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Programme number: Q4.1

Engaging the Net Generation Student (0015)

Teaching and working with the Net Generation can be a challenge. Keeping these tech-savvy (Bibb, 2010: Howe & Strauss, 2003), media-influenced (Newton, 2000), multi-taskers (Oblinger, 2004) prepared and engaged for each college class can be difficult for even the most seasoned professors whether they are a Traditionalist, a Baby Boomer, or a Generation Xer. This paper discusses technology solutions that can be used to motivate the Net Generation such as clicker usage, online textbooks, and wiki-spaces. Other tools such as team projects and mandatory attendance have been employed to encourage students to be ready for class and able to contribute to the learning objectives. The authors have used these techniques, as well as others, in small case studies and have surveyed students regarding online textbooks and wiki spaces.

Net Generation Characteristics

The Net Generation, born between 1981 and 2000 (Keeter & Taylor, 2009) is today's university student and youngest workplace cohort. Researchers have described them as interdependent, collaborative, and networking (Alch, 2000); experiential, engaging, and interactive (Skiba, 2006); and users of technology that bring and keep them together through text messaging and chat rooms (Cox, 2004). They have a created messaging language, download podcasts and music, and take photos with their phones (McCasland, 2005). Their style is high-tech and highly networked and they "will want to be able to work quickly and creatively, and they want to do it their way" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 143). They have high self-esteem as they were taught they are special[1] (Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2010). They are upset at negative feedback, but want feedback right away, do not like busywork, and are considered fearless and direct (Martin, 2005; Sacks, 2006). They understand the need for interconnectivity in the worldwide market and have a global point of reference (Alch, 2000).

How they Learn

A recent study of 2,322 students measured their time spent during four years of college. Less than 20% of their time was spent on academics, including listening to lectures and studying and 51% was spent on socializing or in extracurricular activities. No significant improvement in writing and critical thinking was shown since freshmen year for 36% of the graduates (Rimer, 2011).

[1]It should be noted that descriptions of any cohort are generalizations. There are always exceptions. Variations in culture, economics and ethnicity can make a difference as, according to associate professor Bonnard of Texas A&M, many non-white students have been raised without regarding themselves as "special" (Hoover, 2009).

When considering the behaviors common to this generation such as doing homework while eating, viewing television, talking on the phone and interacting with their parents simultaneously (Frand, 2000) it is understandable that they could have an impact on academics. According to Murray (2004), multitasking behavior may have affected and shortened their attention span which can impair their critical thinking skills and self-analyses.

Although there may be apprehension about their analytical skills, there is faith that their usage of media can be a tool for learning. Students will be expecting different types of education because of their years of using digital media (Trei, 2006).

What They Expect

This multi-media generation seems to expect multiple methods of instruction. In a study of business students (N= 82) in a liberal arts university, learning by solving problems in class, a mixture of course material, frequent exams with a variety of ways to earn grades was preferred by over 90% of respondents. Lecture format (62.6%) and doing ungraded work to help learn the material (60.2%) although not as high, was also favored by the majority (Nicholas, 2008).

The Net Generation, brought up using technology, will continue to learn through it. They expect inclusion and interaction as they have grown up with "open democratic dialogue and negotiations" with parents (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2011, p. 13). Managers have already found that facilitating, answering the many "Why" questions, and bringing this cohort into the conversation will capture their commitment to organizational directives (Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2010). This interaction could be a good model for some classroom lessons also.

Results of Cases

Wikis: Six classes of business students, in academic year 2010-2011, were surveyed about their course interactions. Four sections of Business Communications students were asked about their use of the assigned wiki site, as it was required for a major team project workspace. Of the Fall student responses (N = 32), answers were: hard to access - 12.5%, difficult to load - 6.2%, useful once I understood how - 37.5%, and more convenient than paper/e-mail - 43.7%.

The use of wiki team space, according to the responses in the Spring (N= 30, including the 3 responses of not applicable), was: hard to access - 6.7%, difficult to load - 0%, useful once I understood how - 56.7%, more convenient than paper/e-mail - 30.9%, although the convenience was a smaller response.

E-textbook: Given the option to use a free e-textbook or a hard copy $50 book, respondents of four business courses (N = 67) in the Fall, 61.5% used e-textbooks,

21.5% used hard copies, 12.3% used both and 7.7% answered none (hopefully sharing with another!).

Respondents from Business Communications' courses (N= 34) answered that 45.5% used free e-textbooks, 51.5% bought books, and 6% used both.

Clickers: Clicker usage in the classroom can allow instructors to instantly determine how many students know the correct answer to a question rather than just one or two answering out loud (Martyn, 2007). All students had positive comments about using the clickers in ungraded and graded quizzes.

Grades and attendance: Class attendance has shown to be a significant predictor of grades (Credé, Roch & Kieszczynka, 2010). Recent class records of business students supported this as a forecaster.

Future Research

> The outlook of those we teach has changed, and thus the way in which we teach must change. … The challenge will be for educators and higher education institutions to incorporate the information-age mindset of today's learners into our programs so as to create communities of lifelong learners (Frand, 2000, p.5).