

Breaking the Ice: Why Low Performing Schools Need Digital Media

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When the social and digital media revolution gained momentum at the dawn of the new millennium no one would have predicted that less than a decade later black and Latino youth would be just as engaged as their white, Asian, and more affluent counterparts. Across a number of measures—use of mobile phones and gaming devices, social network sites, and the mobile web—young blacks and Latinos are beginning to outpace their white counterparts. For years the dominant narrative related to race and technology in the U.S. pivoted around the question of access. Today, the most urgent questions pivot around participation and more specifically, the quality of digital media engagement among youth in diverse social and economic contexts.

Picture this: in the very near future the population in many of the major metropolitan areas in the U.S. will be significantly shaped by *young* Latinos and African Americans. A recent estimate from the [2010 U.S. Census data](#) finds that U.S. Latinos make up nearly 25% of the U.S. population under age twenty. The [median ages](#) for Latinos and African Americans is, respectively, twenty-six and thirty. This is compared to a median age of thirty-nine among non-Latino whites. Forty-five percent of children younger than five in the U.S. belong to non-white groups. The population that public schools educate in America will reflect these seismic demographic shifts.



Virtually all of those Latino and African American teens will have access to more information and data in their pockets than any brick and mortar school or library currently provides. Many already hold access to a rich array of information in their hands today. However, most teens use mobile phones as social, recreational, and entertainment devices. This is especially true among black and Latino youth who use their mobile phones to watch videos, play games, and listen to music at rates that dwarf their white counterparts. But what if young people were encouraged to view their mobile phones, cameras, and iPods as learning devices and tools for critical citizenship and engagement in their communities?

This is actually happening in a surging number of community centers, after school programs, and media education initiatives. These community leaders, technology educators, and social entrepreneurs view kids mobile lives as a starting point to engage, explore, and experiment with the world around them. The work that Lissa Soep is doing with [Youth Radio](#) is a great example of an innovative learning ecology where student interest in media technologies is connected to local challenges. Unfortunately, learning experiences like these are rare in the schools that most young people attend.

Everyday, a majority of black and Latino youth walk into schools that are not equipped to engage them in any meaningful way. As one social studies teacher in a school populated by black and Latino students told me, "my colleagues have no idea of how tech savvy these kids are." In many of the low-performing schools that I have visited mobile is viewed less a learning tool and more as a source of teacher-student conflict.



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Mobile phones are treated as contraband to be controlled, policed, and ultimately, confiscated. This battle around the phone reflects a broader problem in low performing schools: the creation of a classroom environment marked by distrust and hostility.

A consistent finding in ethnographic studies of poor urban schools is the high level of mistrust and misunderstanding between students and their teachers. Students believe that teachers do not respect them. Teachers believe that students are often incapable of meaningful learning. Students and teachers lose. In the age of greater public accountability teachers are often penalized for low student performance. And in a world where 21st century skills are vital for meaningful employment the frosty disposition of black and Latino students toward their teachers contributes to a widening achievement gap and soaring drop out rate.

Technology alone will not change what is happening in low-performing schools. But effective insertion of technology into the classroom might help break the ice that chills the relationship between students and teachers. Rather than spending their time and energy policing mobile phones what if teachers asked their students to pull out their devices to execute a class assignment. In a small experiment I conducted a few weeks ago we observed some interesting behaviors. We were curious to see how a group of ninth and tenth grade boys would respond to a new mobile gaming app that offers information and education related to substance abuse. Here is an excerpt of how I reported what we observed:

"The introduction of the gaming app via mobile devices transformed the classroom and learning environment that these students inhabit everyday. Learning became social, communal, collaborative, competitive, engaging, and, in their words, fun. Students voluntarily stated that a game like this should be incorporated into their health class. Doing so, the young student noted, would make the class more interesting and more fun."

My colleague, in a separate brief, also noted how the environment changed once we introduced the mobile devices:

“Immediately, the energy level in the room went up and the emotional intensity increased. The boys were animated, smiling, laughing, and talking together. Teams consulted on the best answer to each question, and then either celebrated their correct response or commiserated after their incorrect answers.”

These students had never met us and yet after playing the game sat through a de-briefing session and gave us rich feedback. Their mood was cooperative and friendly. Boys that may have generally been disinterested and detached were wide-eyed and vocal. We believe that the devices (and the pizza) helped create a very different environment, one in which learning, dialogue, and engagement occurred naturally.

The challenges facing low performing schools are complex and yet elements of the problem are easily identifiable. Low performing schools are filled with students who are simply not engaged or interested in learning. In their eyes school is a place where surveillance, harassment, and disrespect are daily occurrences. Inserting technology into an environment like this is a multi-faceted experiment involving not only the reinvention of learning but also the transformation of students' disposition toward their teachers and learning.

My point? The initial impact of technology in low performing schools may be simply to break the ice between resistant students and reluctant teachers. Until that ice is broken meaningful engagement and learning will never happen.