and trainings around social justice issues. Adults work in a variety of settings, whether it’s judges in criminal justice systems or teachers or mentors at after-school programs, and the policies are all different,” she says. “How can we better train adults in these different settings … and also be oriented to thinking about things such as race and social justice? What are the particular needs in these settings so that we can better serve these youth?”

To find out, Sanchez is working with MENTOR Illinois, an organization that provides technical assistance and training to mentoring organizations around the state. She’s providing training and technical assistance to staff at multiple organizations while making a preliminary assessment on whether such training works.

“Do they change the attitudes of adults and how they work with youth? Do they change their relationship with youth? Ultimately, does it change the outcomes for youth? Those are the different things we need to look at,” says Sanchez. She plans to seek additional funding to continue her research.

“I can use this fellowship to understand what the community needs and then go back to my peers, both in research and practice, and try to influence the mentoring field.”

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—Bernadette Sanchez, professor of community psychology