

Are Students *Today* Really Different?

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Are *today's* students different? This is a question that I have ruminated much about, not only because I have been drawn into discussions with colleagues about “students today” and ways in which they are different from the students they have taught in previous years and decades, but also because I was asked last year to lead a

workshop about “Today’s Learners” for a school of business with two other colleagues. Usually when a discussion starts about “digital natives, digital immigrants,” (Prensky, 2001), “Generation Next” (Kohut, Parker, Keeter, Doherty, & Dimock, 2007) or the “digital generation” (Montgomery, 2007), just to name a few terms used to describe different groups of people, I tend to shift the focus of the conversation from such monikers to the needs of learners and research-based, field-tested strategies that have demonstrated positive learning outcomes. I often do this because I find such labels problematic—it is important to recognize that a digital divide (Dickard & Schneider, 2009) exists and is more pervasive than many might like to even consider. And, I am not convinced learners are really any different—it is our society that is and the tools with which we have to work and communicate that *are* different.

Another challenge with assigning labels to learners today, whether they were “born digital” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) or not, is that these terms and their meanings do not accurately represent every individual that might fall into such categories. These terms are full of assumptions and biases that can seriously cloud an instructor’s and employer’s perception of an individual. Vaidhyanathan (2008) has written an



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article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that raises a similar argument, as he notes:

Talk of a “digital generation” or people who are “born digital” willfully ignores the vast range of skills, knowledge, and experience of many segments of society. It ignores the needs and perspectives of those young people who are not socially or financially privileged. It presumes a level playing field and equal access to time, knowledge, skills, and technologies. The ethnic, national, gender, and class biases of any sort of generation talk are troubling. And they could not be more obvious than when discussing assumptions about digital media. (Vaidhyathan, 2008, ¶ 9)

Therefore, it is important for educators at all levels, and employers and instructional designers as well, to recognize that while some individuals might fit the characteristics of various labels, it is critical to recognize that no matter the demographic, category, or term one might use to describe a group, an individual is, indeed, an individual, and unfounded assumptions should not be made about him or her. In a virtual, distance learning environment, this takes on even greater importance, considering one does not have the opportunity for face-to-face interactions as one would in a brick and mortar setting.

While I am not convinced that learners today are different, I accept that it is possible that interactions with technology, and technology’s influence on brain development might actually have implications which we have yet to discover or comprehend. For example, research on 24 adults by Gary Small, director of the Memory and Aging Research Center at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior and the Center on Aging at the University of California, Los Angeles, shows that regular use of the Internet by these individuals created double the amount of signaling in their brains when compared to individuals who used the

Internet irregularly (Interlandi, 2008). Even so, it is important to keep in mind that research in this area is nascent; therefore, any generalizations about the implications and effects of digital technologies on the human brain without more research on larger and more diverse populations, is simply premature.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS ON STUDENTS AND *THEIR* NEEDS

Whether one agrees with the notion that students today are different or not, it is imperative that educators, employers, and instructional designers shift their focus from “how students today might be different” to “how should I design instruction to meet the needs of my target audience” and “what do I need to change to meet the needs of my learners?” This does not mean adding gimmicks, the latest technology, or other “bells and whistles” to keep learners’ attention or just to seem “current” or “innovative.” Rather, it means making thoughtful, informed decisions about how to engage learners in the process of learning, accepting learners for who they are, understanding learners’ strengths and weaknesses, helping them build on their strengths and diminish their weaknesses, and capitalizing on their “neomillennial learning styles” (Dede, 2005). It means putting learning and learners first, reflecting on what works and what does not, and changing instruction to meet the diverse needs of one’s target audience—and not blaming individuals for being *different* than students one might have had 20 years ago.

New technologies will continue to challenge our assumptions about teaching and learning, not only for distance education, but also for face-to-face and blended (hybrid) learning environments. Are today’s learners different? I do not think so (until proven otherwise), but the digital tools available today for learning, teaching, and communicating *are*. Just think—numerous technologies available as this

article goes to press did not even exist a few years ago!

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