

Crossing the Digital Divide: Metacognition for Learning in the Digital Age

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teaching university students who have grown up with digital technologies presents new challenges for today's educators, who find themselves struggling to bridge the gap between the legacy educational system and an emerging but still undefined new paradigm. Students of the post-digital era have distinctly different cultural and social differences from their predecessors that require a new understanding of their learning needs and challenges. In this chapter the author summarizes generational differences between the current cohort of college students and their predecessors. She reviews and reflects on her experiences with the Digital Learning Initiative and proposes a new focus and approach for moving forward in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

With one foot squarely planted in Generation Jones, the “anonymous generation” born in the second half of the Baby Boom (Williams, 2014), I belong to the last generation that was born before the “digital divide”. We Jonesers were born on the brink of the coming technological revolution, during the calm before the digital storm. We came of age just as the exponential course of Moore’s Law was gathering steam. We remember getting up to change the dial on our televisions to one of the other two available channels. We remember going to the rotary dial telephone and sitting next to it to talk to our friends. We remember going outside to play, reading books, and going to the library to find references for school reports. Plagiarism required a lot more effort back then. We rode the digital rocket from classrooms thick with chalk dust and notebooks and pencils, across the digital divide, to a brave new world of smart boards, tablets and the ever-present cell phone. We learned to Google and surf and text with the best of them. But the old ways are still imprinted in our brains, if not in our DNA.

My first experience of teaching in higher education was as a graduate student in the late 1980’s. My teaching tools were a textbook, a chalk board and my own efforts and ingenuity. My students were a few years my junior, and of nearly the same vintage as myself. For the most part they paid attention when I lectured, took notes, did their homework, and attempted the laboratory exercises. The classroom scene of my early career sits in stark contrast to the present. Gone are the chalkboards and pencil sharpeners and notebooks. These requisite tools of the old days have been replaced with PowerPoints and smart boards and tablets and i-clickers. And yet, my students seem less interested, less able to pay attention, and less able to think critically than ever before.

Over the years the responsibility for student engagement and motivation seems to have shifted from the student herself to the teacher (Weimer, 2013). I don’t remember, in my own college years, expecting to be engaged. We did not expect learning to be “fun”. We expected drudgery and boredom and hard work. We consumed what was placed before us, no matter how indigestible. We accepted that not every course would be a dessert. This is what seems to be missing in classrooms today. Many of my students have such little tolerance for frustration that they seem to be defeated before they begin. They don’t ask questions, they don’t ask for help. They just stop working.

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