



Helping Children Actively Design How They Learn About Health and Wellness

The Institute of Play tests an online social networking tool within a game-based school curriculum

SUMMARY

Youth rarely receive opportunities to craft their own strategies around health and wellness within contexts relevant to them. From 2009 to 2010, the [Institute of Play](#), based in New York, developed Being Me, a social networking site, to enable sixth-graders at the Quest to Learn public school to explore, discover and document a range of ideas related to health and wellness.

Key Results

According to the final report and the project director, the Institute of Play:

- Created and launched Being Me, a social network that allowed students to explore and practice health and wellness by posting videos, photos, audio, games and writing; creating and contributing to blogs and debates; and finding mentors and collaborators.
- Developed a sixth-grade wellness curriculum that connected Being Me with classroom work in physical education, health, nutrition and social and emotional learning.
- Worked with 77 sixth-graders to develop and manage content for Being Me.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded this project with a \$285,000 grant.

CONTEXT

Youth rarely have opportunities to craft their own strategies around health and wellness within contexts relevant to them, according to the Institute of Play, which works to apply the power of games to personal and social development. What's more, students often learn about health and wellness in isolated health or physical education classes, or

through initiatives around school lunch, after-school sports or scattered community programs.

Meanwhile reports show that 57 percent, or about 12 million, of online teens ages 12 to 17 post original content such as blogs, Web pages, artwork, photos, stories and videos. However, adults often overlook the potential to leverage youth-defined spaces for discovery and learning.

In September 2009, [New Visions for Public Schools](#) and the Institute of Play opened Quest to Learn, a public school, in New York with an enrollment of 77 sixth-graders. (Open to all through the city's school-choice lottery, the school will eventually enroll students in sixth through twelfth grades.) The school relies on digital technology and "game-like learning" to engage and empower students.

THE PROJECT

From 2009 to 2010, the Institute of Play created Being Me, a social networking site, to allow students at the Quest to Learn public school to explore, discover and document a range of ideas related to health and wellness. The institute aimed to integrate Being Me into the school's wellness curriculum.

Project staff began developing Being Me in January 2009, working with the [Digital Youth Network](#) in Chicago, and students and teachers began using the site in September 2009.

Challenges

Opening a new school and developing a new social network platform at the same time proved challenging for project staff and faculty, according to Katie Salen, MFA, executive director of the Institute of Play and director of this project. Developing the technology took twice as long as planned, for example. And many of the teachers were overwhelmed with becoming proficient in a new learning model, and had little time to learn to incorporate Being Me into their teaching.

RESULTS

According to the final report and Salen in an interview, the project produced the following results. The Institute of Play:

- **Created and launched Being Me, a social network that allows students to explore and practice health and wellness by posting videos, photos, audio, games and writing; creating and contributing to blogs and debates; and finding mentors and collaborators.**

Site designers developed three Being Me applications to help students integrate in-school and out-of-school experiences, foster community, and participate in a range of peer groups defined and managed by the students themselves.

- ***Moodtracker.*** Helps students connect feelings to behavior such as overeating or acting out. Students can attach emotions to their avatars—their online representations—and use a slider to indicate their energy level. The school’s wellness curriculum then provides information that helps students understand the connection between feelings and behaviors.

“Students would see that if they’re angry and have low energy, maybe it’s because they haven’t eaten lunch,” Salen said. “The moodtracker helps give kids vocabulary and awareness and creates points of connection at school and home in talking with parents or friends.”

- ***Sparks.*** A virtual currency that students earn for any Being Me activity, such as logging on and posting comments. The network seeks to keep the community “in balance” by ensuring that no one student has too few or too many sparks. If a student has too many, he or she can “throw” them to other students. However, students do not choose who receives the sparks.

“This application seeks to reinforce the importance of community,” Salen said. “The kids see how they contribute to the whole—they have to care about the health of the community as well as the health of the individual.”

- ***Expertise Exchange.*** Allows students to define and communicate their sense of expertise. They can use a search engine to find classmates who show expertise in areas such as leadership, making videos, blogging, curating content or writing computer code, and collaborate with them.

- **Developed a sixth-grade wellness curriculum that connected Being Me with classroom work in physical education, health, nutrition and social and emotional learning.** For example, when a student launched an online debate about legalizing gay marriage, teachers used it to spur classroom discussion. Teachers also led students in “wellness quests” on Being Me that complemented the health and wellness curriculum.
- **Worked with 77 sixth-graders to manage and develop content for Being Me.** For example, after a student posted a violent animated video, students developed rules for appropriate content. And when the school faced challenges around bullying, a post by a student spurred the school to create a “positive gossip” program that encompassed Being Me.
- **Developed an introductory tutorial and answers to frequently asked questions on using Being Me for students and parents.** Students who had never used social networking learned to do so, and all students learned to protect their privacy.

- **Collected initial data from Being Me on patterns linked to the school’s core values: kindness, collaboration, respect, design and creativity.** The goal was to use the information in decision-making about the school and its curriculum, and to adapt academic and other support systems to individual needs. However, because of delays in developing the technology, developers were unable to collect as much information as they had hoped.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Students and teachers learn to use online social networks differently.** The creators of Being Me expected students and adults to learn to use it the same way. However, they found that students wanted to jump into the site, begin experimenting and make mistakes. The teachers, in contrast, preferred to learn step by step about how to use the site to support student learning. (Project Director Salen)
2. **Students need guidance on the social aspects of an online community.** Designers quickly learned that students did not need much help with the technology, but they did need help in deciding which content is interesting enough to post, and in interacting appropriately with one another. For example, teachers encouraged students to explain the reasons for their points of view and foster kindness and community. (Project Director Salen)
3. **Quieter students often take advantage of social networks to express themselves.** Project designers found, to their surprise, that some of the quietest students in the classroom were some of the most active users of Being Me. (Project Director Salen)

AFTERWARD

The Institute of Play is opening ChicagoQuest, a similar school, in Chicago in fall 2011, and hopes to add two more schools. All the schools will use Being Me.

The institute also intends to provide more training for teachers in using the social networking platform, and to gather more data on student participation.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Education or Toolkit

Curricula

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