

Creative Learning and Mental Health

Working With Youth in The Clubhouse Network

While mental health issues have always been part of the landscape of youth work, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought them into sharp relief. For nearly 30 years, The Clubhouse Network has

provided young people from low-income communities with a safe

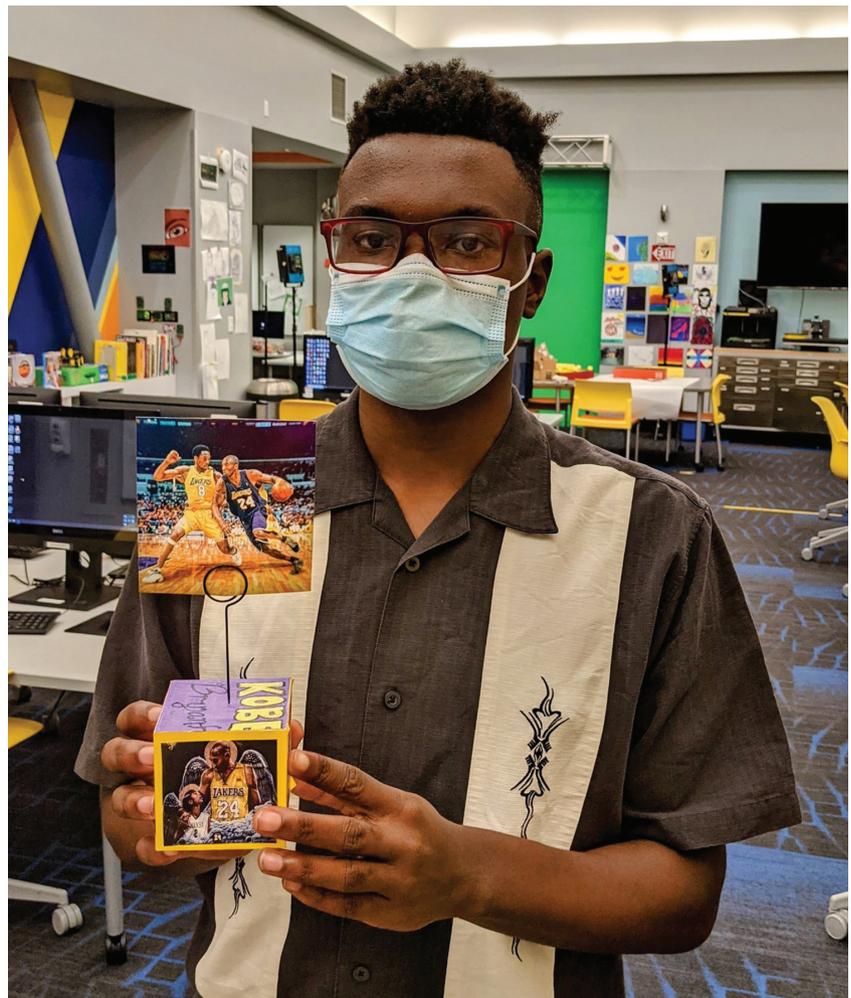
out-of-school setting in which to explore, experiment, and express themselves through technology. In the process, they gain a stronger sense of self while developing marketable technology and life skills. Furthermore, the Clubhouse learning model helps young people deal with some of the real pain in their lives. This article explores how three Clubhouses around the globe (in Colombia, New Zealand, and Nevada) provide unique opportunities to address adolescent vulnerabilities and provide trauma-informed care, and what others can learn from their experience.

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The Clubhouse Network

The Clubhouse Network: Where Technology Meets Imagination

Since its beginnings in 1993, The Clubhouse Network has helped thousands of young people explore their own interests, develop



Teen sharing an ofrenda (offering) he designed for the Day of the Dead during a “Mindful Monday” at the Las Vegas Clark County Library Teen Tech Center

skills, and build confidence through the use of technology. Now located in more than 130 low-income communities in 21 countries around the world, each Clubhouse is at once an inventor’s workshop, design house, sound stage, hackerspace, music

studio, and programming lab. At the Clubhouse, youth from underserved communities unleash their creative talents, engage in peer-to-peer learning, and develop skills related to the vast array of vocations suggested by the acronym, STEAM (Science,

photos courtesy of The Clubhouse Network

Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics).

Founded in collaboration with the MIT Media Lab, the Clubhouse uses a learning model designed to empower youth from all backgrounds to become more capable, creative, and confident learners. From the outset, the Clubhouse was designed to be the fullest embodiment of the constructionist learning approach developed by world-renowned mathematician, computer scientist, and educator Seymour Papert, and inspired by 19th century German pedagogist Friedrich Froebel (the inventor of kindergarten). Papert saw, as early as the 1960s, that computers could do more than deliver information, instruction, and calculations. He believed they could serve to empower children as learners and creators by facilitating the most powerful type of learning, which happens in communities of learner-builders (“constructionism” as opposed to “instructionism”). Expanding upon Froebel and Papert, Mitchel Resnick, co-founder of the first Clubhouse, argued that the kindergarten



Illustration is one of many forms of self-expression and skill-building that engage teens in meaningful ways.

approach should be extended to learners of all ages.

Resnick and his colleagues began exploring ways to encourage and support these types of creative experiences. In 1993, Resnick teamed up with Natalie Rusk (then the Director of Education at Boston’s Computer Museum, now a Research Scientist at the MIT Media Lab) to design a creative after-school learning space for low-income youth. Together, they identified

the four principles that became known as the Clubhouse Learning Model and still guide youth, mentors, and staff who work in these spaces, nearly 30 years later:

1. Support learning through design experiences
2. Help members build on their own interests
3. Cultivate an emergent community of learners
4. Create an environment of respect and trust.



Fig. 1. The Clubhouse Learning Model: 4 Principles

Learning By Designing

People learn best when they are actively engaged in designing, creating, and inventing, not just passively receiving information.

Following Your Interests

When people care about what they are working on, they are willing to work longer and harder, and they learn more in the process.

Building a Community

When people collaborate with others of diverse ages, cultures, genders, and backgrounds, they gain new perspectives for understanding the world—and themselves.

Fostering Respect and Trust

In places where everyone’s ideas and opinions are respected, people are more likely to take risks and experiment—and thus more likely to learn and innovate.



Mentors play a critical role in modelling the joy of learning and collaboration at the Clubhouses.

Walk into a Clubhouse and you will find groups of young people making 3D models and animations, producing and editing films, building robots, creating graphics and websites, designing computer games, writing and recording music, and much more. Whether working alone or collaboratively, youth learn to take a project from early concept to final product, develop the ability to express the steps they have taken to achieve their desired results, and assist other youth in following the same path. In the process, they become inspired about learning and about their own future. Young people who might have become apathetic about school instead find a sense of purpose at the Clubhouse and become re-engaged in their own success.

Drawing on the four learning principles described above, the

Clubhouses also play a critical role in offering emotional support and even healing to youth who have experienced trauma or are struggling with mental health issues.

An Afternoon Refuge: The Clubhouse at Uramba Maker Lab

Buenaventura, at the mouth of the Cauca River, is the busiest port on Colombia's Pacific coast, handling much of the country's export and trade business. But Tomás (pseudonym), a teenage member of the Uramba Maker Lab Clubhouse, is focused on his own daily navigational challenges, involving high school corridors and city streets. Each day, he needs to figure out which fellow students to steer clear of and which streets to avoid, given the shifting boundaries of gang territories. Most afternoons, Tomás

heads to the Uramba Maker Lab Clubhouse after school, where he knows he can let his guard down, co-create with others, and be himself.

Founded in 2016 by the Fundación Portuaria of Buenaventura (the philanthropic arm of the port authority), Uramba Maker Lab is one of four Clubhouses in Colombia and one of 14 in Latin America. Inside the Clubhouse, Tomás is likely to see familiar faces: Clubhouse Coordinator Mauricio Ramírez Martínez; Einer and Tatiana, who were Members like Tomás until they turned 19 and now volunteer as mentors; and various Members who have become Tomás' friends while working on projects at the Clubhouse. He also may see some new faces, including teenagers from parts of town Tomás typically avoids.

During Clubhouse hours, Tomás joins all these people working at different stations, some singly, some in pairs, and others in a group. They gather around the Mesa Verde (Green Table), a feature of every Clubhouse around the world. On any given day they might be editing a video, recording a song, silk-screening, using the 3D printer, or simply sketching. A mentor may be sitting next to them to offer guidance or to create alongside them. Mauricio moves throughout the space, connecting everyone, troubleshooting as necessary, and offering suggestions and support.

The Clubhouse is a place where youth can not only explore new technologies but also build relationships with their peers and with adult mentors. But building those relationships does not happen overnight. Like many teenagers, the members of Uramba Maker Lab struggle with personal insecurities, brought on by the typical challenges of adolescence and exacerbated by the public secondary school environment, with its large classrooms (often up to 60 students), intimidating atmosphere, and frequent bullying. Mauricio finds that, often, “they lose the desire to speak.” Compounding the insecurities brought about by school are those that stem from the violence on the streets of Buenaventura. Youth who run afoul of the local gangs are sometimes forced to move. Recently, one of the Clubhouse members was the victim of an attempted kidnapping for unknown reasons. Mauricio explains, “We’re not sure if it was to recruit him to a group outside the law, or possibly to end his life.”

The Uramba Maker Lab Clubhouse addresses these insecurities and other mental health issues that youth bring with them in several ways. Mauricio’s team has found that the very nature of the Clubhouse environment—one of creativity, invention, and self-expression—can be therapeutic, both as a sanctuary and as a place where youth can process their feelings and whatever issues they are facing.

At the Clubhouse, the number of youth in the space is small compared to the high school classrooms (rarely more than 15-20 members at a time), and the atmosphere is supportive. According to Mauricio, “Young people learn to express themselves, and with time—meeting other youth who share their ideas—they see that others don’t make fun of them, that they are not bullied. . . . They come to share their ideas and express themselves more.”

“All of us, but especially youth,” Mauricio explains, “have this need to be heard, and look for that space of sanctuary.” Activities through which youth can process their feelings and difficulties require an environment of trust and respect. At many Clubhouses during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic when it was not safe to be indoors together, staff and youth took photography walks through their neighborhood to capture images that reflected an emotion they were experiencing, then wrote about them and shared as a community.

In a sanctuary space, youth feel emboldened to explore painful subjects typically shrouded in secrecy and shame. It was precisely as a result of creating

such a space that the youth of the Uramba Maker Lab Clubhouse proposed to create a videogame about mental health. “The idea was that a young person playing the game could learn about what they are feeling and how to deal with it,” explains Mauricio. Designing the game together gave the youth a reason to discuss things that otherwise might be stigmatized or even taboo: What does mental health look like? How do you know when someone is struggling? What do you do when you are struggling yourself?

Mauricio is mindful of the transformative power of the Clubhouse space and activities, and urges others not to fixate on the technology tools and resources, as they are just the means to the end.

“What really counts is not the project itself, but what happens with the youth in the development of the project: The way in which they relate to other youth, the way in which they begin to lose their inhibitions, and the expectations of life that begin to form. In the long term, the real change we’re looking for is the transformation that takes place within each of them, their way of looking at life and doing things, and in turn, their reality in their homes and in their barrio.”

Culturally Responsive Youth Work: Taitā Clubhouse

On the other side of the world in New Zealand, a Clubhouse serves the predominantly Māori and



Wall board displaying Māori values at the Taitā Clubhouse.

Pacific Islander population of Taitā, just outside the capital of Wellington. Clubhouse Coordinator Bennett Pomona sees the effects of poverty on the members who come to the Clubhouse. One boy wanted to play on a local basketball team but did not have sneakers that fit. The Clubhouse found him some. Others take home food provided by the Clubhouse to share with their family.

Racism is also a factor; youth experience it every day in the form of low expectations and discrimination. The Clubhouse is not immune from such challenges: White parents looking for someone in charge will often make the assumption that a white person in the space must be the leader. “The youth just brush it off,” says Bennett, “but it’s something we need to talk about more.”

The Taitā Clubhouse is a place where staff and mentors engage youth in conversations that can be uncomfortable about the issues in their community and the trauma they can cause. They can do so thanks to the trust that is formed among youth, mentors, and staff, and the time that staff take to meet youth where they are. The Clubhouse community adheres to three core values derived from Māori culture:

Te Hononga	Foster union, connection, relationships, and bonding
Kia Kaha	Stay strong, brave, and steadfast
Manaakitanga	Extend aroha (love and compassion) toward others

The staff at the Taitā Clubhouse seek to convey and enact these core Māori values throughout the day, embedding them in communication and project ideas, all while interweaving them with the four principles of the Clubhouse learning model. Recently, youth started talking about the housing crisis in Taitā, where 12 people might share a two-bedroom flat, and longtime residents are being displaced as housing projects are torn down for new construction. Clubhouse members are worried they will be forced out of their homes, and, as Bennett points out, housing instability can trigger profound anxiety and trauma since it is experienced as a persistent, concrete, and intrusive loss of control over one’s future.

Inspired by the conversation, Clubhouse members asked themselves: What would our own housing project look like? What would a thriving community look like? Using cardboard and other Clubhouse materials, youth began designing their own houses. This activity developed into a conversation about the meaning of home, as well as about their hopes and dreams in life.

The Taitā Clubhouse, according to Bennett, functions much like a Korowai, a traditional woven Māori cloak that is symbolic of leadership and implies the duty to care for the people and the land: the Clubhouse environment wraps around the youth, and it is from within this safe space that they can connect, learn, and heal.

Transient Youth, Art, and Vulnerability: Las Vegas Clark County Library Teen Tech Center

Youth in Las Vegas, Nevada, face many of the same challenges as the Clubhouse Members in Colombia and New Zealand: food and housing insecurities, anxiety, depression, and more. Megan Nykodym, Teen Services Department Head at the Clark County Library and Clubhouse Coordinator at the Las Vegas branch, was spurred to action when a staff member found a girl in the bathroom cutting herself. “She was one of our Clubhouse regulars. We realized we needed to provide more support.”

Many Las Vegas Clubhouse youth are homeless and stay in shelters overnight, so their daily travel pattern takes them from school to Clubhouse to shelter. The transitory nature of their lives means that the staff cannot expect their continued attendance. A youth may come to the Clubhouse once and not be seen again. Megan and her staff simply take this as a cue to make the most of the time spent with anyone who walks through the door, no matter how new, no matter how transient. “We asked ourselves, how can our time together contribute to making the Clubhouse a therapeutic space for youth who are struggling?”

Because so many of the Clubhouse Members have experienced loss, holidays bring up feelings of sadness and grief and are especially difficult. So, the Clubhouse offered a “30 Days of Gratitude” theme in November. Provided with a different prompt for each day, Clubhouse members were invited to express what food, color, person, place, and so on they were grateful for through a photograph, painting, 3D print, song, or whatever else inspired them. At the end of the month, they were invited to take their booklet of gratitude with them to remind them of what they have to be grateful for in their lives. The activity also gave everyone a reason to talk about what they were choosing and why, as well as the feelings associated with their choices.

Megan explained that staff and mentors join in these projects alongside the youth,

sharing their own feelings of gratitude and loss. These expressions of vulnerability by the adults in turn provide an opening for the youth to offer support themselves. When a few Clubhouse members noticed Megan crying and she shared that her grandmother had recently died, they encouraged her to use the same tools she had shown them, including mindful breathing and writing about her feelings. “We use everything at our disposal. There’s always something you can do to meet youth where they’re at,” said Megan.

Conclusion

Youth mental health is an issue that every educator confronts, and the issue has become both more visible and more collectively experienced throughout the

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world, whether due to the COVID-19 pandemic, economic insecurities, the climate crisis, or widely broadcast acts of race-based brutality. In fact, both mental health and trauma are social as well as personal phenomena, as those who live and work in disenfranchised communities acutely know. While few Clubhouse coordinators or educators in most other settings are trained as clinical

psychotherapists, we hope this article has shown how places of learning can be—through community-building, creative self-expression, and love—places of healing, both personal and shared.

For Further Reading

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