

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 educated 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.

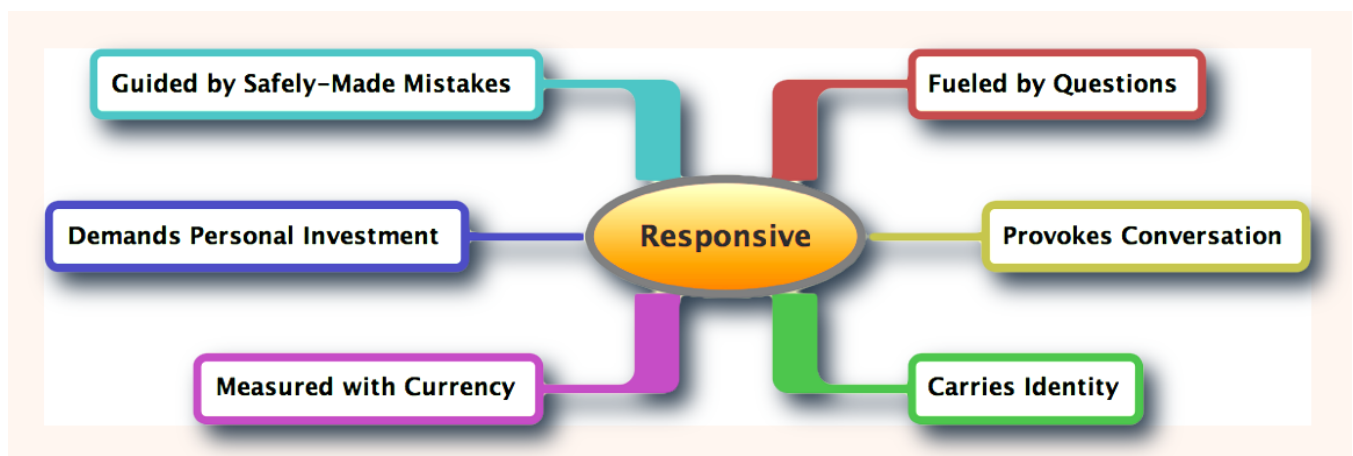
To address the needs and unique capabilities of the millennial generation, some educators have logically promoted the integration of video games and social networking into the classroom – to “Go where the kids are.” I would like to spend a few pages presenting an alternative approach, to identify and 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 – creating a “creepy tree house.”

'Creepy tree house effect,' defined by technological education experts as an online environment created by instructors or institutions that mimics an established and trusted environment.

The term arises from the concept that children can identify a 'creepy tree house' that adults built and will avoid it. Perhaps it explains why, when this issue went to press, Blackboard Sync had only 161 daily active users.²

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.



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

² McCune, Taylor. "Facebook as a Gradebook." TechnicianOnline 22 May 2008: n. pag. Web. 9 May 2010. <<http://bit.ly/bw9NR8>>.

▪ 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 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.³ 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.⁴

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

³ 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>>.

⁴ 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>>.

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?

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
Conversations

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

▪ Carries Identity

There is little about how children experiment with identity. Much of how we raise ourselves comes from pretending. This is probably more true among boys than girls as we, in my time, pretended to be cowboys, soldiers, astronauts, and sports stars. We pretended to be heroes, because it was the heroes that our information experiences (TV, radio, movies, etc.) held up to us.

Our children, today, are growing up in such a dynamically responsive information experience, the possibilities and potentials for experimenting with alternate identities is actually beyond our imaginations. There are basically two ways that identity enters into how our learners spend their time outside of the classroom, in their 'native' experience.

1. The first involves building on and from their own identity through their social networking. Children mostly present themselves through their MySpace or Facebook profiles, within the constraints that we recommend for the sake of safety, constraints that children seem to adopt and even take for granted. But it is still their profile that they populate and mostly their real-life friends who they interact with. But their social networking and fact that their friends can respond, affords some interesting opportunities for children to express themselves, even veering into specific aspects of their identities.
2. The second type involves what we might call fantasy identities. These are the characters or avatars that children play through in their video games. Sometimes, the character is painted by the game itself, with little opportunity for the player to personalize. However, with many games, the gamer is free to express herself with enormous flexibility of avatar building. This is especially true of virtual worlds and MMORPGs, where the player's accomplishments and growing wealth become a visible part of the avatar.

The central question, from an instructional view point would be, "What will classmates remember you for clothed in some part by the curriculum being taught?"

Classroom Examples:

- Find ways to link students to specific persons or concepts in the curriculum and repeatedly remind the class of the relationship.
- Ask individual students to become the class expert on some aspect of the course or class. This would be an ongoing assignment where they might build some sort of information product, encyclopedia of information about their topic. The student would become the focal point for any conversations about their topic or where the topic is related in some logical way with another topic of study.

- Establish teams in class that remain in tact during the entire year or semester. Encourage the team to establish identity for themselves or an individual presence to the classroom.
- Measured with Currency

Measuring instructional gain has almost always been a part of formal education, and perhaps never so much as today, because of political pressure and an information environment that makes measurement and reporting somewhat more efficient. But instructional measurement, from a schoolie view point has almost no intrinsic to today's learners.

The measuring that happens in video games does have meaning, because it is what they talk about. When discussing games, they want to know how many experience points you've earned, what level you are on, what position you hold in your guild, and other measures.

There is a wide range of measurement schemes that appear in the 'native' information experience. For social networking, it is attention, the number of responses you've gotten to your Facebook status, the comments on your blog. In video games, it may be as simple as points, or it could be as integrated into the game as gold or other currency, experience values, levels of difficulty, magical or warrior powers, permissions, protections, property, and much more.

Perhaps the central question we might ask is what type of measure for success might we appropriate, imagine, or invent that our learners will want to talk about outside of the classroom.

It should be stated here that there is not shortage of schemes used by teachers to establish reward or point systems in the classroom, often with huge success.

Class Examples:

- Make the construction of some sort of information product for the class, class written textbook, Wikipedia-style wiki, etc. and give points based on the level of contribution.
 - Establish levels of access to information related to curriculum, and facilitate relationships where learners with higher levels of access (permissions) become valuable to other learners.
 - Encourage students to contribute to or write publications such as books, anthologies, collections of poetry, and then publish them through one of the on-demand publishing companies and have the librarian add the works to the formal collections. Then organize book signings.
- 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.⁵

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

YouTube. People are investing enormous amounts of time and skill into building something that has little or no practical applications, but brings joy and laughter to thousands – or millions.



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This viral video has been viewed by 2.2 million people - <http://bit.ly/rpI3g>

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!"

⁵ "Home Page." MMOBay. MMOBay, n.d. Web. 1 May 2010. <<http://www.mmobay.net/>>.

