No Teacher Left Behind: Teaching Strategies for the Net Generation

Ronald A. Berk

DISCLAIMER:

This chapter is based on my presentation at the 26th annual ES Conference. Unfortunately, none of the theatrical effects can be replicated in this print format. Those effects missing from this version are the opening parody “CSI: Chicago”; music clips on every PowerPoint® slide; video clips from Glee of a Lady Gaga song, The Muppet Movie, The Social Network, and Avatar; and an appropriate sprinkling of jokes. The content has not only been retained but been updated, complete with references. Although lacking the entertainment element of the original, this chapter contains information that will hopefully be valuable in your work.

To date, more than forty books and scores of articles and chapters have been written on the Net Generation (aka Millennials) of students. Nine of the books describe the distinguishing characteristics of the Net Geners from previous generations and their implications for all aspects of education (Bonner, Marbly, and Hamilton 2010; Howe and Strauss 2000; Junco and Mastrodicasa 2007; Oblinger and Oblinger 2005; Palfrey and Gasser 2008; Pletka 2007; Strauss and Howe 2003, 2006; Sturgess 2008). There are also ten national and international surveys of their characteristics.

This generation has been studied, surveyed, scrutinized, interviewed, poked, and prodded more than any previous generation. The purposes of this chapter are to synthesize what is known about these students from an educational perspective and suggest directions for teaching based on the

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latest revision of the core InTASC standards. Specifically, the following topics will be addressed: (1) birth date and terminology, (2) survey research evidence, (3) access to and use of technology, (4) learner characteristics, (5) Net Geners Profile Scale, (6) InTASC standards, (7) aligning teaching strategies with standards and characteristics, and (8) epilogue.

**Birth Date and Terminology**

Although the birth dates used to define this generation have varied across surveys, there seems to be some agreement in the literature: typically between 1982 and 2003 (standard error of ± 2 years). Those students are now 7 to 28 years old. That translates educationally into second grade through graduate school. The up-and-coming kindergartners and first graders may be even more sophisticated. No educator can escape the impact of this generation. That means: “No Teacher Left Behind.”

The name for this generation has been considerably more contentious. Authors and researchers have used a variety of terms in their articles and books, such as Millennials, Generation Y, Trophy Kids, Net Generation, and Digital Natives, to cite just a few. This has produced confusion and much debate over the most appropriate label. There are at least ten proposed names or monikers. For a discussion of those names and their rationales, see Berk (2009b).

1. Millennials
2. Generation Y (or Gen Y)
3. Echo Boomers
4. Net Generation (or Net Geners)
5. Trophy Generation (or Trophy Kids)
6. First Digital
7. Dot.Com Generation
8. Digital Aboriginals
9. Nexters
10. Digital Natives
This chapter uses Net Generation (or Net Geners), which was coined by Tapscott (1997). It is linked directly to the (Inter)net and the emerging digital technology of the 1980s and 1990s with which this generation grew up. They never knew a world without computers and the Internet. This term also seems to be the simplest, most descriptive, least controversial, and easily understood, plus it denotes the profound influence of the Internet on these students’ lives.

**Survey Research Evidence**

As the Net Geners were maturing over the past decade, the eldest members were graduating from college and attending graduate school or entering the workforce in droves. Their impact on education at all levels has been of major interest to researchers and educators. Previously, Berk (2009b) synthesized pertinent research evidence based on ten national and international surveys. For information on the methodologies employed, consult the specific study resources given below:

1. EDUCAUSE (Frand 2000; Oblinger 2008; Oblinger and Oblinger 2005)
3. Greenberg Millennials Study (Greenberg and Weber 2008)
7. The Net Generation: A Strategic Investigation (Tapscott 2009)
10. Technological Preparedness among Entering Freshman (Sax, Ceja, and Terenishi 2001)
Access to and Use of Technology

According to their survey of 7,705 college students in the United States, Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) found the following characteristics of Net Geners (except where noted):

- 97% own a computer
- 94% own a cell phone or iPhone
- 99% use the Internet for research or homework (Pryor et al. 2009)
- 89% begin their search for everything with search engines like Google (OCLC 2006)
- 76% use instant messaging (IM) logged on 35 hrs./wk., chat 80 min./day; 15% logged on 24/7
- 87% read news Web sites (Pryor et al. 2009)
- 34% use Web sites as their primary source of news (40% use TV, with 15% watching *The Daily Show* and 5% *The Colbert Report*)
- 57% are media creators (Oblinger 2008); 35% own a blog, and 57% read blogs (Pryor et al. 2009)
- 49% download music using peer-to-peer sharing (15% download movies, and 16% download software)
- 92% multitask while IMing
- 75% have a Facebook account
- 56% own an MP3 player (iPod, Zune, Sansa, or similar music/video device)

Just because this generation of students grew up with the technology and all of the tools of the digital age doesn’t mean that throwing technology at them in the classroom will automatically result in effective teaching for you and successful learning for them. You need to understand *how they use technology* and *how they think* before systematically applying technology in your classroom. In other words, collect intelligence information (aka “intel”) on your students so that you can match technology tools to their characteristics.

This is analogous to ex-Marine Jake Sully’s task in *Avatar*: to gather intel on alien, supermodel-like, 10-foot tall, blue-skinned, golden-eyed Na’vi inhabitants of the computer-generated sci-fi world of Pandora. His purpose
was to gain their trust in order to set up schools, teach them English, and convince them to leave their homeland voluntarily. Why? Because if they didn’t leave, psycho-warrior Colonel Miles Quaritch would blow them to kingdom come, digitally speaking, of course.

Consider this scenario: YOU are in your teacher–Gen X (born 1961–1981) or Boomer (born 1943–1960) world and your STUDENTS (born 1982–2003) are in their high-tech, twitch-speed, digital, mobile, always-on media world. *(Exception Noted: Since the upper limit of the Net Geners is 27 years old, there may be newbie teachers in the 21–27 age range who fit their students’ profile. For the rest of you, your students’ world may be perceived as a bit alien.)* Could this possibly be a “Close Encounter of the Student Kind”? Now that these alien analogies are over, it’s time to move on.

**Learner Characteristics**

Beyond the use of technology, a synthesis of the research results from the surveys and aforementioned books has yielded twenty learner characteristics (Berk 2009b) typical of most Net Geners. *(CAVEAT: There are many students who do not fit that complete profile, both in the United States and internationally. Social and economic class differences, especially, can account for Net Geners’ proficiency or lack thereof with the technology and their daily habits. Those differences may be evident in your classes.)*

Here is an inventory of those characteristics. For descriptive information on each characteristic and supporting research, see Berk (2009b).

1. Tech Savvy
2. Relies on Search Engines
3. Interested in Multimedia
4. Creates Internet Content
5. Operates at Twitch Speed
6. Experiential/Kinesthetic
7. Trial and Error
8. Multitask
9. Short Attention Span
10. Visually Literate
11. Face-to-Face Interaction
12. Emotionally Open
13. Embraces Diversity
14. Prefers Teamwork
15. Lifestyle Fit
16. Pressure to Succeed
17. Seeks Feedback
18. Instant Gratification
19. Responds Quickly
20. Prefers Typing

Net Geners Profile (NGP) Scale

Now let’s make these characteristics up close and personal. Based on the list of twenty characteristics, I extracted fifteen behaviors that capture a typical profile of most of these students (Berk 2010b). Those fifteen have been assembled in the form of a rating scale (see Figure 1).
Figure 1

NET GENER PROFILE (NGP) SCALE

DIRECTIONS: Read each statement in the context of your own daily activities. If you do it MOST or ALL OF THE TIME, place an X in the YES box; otherwise, mark the NO box. Add the Xs in the YES column to determine your NGP score at the bottom.

IN MY DAILY ACTIVITIES

1. I function at high speed or close to it in everything I do. □ □
2. I use a PC/Mac, iPhone, MP3 player, and other hi-tech equipment. □ □
3. I multitask easily with various tech equipment. □ □
4. I use search engines like Google to find whatever I need. □ □
5. I respond quickly to messages (phone, texting, e-mail, etc.). □ □
6. I use Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, or other online social networks to stay connected with family and friends. □ □
7. I prefer to learn by trial and error rather than to read a manual. □ □
8. I learn best by doing rather than by reading or observing. □ □
9. I prefer to collaborate with others on projects rather than to work alone. □ □
10. Working at home is more convenient than going to the library or elsewhere. □ □
11. I download music, videos, and software easily, sometimes for free. □ □
12. I contribute to my own Website, blog, or a video on YouTube. □ □
13. If I’m not actively doing something, I get bored or impatient. □ □
14. I enjoy being with people from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. □ □
15. I prefer visuals, graphics, and images to just reading text material. □ □

Score 1 point for each X in the YES column. Write your total score on this line: ________

NET GENER PROFILE (NGP) CATEGORY:

13–15 High
9–12 Moderate
0–6 Low

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Consider the following questions:

1. How closely do you embody the major characteristics of your students?
2. In what areas have you changed that narrow your generation gap?
3. What are the areas of greatest difference?
4. How can these differences affect your teaching effectiveness?

The more you can think like your students in planning HOW you teach, the more successful you can be. So, just how different are you from your students? In order to answer the preceding questions, I encourage you to complete the scale and also administer it to your students. It will take five minutes or less.

The results will provide you with an indication of how similar or different you are to the survey research-based “Net Gener Profile.” If you choose to administer it to your students in class or online, you will be able to obtain an overall impression of how closely your students resemble that profile. A comparison of your results with those of your students can reveal areas of discrepancy in the way you think about your teaching methods and how those methods are received by your students. Further information on interpreting the scores can be found in Berk (2010b).

**InTASC Standards**

So what do the students’ characteristics have to do with teaching and the latest edition of the InTASC model core standards for licensing teachers, as well as teacher preparation and professional development? Let’s examine a sample of key indicators:

1. “link prior experiences, knowledge, and personal interests to new information”
2. “accommodate learning differences, learning styles, strengths and needs”
3. “enhance social relationships and engagement”
4. “work collaboratively and independently”
5. “use a variety of media communication tools”
Think *Avatar* in the classroom:

1. Gather INTEL on your students: (a) the way they think; (b) how they behave; (c) their interests; and (d) their culture
2. Understand a–d
3. Match a–d to the STANDARDS
4. Leverage a–d in HOW you teach
5. Establish a connection through ENGAGEMENT
6. Gain their TRUST

An example of how to align the students’ characteristics with the standards and teaching strategies is suggested next.

**Aligning Teaching Strategies with Standards and Characteristics**

The trick is to focus on the students’ characteristics first and last. After all, teaching is all about the students. As you pick a standard, match it to one of their learner characteristics. Then select strategies that will tap that characteristic. Drawing on the five indicators listed previously, this matching process is illustrated in Figure 2.
Figure 2
Matching Learner Characteristics to InTASC Standards and Teaching Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>InTASC Standard</th>
<th>Learner Characteristic</th>
<th>Teaching Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Link Prior Experiences and Interests</td>
<td>Interest in Media</td>
<td>Incorporate YouTube Clips (TV, movies, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Learn. Diff. and Styles</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Draw on 4–6 Intelligences and Learning Styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Social Relationships</td>
<td>Use of Social Media</td>
<td>Plan Activities with Facebook/Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Work Collaboratively</td>
<td>Team-Oriented</td>
<td>Create Cooperative Learning, Games, and Improvisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you extend Figure 2 to your own classroom on a very concrete level, how can all of the information presented in this chapter be boiled down to the improvement of teaching? The message from the standards and the twenty learner characteristics seems to be: learner-centered techniques (Cornelius-White 2007) should be blended with the latest technology (Berk 2010a). Students need to feel connected to you and to each other, face-to-face and online. Mix your methods; incorporate a variety of technology tools. The operative criteria for in-class and out-of-class activities to be successful are digital, visual, speed, hands-on, multimedia, multitask, interactive, collaborative, feedback, and connected (Berk 2008a, 2008c, 2010a).

Once you have leveraged the elements in your students’ world and have established an in-person as well as a virtual connection, you can diversify your methods and content to present elements from your world and discipline(s). For example, using hip-hop music and YouTube video clips to which students can relate to illustrate content points in class will provide the
connection; then you can experiment with Mozart and clips from A Few Good Men or The West Wing to stimulate discussion on other topics (Berk 2001, 2008b, 2009a; Eddy and Bracken 2008; Miller 2009). This will facilitate a multimedia balance to attain specific learning outcomes.

Epilogue

After all that has been written on the Net Generation, including my previous articles, and now adding this piece to that body of work, what can I possibly say or contribute that you don’t already know? Hopefully, this chapter clarified and extended the work of my predecessors in a form that fosters a better understanding of your students and how you can apply the InTASC standards and the vast array of teaching strategies effectively in your classroom. Perhaps a few of the suggested strategies will provide useful additions to your current repertoire.

The twenty Net Gener characteristics indicate that these students crave in-class and out-of-class experiences that are active, participatory, visual, collaborative, fast moving, quick thinking, rapid responding, emotionally freeing, and spontaneous. Plan memorable learning experiences that draw on the available technology gadgets with which your students are most familiar and systematically match their characteristics. Leverage these gadgets to attain specific learning outcomes. They can serve as teaching tools to turbocharge your learning environment to give every student the opportunity to succeed and perform at the highest level.

References


Berk, R. A. 2010b. Net generation profile scale: This is only a test scale! Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal 3 (3): 1–6.


