

Teaching the DIG Generation

Wise teachers capitalize on teens' love for instant digital communication.

Lisa Renard

Technological advances in the last 10 years have increased the pace of just about everything we do. We eat faster, communicate faster, work faster, get results faster. Adolescents embrace these changes. Today's teens download songs, movies, and texts instantly from the Internet. They share these files adeptly among themselves. They journal online to share their ideas the instant a thought occurs to them, and they use digital cameras to record specific moments in their lives. They can find information on just about anything by pushing a few keys, without ever opening a book. No generation has ever had to wait so little to get so much information.

In 2003, Alex Serge Vieux coined the phrase *DIG Generation*, where *DIG* stands for *digital immediate gratification*. Few educators would argue with Vieux's observation that the press for instant gratification is a notable trend. Although Vieux was focusing on corporate America, his idea has weighty implications for teaching and learning. Vieux asserts, "In the move to all things digital, consumer electronics are changing the way we live—and think" (2003). He is right.

Keeping Pace

Pat Reynolds's high school ESL students in Stafford, Virginia, offer a good example of how these changes in pace



affect learning. Her students are new to the English language and often struggle with schoolwork. But they know how to use the Internet, and they value the one-click ease and speed of a hyperlink. These English language learners have found Web sites that translate, define, and provide audible pronunciations of vocabulary words. They are accustomed to using handheld electronic translators and dictionaries.

Having such technology available has changed the way Pat's students think and learn. In the past, students spent their time poring over dictionaries to learn new vocabulary and the nuances of the English language. Now, they often refuse to use a dictionary, considering it too slow and laborious.

The ease and speed of technology is changing the way students learn. Educators cannot change that. We can,

however, learn to keep pace, just as we have with other advances. For example, the first affordable microwave oven was introduced in 1967, and families were soon hooked on the ability to cook a baked potato in just 10 minutes. Today, you would be hard-pressed to find any kitchen in the United States without a microwave. Manufacturers created products and services to help consumers understand microwave

ovens. The food industry added microwave directions to product labels and introduced microwave-only food products. Although most people did not abandon traditional ovens, we embraced the new tool that helped us cook faster.

Educators could take a cue from the microwave oven phenomenon. We have two choices when it comes to the boom in technology and the DIG mind-set. We can sit around wishing that students weren't so prone to instant gratification, trying vainly to make them do things the traditional way—or we can capitalize on digital technologies to help students learn and grow.

We can find ways to combine the newer, faster technology with more traditional methods, just as most of us combine microwave and conventional oven use.

James Gleick, author of *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, makes a case for embracing change:

We're speeding up; our technology is speeding up. Our arts and entertainment and the pace of invention and

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change—it's all speeding up. And we care. If we don't understand time, we become its victims. (2000)

Tools of the DIG Generation

The most effective step educators can take toward keeping pace with technology's impact on education is to become aware of the digital media available to teenagers and of how young people use them. Just about every educator is familiar with the two foundational communication tools of the DIG Generation: Internet hyperlinks (which enable users to shift instantly between one Web site and another) and e-mail. The majority of us use these tools ourselves. Our students use e-mail as much as or more than we do, but many of them now view it as old and slow—at least compared to instant messaging.

Instant messaging (IM) services, offered free by online services such as ICQ, MSN, and Yahoo, allow real-time communication over the Internet. Users can "chat" by exchanging written messages online with the immediacy of a phone call; they can also send files or insert hyperlinks and images as they exchange messages. Many IM services allow voice chat, some offer video chatting, and most offer the ability to talk with more than one person at a time.

The PEW Internet and American Life Project calls adolescents the "instant-message generation" (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2002). According to its survey, about 13 million teenagers use IM

services. One-fifth of these teens say that IM is the main way they communicate with their peers. The PEW project found that "a typical IM session for a teenager lasts more than half an hour, involves three or more buddies, and often includes friends from outside her community" (Lenhart et al., 2002, p. 3). The old cliché of the teenager always on the phone has been replaced with that of the modern teen always connected by IM.

Another Internet phenomenon taking the adolescent world by storm is blogging. Blogs (short for Weblogs) are publishable online journals, usually created and updated by an individual and hosted by such companies as WordPress, Xanga, and Live Journal. By extension, the verb *blogging* denotes the habit of posting and responding to Weblogs. Perseus Development Corporation, an Internet survey company, recently estimated that there are 4.12 billion blogs online, more than half of them created by teens (Twist, 2004). On a blog, teens post their thoughts and experiences, adding hyperlinks, pictures, video, and sounds. Readers can respond or add to the entry, making blogging a truly interactive method of communication.

DIG-Friendly Strategies

Taking stock of the technological habits of teens, then, reveals that they communicate through e-mail and instant messaging, they seek information online, and they are willing to spend a great deal of time writing in online formats. Teachers can use teens' excitement about digital technologies to make learning activities more attractive and meaningful to them.

WebQuests

Most students enjoy surfing the Web. Technology-savvy teachers can guide them in doing substantive research

online. A WebQuest, defined by Dodge (1997) as “an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet,” offers learning experiences that keep pace with the DIG Generation’s habits. WebQuests typically include introductory information on a particular topic, a specific task to complete, a set of online information sources to explore, guidance on how to complete the quest, and a conclusion to provide closure.

For example, Michelle Levin, a teacher at Emerson Middle School in Los Angeles, created a WebQuest for 8th grade language arts students titled “To Choose Freedom” that poses the question, “As a slave, would you have attempted to escape?” (available at www.lausd.k12.ca.us/Emerson_MS/levin_wq/). Students research the risks associated with attaining freedom, compare life for an escaped slave with the life of a slave who stays, and write an essay defending their decision on the basis of their online research and an individual risk analysis. Students work in teams, with each team member taking on a specific role (such as risk assessor, historian, or Underground Railroad expert). This WebQuest incorporates group work, research skills, and higher-level thinking skills.

WebQuests enable teachers to guide students in recognizing quality Web sites. For example, Levin’s WebQuest provides links to high-quality scholarly sites, grouped into logical sections so that students aren’t overwhelmed by the amount of information on the Web.

WebQuest.org is a comprehensive



Photo by Kevin Davis

“Our arts and entertainment and the pace of invention and change—it’s all speeding up.”

site that offers training for educators interested in designing WebQuests and examples of appropriate quests for all content areas and grade levels. Edgate.com, another excellent resource for DIG-minded educators, offers Web resources that provide lesson plans and information aligned with state standards. Edgate also sponsors Schoolnotes.com, a free tool that teachers can use to make information available online for students and parents, making communication easy on teachers who aren’t particularly Web-savvy. Parents can contact teachers through Schoolnotes,

and teachers can use Schoolnotes to help students stay organized, make announcements, and post due dates or instructions for assignments, including hyperlinks to other sites that students might need.

Blogs

Because blogs enable students to post their writing and reflections on the Web, they are ideal for bringing students’ work to a diverse audience. Teachers can invite experts or students from other schools or other countries to visit—and instantly interact online with—a class blog. Students may perceive writing for the audiences they reach through blogs as more “real” than writing for the teacher or even for a class workshop. Students can use educational blogs for reflective journaling, submitting and reviewing assignments, dialoguing for group work, creating online portfolios, exchanging comments on

one another’s work, and sharing resources. The University of Houston’s Blogs in Education Web page (<http://awd.cl.uh.edu/blog>) offers articles about educational uses of Weblogs, sample blogs, and related resources.

The key to embracing the changing pace of technology is teacher training. Teacher preparation courses, schools, and school districts need to offer opportunities for teachers to learn and experiment with interactive technologies. Because teachers do not have the luxury of personal time to bring themselves up to speed on WebQuests, blog-

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ging, and the like, school systems must carve out that time for teachers.

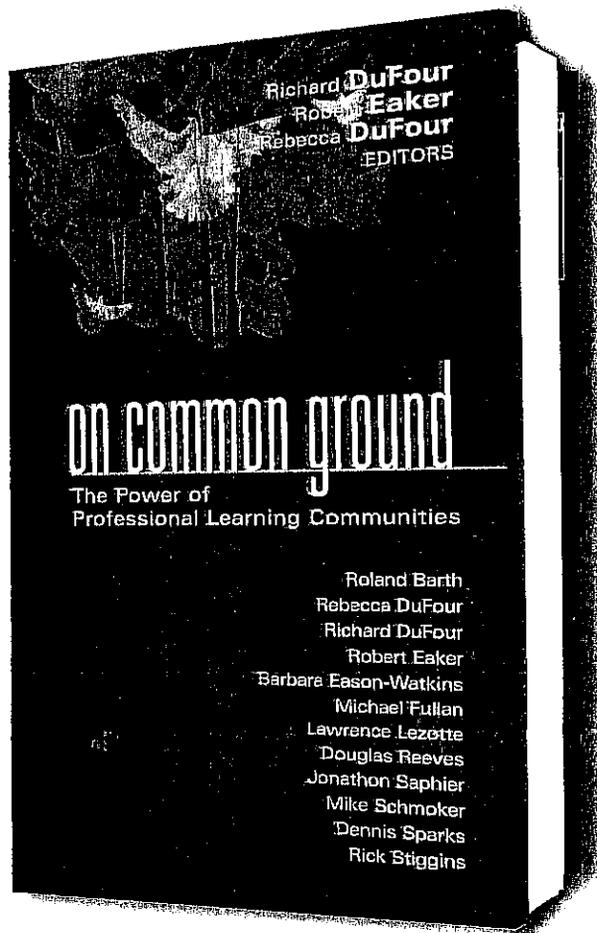
Training should be tiered so that beginners training is available to educators who are less familiar with technology, whereas teachers who already have basic tech training under their belts can plunge into advanced training. When that happens, we won't be victims of the change in pace—we'll be keeping pace. **EL**

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