This paper describes the creation of a professional development website for school library media specialists and youth librarians focused on changing library services to better meet the literacy needs of African American male youth. It establishes the need for such a website, discusses the process by which the site was conceptualized and developed, and describes plans for the site’s dissemination and potential future changes.

The website can be accessed via the following address:

librariesliteracyandaamaleyouth.weebly.com
LIBRARIES, LITERACY, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE YOUTH: CREATING A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WEBSITE FOR SCHOOL AND PUBLIC LIBRARIANS

by
Amanda Hitson

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Approved by:

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Sandra Hughes-Hassell
**Introduction**

In July of 2012, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina Central University hosted an Institute of Museum and Library Services funded summit entitled Building a Bridge to Literacy for African-American Male Youth: A Call to Action for the Library Community. The summit lasted three days and brought together key stakeholders from the education, library, and publishing fields to determine ways libraries could adapt their services to better meet the literacy and individual needs of young African American men. Data was collected through various means over the course of the three days and later analyzed, resulting in the publication of a report that summarized the summit’s findings and provided numerous action steps that can and should be taken to change the ways we serve this population (Hughes-Hassell, Kumasi, Rawson, & Hitson, 2012).

The focus of both the summit and its report was to bring libraries as community based organizations into the conversation about the literacy achievement gap for African American males and to inspire others to begin actively working to make a difference. This means that while the summit is over and a report was issued, the work it started has only begun and continues in the form of inspired projects initiated by summit attendees and readers of the report. The website I have created and am describing in further detail in this paper is one of these projects that seek to continue the summit’s discussion, spread
it to those who were unable to attend, and inspire librarians to change their practice to reflect the needs of African American male youth.

While the report clearly outlines and describes the event’s most important findings, it has several format related limitations including the need to delve more deeply into the strategies it identifies and to provide additional examples. The report is also static and cannot change in response to new research or strategy examples as time goes by without the need for another report to be written. These limitations can be addressed by offering professional development that provides detailed training to librarians on the use of the strategies and by discussing the findings in further detail using the interactive and easily updated nature of the web. It is for these reasons that I chose to create a website offering free professional development to school library media specialists and youth librarians based on the ideas and strategies identified in the summit report for my master’s project. This paper summarizes the project, the process behind its creation, and future plans for the website.

The Website

The ultimate product of this project is a website that offers free professional development related to the findings of the summit to school and public librarians who work with African American male youth. The website is hosted by Weebly, a popular web development platform, at this address: librariesliteracyandaamaleyouth.weebly.com. The site is divided into thirteen pages, with three describing the project and the features of the site and ten modules that inform users about specific summit findings, provide access to additional resources related to these findings, and outline activities to help librarians put this information to use. The site uses a tab navigation system to make it
easier for users to travel between the pages and find the information they are looking for. There is also a search function to help users find more specific topics if they are needed.

When users first visit the site, they are directed to a home page that describes the function of the site, gives details about the summit, provides external links to the summit’s webpage and report, and includes a brief biography of me as the creator of this web resource. This is the first of three pages intended to help users understand the purpose of the site and learn how to use it. The second of these pages is entitled “Using This Site” and has its own tab that is visible at the top of any page on the site. This page describes the learning modules that are the focus of the site and explains how users should work their way through the information and activities presented in each module. The final explanation page is located on the third tab and labeled “Modules”. It simply provides an indexed list of links to each of the modules which can also be accessed through the dropdown menu that appears whenever a user hovers over the “Modules” tab.

There are a total of ten learning modules offered through the site. Each is accessible through the indexed list on the “Modules” page or by clicking on the module number and description that appears on the dropdown menu of the “Modules” tab. All of the modules are divided into multiple sections depending on the type of information being presented and how that information is accessed. Each module includes a brief introduction which I have written to familiarize users with the topic then provides an annotated list of online resources users can access to gain more information about the topic. Such resources include articles, websites, blogs, videos, podcasts, social networking sites, and etc. Each list is divided by subject headings and the resources are presented in an order that will help users develop and build on their knowledge of the
topic as they proceed through the list. Annotations are also given to describe the resource, explain its connection to the topic at hand, and emphasize key points or questions of which the user should take note. At the end of each module, there is an activity that guides users to put their new knowledge to use in their own libraries and a summary to help solidify key points in the users’ minds.

**Process and Challenges**

Before beginning this project, I consulted with my advisor and the summit’s principal investigator, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, several times regarding the need for professional development opportunities related to the summit. Together, we determined that creating a website to provide such opportunities would be a good way to meet this need for librarians on a variety of schedules around the country. With the idea of designing such a website in mind, I began this process by studying the summit report in great detail and pulling out several themes that I felt best represented the message of the report and could benefit from additional description and examples. I also consulted the report and its sources to establish a list of key points related to each of these themes.

Once I had identified the information to be included, I set about researching the nature of online professional development and personal learning networks for educators and librarians. Through this research, I was able to identify several issues that guided my planning for the website: First, online learning requires either a lot of self-direction or needs extrinsic motivation to convince people to complete it (Ross, 2011). Second, the interactive nature of the web should be taken advantage of to ensure the site holds users’ interest (Mitchell, 2012; Ross, 2011). And finally, the creation and maintenance of personal or professional learning networks allows librarians to stay up-to-date on the
latest trends in their fields and to connect with others regarding specialized interest areas (Harlan, 2009; Hornung, 2012; Mitchell, 2012; Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). This is especially important for school and youth librarians who do not always work in a location where there are other librarians who specialize in working with youth.

With these issues in mind, I began looking for examples of similar professional development websites to the one I had in mind—a site offering self-directed learning opportunities related to a specific topic that consulted multiple web-based resources and was available to users for free. I was very surprised to find nothing similar to what I planned to do. Most of the professional development I encountered was fee based and/or required users to register and then virtually attend at specific times. I felt that making the resource accessible to any user for any reason at any time was very important to capturing the interest of busy, self-directed learners, so registration and virtual attendance could not be requirements for my site. For these reasons, most professional development sites provided little inspiration for this project.

One that did influence the design of my site was Project ENABLE, a Syracuse University based site offering training for librarians who work with children with disabilities (Center for Digital Literacy, n.d.). On their site, each activity is described within a color coded box (i.e. red for reading, purple for watching videos, black for brainstorming, and etc.) which provided me with an example structure for identifying the types of activities users are being asked to do. While it is not specifically professional development oriented, I also took some guidance from the Course Extracts offered at OpenLearn, an OpenCourseWare project from The Open University (The Open University, 2013). Each of these Course Extracts includes an introduction, a list of
readings and activities to complete, and a conclusion that summarizes the lesson. These influences will be described in more detail as I discuss the development of the modules later in this paper.

With these models in mind, I decided at that point to establish what my site needed to look like before determining the best possible hosting platform. I determined that I would develop modules around the key themes I had identified in the first steps of the project and structure them in a manner similar to the OpenLearn Course Extracts. I would then divide these modules into activities using some guidance from Project ENABLE’s structure. I wanted the navigation of the site to be something with which users are already familiar and decided to use tabs, a dropdown menu, and a search feature since many other websites use similar tools for navigation. I considered three possible platforms that would allow me to use this navigational plan—Google Sites, Word Press through web.unc.edu, and Weebly.

Word Press was the first platform eliminated since I am more familiar with the other two and my access to web.unc.edu would be limited after graduation meaning the site might not be able to change over time as needed. I then began experimenting with Google Sites but found that it lacked the professional appearance I was really looking for. As for my final option, I was initially hesitant about choosing Weebly because I wanted to develop this site using completely free tools and the options available in the free version of Weebly are limited. When the other options did not work out, however, I chose to use the paid version of Weebly since I have maintained a subscription for the past two years and intend to keep the subscription indefinitely.
Weebly is, in my opinion, a very easy to use web hosting platform that has allowed me to develop and maintain several professional websites including my portfolio over the last several years. When I chose this platform, I had grander plans than were ultimately realized. Since I was already familiar with Weebly and have a long-term subscription to the platform, I initially wanted to develop a larger site that offered professional development opportunities on multiple topics of interest to school and youth librarians, starting with the literacy needs of African American male youth. About halfway through the development of the website, however, I decided that a narrower focus specifically on this topic would make my site easier for users to find and navigate.

Many potential site layouts are offered thorough Weebly including those developed by the company and its subscribers. I felt the layout selection was very important to the creation of my site since it needed to include the navigational structure previously discussed, be easy to read, be attractive, and be appropriate for the subject of the site: African American male literacy. The layout I chose was company designed and intended for educational sites. I selected this layout because the color palate (dark gray heading, olive green tabbed menu, off white background, and dark gray print) is professional, easily readable, and not too feminine for the subject matter. It also includes images of a chalkboard and a globe in the header which I felt corresponded nicely with the site’s focus on professional development. A header image was provided with the layout that I ultimately changed to include several images of young African American men involved in literacy related activities to better reflect the site’s purpose. The title of the site, search box, menu, and header image appear on each page of the site for continuity.
The main part of the site is the set of ten modules based on summit themes I identified as highly important and in need of further description and examples through a careful analysis of the report. These modules are:

1. Literacy and Life Outcomes;
2. High Expectations Lead to Higher Achievement;
3. Authenticity and Relevance in Materials, Instruction, and Programming;
4. Adding Popular Culture to Instruction and Programming;
5. Helping Youth Develop and Use Voice and Agency;
6. Incorporating Writing in Reading Instruction;
7. Using Powerful and Enabling Texts;
8. Developing Partnerships for Support;
9. Characteristics of Effective Library Services for African American Male Youth;
10. Connecting Effective Library Services for African American Male Youth with the Common Core State Standards.

Each module begins with a brief introduction I have written to acquaint users with the key ideas represented therein. The next section of the modules, like those observed at Project ENABLE (see above), provides the users with a color coded list of tasks to be completed that are identified by a header that describes the activity. They include: read an article or blog post (brown), watch a video (dark purple), listen to a podcast (dark blue), explore a web resource (light blue), and complete an activity (orange). The introduction and summary portions of the modules are also color coded (green). By breaking the modules into smaller sections that are identified by color, I believe I have made it easier for users to determine what they need to do to complete the tasks and
found a way to add visual interest to the modules. I have also written a description for each of the tasks and provided annotations for each resource to which the site links.

To find resources to include in the module tasks, I began by using the summit report, the sources it cites, and the work of the two keynote speakers who attended. I also consulted a variety of freely accessible trusted web resources including Teaching Tolerance, National Public Radio, and School Library Journal among others to identify additional multimedia resources for inclusion. Because of my research into personal learning networks (PLN), many of the modules refer users to regularly updated resources that they could add to their PLNs including blogs and social media feeds. I specifically chose to include these resources for several reasons. First, the selected resources provide excellent examples of the topic discussed. Second, they will continue to be updated over time, providing a continual source of good information. Third, many blogs and social media platforms enable comments, which would give users of my website an opportunity to engage with others and increase the interactivity of my site. And finally, I am hoping that the inclusion of these resources will encourage users to develop and maintain their own PLNs.

I encountered two difficulties in creating the modules. First, in some cases it was difficult to find freely accessible web resources related to each of my themes and points. Whenever this became a problem, I consulted my colleagues for advice and was ultimately able to find what I needed in each case. Second, while it was fairly easy for me to add most of the forms of media I wanted on the site using Weebly’s drag-and-drop web development interface, I had some trouble adding tables to modules nine and ten. There is no drag-and-drop feature for adding tables, so after some consideration, I chose
to write the tables myself in HTML and then use the Custom HTML feature to add my tables to the page. This worked well, although it was rather time consuming and the tables do not appear as polished as I would like them to be.

To provide the users with context for the modules, I used the home page to describe the summit and provide links where users can find additional information. I also felt that users might need some description of how to proceed through the modules including an explanation of the color coded tasks, so I added an additional tab leading to a page that provides this information. I created a specific page for this because I did not want the home page to appear too cluttered or to risk having users miss pertinent information because of the need to scroll down for it.

**Future Plans**

After this project has been formally submitted and feedback on the final version has been received, I plan to make any necessary adaptations based on that feedback and then begin the process of dissemination. The first step in this process will be to add a link to the site from the summit’s website and send the link to the attendees via email. This will provide access to the audience for which I had initially planned the website: librarians who attended the summit and those who were interested in the summit but were not able to come.

In addition to these audiences, I have recently learned of two other groups who may find the website useful. In January and March of 2013, Sandra Hughes-Hassell and I delivered two presentations related to the summit’s findings to school librarians in Orange County. The site will be sent to them as a potential resource to help them change
their services, programming, and instruction to better meet the needs of their African American male students. Also, Durham Public Schools and the Durham Public Library submitted a Library Services and Technology Act grant in February of 2013 that will hopefully enable them to provide further in-person professional development for 125 school and public librarians in North Carolina who work with young African American men. It is my hope that by providing these librarians with access to my site before the training sessions, they will come to the sessions more prepared and ready to engage with the topics of discussion.

Additional information and modules may also be added to the website over time as more research is conducted in this field and in response to feedback from the site’s users. For example, I have already determined that I would like to add a module related specifically to social justice issues as this is a subject that is only mildly incorporated into the current site and I feel it deserves more attention. I am also considering breaking the ninth module, Characteristics of Effective Library Services for African American Male Youth, down into several additional modules that explore the characteristics of administrators, policy-makers, librarians, and library space in more depth.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of this process I have been able to learn many things. First, as the largest web development project I have ever attempted, this project has enabled me to vastly improve my website building skills. Though I used a web development platform to guide the creation of the site, I spent much time carefully considering layout options, navigation features, structural issues, usability, and methods for presenting information in
a variety of media formats. The need for troubleshooting also arose when the platform was unable to incorporate tables, leading me to work on my problem solving abilities and ultimately learn to create tables using HTML.

Second, I was able to delve much deeper into the ideas and themes related to African American male literacy that resulted from the summit I helped coordinate and attended in 2012. Prior to starting this project, I believed I already had a very good understanding of these ideas and themes. I was therefore quite surprised when I reflected on this process and realized that engaging with these topics for such a long period of time and searching for resources to include on the site really helped me to understand the themes more fully. I suppose this is what is meant when people say teachers often learn as much if not more than their students.

Finally, I now have a much better understanding of the work that goes into creating professional development for other librarians. This knowledge will be very important as I become a school library media specialist and begin offering training and professional development opportunities within my school community. Also, as I will most likely be the only librarian working at my future school, I have used the research I conducted on the value of creating and maintaining a personal learning network to greatly improve my own.

I am very grateful to have been a part of the summit and am glad to have had this opportunity to accept the “call to action” that was issued by the summit and its report. I believe this website will prove to be a valuable resource for school library media specialists and youth librarians seeking to improve their services to better meet the needs
of their young African American male users. I look forward to seeing how others use this resource to further their knowledge of this important topic and enact change in their own library communities.
References

Center for Digital Literacy. (n.d.). Project ENABLE. Retrieved from projectenable.syr.edu


Additional references were consulted in the creation of the website and are listed on the reference lists of the pages where the source is cited. The website can be accessed at librariesliteracyandaamaleyouth.weebly.com