MEDIASTUDIES™:

FROM YESHIVA DROPOUTS TO MAINSTREAM

For the academic year 2001-2, I developed and executed a rehabilitative program called the MultiMedia Project (**MMP**) for Yeshiva Drop-Outs with drug, alcohol, self-mutilation and other emotional problems (ages 16-22).

This program was hosted by a major national communications corporation and administrated by a Jewish College in the NYC Metropolitan area. Two years later, the results for the fourteen students who completed the program, (which started with ten), are as follow:

Attending College:	4	a b c
Learning in Yeshiva:	4	d e
Learning in Yeshiva & Working:	3	f g
Working:	3	f

[a]   one student is pursuing his Masters in Psychology.
[b]   one student is studying to become a teacher.
[c]   two students are graphic arts majors in College.
[d]   one student is learning in the Mir Bais HaMedrash.
[e]   two students are learning full time in Israel.
[f]   two students obtained GEDs.
[g]   the only student who was never frum, got a job as a web designer and computer programmer at the sponsoring corporation. He subsequently became a Baal Tshuvah, and is now learning at Yeshiva in Israel while he continues to work.

This paper discusses some of the methods of the MultiMedia Project (**MMP**) that can be ported over to mainstream Yeshivas to serve the needs of regular students (**MEDIASTUDIES™**).

MEDIASTUDIES™ can:

- ✓ **Wake up students** who are performing well, but seem to be learning **on automatic pilot.**

- ✓ **Turn students around** who are not yet categorized as "at-risk," but might turn out to be "at-risk" in the future.

- ✓ **Stimulate gifted students** whose creativity is not sufficiently engaged by the Yeshiva.

THE METHODS OF MEDIASTUDIES™:

1]   Make the learning essential for what the student wants to accomplish.

The students in the **MMP** had all been out of school for at least six months. Most of them had been staying up all night and sleeping until 3PM before they started attending this class. They were not interested in learning anything (at first) and only joined the class because of the lure of being able to make their own video. (Almost all teens want to make their own video).

Had I announced, "Now class, we are going to establish hierarchical directories for the Windows XP operating system," the classroom would have been empty by the time I finished my sentence.

Instead, I handed a digital camera to the students. "Take pictures of each other." The pictures were dumped into a PC and brought up in Adobe PhotoShop. "Who wants to change the color of his hair?" All hands shot up.

I chose a student with multiple face piercings. "What color?" "Green." I did a quick selection of his hair, brought up HUE from the IMAGE menu, and voila! Green hair. I also did a quick selection of some face piercings, hit COPY, then PASTE, and voila! Extra face piercings!

At this point, every student was desperate to get to a computer to play with his own image. When I showed them that you could remove pimples with the rubber stamp tool, they could no longer contain themselves. Then I said, "In order to manipulate your own face, we have to place the .jpg of your picture in a file, and we need to be able to locate that file.

Having captured their rapt attention, it was now easy to teach hierarchical filing very quickly, and every student quickly mastered

this in order to be able to play with the image of his own face. They also learned the rudiments of PhotoShop selection, layers, color manipulation, and the rubber stamp tool in the same session.

The students were never told that there is only one way of doing something at the computer. I also didn't insist that they learn every possible way to copy, paste, etc. Fourteen different students would accomplish the same result in fourteen different ways.

My Java programming instructor was fond of saying, "There is more than one way to skin a goat." (He was a Pakistani). Yet, when we teach computers in Yeshiva, we often insist on a "one-size-fits-all" approach, which although reliable, comes at the price of stifling the inherent creativity of the student. This is too high a price to pay because the more the student's creativity is encouraged, the more the student is motivated to learn.

2]   Teach the Organization of Information.

An **MMP** student, asked what he was learning, would probably say, "We're learning to do cool stuff on the computer…video, music, digital photography, web sites, computer graphics, etc."

True, but from a pedagogical point of view, he was learning **The Organization of Information**, with the computer as his "instrument." Just as no two virtuoso guitarists approach the guitar the same way, no two computer students should approach the computer in the same way. The word "instrument" implies extension of the user's capabilities and experiences, and each student should be encouraged to find his own unique approach to problem solving.

Whether the computer is being used as a word processor, (*MS Word*), for audio visual presentations (*MS PowerPoint*), spread sheets (*MS Excel*), digital image manipulation (*Adobe PhotoShop*), audio and music editing (*MOTU Digital Performer*), Web Design (*Adobe Olive*), or video creation and editing (*Apple Final Cut*), it is being used as a tool to gather, sort, organize, and process information.

The student quickly catches on to the fact that all of these programs are essentially the same. Each new program learned brings a better understanding of the previously learned programs.

In the traditional approach to computer education, the student studies a manual, learns specific macros and idiosyncrasies of the program, and is forced to adopt a one-size-fits-all style of working with that program. When he learns a new program, little of what he has previously learned is relevant.

When operating systems and software are updated, much of the memorizing that a conventional computer student does is rendered meaningless.

Our students are not thrown for a loop, because they master the underlying concepts, instead of just memorizing macros and prefabricated work routines.

As most people in business know, it is necessary to constantly "bounce" data from one program into another, and back again. For instance, in Final Cut Pro (the video software), one often has to import pictures from PhotoShop, music and sound from Digital Performer, text from Word, etc.

Since we stress the execution of projects, rather than the learning of individual programs, our students feel comfortable moving data between programs, and learning new programs.

3]   **The greater the relevancy of the subject matter, the greater the student motivation.**

I've never met a student who was interested in learning how to convert numbers from decimal to hexadecimal. However, when the first lesson in writing HTML code (for Web pages) was given, I went over to one student's computer, added two lines of code, and turned his web page red. All of the students wanted colored web pages. It was explained that colors were originally specified as 3 hexadecimal numbers, and a lesson was taught on hexadecimal conversion.

Since the students all wanted to play with the colors, they all quickly mastered the necessary math.

Theory is never taught without a "hook." When the students wrote a report on the film "Citizen Kane," they had to format their text in Word to look like a tabloid newspaper. This led to a study of fonts. When a student wrote a tutorial on masking in PhotoShop, he had to present it using Word's outlining features.

When the students reported on the film "32 Short Films About Glenn Gould," they had to prepare an Excel spreadsheet to gather data about the 32 vignettes.

Showing this Glenn Gould film was a pedagogical grand slam. It depicts the life of pianist Glenn Gould (film/biography), and features a half hour of the music of J. S. Bach (music), which is sometimes animated (computers). It deals with Gould's principal interests: audio editing, finance, and auto-pharmacology. The film graphically dramatizes Gould's mental and physical decline and death from prescription drug abuse. The symbiosis of these vastly differing elements created an exciting classroom atmosphere that greatly motivated the students.

Another way to motivate students to learn is to choose projects that are relevant to them. Instead of teaching the students to write business letters, (something that was intangible to them), I taught them how to write purchase orders and invoices (formatted in Word, of course). This led to a class on standard business procedures for free lance workers. This, in turn, led to a discussion of the Torah's view on ethics in business. Some students started small businesses designing flyers and web sites with the information they learned in class.

A student who can competently organize information on a computer, one who can create a resume or business proposal, a budget spreadsheet, an illustrated tutorial, edit a graphic, create an educational web site, and produce, direct, and edit an industrial film, is a student who is prepared to succeed in college, and today's rapidly changing market place.

4] Students who won't read, will eagerly watch films, and then write about the films.

Most of the students in the **MMP** came in with extremely poor reading skills. The students' reading improved substantially by the end of the year: Four dropouts were admitted to college, four dropouts went back to Yeshiva, and two dropouts received their GED.

The **MMP** did not work on their reading problems at all. We taught them to organize information and to write. Reading is passive; writing is active, and a form of self-expression. Whenever we would show a film (ostensibly to study the editing, camera angles, and scriptwriting) the students were eager to express their opinions on the issues presented by the films. Films such as "The Godfather," "The Jazz Singer," and "Citizen Kane," affected the students deeply, and they were happy to codify their thoughts.

My inspiration for this writing approach to improved reading came from my own life experience. As a professional studio musician, I was always troubled by my lack of fluency in music sight-reading. When I took a job as a music instructor at the New School, I had to write hundreds of pages of music from which to teach. After a few years, I realized that my music sight-reading difficulties had disappeared as a result of the writing.

5] Testing must be fair, relevant, comprehensive, and failure-proof.

All kids-at-risk have an aversion to tests of any kind. There are several good reasons for this:

• Tests often reward "thinking inside the box" and punish "thinking outside the box." Nothing turns a kid off from learning faster than having his intelligent answer to a question marked "wrong."

• Tests often reward students who memorize without understanding, and punish those who understand without memorizing.

- Uncommitted teachers often create tests that are so superficial, and cover so little of the required knowledge, that a student can know a subject extremely well, yet still receive a poor mark on such a test. This poor mark makes the student feel that any future effort spent on test preparation is pointless.

- Students can become shell-shocked from constant test failures, and simply turn in blank papers whenever tested (the "blank test paper" syndrome).

<u>Our testing procedure:</u>

- Students are allowed to "question the question." Several highly intelligent students consistently got grades of 105 or 110 (out of 100) on my tests, because they would find some flaw in one or more questions.

- Our tests are interesting and stress real understanding and practical application over memorization. All knowledge is directed towards being able to do "cool things" on the computer, and the kids want to learn what is being taught.

- Our tests are comprehensive. If you need to know 27 basic lines of code for HTML web design, we test all 27 lines of code.

- We have a unique testing system.

  o We pre-teach the test. Since the test includes ALL of the necessary information on the subject, teaching THE ENTIRE TEST in advance is an excellent use of class time. Some students will get 100 (or better) the first time out. Others will get in the 70's or 80's, and others will do very poorly.

  o ALL STUDENTS MUST GET 100 % to go on to the next "cool thing." Any student who does not get 100 % takes a re-test. Some students need 1 or 2 re-tests. Others need as many as 5 or 6. All students eventually master all of the material. The motivation is the student's desire to go on to the next project.

We had one student who could not remember having ever passed a test in school. On his third re-test, when he received a 73, he said with an infrequent smile, "Now I can go home and show this to my mother. She'll hang it up on the refrigerator!" He showed great joy at receiving 100 on the fifth re-test. By the end of the year, he was no longer afraid to take tests, and he did well on them.

6]   Peer Pressure and Corporate-like Professionalism are the keys to classroom discipline.

Peer Pressure:

The **MMP** had students of widely variable age, background, intelligence, grade level, etc. The primary instrument of discipline was peer pressure. The capable students want to progress to the "cool stuff" as soon as possible.

Because every student was motivated to learn to make a video, I was able to run a fairly tight ship with students who had been previously considered uneducable.

Should a student disrupt the class, make a mess, mistreat a piece of equipment, or do something to damage the reputation of the class itself, it was usually unnecessary for me to intervene. The brighter (and in this system, intelligence equals power) students immediately challenged the disruptor, and order was restored.

The lab at the **MMP** contained over $100,000 worth of the latest high tech computers, cameras, projectors, etc. Initially, I was very concerned that the equipment might be stolen, broken or vandalized. At the end of the year, we were missing one $40. pair of headphones and a box of blank CDs. I attribute this miracle to the corporate atmosphere of professionalism and peer pressure established early on.

The class was run as I had run businesses. The computers had to be maintained, and equipment and supplies had to be accounted for. If a student were about to install unauthorized

software on a computer (which might adversely affect the network), his neighbor would take away the CD, and tell the rest of the class.

Nobody wanted his video career jeopardized by someone else's reckless act.

Corporate Environment:

The **MMP** was hosted by a major telecommunications corporation. The students wore the same ID badges as the corporate employees. They ate at the same cafeteria, and some students formed social relationships with corporate employees. I frequently had corporate employees come and speak to the class on their fields of expertise including videography, photography, advertising, finance, investor relations, business, and fund raising.

I suggested to the students that they look around at the executives and workers at lunch. "Study the way the highly paid executives dress, act, and speak. Then, study the way that the maintenance and other lower paid workers dress, act, and speak."

Inspired by the corporate environment, the students gradually started to dress better, speak more politely. By the end of the year, their *midos* were greatly improved. Some students applied for corporate internships, and as of now, five of them have had paying jobs at the sponsoring corporation.

Professionalism:

An assignment was given to create a storyboard (a comic book like mock-up) for a TV commercial demo. Five of the initial ten students brought in storyboards advertising marijuana. This was not a good time to discuss the dangers of marijuana. The class wouldn't have been receptive, and any lecturing would have been counter productive.

Instead, it was explained that such a commercial would make their portfolio look unprofessional. All of the students wanted to get

summer jobs as apprentice video makers, and their portfolios were very important to them. Having a commercial for an illegal substance on their reel would look immature and amateurish to an advertising professional. We conducted a lesson in choosing appropriate products to advertise, and there was no resistance.

Afterwards, several students asked, "What's wrong with marijuana, anyway?"

At this point, since the question came from them, they were receptive to hearing the horror stories of wasted lives and potential from my twenty years of experience in the advertising, film and music businesses.

7]   Keep all criticism *impersonal* and based on helping students to attain goals that are meaningful to *them.*

One student, who was heavily involved with drugs, used PhotoShop to color his eyes black and create red pupils to turn his face into that of a demon. The whole class was watching to see my reaction. I told my him, "That's unacceptable! We do professional quality work here, and if you study the shape of an eye, you'll find that it's an ellipse, not a circle. You used the circle tool, and you should have chosen the ellipse tool. Go back and do this again, correctly."

The student was amazed that he wasn't criticized for the content or intent of his work, only the quality. A few weeks later, this student checked himself into a drug rehab center "so that he could succeed in this class." He is now majoring in computer graphics in college.

8]   A meaningful, interesting classroom experience is the ultimate student reward.

The instructor of another program said to me- "The attendance of your course (with "uneducable" kids) is high, and that of my own course (with "regular" kids) is low. What rewards do you give for good attendance?"

"None," I responded.

"With what punishments do you threaten them?"

"We have no punishments."

"Then why do they show up?" he asked.

"I try to make each minute of class the most exciting and interesting possible minute of their day. If the **MMP** is the 'coolest place,' why would a student want to be anywhere else?"

9]   Proper Nutrition helps to lessen substance abuse.

All of these kids came in addicted to Snapple and junk food. We gave them high protein kosher lunches; we had nutritious snacks available at all times, and gave them extra food to take home. Without proper nutrition, and a change in eating habits, it was difficult to get the kids to sit still or concentrate.

At the beginning of the term all of the kids smoked and needed more than one cigarette break per hour to function. By the end of the term we were down to two cigarette breaks per day. We feel that the proper nutrition lessened their need to smoke.

All of the kids were initially substance abusers to varying degrees. Two went into rehab for hard drugs (and returned to complete the class). The rest drastically decreased usage of marijuana and alcohol, etc. during the year. They, themselves, attributed this to three factors:

- Having something interesting and challenging to engage their attention and imagination every day.

- Increased self-esteem as a result of:

   o Learning new, exciting skills.
   o Creating flyers, resumes, graphic designs, web sites, PowerPoint presentations, and films) with which they were able to impress their friends and families.

- Proper nutrition.

10]   Guest Lectures make the class seem more relevant to "real life."

People prominent in related fields such as filmmaking and music came to give guest lectures and performances. Director/Cameraman Ashley Lazarus lectured on writing for film, camera techniques and advertising business practices. He was so impressed with the class that he invited all of them to the audio recording of his latest film, Rambam, featuring Leonard Nimoy and Armand Assante.

A CD producer/violinist came to perform the JS Bach Double Violin Concerto, and lecture on his experiences in the pop music world with artists including Britney Spears, Aerosmith, *NSYNC, Jimmy Page & Robert Plant, and Aretha Franklin.

In true **MMP** fashion, he concluded his music lecture with a surprise twist. He said, "By the way, I'd also like to tell you how I squandered my health and a million dollars on drugs and alcohol, and about my experiences in drug rehab."

Had he come in as the usual drug lecturer, he would not have had the full attention of the class. Since he had totally won them over by his violin playing and show business stories, when he told them of the dangers of casual drug use, they hung on his every word.

11]   Torah as a rehabilitative tool.

The class had a one-hour Torah shiur each day. A rabbi taught a unique Torah memorization program (which was very successful with teens-at-risk who dislike reading) twice a week, and different corporate executives and workers came by (on their own time) to teach shiurim.

The frum students who came into the program non-observant did not necessarily have issues with Hashem or the Torah. Their issues were with Rabbis, teachers, or parents who "talked the talk," but didn't "walk the walk."

Once a teen became convinced that the offending parent or teacher was a hypocrite, it seemed to them to be a "moral" act to do the opposite of what the hypocrite did. Thus, if a hypocritical father served Hashem by putting on *tefillin,* the "moral" teen would then serve Hashem by <u>not</u> putting on *tefillin* (to distance himself from hypocrisy).

These students were unwilling to listen to Torah from any "professional" rabbi, but they were willing to listen to shiurim given by corporate accountants or graphics designers who willingly gave up their own lunch hours to teach Torah.

We instituted a mandatory *mincha*. We realized that most of the boys were not putting on *tefillin* because those who were davening, davened *shacharis* on the train. So, after consulting with rabbinical authorities, we started having the boys put on *tefillin* before *mincha*. Again, peer pressure came into play, and even kids who had been "off the derech" started davening *mincha* and putting on *tefillin.*

One Chassidic teen, spoke little English, and was socially isolated from the rest of the boys. He was not davening when he came to us at first. He was somewhat amused at the slower reading and "Americanisher" pronunciation of the kids in the class. We asked him if he could do better. He took a *siddur,* and led the davening. We made him our official *baal tefilla,* and from then on, he davened every day. He left the program a few months later to return to Yeshiva in *Eretz Yisrael.*

The most important Torah that was taught, was "sneaked in" during the computer classes. A class on writing an invoice became a shiur on honesty and ethical behavior in business. A class on the hexadecimal conversion of numbers into digital colors led to a discussion of how "we are all ones and zeros on the hard disk of Hashem."

A critique of a student's commercial storyboard led to a discussion of the Torah's view on alcohol, smoking, controlled substances, and substance abuse. When Torah issues are

presented in the context of meaningful real world issues, the class becomes excited about them.

One day, when most of the class insisted that they were "burnt out" on Torah, I asked the simple question, "What's wrong with the current Yeshiva system."

The ensuing discussion filled the shiur hour, went on to occupy the entire afternoon, and I had trouble getting the boys to leave at the end of class.

12]   In Conclusion:

In closing, we can use the computer as the centerpiece of a new discipline, **MEDIASTUDIES™,** which combines computer science, art, music & film. **MEDIASTUDIES™** can:

- Jump-start the interest of the average student.

- Motivate students who are "pre-at-risk."

  and

- Stimulate gifted students.

I would be happy to discuss any of the above points with professional educators. Please feel free to e-mail me at jordankap@aol.com.

Thank you,

Yehuda Kaplan,
MEDIASTUDIES™