

The Dreamscape effect

ASU and Hollywood creatives are rewriting the script on how students discover science

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News
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Written by Bret Hovell

Seventh grader Samuel Granado is a well-spoken and bright student at Villa de Paz Elementary School in Phoenix. But he starts out cautiously when he describes a new virtual reality-enabled science curriculum at his school called Dreamscape Learn.

"I don't want to call, like, regular science class boring," he says. "But Dreamscape is definitely more exciting and fun than, well, a regular science class."

Even his "regular" science teachers are likely to agree.

Because what Samuel and his classmates see when they sit down in Villa de Paz's custom, virtual reality classroom is the vibrant, colorful Alien Zoo, the immersive setting for the lab work in their middle school science class.

Steep mountains and craggy rocks populate the landscape. Alien creatures eat from trees with bright orange foliage. In one of the school's learning modules, the students see megaraffes — huge animals that are shaped like a dinosaur but have colorings like a giraffe — moving together in a herd.

The students wear fully immersive virtual reality headsets and sit in chairs that vibrate as they move through the virtual world. They even feel air blowing on them from discreet fans on their desks as they pilot their spacecraft through the Alien Zoo.

"It's something much more hands-on than, say, a teacher putting up a slideshow and you just writing down notes," says Samuel.

A break with tradition

Dreamscape Learn has launched this new, high-tech curriculum for middle schoolers in the Pendergast Elementary School District, which serves students from pre-K through eighth grade. It has led to high engagement and excitement among a population of students that, almost universally, struggle to care as much about school as they do about all the other things happening in their lives — or on their phones.

Dreamscape Learn is a partnership between ASU and Dreamscape Immersive, a company founded by Walter Parkes, an Oscar-nominated Hollywood producer and writer and the former head of DreamWorks Motion Pictures. It combines the emotional power of Hollywood storytelling, the technical achievement of virtual reality and the rigorous academic design for which ASU is known.

The Dreamscape Learn curriculum is in wide use at ASU, especially in the sciences. Now the university is taking the lead in bringing it to high school and middle school classrooms around Arizona.

“At ASU we take responsibility for the success of our students,” says Michael M. Crow, ASU’s president. “We have never blamed students for lack of achievement, we have only asked ourselves what we could do to help them learn better. We have an unbelievable tool now that is helping people to learn better, and we will not rest until we get it to as many students as possible.”

The Pendergast district, led by Superintendent Jennifer Cruz, '96 BAE, '02 MEd, '14 EdD, was already deeply engaged in research about how to improve the middle school experience, when they heard about Dreamscape Learn. They brought students, teachers, parents and school board members to Tempe to try it out.

“My team couldn’t believe what a phenomenal experience it was,” Cruz says. “They totally got the power of it.”

Villa de Paz was the first school to get a custom-built virtual reality lab. Now, ASU-owned Dreamscape Learn mobile pods, built into towable trailers, are circulating in the Pendergast district so that all of Pendergast’s 3,000 middle school students have an opportunity to participate.

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—

Michael M. Crow
President, ASU

The excitement of taking action

The technology, design and storytelling allow Samuel and his fellow students to care about the inhabitants of this orbiting space zoo. Because the students are able to interact in the story, these middle schoolers are not just passively absorbing the wisdom of scientists who came before them. They are empowered to act as scientists themselves, using real-world biology to figure out how to help these make-believe creatures.

In one module, there is something wrong with the wise but aging leader of the megaraffes, named Xor. Xor is sick. In her disorientation, she has led her flock to a dangerous location. It is each student's job to determine what is wrong and try to save the entire society of megaraffes.

"The students actually feel like they're making a difference and actually taking ahold of their learning," says MacKenzie Skarlupka, '22 BS in biological sciences, and a seventh and eighth grade science teacher at Villa de Paz.

Benjamin Benton, also a seventh grader at Villa de Paz, says that he starts thinking about his sessions in the Dreamscape lab the night before he's scheduled to be there.

"It's like, oh my gosh, I'm so excited to go do this," he says. "When you wake up, you're so happy to go to science class."

Dreamscape has been in the Pendergast district just over a year, and leaders know many students feel similarly to Benjamin.

"We have seen an extraordinary increase in attendance on days when students are going to be working on Dreamscape," says Cruz.

At ASU, researchers have been monitoring the university's implementation of Dreamscape Learn. They are seeing significant improvements in educational outcomes of the students studying in the Dreamscape-enabled classes compared with students studying the same material in a more traditional way. Those improvements are holding across demographic groups and across socioeconomic groups. And the Dreamscape pedagogy is allowing students to perform well regardless of their educational background.

Those researchers are now beginning to conduct rigorous analyses of the program in Pendergast's schools.

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—

Jennifer Cruz

Superintendent, Pendergast Elementary School District in West Phoenix

An emotional connection to learning

Milliah Pennington was in the first cohort of middle school students to try out Dreamscape Learn.

Kelsie Pennington, '01 BA in education and Milliah's mom, doesn't remember if she heard about it on the first day Milliah tried Dreamscape. But she's confident it was no later than the second day.

On their 45-minute drive home from school, Pennington asked that all-too-familiar question: How was your day?

“It was the most I’d heard about school,” says Pennington, about Milliah’s response.

Pennington, herself an educator, was used to hearing from Milliah about something that had happened at lunch, or maybe a project Milliah was working on in art class.

“You don’t necessarily, typically, hear about the academics first,” she says. “And so that was one of the things that stuck with me that day.”

Milliah was in her final year at Villa de Paz and remembers being blown away when she put on her headset — not just by the technology, but by the narrative.

“I think we definitely had an emotional attachment to the story,” she says.

Cruz sees that emotional connection as crucial to serving students.

“If we can give them really compelling work, like all of us, they’ll do it,” she says. “So we’re super excited about that promise and this opportunity.”

Students typically have a few days of in-class learning before each session in virtual reality. It is those lessons that can be modified by grade level. What middle school students do to prepare for their visits to the Alien Zoo is different from what college students do.

“The VR stories were meant to be evergreen, not necessarily audience-specific, and so that translates well across ages,” says John VandenBrooks, associate dean for immersive learning at ASU.

And those stories follow the three-act template that will be familiar to anyone who has watched a Hollywood movie: the setup, the conflict or problem to be solved, and then the resolution. Mimicking that structure is by design — it’s a proven way to connect with an audience, and it can be applied to teaching and learning.

“They’re growing a connection to the scientific concepts at a deeper understanding than if I just gave a worksheet or an assignment online,” says Skarlupka. “They actually want to talk about what they have learned. ... They will even talk about it at recess, which is bizarre to me, because my kids don’t usually talk about academics at recess.”

This has turned out to be what Dreamscape’s leaders believe makes the difference: If you can get students to feel connected to the material, they can learn anything.

“They’re still kids and it’s not that hard to get them excited about something cool — if it’s cool,” says Josh Reibel, the CEO of Dreamscape Learn and a former high school English and philosophy teacher. “We are taking them to amazing places and putting them in the context of really emotionally compelling stories where there is real drama and twists and turns and surprises. And you hook them.”

Explore Dreamscape Learn for yourself

Schedule a demo at Creativity Commons on the Tempe campus, located at 501 E. Orange St., or learn more at dreamscapelearn.asu.edu.

In one story, the twist at the end involved the death of Xor, the leader of the megaraffes who had gotten her herd off course. It packed an emotional punch for the students.

“We had a lot of sobbing,” says Skarlupka. “And because they care, they’re actually learning more.”

About the author

An Emmy Award-winning journalist who covered the White House, the Capitol and national politics for CBS News and ABC News, Hovell has spent the last decade working in higher education.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Teacher MacKenzie Skarlupka (left) says modules like the Alien Zoo help students like Samuel Granado solve problems the way scientists do. Photo by Jeff Newton

Text image(s)



Students attend class at a Dreamscape Learn Lab on ASU's Polytechnic campus in Mesa. Photo by Jeff Newton



Milliah Pennington, one of the first Dreamscape Learn students at Villa de Paz, says the program connected her to her schoolwork in a way she hadn't felt before. Photo by Jeff Newton

Gallery



Dreamscape Learn mobile pods circulate to all 12 schools in the Pendergast district, ensuring students have access to the VR-enabled curriculum.



Pendergast students interact with the Dreamscape Learn module on a mobile pod.