



Brokering in the Classroom: OST Partnerships with Schools to Connect Youth to Future Learning Opportunities

Dixie Ching, Rafi Santo, Chris Hoadley, & Kylie Pepler (Hive Research Lab)

Brian Cohen, Grace Freedman, Allen Riley (Beam Center)

“We work in many Title I schools throughout the city, which adds urgency to the idea of how we can make a connection and be inspiring to a young person in such a short amount of time. This is how we reach the most kids in the most high-need areas, so we want to make it matter.”

~Grace Freedman, Director Development, Beam Center

Audience

- Informal / OST Educators
- Education Directors
- School-Partnership Directors
- School Administrators or Ost-Point Person

What's the Issue?

When OST organizations bring projects into the classroom, they have an opportunity to act as learning brokers that can support the futures of a great number of young people. Informal educators represent a link to individuals and institutions that students would otherwise not know about or be wary of visiting or meeting. By making introductions or naming these places, OST educators can help students build their social networks and knowledge of opportunities. Also, the projects that educators introduce into classrooms can be a way for students to realize new interests and pathways they would like to explore. But brokering into the classroom can present its own set of challenges—a key one being the sheer increase in number of students that an educator may potentially be a broker to. Given that brokering well is ideally a personal and high-touch act, how can educators equitably and impactfully broker in the school setting? This brief discusses some key strategies to consider regarding how OST educators may act as learning brokers to students they meet at school.

Spotlight: Beam Center

Our insights draw largely from a months-long design research collaboration with Beam Center, a non-profit organization based in Brooklyn, NY, that offers making and learning experiences to “enliven student curiosity, bridge the opportunity gap, and prepare youth for the way the world works.” In addition to offering several youth and teacher professional development opportunities at their organization, Beam

¹Social capital might be thought of as any highly valued resources and forms of support necessary for achieving immediate and long-term goals.

Hive Research Lab is a project of



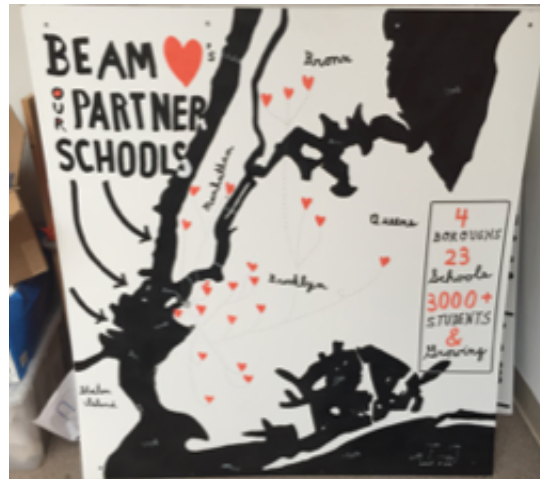
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partners with over two dozen schools in New York City, offering project-based learning programs during the school day that integrate curriculum goals and digital media making. Here, we share some of Beam's brokering practices in and outside the school context, as well as approaches that other OST organizations and educators may want to consider.



Every Beam instructor is already a natural broker.

Beam instructors often provide young people with information about upcoming programs, make introductions to other people or organizations that might relate to their interests, or engage in discussions around how students might leverage other resources in their lives to continue pursuing an interest. Here are some concrete examples of things Beam instructors do that can either support brokering or directly broker future opportunities:

- Instructors identify themselves as artists/makers/engineers with a diverse set of interests and skills—this encourages students to approach them for brokering support.
- Beam projects may lead to a 'sparking' of an interest that an Instructor can help to support by sharing ways to continue engaging in that interest.
- Beam staff have arranged to have high school students come to volunteer or visit the annual Inventgenuity Festival or some other public Beam Center event.





Beam instructor Jeff Wood helped organize a “publishing party” outside school for students who did the “Book of Unknown Students” project at Urban Assembly School of Design and Construction.

We also know that offering brokering support in these ways contributes to the long-term support of “Beam youth.” Here are short vignettes based on past and current Beam youth that illustrate how brokering support has helped shape a young person’s life in big and small ways. In these examples, note that “brokering” can include providing a program experience, a work opportunity (at Beam Center or through an instructor’s professional network), access to tools, ways to build one’s portfolio, housing, or other direct support. Note that while brokering may take varied forms, it is an essential component of helping young people thrive.

- A Beam staffer offered a Beam Camp youth (who worked as a dishwasher at the camp for multiple years) a place to stay so he could attend CUNY.
- A Beam Camp youth stayed in contact with the organization over the years and eventually Beam was able to offer the young person an assistant director position at the camp.
- A Beam staffer offered a young person from one of their programs a work-trade opportunity that allowed him to use Beam’s workshop for free to build bicycles.
- A former Beam instructor offered a graduate of Beam’s apprenticeship program a position at his composting startup venture.

These are stories that illustrate how successful brokering can contribute to an expanded array of opportunities for young people to pursue that align with their interests and goals. The next question is how we might broker successfully in the context of a classroom.

“There were youth in the rain harvesting shed program. I told them you should go to [Beam Camp] but I didn’t know enough about the scholarship programs or when she would need to apply. I didn’t have the materials on me. So I just said it and she didn’t write it down.”

-Lizzie Hurst, Beam Center instructor

Challenges with Brokering in the Classroom

In speaking with OST educators who have experience enacting projects in classrooms, we have learned many reasons why it is hard to broker effectively in the school context. Beyond the ever-present challenge of always being time-strapped and feeling overwhelmed with a multitude of tasks, educators have to contend with:

- The sheer **number of students**, which makes it difficult to get to know everyone, develop a rapport, and recommend opportunities tailored to their interests and needs. A Beam instructor might be in multiple schools, engaging in 100+ students. How is it possible to build trust, learn of their interests, and be able to respond with appropriate opportunities?
- The difficulty of describing **what an informal organization does and the kinds of opportunities and experiences students can have here** in a clear and effective way for a young person.
- **The difficulty of keeping track of currently available and open learning opportunities for young people.** It is a constant struggle for any committed learning broker to know about current, available, and appropriate opportunities for young people at any given time.

Attending to Equity

OST educators naturally broker as part of their commitment to support young people and their ongoing development. Nevertheless, it's important to move this practice beyond one's natural impulses alone. Brokering is best viewed as a practice that is enhanced with careful study, regular practice, and ongoing refinement. For example, in attending to issues of equity when it comes to brokering, we need to focus on providing every student an opportunity to continue their learning and development. Such an approach will ensure that we broker more equitably, and not inadvertently reward students that are the most vocal and who are able to express their interests most articulately. Without placing this high bar on ourselves, we risk favoring only those who come to us for help, or who proclaim their interests in ways we can detect and understand. As Beam instructor Jeff Wood recommends:

Make sure students feel heard. Make sure that everyone kind of knows that you're gonna be responsive to them. Notice the kind of range of the loudness of people's voices in the room, and who has more trouble being heard, who disappears into the background a little bit more. You're gonna need to just pay more attention to them so that they don't get frustrated or feel unheard, like they might feel in other parts of their life.

“We need to keep in mind that Beam instructors may be coming back to the school and spending time with the same students over a few years ... It’s about opening the door.”

-Brian Cohen, Executive Director of Beam

APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

OST educators entering a school classroom should feel both equipped and empowered to make brokering connections and to inspire all youth as they learn new skills, discover new things about themselves, and experience learning about new pathways for learning. Following are some strategies to help make that happen.

- **Have an internal understanding of what pathway opportunities your organization can offer** and how that might align with the types of opportunities or potential pathways schools offer.
- **Keep in mind that each educator represents a source of contacts and opportunities.** This could be part of an organization’s onboarding or ongoing professional development.
- **Consider ways to build deep, long-term partnerships with your schools.** OST educators will be more successful at brokering learning opportunities to students if their organization has some sort of felt presence at the school. Multi-year engagements also afford the opportunity to interact with students over an extended period of time, to get to know them, and to develop the kind of deep, trusting relationships that promote brokering.
- The most successful brokering processes involve **building infrastructure and a robust set of strategies** that can support educators to broker to their fullest capacities. For example, organizations may want to build an internal database to make it easier for their educators to learn about and share learning opportunities with youth.
- **Prepare information about your organization, opportunities both at your organization or other organizations that you recommend.** Examples might include handouts, postcards, presentations.
- **Seek out the “natural brokers” at a school and consider partnering with them to help get the word out about your opportunities.** For example, this could include advisors, college and career counselors, a popular teacher that many students gravitate toward. While this is often the way you make the greatest and longest-lasting impact, it can be hard to identify these individuals. We recommend asking questions like, “Does someone here handle things like internships and after-school programs for students?” Also, notice whether there’s a school staffer that is often surrounded by happy students. This is a great person to get to know, too!
- **Learn more about any school activities or initiatives that your organization may align with.** This might include credit-bearing internships, career and technical education classes, “shadowships,” and so on.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What are opportunities we can offer students at our organization?
- Are there other organizations or opportunities we endorse that we should also recommend?
- Are there existing school activities or initiatives that our organization could align with?
- What are things we can do, now, in a year, and in five years, to increase our brokering capacity?