Ed Tech Is Poised to Go Mainstream

By Sari Factor

Six hours a day. That’s how much time the average teenager spends online, according to a June 2013 study by McAfee. These are “digital natives,” a generation that has grown up online and connected.

Just think about it: students born in 2007, the year the iPhone was launched, are already in first grade. Students born during the dot-com boom of the late ’90s are in high school. These students have never known a world without the Internet. They’re communicating 140 characters at a time, establishing completely new ways of consuming news and information.

Clearly, dictating to digital natives that they “power down” in school is a huge turn-off. Yet many adults express concern that students won’t be able to learn as effectively in classrooms that are fundamentally different from their own experiences. Educators are increasingly breaking through that resistance to create a learning experience using technology to engage today’s learners and improve outcomes, with benefits that include:

**Personalizing the learning experience** – Digital natives have grown up surrounded and stimulated by media, and they consume information very differently from the previous generation of students. Netflix, playlists and DVRs have fueled their personalized entertainment, and technology makes personalized learning possible too. Any teacher can tell you how difficult it is to customize instruction for every student. Inevitably, they end up “teaching to the middle,” leaving some learners behind and failing to challenge those who have already mastered a concept. Technology allows teachers to tailor instruction to meet individual student needs, making learning more accessible and enabling all students to maximize their potential.

**Learning how to learn** – Being a lifelong learner is the most important attribute for success, and will grow in importance in our dynamic and competitive world. Today’s students will change careers multiple times throughout their lives – many studies suggest Americans will hold between fifteen and twenty jobs over the course of their careers – and the jobs these graduates will hold may not even exist yet. Knowing one’s own learning style and developing the self-discipline and grit to grasp new skills throughout a lifetime will be critical for digital natives – especially in the fast-paced, distracting information landscape that is their natural habitat. Using
technology to conduct research and acquire new skills can help these students develop the most essential capability in the information economy: how to learn.

**Putting students in charge** – Technology-based platforms and tools can provide students constant feedback so they understand how they’re progressing relative to their own goals, their peers, and their teachers’ and parents’ expectations. A clear road map of progress can be motivating for the student and immensely valuable for the teacher, who can intervene early or help a student advance more quickly. By empowering students and making them directly responsible for their progress, online learning encourages habits of resourcefulness that will serve students well once they leave the classroom.

**Helping students disconnect from the Twitter-verse and spend more time on task** – The more time students spend focused on their course work, the better their academic performance. With online learning, no one can hide in the back of the classroom, so every student is accountable. Rich multimedia content and interactive activities in many of today’s technology-based curricula offer familiar, friendly terrain for digital natives and can keep students more engaged and focused on their work. Over time, students get better at shutting out distractions and staying on task, even when they’re not in school – an extremely valuable skill in this media-saturated age.

**Encouraging constructive communication** – Digital natives are growing up in a social media landscape where multi-directional dialogue is commonplace. Yet the classroom too often remains a one-way street where the teacher imparts knowledge and students are expected to absorb it. Technology can help broaden the discussion by connecting students and teachers, and by opening the doors to outside voices that can lend additional knowledge and expertise to the classroom.

The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation forecasts that 50% of high school classes will be online by 2019. For some, this may sound worrisome, but resistance to education technology will begin to break down as people see how eagerly today’s digital natives embrace learning online. The use of technology presents an undeniably radical shift in the business of education, but skeptical and concerned adults alike should take comfort in the fact that in many ways, ed tech also embodies a return to the basics. The skills that technology-based instruction can impart to today’s digital natives – self-reliance, perseverance and resourcefulness among them – have a distinctly retro feel. In an increasingly distracted, text and tweet-addled, short attention span world, these skills will be indispensable for the students of today and tomorrow.

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