

Millennials in Our Classrooms

Cracking the 'Native'¹ Information Experience

We are preparing a new generation of learners, within a dramatically different information environment, for a future that we can not clearly describe. These three ideas or converging conditions are forcing us to rethink education and what it means to be educate for the first time in decades.

Our children, the millennials, have grown up with an information experience that has given them access to far more information, people, and diverse experiences than any generation before, and it has also isolated them from much of the world that we grew up with and continue to value. It's not a perfect picture and it never has been.

To address the needs and unique capabilities of the millennial generation, some educators have logically promoted the integration of video games and social networking into the classroom – to “Go where the kids are.” I would like to spend a few pages presenting an alternative approach, to identify and examine some of the qualities of our students outside-the-classroom information experiences and consider ways of integrating those qualities into their curriculum learning experiences rather than trying to duplicate their games.*

Qualities of the Native information Experience

There are four distinct qualities of the 'Native' information experience that are explored during the workshop and a fifth quality that enables and is the medium for the other four.



- Responsive Our learners' outside-the-classroom information experiences are responsive. They are accustomed to receiving feedback on their actions, decisions, and ideas. Video games are an obvious example of how they play and work in an environment that responds to them. If you send your player down the wrong road or through the wrong door, he dies and you have to start again. But there has to be a logical and contextual reason for it. There has to be a basis that the player reasons through to

¹ Prensky, Marc. “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” On the Horizon October 2001. 04 Nov 2005 <<http://bit.ly/upQuy>>.

* When we try to duplicate their world in the classroom, Millennials call it “Creepy tree house.”

rationalize the death and plan better for the next time through.

But it would be a mistake to believe that all of the responsiveness that our learners are accustomed to is immediate – or that immediacy is even the most important element of responsiveness. Many video games fail the player out, not because of a single mistake, but for committing a cascade of mistakes, some of which may have been committed minutes, hours, or days earlier. Even their social networking is responsive, and the comments they receive back are often extended across hours or days. The key to responsiveness is not time-based as much as it is relevance-based. If the response is authentic to what the learner is doing, then the influence on learning is greater.

Classroom Examples:

- Instructional software that provides feedback within a learner identified context
- Writing assignments submitted as blog entries or wiki pages to be read and responded to by classmates or readers outside the classroom
- ePortfolios, accessible from outside the school environment and available for comment/feedback
- Various academic (and physical) competitions (website creation, robotics, field day, competitive quizzes)
- Collaborative work that involves group planning, individual specialization, and a valued deliverable
- Student produced learning resources (study guides or even student produced textbooks)

▪ Fueled by Questions

Google and what it represents has turned us into a question-asking culture. We love to ask questions at a rate of more than a hundred billion a month, through the top ten search engines.² We ask questions, because we know that the answers are available and often no further away than our pockets. Our demand for high speed access to the answers has increased, even during recession years and among previously reluctant demographics.³

But, for our students, it goes much deeper than posing questions out of curiosity. Consider that many of the video games that they play come without user guides. With a sense of context that they receive from introductory videos and conversations with friends, they find themselves thrust into an alien world with almost no guidance. How do you approach an experience like this? You approach it by asking questions:

- What are the goals of this game?
- What are the rules?
- How can I use the rules to accomplish the goals?

² SEW Staff, . "Top Search Providers for August 2009." Search Engine Watch. 15 Sep 2009. Incisive Interactive Marketing LLC., Web. 7 Oct 2009. <<http://searchenginewatch.com/3634991>>.

³ Horrigan, John. "Home Broadband Adoption 2009." Pew Internet & American Life Project. Pew Charitable Trusts, 17 Jun 2009. Web. 7 Apr 2010. <<http://bit.ly/hrEiX>>.

The game constantly presents barriers to accomplishment that the player has to question his way around.

Classroom Examples:

- Presenting less than a minimum of content in lessons, requiring the learner to question out the necessary details – growing a more big-picture awareness.
- Starting a new math topic with a word problem and facilitating question asking and answer exploring conversations
- Making assignments with authentic audience and goal, but not including specific instructions or rubric.

▪ Provokes
Conversation

There is very little that millennials do alone, and it is, to some peoples reckoning, counter intuitive that today's youngsters are actually more sociable and skilled socially than previous generations. They are together at school, at the ball game, at band camp, at the mall, and at home, through their IM, text messaging, and social networks. They are more like room mates than mere friends. They are constantly engaged with each other and they never say goodbye – because the conversation continues, even when they are no longer physically together or even in the same state.

Beyond the availability that they have with each other, through the information and communication technologies (ICT) that they assume to be a part of their experience, many of their activities demand communication. The very nature of Facebook, Beebo, and MySpace is conversation. You are posting your updates to be read and responded to. They comment on their digital walls, upload photos and videos for comment, and discuss their homework through their social networks.

Many video games also require conversation. Operated over the Internet, players are encouraged to form themselves into teams or guilds, plan and implement campaigns, form economic cartels, and even push the games into unintended functionality, such as machinima (<http://bit.ly/o5lm7>).

Classroom Examples:

- Online collaborations across classrooms and even age groupings
- Ask students to read separate parts of a chapter and then sequence and outline the context as a team
- Arrange guest speakers either in-class or virtually, but, after a short introduction, have students interview the speaker rather than ask for an extended formal presentation
- Assign homework that asks students to collaborate through their social networks
- Ask students from geographically different places to plan, together, virtual field trips through Skype or other video conferencing software

- Demands Personal Investment & Identity

It is our tendency, as a generation who grew up outside and fashioning our toys from scrap lumber and straightened nails, to see the games our children play and to think, "Instant gratification" – and there is certainly much of that present in our learners outside-the-classroom information experiences. But we also must consider that they are willing and eager to invest hours, days, and even weeks into the play of a single game because they want to reach a certain level or attain a quantity of wealth.

There is a need to invest oneself in the endeavor because there is value that. It is perhaps not something that we value, but there is worth none the less. This is evidenced by the growth of Gold Farms, where youngsters play games in factories (of sorts), earning digital powers and currency (digital assets), which are then auctioned off on eBay by the company. People pay a thousand dollars for a character who has already been played to a certain level of power.⁴

Classroom Examples:

- Researching and developing a plan to address a problem of the community and then presenting the plan to the governing concerned governing body
- Using a classroom wiki to have students contribute their notes and organize them, in collaboration, into study guides for the test
- Asking students to create a multimedia presentation for younger students on a topic of mutual addressing

- Guided by Safely-Made Mistakes

One of the defining qualities of most video games is that you are forgiven for making mistakes. In fact, you are rewarded for them, because you walk away with some new piece of information – knowing something that did not work.

It is also relevant to recognize that there is an interesting new sense of playfulness today, probably owing partly to the integration of video games into the culture of our youth and young adults, but also to the increasing access that we enjoy to expressive technologies. Video editing tools like iMovie and MovieMaker have contributed greatly to the astounding rise of

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This viral video has been viewed by 2.2 million people - <http://bit.ly/rp13g>

⁴ "Home Page." MMOBay. MMOBay, n.d. Web. 1 May 2010. <<http://www.mmobay.net/>>.

Classroom Examples:

It is difficult to itemize specific example. Giving learners permission to make mistakes has more to do the general attitude of learning work in the classroom. It is a classroom where mistakes are invited and even celebrated. "I'm glad you said that. It's wrong, but here's why and here's why and why it is important."

It is a classroom where the teacher regularly says, "Surprise me!"