

Getting Ready for the Net Generation Learner

In June 2004 I attended, with three other Southeast Missouri State University administrators—the provost, the vice president for administration and enrollment management, and the assistant vice president for information technology—“The Key to Competitiveness: Understanding the Next Generation Learner” conference, sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), EDUCAUSE, and Microsoft. Since this was a “pilot” project and the first such conference, we really didn’t know what to expect. All of us thought we would hear two to three days of “here’s what we do” from administrators and faculty.

To our pleasant surprise, we instead heard about what today’s students, the “Net Generation,” expect from information technology, based on their lifetime experiences with computers: instant messaging, chat rooms, Googling, online games, virtual tours, and bulletin boards, for example. We heard about the multitasking Net Generation students who demand instant access to infinite amounts of information on a 24/7 basis. It soon became very clear to us that our current and future students expect state-of-the-art technology at home, in the classroom, and on campus. This technology reality check made our team pause to examine not only what we are doing now to satisfy our students’ technology expectations but also what we can do to satisfy the expectations of the future Net Generation learners, those currently in elementary and secondary schools. We wondered whether our faculty, staff, and technology infrastructure are prepared for this never-ending, always-growing demand.

One outstanding aspect of the conference was planning sessions in which each four-person campus team defined its campus needs, planned how to address those needs, and received feedback from other participants and conference staff. The major goal of our plan was to get our faculty and staff ready to respond to the needs of the Net Generation learners. To that end, when we returned to campus, we established a task force composed of the conference team, the vice provost, the dean of academic information services, and the director of the Center for Scholarship in Teaching and Learning. The task force planned a campus-wide workshop to begin discussing the Net Generation learners and their preferred learning methods. We hoped that raising faculty and staff awareness would stimulate new thinking about learning and would begin the process of adjusting teaching strategies for the Net Generation learners.

Developing the Workshop Agenda

The task force wanted to include general themes from the AASCU-Microsoft-EDUCAUSE conference and to address specific technology challenges for our campus. The program began to take shape with the acceptance of our keynote speaker, EDUCAUSE Vice President Diana Oblinger, who is responsible for the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI). Next, to identify specific campus needs and to really appreciate the Net Generation learners’ expectations, we decided that we needed to understand the technological environment and habits of current and prospective students (through the next decade). As a result, the task force members observed classrooms and dis-

cussed how technology was used with teachers and students in fourth-grade computer-enriched classrooms, in eleventh-grade classrooms, and at Southeast Missouri State.

The fourth-grade computer-enriched classrooms had one PC for every two students, with the PCs being used throughout the day for various assignments. As a result, teachers were able to open their classrooms to the world and to differentiate instruction based on the skill levels of the students. These students were well versed in using cell phones, e-mail, online chat rooms, and Microsoft Word. We found that the fourth-grade students were excited about the access to and timeliness of information, especially when compared with the information in outdated textbooks. Their inquiry-based learning made them self-motivated and proficient in accessing and using online encyclopedias, news, sports, weather, and search engines. Quite interestingly, students taught in these computer-enriched classrooms are showing higher scores on the Missouri Assessment Program tests.

The eleventh-grade teachers also viewed technology as allowing differentiated instruction, even with students having low math and verbal abilities. Technology allows students to do their own research and assembly of projects regardless of their abilities. These students were well versed in e-mail, online chat rooms, news services, and various software products. Obviously, the eleventh-grade students had significantly more skill in editing video, compiling movie and sound clips, using database files to research issues, and creating multidimensional pre-

sentations. They all expected instant access to information at home and at school.

Southeast Missouri State students were generally well versed in all aspects of technology. For many, the first thing they do each morning is check their customized portal page for messages, the news, or the day's schedule. Our students believe that classroom assignments, online grades, online course syllabi, and Web-based courses force them to be computer literate. Since Southeast offers more than 125 Web-based courses each semester, faculty also tend to be well versed in technology relating to instruction.

in Teaching and Learning now defines twenty-first-century learners as not only those Net Generation students but also the large number of nontraditional students who are older than Net Generation students but who must become technologically competent to be successful in higher education.

To make substantive and permanent changes in curriculum delivery, an institution must have a critical mass of faculty and staff who believe such changes are needed and who are willing to champion those changes. Our workshop energized those individuals. To further facilitate these changes, we held summer workshops to



Illustration by Steve McCracken. © 2005

Our Workshop and Results

Diana Oblinger started the workshop by describing the Net Generation learners and what they expect from technology. From there, live sessions with fourth-grade, eleventh-grade, and university-level faculty and students were used to introduce our faculty and staff to the current use of technology and to set the stage for the technology expectations we will face from now until 2015. Additional sessions—addressing information literacy, the teaching of future teachers, computer games as learning tools, computer competency, and faculty best practices in teaching Net Generation learners—were also offered.

Approximately 35 percent of our faculty attended at least one segment of the two-day workshop. More important, we engaged our campus in discussing the Net Generation learner, which has made many of us rethink our instructional techniques for current and future students. In fact, based on our conference, the director of the Center for Scholarship

address a variety of topics relating to the needs of the twenty-first-century learner. We plan to continue with similar activities in the coming academic year to stimulate a sustained discussion.

Change is difficult in any circumstance. However, effecting change without knowing what and why to change is an almost impossible task. We believe our workshop on the Net Generation learner and our follow-up activities will give us the focus we need to address the expectations of our future students. Over the next decade, faculty, staff, and technology infrastructures at all higher education institutions will need to be prepared for this demand.

Note

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