

Digital Expression or Distraction: Urban Youth and Digital Media

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By

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Abstract

The author proposes that with all the challenges facing urban youth, the use of digital media, specifically music technology, will aid in the positive development of students' overall attitude, and educational experience. This case study looks at this question and summarizes observations supporting this premise. Participants of this study were metro Detroit students ages fifteen to nineteen. These participants were surveyed before and after the study to determine their experience with and attitudes toward digital media. During a seven-week period, as part of an after-school program, students learned digital media through audio recording and music creation. The applications used during this study were Avid ProTools and Apple GarageBand for iPad. Results showed that participants in this study gained a greater knowledge of digital media, developed their capacity for self-expression through technology arts, and established a new confidence in their abilities.

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Chapter 1

There are many challenges facing urban youth in today's society which create roadblocks to their educational success. Factors like poverty, violence, and family dysfunction often produce an environment where learning is not the first priority. Consequently, schools in urban neighborhoods face unique challenges in reaching these students. Over the years, there have been a number of researchers who have proposed that working with empowering technologies, such as digital media, can transform the attitudes and abilities of these students (Podkalicka, 2010). By studying digital media students have an opportunity to freely express themselves. When students rap a verse or record a poem, they engage in a form of digital storytelling. This digital expression opens the door to building relationships with the teacher and unity and acceptance with classmates.

Dr. Aneta Podkalicka (2010) gives insight in her research article, "Understanding Digital Storytelling":

"Digital storytelling has been widely used as an empowering technique for marginalized voices across community-based projects worldwide. The idea of providing ordinary people with access to media and basic editorial skills to allow personal stories to be told through a simple, two-three minute digital format has found application across a range of educational, developmental, and public contexts." (pg. 208)

Dr. Podkalicka conducted research with Youthworx, a media program for at-risk youth. Their study found that (1) self-expression, (2) critical reflection, and (3) collaboration were valuable in creating social transformation. These themes from their study contribute to the development of urban youth, especially those from low-income, high-poverty neighborhoods, and will be examined in this study.

Youth may lack the confidence or self-esteem to share their thoughts and experiences. Digital self-expression is one way that youth may gain the confidence to share their feelings. This can be seen in the rise of social media among youth. When a young person logs into a social media app, they can leave their current reality and enter a judgement-free zone. The same can be said of the use of digital media in the classroom. Digital media allows students to create without being bound by their insecurities. Christina Baker (2011), in a quote from her research study entitled, “Digital Expression Among Urban, Low-Income African American Adolescents” says:

“Digital production is a vehicle for youth self-expression, allowing adolescents to create and share their own content. Frequently, youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods are exposed to, and interact with deviant peers due to a lack of organized or supervised settings for peer interaction. Youth can now create media content as well as communicate information digitally to peers, which provides that venue for self-expression.” (pg. 531)

Baker’s study examined the content and the form of digital productions of 24 urban, low-income African American adolescents who attended a summer academic program. Their results suggested that when placed in a supportive, academic environment and provided with digital production resources, students who traditionally face barriers due to cultural and economic inequalities digitally express to their peers an interest in academics and positive peer relationships, and that youth communicate their experiences through a shared production style that reflects their broader cultural experience.

This peer-to-peer self-expression creates a sense of community. Digital media allows students to have a sense of ownership and pride about their works. Linda Charmaraman, from Wellesley Centers for Women, performed a case study entitled, “Congregating to Create for Social Change: Urban Youth Media Production and Sense of Community.” Their case study

explored how adolescents were empowered through after school media production activities and in the process, reimagined themselves as active and engaged citizens within their community. These young people exercised their collective voice toward pro-social actions by writing and producing their stories and showcasing their works at community screenings. They hoped that their videos would promote individual and community transformations. Charmaraman (2008) states:

This especially benefits disenfranchised urban minority youth who often confront issues of prejudice and public distrust, and have limited resources and social capital to combat negative stereotypes perpetuated as cultural representations on and off camera. (pg. 1)

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to examine whether the use of digital media, specifically music technology, will improve the attitudes and educational experiences of urban youth. Specifically, this study will examine whether music technology will improve students' personal outlook toward their future, and encourage the development of their talents.

Participants of this study will be metro Detroit students ages fifteen to nineteen. These students will be surveyed before and after the study. The survey will allow the participants to indicate how they view themselves personally and will assess their digital media skill-set. During a seven- week period, as a part of an after-school program, students will learn digital media, through audio recording, video creation, and music making. The applications used during this study will be Avid Pro-Tools, and Apple Garageband for iPad. The media content will then be compiled into a multi-media presentation.

Hypothesis:

Through this research study, students will gain a greater knowledge of digital media, develop self-expression through technology arts, and establish a new confidence in their abilities that was not present before the study.

Chapter 2

The use of digital media among urban youth is a topic that has been discussed and researched more in the past few years as music technology, specifically recording technology, has become more accessible on the consumer level. Recording music was once primarily found in a recording studio, but now software and hardware is available for consumer computers, tablets, and mobile devices. Consumer computers and mobile devices also have the ability to record and edit digital video. With these advancements in technology, digital media in the classroom will continue to increase in value as a resource for reaching urban students. David Buckingham (2008) of the Institute of Education at the University of London had this to say about technology in his article, “Youth, Identity, and Digital Media”, “Advocates of technology have extolled its value for encouraging creative, and student-centered learning, for increasing motivation and achievement, and promoting demanding new styles of thinking (pg. 16).”

This quote from Buckingham embodies many themes that can be found consistently across the topic of digital media and urban youth. Digital media in education has a great opportunity to bring creativity to the classroom. The ability for students to create while learning a discipline fosters a sense of accomplishment, ownership, and establishes a voice for the student. Once students get their hands on the technology, they are usually motivated because they become active participants in their educational experience. Gunther Eysenbach (2008), from the University of Toronto Department Policy, agrees with this concept. In his research article, entitled “Credibility of Health Information and Digital Media, New Perspectives and Implications for Youth”, Eysenbach says, “One impact of networked digital media is that people are being pushed to be more informationally self-sufficient (pg. 131).” Today small children

have no problem operating smart phones that require swiping and tapping. Youth working with digital media are the same. Once they are engaged, they heighten their focus and move forward and explore the technology.

Buckingham also states, “Technology, in combination with a whole series of other social and economic changes, is transforming young people’s experiences, albeit in ways that may only become fully apparent several years further down the line (pg. 15).”

Another common theme among researchers is that the skills developed by young people through the use of digital media can be used later in a student’s life. In the grand scheme of things, students who are exposed to the tools of creating digital media, can have an opportunity to continue study in this field and pursue careers in digital media. In chapter one, it was discussed how digital media creates a voice and a sense of ownership among youth. Many groups and organizations have looked at this concept of developing skills in youth for their careers after school. One of the organizations, that has been reviewed by many researchers in this field, is the Digital Youth Network based in Chicago, IL. A motto of this organization is “Digital literacy is the new literacy.”

In their book, “Digital Youth Network, Cultivating Digital Media Citizenship in Urban Communities”, the authors highlight their research studies using digital media with urban youth in Chicago. In their studies, they concluded that skills learned while working with digital media can have benefits later in life when pursuing a career. These skills are divided into the following categories: writing, designing, performing, building, and managing. Developing writing skills can be useful for song-writing with lyrics, script writing, blogging, and creating a documentary. Designing skills can help with organization and developing layout skills for blogs and newspapers. Performing skills help during the production of music and movies, and when

developing speeches, and podcasts. Building skills include putting together a project from start to finish and setting up the production equipment to complete the project. Managing skills will help with producing and work with others on projects, which is also a skill that can be used in many areas of life. One quote from their book that continues the point of digital media being used to create a voice is, “Be a voice, not an echo, create with a purpose.” This quote encourages students to use technology to share their thoughts, ideas, and talents openly without restraint.

One reason that digital media has been added to many school programs is to build a connection between the student and the content learned in a traditional school. In her book, “Digital media and technology in afterschool programs, libraries, and museums,” Becky Herr-Stephenson raises an issue that many educators face in the traditional learning structure. She states:

“The emphasis on standardization in current educational policy-making and programming has made it increasingly difficult for students to explore individual needs and interests. Because student performance on standardized tests has been placed at the center of school funding and governance, those tests and accompanying test-preparation materials tend to dictate the form and content of the school day.” (pg. 24)

Many teachers are faced with the dilemma of “teaching for testing”, where standardized testing has become a burden of pressure and stress. Teachers face pressure from administrators for their students to score high on these test, often with the teacher’s job security at stake. In urban schools, sometimes the preparation for certain tests is placed ahead of student’s knowledge and skill-set to perform well on these tests. For example, if students struggle with reading and writing, preparing for a test will not solve the issue at hand. Digital media will not solve this problem, but it will give students a break from the pressures of performing well on these tests;

and will allow the student an opportunity to study a discipline where they would have an active role in its content.

A student's interest in school, more specifically digital media, can help urban students to express themselves. Students that might come from a difficult background may find it easier to communicate digitally than verbally. The use of technology is used to communicate outside of school, so it would be advantageous for teachers to use technology to communicate with their students.

Having teachers and mentors that are passionate about teaching digital media is just as important as technology itself. The Digital Youth Network in Chicago, and other organizations, have stated the importance of having the right teachers in place in order to reach students through digital media. If the teacher or instructor is excited to teach the material, that energy will transfer to the students. When you have teachers and students excited about the content, it creates an openness to allow the flow of creativity.

The bond or community structure when youth can create freely, has been discussed in several research case studies. Poverty, unemployment, and family disruption in some cases define the context for residents in many inner-city neighborhoods. Some youth live by the code of the street in their neighborhood subculture. This street code relates to rap music and helps create the social identity of its listeners. The social impact of students working together and showcasing their abilities, may have a positive effect on the student's future.

In a case study entitled, "Congregating to Create for Social Change: Urban Youth Media Production and Sense of Community," Linda Charmaraman (2008) from Wellesly Centers for Women offered the following perspective:

Through developing a collective identity and accomplishing tasks collaboratively, youth become aware that everyone offers a valuable and unique voice to the project despite

differences in background, increasing optimism for group ownership and making a positive social impact (pg.9).

Charmaraman confirms the theme that digital media provides an environment for creative learning and freedom of expression that sometimes cannot be found in all learning structures. She also confirms the theme of community through what she calls “group ownership”. The idea that students can have ownership in their education is a concept that will help students feel a greater sense of completion and fulfillment in their educational experience.

With the economic and social challenges facing urban schools, researchers of the field believe that use of digital media will help students become more engaged in their education and develop confidence in their voice and talents, while learning a discipline.

In summary, digital media in the classroom fosters a sense of accomplishment, ownership, and community among students. Skills learned while working with digital media can have benefits later in life when students pursue a career. Technology in the classroom is a great way for students to become engaged. Students are motivated and become active participants in their educational experience through digital media.

Chapter 3

Kianna, a sixteen year old student at the Creative Learning Center in Highland Park, Michigan, was interviewed to get some background from a student's perspective for this case study. Kianna, a current student in a digital media class, was asked how the class has helped her and what she likes about the class. She responded, "Before I started this class I was shy, insecure and would have never thought that I would be recording my music and poetry, especially since I get stage fright. But this class was a great motivation for me and boosted my confidence. Now I work with others and it's great". Kianna also mentioned that she has experienced bullying and peer pressure in her past. Kianna's words echo some of the themes that have been discussed in the first two chapters of this study. These themes may seem like just words, but they are the driving force and motivation behind this case study.

This case study will examine the use of digital media among urban students in the metro Detroit area. It will take place at the Creative Learning Centers Highland Park and Dearborn locations. These alternatives schools service urban students in metro Detroit, many of whom come from various backgrounds. Some students have been taken out of traditional schools for behavioral and social reasons. The students, like all youth, sometimes have a hard time publicly expressing their thoughts and enthusiasm for school. This paper will examine if the use of digital media will allow students to be open, creative, and to digitally express themselves in an educational environment where they usually lack motivation towards school.

Technology is used to communicate outside of school through email, text messaging, and social media, but this study will encourage digital media communication in a school and learning context. In digital media classes students can digitally store and share their work. Whether it is

a slideshow video, or a song, having the ability to share it immediately and store it in their mobile devices is a great tool for digital media students.

One of the devices used will be the iPad by Apple. On the iPad, students will create music through the Garageband iOS application. With Garageband it is easy to use the samples of pre-recorded loops to create songs from scratch. Also used will be digital audio workstations with Avid Pro Tools and PreSonus' Studio One to record the student's poetry, rap, and singing.

The production element to this case study is to put together the music and videos into a multimedia presentation documentary. The documentary goal will be to show the exposure of digital media to the students and to collect information on the attitudes and competencies they develop. A survey will be given to all students with questions regarding their views on themselves, their educational experience, and their experience with digital media. A similar survey will be distributed at the end of a seven week after-school case study. The results of both surveys are discussed in chapter four. The goal of this research study is to document whether students gain a greater knowledge of digital media, develop self-expression through technology arts, and establish a new confidence in themselves that was not present before the study.

Chapter 4

Pre-Case Study Survey

This study began in February 2017, working with thirty students from the Creative Learning Center's Highland Park and Dearborn campuses. Creative Learning Center is an alternative high school option for students ages fifteen to nineteen. The study commenced by giving students a pre-case study survey to gauge their experience with digital media. The following questions were asked of each student.

- Q1-How interested are you in digital media and music technology?
- Q2-How interested are you using technology in your education?
- Q3-Do you believe skills learned in digital media can help later in life?
- Q4-Do you believe learning digital media in education will help you better express yourself?
- Q5-Do you believe learning digital media will help you be more creative?

Students were to give a response from 0-5, 0 being the lowest and 5 being the greatest. After collecting all surveys the average score from the students were as followed:

Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
3.85	4.11	3.94	4.05	4.23

Results of the Pre-Case Study Survey

Results of the survey were consistent with the average for all questions ranging between 3.85 and 4.23 on a five-point scale. The item ranked lowest by the students was their initial interest in digital media and music technology. Possibly students were unaware of what would be involved, but this shows that one of the first jobs of any teacher is to help students understand and appreciate their subject. The second lowest ranked question was on whether digital media skills would help later in life. Since digital media is a pervasive part of modern life, one would

think that it's impact into the future would be evident. This highlights the need of teachers to help students connect their discipline to their future lives, which is likely true of every discipline. The highest ranked question indicated a belief by the students that working with digital media would help them be more creative. From this ranking, we can conclude that the students not only have a strong interest in using digital media, but believe that they will become more inspired and stimulated through its use.

The last question asked the student to finish the phrase, "The greatest benefit of learning music technology is _____."

Bruce, a sixteen year old student, responded that "it would be beneficial to learn how to use new tools and software for my productions." Bruce, a quiet and shy student, had experience in making beats but was very interested in learning ProTools so that he could take what he learned and apply it to his home production work. Bruce emerged as the lead classroom studio engineer at the Dearborn campus.

A few of the student responses were similar to Joe, a seventeen from the Highland Park campus. Joe responded that the greatest benefit would be "the opportunity to express himself and his life through the music." From responses like this one, a consistent theme among the students was that learning digital media would provide an avenue for self-expression.

Study Implementation

Students were observed in a music technology class for seven weeks. During the study students were introduced to Avid ProTools and Apple Garageband music production software. The initial goal of the case study was to expose students to a variety of digital media software. After consideration, it was decided to feature the use of music technology applications in this study.

At the start of the study students were introduced to the basics of signal flow, and engineering sessions with the classroom music studio. The students took turns engineering each other, as well as making songs on the iPad with Garageband. Inconsistency in the attendance of some students caused certain students to fall behind. This caused students with good attendance to become student leaders. All students who completed the study had the opportunity to record their own material in the studio, engineer a session, and create songs.

Study Observations

After seven weeks of instruction, in a post-case survey, students were asked to share what they gained after working with music technology in the classroom. Results showed that participants in this study gained a greater knowledge of digital media, developed their capacity for self-expression through technology arts, and established a new confidence in their abilities. After examining the responses, the following themes were consistent among the students: collaboration, career focus, distribution, ownership, new skills learned, exposure to new technology.

Gerald, a student from Highland Park responded that he enjoyed being provided the tools to be able to express himself. At the start of the study Gerald was the quietest of all the students. He barely engaged in conversation or eye connect. After being introduced to Garageband, Gerald was determined to make a new song every class. It was noted that his mood and demeanor seemed to change as he began to explore the technology and interact with his classmates. By the end the study, Gerald created several songs, and some of his material was used by his peers in the classroom recording studio.

Most students in the case study were interested in music technology. Aivion, a student from Highland Park, emerged as one the most creative students during the survey. In her

response to the post-study survey, Aivion mentioned she has always desired to pursue a career as a singer or actress, and that the class forced her to beat her fears of singing in front of others. Aivion's songwriting skills and creativity flourished throughout the study and as a result her music was listened to and enjoyed by other students and staff in the school. Aivion is now taking acting classes and singing publicly more often.

When teaching music technology, the students learned that the distribution process is the last part in the five stages of production. Current technology permits instant gratification for students as they enjoy and promote their music. Several students were excited to have their songs recorded with ProTools, bounced to an mp3 file and emailed for listening on their phones. Some students even took it one step further, and uploaded their music to their YouTube accounts and to their SoundCloud profiles. The SoundCloud online digital community brings together musicians and artists from around the globe, but also connects artists from the same community that have never met. Juston, a student from the Dearborn campus, has gained many followers on social media through his music. Through his social media presence, Juston has been invited to perform at local concert venues.

Another theme that emerged from observing the students was a willingness to collaborate with and assist one another. During the study, students took turns recording each other in the studio. Leadership skills also emerged. Students managing the studio developed a sense of responsibility as they assisted with the tasks such as engineering the session, providing feedback to the recording artists, and managing the time of the session so that every prepared artist could record. Also a considerable amount of collaboration and trust was demonstrated by the students in the recording role. They were able to handle constructive criticism, a skill which is essential in this type of educational and working environment. In many cases, the students

have never openly shared their music or poetry, so working with others on their personal material provided a boost of self-confidence and ownership.

The study also opened the door for discussions regarding future opportunities working with digital media. Many students worked to create beats and videos from their mobile devices. With the resources available on their phones or tablets, students came to class ready to show what they had accomplished. Responses revealed that students enjoyed being encouraged to use technology to further their skills and explore different career paths.

Learning digital media in education can be beneficial to students of all backgrounds, especially to schools that lack resources to effectively reach and mentor students who come from challenging life circumstances. This case study confirms previous research of the positive effects of using digital media in an educational environment and with urban students.

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