

PASS 3: Strategies that Enrich and Expand Student Learning

Technology for Teaching and Learning Outside of School

The PASS model refers to the term "parent" as any adult who plays an important role in a child's family life.

"The president and I are convinced that with technology, we have an extraordinary opportunity to expand educational excellence and equity, and personalize the experience for students ... Technology can enable the high-quality teaching and learning that today's students need to thrive as citizens, workers, and leaders in the digital age and the globally competitive knowledge economy."

—Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education

This document is a reformatted adaptation of an issue brief presented by The Afterschool Alliance and MetLife Foundation as part of their series examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role that afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. The original document can be viewed at: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_briefs/issue_digital_learning_58.pdf

Digital Media & Learning After School

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Digital media and technology are revolutionizing how, where and when children learn. As one might expect with such a transformative innovation, digital media have compelled many educators to completely re-imagine the learning experience. There is broad agreement that digital media and technology should be viewed as tools that can: facilitate equally valuable learning opportunities beyond the school day and outside the school walls, permit students to learn at their own pace, and provide interactive experiences that allow them to learn in their own style and in ways that are personal and engaging.i These digital tools are viewed as most effective when grounded in strong, learner-centered environments that are collaborative, relevant and often involve the application of knowledge through project-based opportunities.ii

As school districts around the country race to build technological infrastructure that permits increased access to digital devices in the classroom, the resulting fundamental shifts in instructional practices are blurring the lines that once existed between formal and informal learning environments. Increasingly, teachers are adopting strategies that have long underpinned the youth development framework that is at the core of quality before school, after-school and summer programs. These strategies include the use of a flexible and interest-driven curriculum, the view of educators as mentors and facilitators within an environment that encourages youth to take ownership of their learning, and a focus on situating the goals of schooling within the broader context of a child's life.iii

Now that these strategies are also being recognized as instructional practices that fosters more effective digital learning n schools, the question turns to how digital media and technology are affecting the after-school field in ways that complement the changes occurring during the school day. This issue brief reviews existing research on digital learning and a sampling of after-school program models from around the country that have integrated digital media and technology in varying ways.

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Challenges and Opportunities for the After-School Field

Although many after school programs find ways to successfully integrate digital learning practices—or develop entirely new offerings built around digital media and learning—there are a number of challenges that inhibit the widespread adoption of these practices. Chief among them is the difficulty of securing the necessary funding to acquire and maintain a technological infrastructure. In today’s uncertain economic climate, many programs are struggling just to meet the basic needs of the children and families in their communities. With more than 3 in 5 programs (62 percent) reporting a loss of funding over the last three years, many are cutting services in order to keep the doors open.^{iv} These funding concerns, which are not unique to afterschool programs, strongly reinforce the need for schools and after school programs to work closely together as they seek to integrate digital media in teaching and learning.

After-school providers extend learning beyond the classroom through innovative uses of digital media and technology enhanced by strong mentorship components.^v Together, they are working to reinforce the notion of “anytime, anywhere learning” by creating a system that recognizes and documents how these informal learning environments use digital learning practices to support core academic standards.

The New Digital Divide

Within disadvantaged communities, afterschool programs have traditionally been praised for helping to alleviate the “digital divide.”^{vi} When defined in terms of basic access to the Internet and technology, informal learning environments certainly offer spaces where middle school youth—who might not have broadband access at home—can develop digital literacy outside of the school day. However, there is evidence to suggest that the nature of the digital divide is changing. The student-to-computer ratio between low-income and more affluent schools has closed considerably.^{vii} Additionally, the gradual decrease in the price of computers and rise in popularity of tablets and Internet-enabled mobile devices has meant that more disadvantaged youth are finding ways to get online. According to a 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation Study, among youth ages 8 to 18 years of age, African-Americans exceeded whites in their use of mobile devices.^{viii} The survey also found that a majority of all youth, regardless of race, have access to a computer and the Internet at home, although the quality of Internet access does vary.

Today, a new digital divide is emerging—one defined in terms of interaction rather than access. There is a growing awareness of the inequalities that exist in the way that youth are interacting with digital media; whereas affluent youth are more likely to behave as “content producers,” disadvantaged youth tend to be “content consumers.”^{ix} Through the process of creating digital content (such as blogs, vlogs, zines, vines, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, YouTube channels, Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, digital art and many more) youth who are content producers are acquiring a number of key skills and competencies, including a more comprehensive understanding of intellectual property, opportunities for cultural expression and the importance of active citizenship. ^x

Youth who sit on the sidelines as content consumers—or, in other words, those who interact with digital media only in the context of watching videos or using social media sites—will be left behind as they enter institutions of higher education and, eventually, the workplace. The 21st century skills perceived to be essential to the future success of youth are precisely the same skills that are fostered through involvement in a participatory digital learning culture.

While a divide exists between higher- and lower-income youth, overall youth interaction with digital media leans toward the content consumer side of the spectrum, with youth engaging in basic digital media activities. A 2005 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey found that half of youth ages 12 to 17 created content for the Internet.^{xi} The Pew Internet & American Life Project’s July 2011 survey found that although 95 percent of 12 to 17 year olds use the Internet, just 27 percent record and upload videos to the Internet.^{xixiii} Their September 2009 survey found that only 38 percent of youth said they shared something they created—such as artwork, photos or stories—online and 21 percent said that they created their own work from pictures, songs or text that they found online.^{xiv} A recently released report by the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub at the University of California, Irvine, further reinforces this data, stating that “many young people take the fairly basic steps” when going online, “fewer undertake the more complex, social, or creative activities that techno-optimists have hoped for them.”^{xv}

Content Producers and Consumers:

Through the process of creating digital content (such as blogs, vlogs, zines, vines, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, YouTube channels, Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, digital art, and many more) youth who are *content producers* are acquiring a number of key skills and competencies, including a more comprehensive understanding of intellectual property, opportunities for cultural expression and the importance of active citizenship.

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Promising Practices for Digital Learning

Effective digital learning practices in afterschool depend on the recognition that the use and purpose of technology in informal learning environments can vary as widely as the curricular objectives that the technology is intended to support. Across the spectrum of programs that have implemented digital learning strategies, technology is frequently used as a tool to enhance and extend broader goals that often revolve around a few key themes, including creative expression, youth empowerment and civic engagement.

When used appropriately, these tools naturally support the core principles of youth development practiced by quality afterschool programs. For middle school youth in particular, these informal learning environments offer an important opportunity for them to explore their own identities and engage with the world around them in ways that are exciting, relevant, and driven by their interests.

(A full copy of the issue brief includes a small sample of providers with promising practices as determined by the authors, The Afterschool Alliance and MetLife Foundation.)

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Key Elements of Successful After School Programs

- Highly effective programming can be built around readily accessible technology.
- Digital media and technology should support broader programmatic goals through research-based instructional practices.
- Digital media and technology projects should create opportunities to empower youth by providing an outlet for self-expression and a platform to assert their voices within the local and global community.
- Digital media and technology projects should be supported by explicit goals, while allowing for flexible implementation.

PASS, Learning Partnerships, and Technology

At the core of effective digital media and learning is the principle that instructional strategies should be personalized and flexible and that technology is a tool that supports effective teaching and learning practices. There is no one formula for success, but rather a multitude of ways that technology can be effectively applied to support the academic, social and emotional needs of middle school youth. Digital learning does not require educators to be experts on technology, but rather enables them to be facilitators in an environment where youth are encouraged to explore and find the answers on their own.

Learner-centered strategies developed through partnerships with parents and educators who are invested in both the children and the program, are most effective when partners are passionate, supportive and willing to experiment with new technology and new ways of teaching and learning. The lower-stakes environment and higher degree of instructional freedom within afterschool settings allows these programs to more easily develop and test innovative models of technology-enabled learning.^{xvi} These elements of effective digital learning, along with the fact that afterschool programs already excel at providing interest-driven learning opportunities, contribute to afterschool being an ideal setting for digital learning and an excellent partner to schools.

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