

Digital Media: A Pathway to School Success and Improved Graduation Rates

Introduction

In order to describe the profound power of digital media arts as a dropout prevention intervention, one must first understand the anatomy of “a dropout,” and the slow process of disengaging that is endemic to dropping out. The following descriptive concepts are drawn from extensive dropout research. Dropping Out has:

1. Multiple Causes

In one sense, aggregating students into a single category of dropouts does a huge disservice to the youth, in that the only common ground amongst dropouts is the end result. Research demonstrates that there are multiple stem causes for dropping out, many of which are interactive.

2. Alterable and Unalterable Causes

There are some causes for dropping out that may not be “fixable.” Our stance is we should focus on the causes that are “alterable.”

3. Dropping Out is a “Process” not an “Event”

In terms of interventions it is more efficacious to view dropping out as a process, that often begins in elementary school and is impacted by situations, events and factors not related to school as well as many drivers that are part of the school experience. An intervention that takes into consideration this fact is more apt to succeed than one that treats dropout as an event.

4. Disengagement is Major Factor in Dropout Prevention

Disengagement from school, socially and academically is the most often cited alterable root cause for “Dropping Out.” Our intervention, using digital media as the fulcrum, focuses on the process of disengagement.

5. Multiple Pathways and CTE is a Proven Avenue for Success in Preventing Drop-outs

According to research principally; *Alternative Pathways to High School Graduation: An International Comparison* by Stephen Lamb (2008) California Drop-out Research Project, UC Santa Barbara, the use of CTE and Multiple Pathways

tied to career readiness is a significant positive pathway for success in preventing dropouts because it offers a clear school to work pathway and potentially part-time work (working under 20 hours is a graduation success predictor compared to no work or more than 20 hour work-week).

The Digital Media Intervention- Personal and Academic Engagement

Considering the vast body of evidence and research, we have constructed a model for success in dropout prevention that is research based and utilizes the introduction of digital media arts into a student’s live as the main feature in reducing dropouts.

The following chart is the compilation of over 150 studies. The rankings from 3 at the highest to 1 at the lowest is the single most concise ranking of dropout risk factors by domain, that is factors within entities- individual, school, community, family etc., and category for prevention. The combined rankings by an exhaustive panel of experts highlight interventions in order of importance. It was compiled by the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University in 2007. We use it here to structure our particular interventions in order of likely success and importance. By improving most of these pre-conditions, digital media is a key component for dropout prevention programs and strategies. Some categories and domains are not alterable by our program. However, the most highly ranked domains and categories are part of our intervention.

Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report

Domain	Category	Average
Individual	Attitudes, Values, & Behavior	3
Individual	Behavior	2.85
Individual	School Performance	2.85
Individual	Academic Engagement	2.85
Individual	Behavioral Engagement	2.71
Individual	Psychological Engagement	2.71
Family	Household Stress	2.71
Individual	Adult Responsibilities	2.57
Individual	Social Engagement	2.57
Family	Background Characteristics	2.57
Family	Attitudes, Values, & Behavior	2.57
Family	Behavior Related to Education	2.57

School	Environment	2.57
Individual	Background Characteristics	2.43
Individual	Experiences	2.42
Community	Socioeconomic Status	2.42
Community	Environment	2.28
School	Student Body Characteristics	2.28
Community	Attitudes, Values, & Behavior	2.14
Community	Behavior	2
Community	Experiences	2
Family	Family Dynamics	2
School	Supervision & Discipline Policies & Practices	2
Individual	Skills/Abilities	1.71
Individual	Education Stability	1.71
School	Resources	1.71
School	Academic Policies & Practices	1.71
Individual	Biological/Physiological Traits	1.57
Community	Location/Type	1.57
School	Structure	1.42

Shaded areas are the core factors in exemplary program building.

Interventions in the following areas explain why digital media is a determinative factor in keeping student's engaged.

Factor 1-Individual Attitudes, Values and Behaviors

We believe this is the most significant entry point in our intervention. Students with poor self-concept and the related characteristic of low self-esteem are often disruptive, devalue school and have the attitude that school is boring and believe the whole school environment is foreign to their way of life. These students live through social networks and routinely depend upon digital devices to communicate while both in-school and out-of-school.

The DASP model re-enforces the need for project learning and practice. Our teachers learn how to connect students to a daily regime of work that teaches discipline, effort and feedback as key features of success in school. DASP teachers are adroit at engaging students in positive relationships.

An in-school digital media program achieves the following positive impacts within the attitude and behavior:

- a. Students are naturally drawn to the magic of digital media. We call this “*image-engagement*.” Digital media is unlike any other intervention in school because it is vibrant, is communications based, and has immediate cache with students. That is because they are already competent and comfortable with it and use it regularly to have influence in other facets of their life,
- b. Research demonstrates that whenever a student changes his/her self- concept from “a loner” to “a participant,” from “passive” to “active,” and from “alienated” to “engaged” they begin the process of re-connecting to school. They have confidence that they can perform better at academic and social tasks.
- c. Working with digital media is a social event. We call this the studio environment. It means students necessarily trust other student’s contributions to their own success. This re-joining the group, meaningfully belonging, is a critical part of reconnecting to school. They know their work, expertise and success helps others succeed and they gain status as a successful creative person.
- d. Digital media is valued by people in the student’s social network, parents, teachers and other students.
- e. Discipline is a key factor in performing project- based assignments. Missing an assignment has immediate consequences. Students know that they and others will evaluate their work on a daily basis. They cannot “slide.” Many studies demonstrate lax learning environments and end-of-term evaluation (rather than daily feedback) as important contributing factors to getting behind at school and dropping out. Digital media ensures a daily record of achievement that is displayed on an immediate basis.
- f. Students value their ability to communicate effectively with their peer group. The more skilled a student is at interviewing or scripting situations the more successful they believe they are as communicators. The evidence of their growth is tangible. Students in digital media often report this as the most important attribute in engaging in digital media projects.

Factor 2- Individual School Performance

Once a student understands that school is more than passing paper and pencil tests they are prepared to accept academic performance as part of their challenge. Others have high expectations and so do they. They see themselves as “learners” and successful students. For visual and kinesthetic learners, digital media provides an unusually effective means to use dominant modalities that successfully connect students to learning. DASP contributes to these competences by training teachers in the use of digital media learning environments (see DASP Q1 conference best practice-Charles Angelis session).

- a. Digital media classes provide students the opportunity for a school subject to be taught using their dominant modality. Students see school as relevant and welcoming.

- b. Digital Media has been used successfully as a core learning and teaching tool. Students can use digital media to amplify social studies issues, biology or even chemistry. Student data from successful digital programs such as Cleveland High School in Reseda (A DASP partner school), demonstrates how digital media is the core learning competency that translates into academic improvement in other subject areas from bio-medical uses to architecture.
- c. Many learners, particularly those at risk of dropping out, utilize social networks at higher levels than other students. When social networks are utilized as part of the academic regime, grades improve.
- d. Students who spend more time on task, have higher grades in general. Students who have an interest in digital media, participate more in school and after school and therefore tend to raise their grades.

Factor 3 Individual Behavioral/Psychological Engagement

Engagement is the key component to the use of digital media arts as a dropout prevention methodology. Engagement is a characteristic that is comprised of at least three parts; students need for competence, underlying participation in membership at school and the authenticity of the work they do.

The DASP model builds teacher's confidence in using digital media, and their abilities to engage students. Students immediately seek to "get good" at media, partly because they can achieve success in this modality, and partly because the better communicators they are the more likely they are to join in activities at school. They feel comfortable as learners.

They also immediately recognize digital media as an authentic activity in school. It is tangible, hands-on and looks and feels like the rest of their life. They gain immediate feed-back. They also know they can use these skills to find careers after high school or in college. Digital media has real value for them.

In a recent study by the Drop-out Project at UC Santa Barbara ***Why Students Drop Out of School: A Review of 25 Years of Research*** the following statement is made on pages 6-7.

"One of the most important and immediate factors associated with dropping out in the preceding models is student engagement. Because student engagement has been identified as an important precursor to both dropping out and student academic achievement, there is a growing theoretical and empirical literature on the subject. Newman, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) developed a model of engagement in academic work, which they define as "the student's *psychological investment* in and *effort* directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (p. 12). As they point out, because engagement is an inner quality of concentration and effort, it is not readily observed, so it must be inferred from indirect indicators such as the amount of participation in academic work (attendance, amount of time spent on academic work), *interest* and *enthusiasm*."

- a. Students find work in digital media rewarding and useful
- b. As a result of their comfort they spend more time on task, complete assignments on time and begin to show real effort.
- c. As a result of these efforts, their grades improve and they begin to associate themselves as learners.
- d. Students try harder because they view digital media as tangible and of real value in the real world. They enter festivals offered by TOY and put work on YouTube, both of which gain them positive notice and approbation.
- e. Students complete the re-engagement loop by influencing other students to join their group and the circle of learning expands.

Factor 5- Family Stress

Another key component to student change and improvement has to do with the improvement in parental relationships when they achieve at school and change their self-concept. One of the features of participation in film festivals for example is the social and family value of public participation in an activity. We know from DASP surveys that students feel more support from the family because their accomplishments are recognized as valuable. To the degree that family stress is an attitudinal issue we know participation in digital media arts often relieves family stress. One need only come to youth film festivals to see how this support is vociferous and apparent.

Factor 6 – Individual Adult Responsibilities

Students who are at risk of dropping out often face the task of earning money. Research shows that there is a positive correlation between working more than 20 hours per week and dropping out. Students report that there are two factors involved. The first is need for financial remuneration, the second is that the world of work is often more psychologically supportive than the world of school.

Through DASP students can gain skills that can be translated into part-time and summer internships and jobs, at relatively high rates of pay. Through the DAPP program for example, DASP offers a program that improves skill sets and offers stipends to students who perform work for nonprofit organizations through the development of commissions to produce digital products.

- a. Digital media provides students with the ability to make money, improve their academic and vocational skills and improve their community.
- b. Students find clear career pathways through DASP that fulfill their (and parents) expectations, whether they continue on to college or find work.
- c. Digital media is a useful learning experience because it effectively teaches students the soft skills that have value at work, collaboration, discipline, hard-work, practice, punctuality, respect for other people's work and more.

Factor 7- Community Environment

Through the self-conscious connection between students who have built digital media skills and service to the community the students, DASP promotes improved social capital.

- a. Students who volunteer time in the community have a higher graduation rate than students who do not participate in community service.
- b. Community nonprofits give students confidence when they “hire” students to do digital media products for their endeavors.
- c. Service learning models can be useful in growing a connection between students and the community as well as getting credits for students to do work and therefore stay in school.

Factor 8- School Student Body Characteristics

Students who participate in extra-curricular or after-school programs have better grades on average than students who do not participate. In addition, studies also show that the same student will improve academic performance over their own past performance once they have joined a school activity, particularly in the arts.

- a. DASP encourages member schools to utilize after-school, 8th period or 12 –hour school days as a normal schedule for producing digital media arts.
- b. Students volunteer to join other activities sponsored by TOY and DASP such as participating in jurying film entries, public speaking and doing journalistic projects at or after school.

Factor 9 – Individuals Skills and Abilities/ English Learners

Students who make forward progress in building authentic skill sets will stay engaged in school, invest more time on task, complete more assignments and gradually improve grades. This is particularly true of English Language Learners students who use digital media arts to communicate at advanced levels even as they learn proficiency in English.

- a. ELL students use digital media to improve learning in English.

A article written by Schlosser, L. K. (1992, March-April), “***Teacher distance and student disengagement: School lives on the margin.***” Journal of Teacher Education, 43 (2), 128-140 makes the following statement.

“Varying activities, providing cooperative learning opportunities, and **using audio-visual aids while attempting to draw the student’s past experience is an excellent strategy to implement.** The goal is to not only teach students literacy skills in the native language, but to also teach meaningful, communicative, and functional use of the English language. The previously mentioned ESL* Standards provide educators with a foundation from which to develop various meaningful opportunities for LFS students to learn English.”

* English as a Second Language

b. Students who have a demonstrated academic skill set tend to see themselves as learners and improve their academic standing.

Conclusion

Digital Media Arts is a useful and significant tool in stemming the rising tide of dropping out. Students are immediately intrigued with digital media through the process of image engagement, they in turn invest time and energy in building skills in media. This process leads to personal engagement with a teacher and the school. More time on task follows, attendance improves, disciplinary actions abate, and students flip the self-concept switch from alienated to connected. They re-join the school membership, begin to perform after school activities. The bar is raised as they and their teachers formulate higher expectations for success. Their grades in digital media improve and this transfers to other subject areas.

Digital media provides project- learning (hands-on) experiences that appeal to visual learners. Students become more comfortable with school when they are able to utilize social networks, cell-phones and computers to learn and communicate. Soon, the student looks to utilize their newfound skills in the community and through DAPP they receive stipends to work in the field of digital media that provides pathways to college and work and further validates their efforts. Success breeds success. Digital Media Arts has all the necessary ingredients to start the process of engagement. It offers immediate attraction, engenders personal commitment, rewards hard work and concentration, provides tangible improvement and longer term career pathways. We believe that digital arts and communications technology and pedagogic methodology is the single most powerful antidote for school failure and dropping out, given the profound experience of competence, belonging and influence shared by students participating in a digital media program. This intervention warrants regional and statewide strategic investments in the DASP program.