

Creative Connections

Using Digital Relationships to Start a
New Children's Museum in New Bern, North Carolina

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INTRODUCTION

Individuals interested in building a children's museum in their town can engage with digital communities, both locally and across the globe, to make connections that allow them to gauge community interest, develop strategies, find inspiration for potential exhibits, and use the experiences of other children's museums to create a road map toward building a museum of their own.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Children's museums help fill a learning gap between the structured environment of a school and the creative freedom that children enjoy while at home playing with their toys. By combining structure and creativity into a unified experience of guided play, children become more successful students, and more importantly, learn how to associate learning with fun (Steele, 1999). Unfortunately, this opportunity is often limited to children who live in metropolitan areas, which is where most children's museums are located.

Families living in rural areas and smaller towns do not have to accept a gap in education or geography, but overcoming those challenges requires enormous support from a community of like-minded individuals who are bonded together around the idea of providing creative learning opportunities for children. The first step toward capitalizing on that support requires an understanding of the community that already exists. This plan attempts to guide that first step in the right direction by using digital communications from external sources (e.g.,

children's museums, parent groups, schools, bloggers, and journalists) as curated content that can be funneled into local channels that are based in Eastern North Carolina, and more specifically, the town of New Bern.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

Cities of all sizes are filled with clusters of people who are connected because they share a similar purpose, and in many cases, that purpose is to create enriched learning experiences for their children. This plan seeks to connect the people of New Bern, North Carolina who are interested in providing children with creative learning opportunities that may also include the construction of a local children's museum.

RATIONALE

New Bern's nearest options for a children's museum are in Raleigh and Wilmington, which are both two hours away. In addition to New Bern's population of 30,000 year-round residents who are underserved by not having creative learning opportunities, thousands more children visiting nearby beaches would be able to take advantage of a children's museum, especially on days that are too cold or rainy to visit the beach.

When New Bern's population is combined with surrounding counties in Eastern North Carolina, which include the military bases of Camp Lejeune and Cherry Point, and the neighboring beach communities of Atlantic Beach and Morehead City, the population that would be served by a children's museum is nearly 228,000 children ages 0-15 (NC East Alliance, 2014).

Established Museum and Tourism Community

New Bern's largest tourism draw is the prevalence of historical attractions, including the reconstructed government building of Tryon Palace and the North Carolina History Center, which draw 180,000 visitors each year.

Additionally, New Bern is located on Highway 70, which is the main entry point for people visiting North Carolina's Crystal Coast. Although tourism contributes more than \$282 million each year to the Crystal Coast's local economy (Carteret Economic Development, 2012), the only child-friendly attractions are the beach and the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores.

Geographic Opportunities

Despite having thousands of young military families and beach vacationers in Eastern North Carolina, the closest children's museum is Marbles Kids Museum in Raleigh, which is 112 miles away from New Bern. Although a 2013 attendance of more than 600,000 visitors moved Marbles Kids Museum up in the rankings to become North Carolina's sixth-most visited attraction (Carolina Publishing Associates, 2013), it is likely that many of those regular visitors are from the Triangle area of Raleigh, Chapel Hill, and Durham. Eastern North Carolina families are not regularly traveling to these museums because of distance, and not a lack of interest.

Gauging the actual level of interest in New Bern for a children's museum will be difficult, partly because there are no clear indicators that an ongoing discussion about this topic is

occurring at community meetings or digital platforms. However, if the young families located in the New Bern area were to become connected on a digital platform with one another, and with other children's museums, they would better understand the path that is necessary to start a children's museum.

GOALS

The most realistic path in establishing this community is to first build a connection with established children's museums across the United States and the stakeholders (e.g., bloggers, media, and content feeds) who facilitate those museums, and then use those connections to build a narrative that can be offered to a more localized group of people in Eastern North Carolina.

The three primary steps in achieving this plan would occur in the following order:

1) Leveraging External Stakeholders

By examining the conversations posted on social media by well-known museums, journalists, and support conversations by individual visitors, a broader narrative surrounding the topic of creative learning will take shape. This broader narrative can then be leveraged as curated content that is funneled into New Bern's local channels.

2) Discovering Local Stakeholders

As success stories and exhibit ideas from museums located across the U.S. are funneled through locally-based digital channels, such as Twitter handles dedicated to New Bern (i.e., @CreativeKidsNB) or Facebook groups that are used to facilitate playdates, a more intelligible conversation about building a local children's museum will be introduced.

Ideally, this conversation would begin as digital connections between local parents, educators, and museum professionals who are all interested in the stories of other children's museums. The progression of these conversations will then determine the level of interest they have in starting their own museum.

3) Establishing a Committee

The ultimate goal of building digital connections is to create a framework that will inspire a select group of individuals to form a committee focused on the creation of a children's museum in the New Bern area. As diverse skillsets and common interests on the local level are brought together with the narratives provided by other museums, this committee will have free resources and support to help guide them toward the initial steps of gathering funds for the early phases of a feasibility study that examines necessary demographics, funding, and startup costs (Association of Children's Museums, n.d.).

COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

The target audience for this plan is divided into two separate groups of external resources (Group A) and local stakeholders (Group B). Group A is an established, somewhat cohesive community of children's museums, news outlets, and nonprofit organizations from around the U.S. that will be able to provide relevant content and advice focused on the creation and operation of children's museums. Group B is much less organized in its current state and will be limited to educators, parents, and museum professions located in Eastern North Carolina who are bound together by the common interest of providing creative and educational experiences for children.

Digital connections will need to be nurtured with each group in parallel, with the idea that both groups will become connected behind the purpose of sharing pertinent information about children's museums. This crossover should result in a much broader community, while also sharpening the New Bern group's focus on local efforts.

Analysis of Group A

More than 31 million people visit children's museum's each year (Association of Children's Museums, n.d.), which allows museums and their visitors to have an enormous presence on the Web. These conversations are updated every second on numerous social media channels in the form of photos of museum experiences, news stories about the opening of a new museum or

exhibit, field trip plans, and collections of user-curated content about the most creative exhibits available.

By tracking conversations on social media for a period of seven weeks, we have been able get a clearer picture about this community.

- **Values:** All the members of this group are excited about helping children explore their imagination through creative play. This sentiment is reflected by attendance, the prevalence of museums in metropolitan areas, and by the hands-on nature of exhibits available from children's museums.
- **Central Discussions:** Discussion topics for this group are broad, ranging from the introduction of new programs and exhibits, to simply sharing a photo of an experience at a specific museum. While many children's museums will use the Association of Children's Museums as a resource for planning and sharing organizational information, the most connective discussion revolves around the notion that children's museums offer a positive alternative for parents and teachers who are trying to introduce children to new experiences.
- **Key Influencers:** This group is comprised of three primary clusters of people: children's museums and related organizations (e.g., Association of Children's Museums), facilitators (e.g., journalists, bloggers, and content curators such as @Social Rugrats), educators, and parents.

Analysis of Group B

Finding the exact boundaries and members of Group B has been challenging. The presence of groups on Facebook and MeetUp indicate that parents, educators, community organizations, and museum professionals are interested in creative learning opportunities, but the conversations have proven to be sporadic, and not influenced by any specific person. Here is what we do know about Group B:

- **Values:** New Bern has an active group of parents on Facebook (e.g., Playdates of New Bern, Eastern NC Moms, and Moms and Tots of New Bern) who are proactive in expanding the social experiences of their children through local playdates at fun, public locations, and events like Train Day, Kids Day in the Park, and Family Day.
- **Central Discussions:** While there does not appear to be a cohesive conversation on New Bern's social media channels (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and MeetUp) about starting a children's museum in Eastern North Carolina, there is evidence of having an interest in promoting more activities for children.
- **Key Influencers:** New Bern tourism is primarily focused on history, which has resulted in the establishment of numerous museums (e.g., Tryon Palace, Firemen's Museum, and the New Bern Academy Museum) and community organizations (e.g, Twin Rivers YMCA) that market to younger audiences.

The Greater Network

Over a seven-week period, content from Group A and the New Bern area was curated for Group B through the Twitter handle @CreativeKidsNB. These specific messages often originated in Group A as museum promotions—information about museum activities and exhibits—that were targeted at parents who share a common interest in taking their children to safe, creative environments. By selecting specific discussions and content from Group A, and then funneling it to Group B, this analysis was able to identify key discussions, hashtags, and influencers from both groups, as well as the preferred method of engagement.

Below is a network map that indicates key influencers from Group A (branches on the left) and Group B (branches on the right).



STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

As a father living in New Bern with his five-year-old son, I have a personal interest in creating a nearby children’s museum that he can enjoy, and have met likeminded parents who share the same desire. I am also the marketing and communications manager for Tryon Palace (New Bern’s largest tourist attraction), where my day-to-day tasks of public relations and the

management of social media pages go hand-in-hand with the skills needed to build and connect digital communities. I also know many of the influential philanthropists in the area, hold a seat on a Craven County Tourism Development Authority's board of directors, and have helped create marketing campaigns focused on educators who are looking for new field trip opportunities.

The success of this connectivity plan will require overcoming several challenges. Many of Group B's Facebook groups—where discussions about children's museums are likely to occur—are dedicated to area mothers and playgroups that generally limit membership to women. One group, which has a presence on Facebook and MeetUp, has allowed me to join, but overall, the conversations in that group and on Twitter have not coalesced around the specific topic of starting a children's museum. Group B's interest has also been difficult to track on Twitter, which seems to have very few engaged users on any topic other than local news.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This strategic communication plan utilizes Robert Putnam's theory of social capital to better understand the benefits of forming a new community that is motivated toward a specific goal.

Social capital is broadly defined as the strength contained within an association of individuals who are connected because of a shared objective (Luoma-aho, 2009; Putnam, 2000).

Individuals such as parents, educators, and museum professionals may have a sense of civic virtue and common interests, but these virtues cannot reach their full potential until they are embedded in a "dense network of reciprocal social relations" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Once the

individuals in a specific group trust one another, they are able to grow stronger and develop organizational social capital that allows them to become agencies of change that affect civic community, political equality (Luoma-aho, 2009), and in this case, start a children's museum.

Applying Social Capital to Digital Networks

Organized groups may exhibit two specific forms of social capital known as “bonding” and “bridging” (Luoma-aho, 2009, p. 235). Bonding capital occurs among members of an organization as a way of maintaining the connections that already exist. In the case of Group B, the bonds between parents, educators, and museum professionals may already exist on a philosophical level, but they will require a centralized discussion in the digital realm to find one another and better define the existing bonds. The key method in illuminating these bonds will be through the curated content that is produced by Group A. As more content is introduced to Group B, the people of that group will collaborate and bond over specific goals and challenges related to creative learning opportunities, and in turn, grow stronger.

Bridging capital is equally important—if not more so—because it helps establish new bonds with outside groups and individuals. By identifying networks that bridge the social divide between Group B's interest in building a children's museums and Group A's established record of experience on the same topic, bridging capital allows both groups to “promote heterogeneity in groups and societies” (Luoma-aho, 2009, p. 235) that will benefit each group with new ideas, knowledge, and clearly-defined goals.

Strategies and Discoveries

The clear values of bridging and bonding capital can be pursued in this plan through the concurrent approach of facilitating digital connections among—and between—groups A and B. By creating a funnel approach of using Group A’s easily-defined social capital as a source of curated content for the fledgling Group B, the latter will hopefully build interest and unite around New Bern’s need for more creative learning experiences. This increase in community should result in an established form of organizational social capital that increases Group B’s bonding capital, and willingness to bridge out to Group A for the knowledge and guidance that will be needed as the group moves toward offline discussions about creative learning and the possibility of building a children’s museum.

As some topics draw more discussions than others, we will also discover the group’s strongest bonds. For example, if a topic introduced to Group B generates a robust discussion or upstream questions directed at Group A’s stakeholders, then it is worth perusing. Likewise, if Group B has no reaction to a topic, perhaps it is time to reframe the question, or try a different digital strategy (e.g., separate platform, different hashtags). By continually testing and analyzing these topics, bonding capital will grow stronger among Group B and the conversation will sharpen its focus as it moves closer to an offline discussion that produces real-world results (i.e., a children’s museum).

CONTENT CURATION AND MESSAGE EXPERIMENTATION

The Twitter account @CreativeKidsNB was created in October as the first step toward providing Group B with curated content from established children’s museums and related organizations (i.e., Group A) located across the U.S. Various messages (e.g., exhibit ideas) and hashtags (e.g., #KidsMuseum, #newbern) were used over the next seven weeks on Twitter, Facebook, and MeetUp to gauge interest and existing activity.

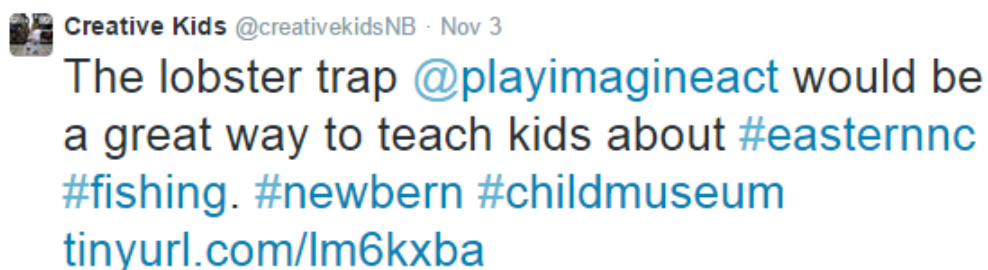
Communication Tactics

Evidence suggested that no conversation about starting a children’s museum was taking place in New Bern. With that in mind, @CreativeKidsNB was used to inspire Group B on Twitter with content that included links to museum exhibits, stories about new museums, and inexpensive creative learning programs that provide a realistic, short-term alternative to building a children’s museum.

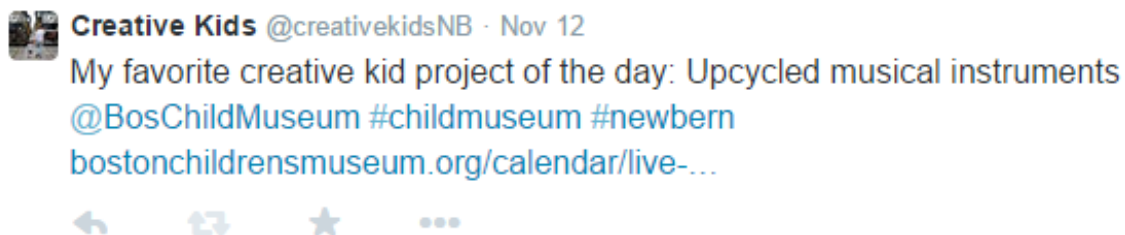
Group B also needed to become connected around the issue of creative learning to help build its bonding capital. With that in mind, the hashtag #newbern was used in virtually every post, and was alternately paired with #childmuseum, #KidMuseum, or #creativeplay. Other tactics included the creation of the MeetUp group “Interested in Starting a Children’s Museum in New Bern” and membership to the Facebook group “Moms and Tots of New Bern.”

Below are a few examples of the communication tactics that were used:

Example One: Link to a children’s museum exhibit that relates to fishing, which has deep roots in Eastern North Carolina.



Example Two: Make the idea of starting a children’s museum seem less daunting by reminding Group B that creative learning projects can start small. Also used the phrase “my creative project of the day” to establish @CreativeKidsNB as a reliable content source.




Example Three: Leverage a highly-marketable Twitter user that is not directly connected to Group A, but still provided relevant content.



Example Four: Establish credibility as a local source by providing content about upcoming children’s activities in New Bern.



Example Five: Created a group on MeetUp and posted a discussion about starting a children’s museum in New Bern.

Craig	Posted 11/11/14 1:49 PM Link to discussion Edit Delete thread Quote in reply
 user 180790822 Group Organizer New Bern, NC Post #: 1	Welcome everyone to this new MeetUp group. My name is Craig and I am the parent of a 5-year-old boy here in New Bern. I've lived here with my wife for about three years and we are always talking about the fact that New Bern doesn't have a children's museum. I've started this page to see if there are other like-minded parents and if so, what they would like to see from a children's museum. If we, as adults, allow ourselves to be creative, perhaps our children will have a place to be creative as well. Who's with me?

Analytics

After seven weeks of funneling content from Group A to Group B, it has become evident that Group B’s social capital regarding the issue of creative learning and children’s museums is still scattered and unorganized.

The Twitter account @CreativeKidsNB pushed out thirty-nine messages over a seven-week period, resulting in only four retweets and seven favorites. The top-performing message raised awareness about the absence of a children’s museum in New Bern, which prompted user @blakewiggs to favorite and retweet the following post:

Creative Kids
@creativekidsNB

It looks like there are no new [#childrensmuseums](#) planned within 100 miles of [#NewBern](#). Let's get started! [childrensmuseums.org/index.php/comp...](#) [#comm658](#)

RETWEET 1 FAVORITE 1

7:14 PM - 28 Oct 2014

The only other retweets and favorites were received as a reciprocal “thank you” from the tagged organizations in Group A that provided content for @CreativeKidsNB.

Creative Kids
@creativekidsNB

Cool idea [@ArtStrategies](#). There are lots of child museums, but how often do you see an art [#childmuseum](#) ? [#newbern](#) [artsjournal.com/fieldnotes/201...](#)

FAVORITE 1

6:10 PM - 14 Nov 2014

Despite a range of content and consistent usage of the #newbern hashtag, the Twitter account @CreativeKidsNB has only managed to gain fifty-three followers, and of those, only five represent people and organizations from Group B, and include: @NewBernMusic (children's music teacher), @tgriff7 (county commissioner), @brucewisedesign (local media), @tryonpalace (local museum), and @blakewiggs (educator and parent).

Equally disappointing is the fact that my membership to the Moms and Tots Facebook group was inexplicably revoked, and of the five people who joined the MeetUp group, no members responded to the discussion that was posted.

Learning

While the results of message experimentation in Group B are not promising, they do indicate that Group A's social capital is more clearly defined. This is not surprising, considering the fact that established museums have employees who work daily to build social capital in digital communities. But it could also be an indicator that Twitter is more popular in metropolitan areas than rural ones.

This leaves us with two ways of interpreting the data. One avenue suggests that Group B is not responding to Twitter posts because people in small towns are not usually active on that platform, and the other avenue suggests that users are not interested in the content or subject of having a children's museum. Before either assumption can be made, it may be beneficial to

move forward with new strategies that include the creation of a Facebook group dedicated to New Bern, and then simultaneously push content to both Facebook and Twitter.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

For Group B to move toward the development of creative learning opportunities, or the possibility of a children's museum, it will first need to identify strategic stakeholders who can have a direct impact on the group's social capital. This can be achieved by introducing several new communication strategies that utilize analytics produced by @CreativeKidsNB, as well as Putnam's theory of social capital.

Create a Facebook Page

The first step toward building connectivity should involve the creation of a Facebook page that mirrors the content curation that is also posted on Twitter by @CreativeKidsNB.

Facebook has a strong presence in New Bern, which creates a large opportunity for communication that has not yet been utilized for discussions related to creative learning opportunities. If potential stakeholders prefer to use Facebook over Twitter, as evidenced by the analytics associated with the @CreativeKidsNB Twitter feed, then they are more apt to like the page and interact with posts related to creative learning and children's museums. Facebook also offers a more organized grouping system (i.e., everyone who likes a page is grouped together) that makes it easier to harness the bonding social capital that may already exist in the community.

- **Communication Tactic:** A mix of content will be introduced that balances news (e.g., new exhibits and museum openings) with local content (e.g., upcoming events and photos from past events) that promotes children’s activities in New Bern and the surrounding area. Some of the greatest sources of local content will include local museums (e.g., Tryon Palace and the New Bern Firemen’s Museum) and organizations (e.g., Twin Rivers YMCA, New Bern Sun Journal, and New Bern Now) that are more active on Facebook than Twitter. This will continue to help build the CreativeKidsNB name as a reliable content source of information for Groups A and B.
- **Timeline:** The new Facebook page should be created immediately and no page skews should be created in the future. Once established, updates should be posted daily as a mirror of the content shared on Twitter by @CreativeKidsNB.
- **Resources:** Management of this page will require at least one person dedicated to providing daily content and a budget of \$100 for promoted Facebook posts that target individuals living in Eastern North Carolina.
- **Metrics:** Success will be measured by how many likes and shares the page receives over its initial seven-week period. If analytics are stronger after this period than those observed during @CreativeKidsNB’s first seven weeks on Twitter, then we can conclude that Facebook is the preferred platform for Group B.

Recruit Content Managers

As social capital among Group B increases, certain stakeholders will be revealed as being active users on social media. One or two of these users should be recruited to manage the Facebook and Twitter feeds for CreativeKidsNB to ensure a steady stream of information from more than one viewpoint.

I was the only user who managed the @CreativeKidsNB Twitter feed over the initial seven-week period, which limited social capital to me and the followers that I could attract. Adding a second and third manager to the content feeds would bring along the social capital of those individuals, and lead to content that is better suited for his or her circle. Adding content managers also provides more time to nurture bridging capital, which allows communication to flow upstream to Group A's preferred use of Twitter, and downstream to Group B's likely preference for Facebook.

- **Communication Tactic:** Ask Group B's most active users if they would be interested in supporting the community as content curators. Currently, the Twitter user Blake Wiggs (@blakewiggs) seems to be the first logical choice; he is a teacher, a parent, and has shown interest in @CreativeKidsNB on Twitter.

- **Timeline:** Once the Facebook page has been established, Blake Wiggs should be contacted immediately to gauge his level of interest. Whether Wiggs accepts the role or

not, he should be asked to recommend a female content curator who also lives in New Bern.

- **Metrics:** This strategy will be considered a success if at least three people are actively managing the CreativeKids social networks within three months of launching the Facebook page.

Collect Contact Information

Facilitate “bonding” social capital by establishing an email database comprised of key stakeholders from Group B. Bonding social capital requires people to rally around a specific issue, without distraction or competing ideas. This can be difficult to achieve if curated content is floating in a sea of competing content. There must be a secondary option where key stakeholders can step away from the noise and focus on one specific issue.

- **Communication Tactic:** Weekly posts on Facebook and Twitter should invite followers to sign a digital petition that supports the creation of a children’s museum in New Bern. The petition could be used for grant opportunities in the distant future, but in the near term, each name and email address that signs the petition would provide the contact information for a stakeholder that can be reached in the near term for more focused discussions, as well as offline meetings.
- **Timeline:** A digital petition should be created after the CreativeKids Facebook and Twitter pages have acquired at least 250 followers. This will ensure that a level of trust

and bonding social capital is established before the more invasive request for contact information is introduced.

- **Resources:** A digital petition will need to be created on Change.org and then connected to the CreativeKidsNB social media accounts. At least one person will need to be assigned this task to ensure that contact information is being collected correctly, and to provide additional content that will be emailed to the group on a monthly basis.
- **Metrics:** Most people are hesitant to sign up for email notifications unless it relates to a subject that matters to them. Rather than measure these names in quantity, the value of each person should be examined individually as a willing volunteer, as a strategic partner from an area organization, or both. Additionally, we can discover a new level of interest by examining a person's willingness to like and share the petition on social media, even though they may not sign up.

CONCLUSION

It is no accident that children's museums are often located in metropolitan areas. Greater numbers come with greater opportunities for social capital. Cities are filled with smaller groups that bonded over specific issues that were important to them, and then used their social capital to enact change. Whether it is a broad social issue or the specific desire to build a children's museum, the greatest accomplishments occur when networks of people join together and speak in a unified voice. New Bern can speak with one voice as well, but it will require a greater

effort to establish the social capital needed to get the project started. Waiting for the networks to form on their own will take longer, and is not likely to produce results. New Bern must introduce a proactive digital strategy that is focused on building social capital around the area's need for creative learning opportunities, and the advantages of having a children's museum nearby.

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