

The Media Center Start the Year Right With Digitally Native Teachers

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They come to the media center to plan and schedule carrying their laptops; they frequently stop by to reserve a video projector for a PowerPoint presentation. They're impressed with the amount of technology available to today's kids, and many say they didn't have good access in their own high schools. Their eyes light up when they share early memories of playing *Oregon Trail* and *Number Munchers*. Meet generation tech, the first generation of "digitally native" teachers—those born after 1980—to work in our schools.

Much has been written about the challenges "digital immigrant" teachers—those of us who've come later to technology—face as they work with digitally native students. But what's it like to work with digitally native teachers? I've noticed some consistencies among this first generation of educators to grow up with technology. This article reflects insights from other media specialists and educators as well as personal experiences working with new teachers and innumerable university students each year.

The Digital Native Teacher Paradox ...

Digitally native teachers are very comfortable with technology. They view it not just as the way to do something better or more efficiently than it was done before, but as the only way to do it. They can't imagine functioning without Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and online access to information. They know how to search for lesson plans and journal articles; they know how to use ERIC, academic databases, and of course, Google. Best Buy is their favorite store, and they would be lost without their laptops. They are excited about bringing their experience and expertise to the classroom.

They have a good background in educational pedagogy to complement their tech skills. *But many are clueless about effectively integrating or infusing technology into the curriculum* despite having a technology skill-set exceeding that of many experienced teachers, and university credits in technology integration. Their description of technology use is from an adult perspective. Their plans for using technology in the classroom are quite traditional and seldom innovative.

They don't think to turn to a media specialist for help because most likely no one has told them about us! "I didn't think a media specialist would do this for me," they say! They don't get that message in college and most likely are unaware of what their own media specialist contributed to instruction when they were in high school. They may even be avid users of their own high school's media center, but recognize the role their school's media program had. They apologize if they need assistance but are thankful and appreciative of our help and encouragement. Student teachers are amazed that I would make a special trip to the bookstore to purchase needed resources, work with them to develop teaching materials, or link Web sites for student projects on our school's Web site.

... And the Implications for Today's Media Specialists

What are the implications for 21st century media specialists? How do we work with them to create seamless, customized support, enabling them to use their innate skills and effectively take advantage of resources and teach today's students?

It's important to view their comfort level and positive attitude as an opportunity, a bridge to building instructional partnerships. Digitally native teachers enter our schools assuming they will be expected to use technology. Each August we provide an in-service for new teachers and student teachers; they always are eager to learn about the e-mail system they'll use, or whether they'll be permitted to make their own or a class Web page. They're eager to apply their tech skills and are confident that they will transfer them to their new work environment. They are required to use textbooks or teaching materials infused with technology. They know how to figure things out and adapt quickly to learning the instructional management software the district uses for grades, attendance, or online lesson plans. This is the time to begin building relationships and provide support, since they have a compelling need to make it through those first few days. We should help them at this level to build the foundation for future instructional partnerships!

Interestingly, digitally native teachers often become role models for the experienced teachers they work with. New teachers with fresh ideas can move a department or teaching team forward. A new music teacher developed a classroom Web site that set the standard for his school. A student teacher with some creative ideas for using technology in the curriculum worked with an experienced teacher whose comfort level was primarily limited to the classroom and textbook. By modeling the use of technology in student activities, the student teacher helped the experienced teacher become more confident in her own abilities. *Media program support is pivotal in situations such as these.* This becomes a time to not only reach out to new teachers, but strengthen relationships with current staff who are energized by seeing new approaches.

Helping Bridge the Gap and Cement Relationships

Career teachers are occasionally concerned that the newcomers' expertise makes them look incompetent. Student teachers may be stymied by a supervising teacher who does not use technology or the media center. Media specialists can provide assistance and support them in their enthusiasm and excitement. Be careful, though, not to damage current relationships while building new ones.

When the relationship and trust level are in place between these teachers, it is appropriate to offer *your* suggestions. Be available; surprise them with an extra touch of service. They often welcome input in the logistics of technology integration. Typically they haven't considered all the implications of developing a Web-based activity, all the finite skills involved in what might appear to be a basic project, or the necessity of locating age- and ability-appropriate resources. Provide praise and guidance; avoid negative comments about their ideas. While an idea might be something traditional that you've seen many times before, it's new to them and they are proud of what they have planned. Trust, modeling, your expertise and a good support are key to making instructional connections.

~~Here are a couple of~~ "I wish I'd known that"

- Molly, a student teacher in language arts, developed a wonderful project based on Beatles lyrics. She had not considered the possibility of inappropriate lyrics, too much music all at once, or Internet plug-ins that would be needed.
- Bill, a new middle-level art teacher, had planned a comprehensive research and multimedia activity and was frustrated by his inability to find appropriate resources for students who needed easier materials.

In both situations collaborated within the realm of their project to locate age- and ability-appropriate resources. Learning how to find appropriate resources is what sticks with digital age teachers more than anything else I

help them with. “I wish someone had told me about this” and “I wish I had talked to you earlier” are typical responses. Opportunities for further collaboration grow from these initial connections.

Eric Paulsen, a student teacher with mature insight, offered this perspective when I asked him what he would expect of a media specialist:

- Up-to-date expertise on applying technology toward meaningful learning for the students (and teachers). Not just how to use it...but how to *put it to use*.
- The ability to facilitate the training of teachers and others who work with students. Lets face it, most adults in education know less about educational technology than the students they are teaching. The media specialist must (somehow) be able not only to instruct teachers on how to use it, but to motivate them to want to learn.
- An organized method of tracking and scheduling the use of equipment. The media specialist should have a system in place that allows teachers and other people working with students to easily find and use technology the school may have.
- Up-to-date expertise on equipment—how to hook it up, how to troubleshoot the various things that always seem to go wrong.

Summing It Up

Is this anything new? Not entirely. Are teachers who are digital natives much different from the digital immigrants? As is so often the case, it’s all about building relationships. The difference is that today’s new teachers have knowledge of education, skills, and thinking patterns, not to mention technology, that are unique. Media specialists should be delighted to learn from them and work with them. Eric Paulsen said it best: If we possess “patience, kindness, tolerance, and most of all the desire to help others grow,” we can build relationships. Today’s new digitally native teachers will become tomorrow’s collaborators and constructivist learning teachers. Help them adapt, integrate and explore!

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