Adapting your teaching to accommodate the net generation of learners.

Adapting Your Teaching to Accommodate the Net Generation of Learners

Abstract

Educators are faced with the challenge of adapting their teaching strategies to accommodate a new generation of learners. The Net Generation or Millennials, who are now entering colleges and universities, have learning expectations, styles, and needs different from past students. This article assists educators by highlighting the characteristics of the Net Generation and providing examples of how to adapt teaching strategies to accommodate light of their preferences for digital literacy, experiential learning, interactivity, and immediacy.

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including network security and disaster recovery. The challenges of an aging faculty are realizing that traditional classroom teaching is no longer effective with these students.

A common way to classify the population into age groups is based on the time period in which one was born. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) developed a classification system for generations as Matures (1900-1946), Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1961-1981) and Millennials (1982-present). This classification demonstrates the often noted overlap in years among classifications. Howe and Strauss (2000) classified the generations as: Boomers (1943-1960), Gen-X (1961-1981) and Millennials (1982-present). In most instances, Boomers. However, the student population crosses all generations with the newest, the Net Generation, being distinctly different in their characteristics and learning expectations.

The impact of the Net Generation is particularly intense as we consider the complicating impact of information technologies in higher education. Information technologies have become so pervasive on campus, it is hard for faculty not to embrace them in the instructional process. In addition, colleges and universities must cope with the growing demand to provide infrastructure support for learner’s personal technologies, such as wireless laptops, PDAs, and iPods. As so aptly stated by Oblinger and Oblinger (2005), "Whether the Net Generation is purely a generational phenomenon or whether it is associated with technology use, there are a number of implications for colleges and universities. Most stem from the dichotomy between a NetGen mindset and that of most faculty, staff and administrators" (p. 2.10). With this caveat in mind, what are the characteristics of the Net Generation?

Prensky (2001) used the distinction of the digital natives and the digital immigrants to differentiate students in the past from the traditional-age college students of today technology, they live in a digital world. Digital immigrants view technology up in an analogue world. For digital natives, "...when asked what technology they use, you may get a blank stare as they do not think in terms of technology they think in terms of the activity technology enables" (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p 2.10). A perfect example to distinguish between the two is to see how people find information about a restaurant, where to buy a particular item, or to see if a bookstore carries a particular book. The digital immigrant reaches for the "yellow pages" book and the digital native "googles" the information on the Internet. As digital immigrants, most faculty and administrators are still working to adapt to this new language and new ways of thinking, communicating, teaching, learning, and socializing.

The purpose of this article is to describe the characteristics of the students of the Net Generation and their impact on higher education as it relates to shifting the teaching-learning paradigm. The remainder of the article will focus on members of the Net Generation and their preferences for digital literacy, experiential learning, interactivity, and immediacy. For each of their preferences, there are examples of how faculty can adapt their current teaching strategies to accommodate the learning needs of the Net Generation.

The Net Generation Learners

The Net Generation or Millennials, born in the 1980s, have unique characteristics that differentiate these students from other generations. These unique characteristics are challenging the traditional classroom teaching structure, and faculty are realizing that traditional classroom teaching is no longer effective with these students. As Prensky (2001) stated, "Our students have changed radically.

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Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach” (p.1). Several authors (Brown, 2000; Frand, 2000; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Mer Tapscott, 1998) have written on the characteristics of the Net Generation, the Net Generation member as an assertive, self-reliant, curious person who is enmeshed in an interactive culture that centers around 10 board themes. These themes:

- **Fierce independence:** Their sense of autonomy derives from their experiences as active information seekers and creators of information and knowledge.

- **Emotional and intellectual openness:** The N-Geners value the openness of the online environment, like anonymity, and communicate through numerous tools.

- **Inclusion:** They view the world in a global context and move toward greater inclusion of diversity.

- **Free expression and strong views:** With access to knowledge, the N-Geners are assertive and confident.

- **Innovation:** This group is constantly trying to push the technology to its next level and figure out how to create a better world.

- **Preoccupation with maturity:** Armed with knowledge, they strive to be more mature than their predecessors.

- **Investigations:** Curiosity, discovery, and exploration are key for this generation.

- **Immediacy:** This generation views the world as 24/7 and demands real-time and fast processing.

- **Sensitivity to corporate interest:** Consumer savvy, these customers like customization and want to have options and to try before they buy.

- **Authentication and trust:** Net savvy individuals, they know the need to verify and check resources and authenticate people.

Howe and Strauss (2000) described additional characteristics such as their fascination with new technologies, their need for group activity, their emphasis on extracurricular activities, and their focus on grades. Millennials think being smart is cool. They are close to their parents and are one of the most ethnically and racially diverse group of students in academia.

Given these characteristics, it is obvious that this generation demands a new learning paradigm. The traditional teaching paradigm, prevalent in higher education for many years, focused on the role of the instructor as the “sage on the stage” who disseminated knowledge through lectures and PowerPoint slides. Brown (2000) refers to it as the authoritarian, lecture-based model of education. This traditional teaching emphasized the acquisition of facts or, as Oblinger (2005) noted, content-focused learning. Faculty from previous generations were text-based; focused on logical sequencing of knowledge; emphasized memorization, repetition, and recall; believed “one size fits all”; and saw the teacher as master and commander (Brown, 2005). As you will see in the next section, the Net Generation requires a learner-centered model of education with a shift from the traditional teaching paradigm to a constructivist learning paradigm (Brown, 2005). Net Generation learners focus on understanding, constructing knowledge using discovery methods, and active engagement; want tailored and option-rich learning; and view the teacher as expert and mentor (Brown, 2005).
Net Generation Characteristics and Teaching Adaptation Examples

Net Generation characteristics include digital literacy, experiential and interactive learning, collaboration, and immediacy and connectivity. To illustrate the paradigm shift described above to these new ways of knowing, the following major characteristics of the Net Generation related to these characteristics are highlighted, and the implications of these characteristics to teaching and learning are discussed.

Digital Literacy

The Net Generation grew up and is comfortable in a digital world. Action and what the technology enables them to do is more important than the particular technology (part of this digital literacy). Net geners are both information and multimedia literate. They have the ability to read visual images and have visual-spatial skills.

Oblinger and Oblinger stated, "They are more comfortable in image-rich environments than with text." This is best illustrated in the situation described by Oblinger (2005) in which a student realizes that he does not understand the teacher's lecture, and even the PowerPoint (text) slides provide no new insights. This student, using his wireless laptop, canvases other students in the class via text messaging and IM (instant messaging) and discovers they too do not understand the lecture. To solve this problem, the student googles the concept, finds a URL with simulations that better explain the concept, and immediately transmits this URL to others. It is important to remember that the Net Generation seeks immediate information and knowledge not by finding it in a textbook, but by connecting to the Internet.

Digital Literacy Examples

In order to teach Net geners effectively, wired classrooms are a must. Since they don't respond to lecture format, it is important to take advantage of their multi-tasking ability by posting course notes with relevant web links so that students can explore relevant resources and become engaged with the content. It is especially important to direct students to discipline-specific databases such as CINAHL, MEDLINE, or Web of Science rather than relying solely on Internet search engines.

In nursing education, it is particularly important for students to learn how to use handheld devices, such as PDAs, to facilitate evidence retrieval at the point of care. Incorporating technologies that facilitate the nurse's role as a knowledge worker will not only engage Net geners, but may help transform the nursing profession as well.

To meet the needs of students, think about developing a web page for each course. The web component can contain class materials, notes, slides, a webliography, and other pertinent multimedia. This is not only important to the net geners but also to nontraditional learners who appreciate the flexibility of finding class materials while perhaps living off campus. One may also want to consider having a blended course with some face-to-face time and some web-based interactions...
this is particularly relevant for the nontraditional student. What is important is that the web-based component needs to be interactive and engaging, not just a static web page dispensing content.

The Net Generation lives in a mobile world which facilitates their multitasking nature. Think about podcasting some important lectures so that students can listen to these MP3 devices. For more information about podcasting, see articles by Skiba.

**Experiential and Engaging**

Net learners want to construct their knowledge. They have a bias toward action (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005) described it, they are first person learners. They want to immediately engage in the process. Discovery learning (Brown, 2000) builds upon the Net Generation’s independence and investigative nature (Tapscott, 1998). Net Gen views and incorporate their experiences into their learning (Tapscott, 1998) isolation and they learn by doing. According to Frand (2000), this is the key to winning Nintendo is the persistent trial and error to discover the referred to the Net Generation as digital bricoleurs. He noted that this information, objects, or tools to create something new. Visualizations, other methods of participatory learning such as fieldwork are all part of the learning repertoire.

**Experiential and Engaging Examples**

The use of simulation technologies will help engage learners in a process that they desire with the feedback they need in real-time situations. Through scenarios, faculty can direct learning in a way that facilitates student understanding that occur in patient care. This may help prepare Net Generation students for the transition to the work force as new nurses by nature "tend not to focus on individual client needs" and "may be unaware of relevant cues in changing client situations" (Ferguson & Day, 2004).

Blogging is another method that allows students to interact and become engaged in the course. In short, a blog is a web-log which allows students to contribute to and comment on the blog entries. Learners can research their information and provide their reflections on their learning through the blog (Skiba, 2005).

Another example is that of an interactive, engaging web environment that allows learners to interact with the instructor, other learners, or with the content. One example of with content is the use of a dynamic web page, such as the National League for Nursing’s "Living Book." As learners work their way through the chapters of directed to web sites to find information and respond to questions. In learners a chapter in this book to learn about the Net Generation. To view these interactive chapters, go to [www.electronicvision.com/nln](http://www.electronicvision.com/nln).

**Interactivity and Collaboration**

Learning is a social activity (Tapscott, 1998), and as such should be engaged. Interactivity can occur with students, faculty, other professionals such as the content itself. Millennials gravitate toward group work (Howe & Strauss, 2000) best when they construct their knowledge (Brown, 2000; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). "The TTT (talk, text, test) approach" (Oblinger & Oblinger, p. 2.13) is not valued by the Net Generation. TTT represents the traditional teaching paradigm of lecturing, asking students to read text, and giving a test to ensure they have recall and acquisition of fact...
prefers to work in teams and participate in peer interactions. According to Oblinger and Oblinger, Net geners are more social and inclined to participate in learning activities. Social interactions reinforce their use of IM, blogging, gaming, and their large global network. As Oblinger and Oblinger point out, interaction is a key element of learning activities that promote social interactions. Interactivity and collaboration desires of the Net geners allow for the implementation of creative teaching strategies in the area of collaborative learning. While previous generations have consistently rallied against the concept of "group work," Net geners embrace collaborative learning in both face-to-face and virtual venues. Think about the incorporation of chat rooms and web-based collaborative learning centers that allow students to share a common workspace with white boards and document sharing. For example, at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center, informatics specialty students interact with each other in a web environment (Collaboratory) that allows collaborative workspace. Learners can co-edit chat rooms, audio, or video conferencing (Skiba, Barton, Howard, Fie, and McCullar, 2004). In the classroom, the use of Clickers or interactive response devices is another example of fostering interaction within a lecture hall environment. The faculty member can create higher interactive learning experiences by asking learners to use these devices to select responses to questions, thus interacting with the content. Responses are then automatically displayed for all in the class to see. Once responses are displayed, faculty can ask learners to talk with each other about their particular response. Then the class can select responses again and display them. Use of these devices engages the students in the content, promotes interactivity with colleagues, and takes advantage of teachable moments in the classroom.

Another example of interactive and collaborative learning is the increasing use of wikis by the Net Generation learners. According to Wikipedia (March 15, 2005), "A wiki is a website that allows users to add content, as on an Internet forum, but also allows anyone to edit the content. It also refers to the collaborative software used to create such a website." According to Skiba, defining characteristics of a wiki are: social software that allows the abit document with relative ease; a simplified hypertext markup language open editing philosophy in which the community can edit and add to documents; collaboratory concept facilitates collaboration and sharing while requiring learners to be active participants in the learning process.

For Net geners, the notion of collaboratively constructing knowledge within a social community is very appealing.
As Frand puts it, the Net Generation has little tolerance of delays. They expect instant access and instant responses. Email is "so yesterday" when you can IM or text message someone immediately. Net geners are multitaskers who are always connected (Rheingold, 2003). Their connectivity via cell phones, wireless PDAs, or laptops fosters fast and quick communication. They use short hand communications that seem like hieroglyphics to the digital immigrant population. As a part of their new emotional and intellectual openness as well as a respect for diversity (1998).

**Immediacy, Connectivity and Communication Examples**

The immediacy expectations of the Net geners are a challenge to digital immigrant faculty. While email is used regularly for communication, responses don’t fit within “instant messaging (IM)” time frames. It is important for faculty members to communicate with when they can expect to receive feedback. Basically there are three different forms of communication that a faculty member and learners can use:

- One-on-one (email, IM)
- One-to-many (news groups, message boards)
- Many-to-many (chat rooms, wikis, and webcasts)

Try using IM during your office hours. Make sure to tell learners when IM does not work 24/7. In our program, we also set up video conferences.

The need for connectivity and communication can be exploited to remove mundane tasks from the classroom. For example, at our institution, clinical placement scheduling for all clinical courses is conducted via a web-interface two months prior to the clinical rotation. Students indicate their preferences by rank ordering the clinical site and shift so a random number generator is used to sort students and fill site rosters based on student preferences. Students know their clinical schedule more than a month in advance and are able to adjust work and childcare responsibilities as needed.

**Summary**

There is no question that this new generation of students is challenging the traditional teaching paradigm in higher education. In order to accommodate the Net Generation of students, it is important to devise learning activities that align with their learning styles and expectations. It is also important to remember that one should start with the content to be mastered and then figure out what technologies might enable the activity. To begin this process, ask yourself, your colleagues, and your administrators the following questions drawn from Carlson, 2005.
...one should start with the content to be mastered and then figure out what technologies might enable the activity.

There is no doubt that the Net Generation has arrived in our higher education institutions. Faculty must understand these learners, their expectations, and their learning needs. It is important for faculty to adapt their teaching and consider numerous strategies to accommodate these learners. As Oblinger (2005) states, "Learning is advanced when the use of IT is predicated on an understanding of the diverse needs, expectations and values of all of these students, rather than on the IT capabilities" (p. 69).

Authors

Diane J. Skiba, PhD, FAAN, FACMI
E-mail: Diane.Skiba@uchsc.edu

Diane J. Skiba, PhD, FAAN, FACMI, is a Professor and Health Care Informatics Option Coordinator at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Care Sciences Center. She earned her BA from Southern Connecticut State College and her PhD from the University of Virginia. Since 1982, she has taught nurses in the field of nursing informatics. She currently is funded by the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) Division of Nursing Advanced Nurse Education Training grant to prepare nurses in the field of informatics. This grant supports their online Master's degree program and funds the I-Collaboratory, an online community to support informatics learners. Dr. Skiba was instrumental in spearheading an academic-business partnership with McKesson Corporation and is the current Chair of the National League for Nursing and Information Management Advisory Council. She writes an Emerging Technologies Column in Nursing Educational Perspectives. She serves on several editorial boards and recently co-edited the Nursing Administration Quarterly's 2005 Winter edition on the transformation of nursing practice through the use of information technologies. She is a Fellow in the American College of Medical Informatics and a honorary Fellow in the American Academy of Nursing. She has received several teaching awards and most recently received the National League for Nursing Excellence in Teaching Award.

Amy J. Barton, PhD, RN
E-mail: Amy.Barton@uchsc.edu

Dr. Barton earned a BSN from the University of Toledo, a MSN from th
coordination and staffing of over 600 clinical education placements per semester, and online education support for 40 courses per semester. Her unique contributions occur at the crossroads of administration and informatics, with a focus on data-based decision making. She established an informatics infrastructure to support faculty practice, document the value added component of nurse practitioner care, and mentor clinical faculty in the conduct and dissemination of research. She has published articles and book chapters on topics including faculty practice, patient outcomes, and informatics. Her current research examines the use of informatics in the promotion of vulnerable populations. Dr. Barton is a member of the 2005 cohort of the Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows. She is currently secretary of the Board of the National Nursing Centers Consortium. She also serves on the Consortium of Omaha System member of Sigma Theta Tau International, the American Nurses Association, and the American Medical Informatics Association. She was elected to membership as a Distinguished Practitioner in the National Academies of Practice (1998). Awards include recognition as an Emerging Leader in the University of Colorado system (2004-05) and the Chancellor’s Recognition for Promoting and Supporting Diversity (2003).

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