

The recent programming webinar resulted in some fantastic follow-up questions. I expected this. What I did not expect was a series of questions that made me rethink a core concept so completely that I would take it up on with my fellow state data coordinators (SDCs) and IMLS – and that the resulting debate would have me walking back a key point about self-directed activities.

During the presentation, I explained the rule of thumb that nearly every “drop-in” event would be a self-directed activity, just by virtue of being drop-in. People chose (self-directed!) when they would come and go, which in turn negated the shared experience aspect of programming. There was a bit of discussion surrounding duration of the visit, but the ultimate conclusion was that drop-in “programming” isn’t really programming.

...except when it is.

I now want to advise you that **some drop-in events/activities can and should be counted as programs**. If the event in question meets the other programming requirements (a planned/advertised event occurring at a specific time with a specific focus that introduces attendees to information or activities, etc.), it may be a program. Some real-life examples that fit this mold:

- Teen Gaming Time - Once a week, for two hours after school, the library sets up their video game consoles and allows teens to play. It is advertised on the calendar of events and staff are present the entire time.
- Santa Celebration - Santa visits the library for two hours. Families can stop by to take photos, eat snacks, and make crafts. Activities happen in the meeting room and staff are there the entire time to keep things running smoothly.
- Author Fair – The library invites numerous local authors to participate in an author fair at their library. During the four-hour block, visitors can chat with authors at their individual booths, purchase books, and enter giveaways. Staff is present to hand out schedules and assist as needed.

So why the about-face? That SDC debate centered around the concept of a group activity, with numerous arguments that the focus point should not be the timing/duration, but whether interaction with others was a necessary component. Although attendees may not be interacting with a group for the entirety of the time, the nature of these programs makes it a **shared experience** for however long they are there. They’re playing games with others, smiling for a photo with Jolly Old St. Nick, talking with authors. **Unlike true self-directed activities, it would not be possible to experience these programs independent of interaction with other people, including staff.**

Things to keep in mind when deciding if something is a self-directed activity vs. an event:

- Could the participant partake in the activity with minimal-to-no interaction with other people? If so, it's probably a self-directed activity.
- Do you advertise the activity on the calendar of events? If not, it's probably a self-directed activity.
- Does the activity otherwise meet the definition of a program? If not, it's a self-directed activity.

That the group of SDCs can argue for hours and still struggle to come to consensus is testament to just how complicated this task defining a program can be. No matter how many checklists I provide or webinars I make, there is going to be an element of subjectivity. I'm happy to continue to help answer questions about particularly tricky events. Beyond that, I encourage you to do the best you can – and know that's enough!