

Teaching Our First Digital Generation

By Steve M. Dorman

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IN his book, *Growing Up Digital*, Donald Tapscott describes the Net Generation (N-Gen)—now aged 2 to 22, the first to grow up surrounded by digital media. The computer has been an ever-present force in the lives of N-Geners, who, in many ways, feel more comfortable with computers than their parents do. They play, learn, create, communicate, and work using a computer.

According to Teenage Research Unlimited, the percentage of teens calling it “in” to be online rose from 50% in 1994 to 88% in 1997. Tying up household phone lines nationwide, programs such as *Instant Messenger* are changing the way and frequency that teens communicate.

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Tapscott discusses implications of the N-Gen for families and education. He describes the N-Gen as accepting of diversity, curious, assertive, and self-reliant. He cites characteristics that educators and youth workers should consider as they plan activities to meet the needs of the N-Gen:

Fierce independence. N-Geners are information seekers rather than passive information recipients. Access to the vastness of information on the Internet allows them to easily confront information they believe incorrect. Consequently, N-Geners display a strong sense of autonomy and independence.

Emotional and intellectual openness. N-Geners may find it easier to expose their inner thoughts and personal information. They have done this online for some time. Look only as far as personal home pages to find that individuals are revealing more about themselves than they would in other formats. Most home pages contain personal information such as addresses, phone numbers, likes and dislikes, and links to favorite information sources.

Inclusion. Technology enables N-Geners to talk with others worldwide. Hence, a greater openness and global awareness exists in many in this group. E-mail and chat rooms let them talk with others without regard to racial or ethnic stereotypes or geographic boundaries.

Free expression and strong views. The Internet allows this generation to be exposed to wide-ranging ideas and opinions and to express opinions, often anonymously, in very strong ways. Users who might hesitate to express their views face-to-face may find the Internet a more comfortable place to freely express themselves.

Innovation. N-Geners are at ease with new technology and media, and not fearful to try new ideas and products. Many innovations of existing media and technology derive from ideas and desires of the young N-Geners. N-Geners have been quick to adopt new communication technologies to converse with each other and learners around the world.

Preoccupation with maturity. Tapscott says "adults have to re-evaluate exactly what it means to be a child when that child has been growing up digital." The independence and autonomy required by Internet users may change the nature of childhood and produce children more focused on maturity at earlier ages. Perhaps not new to adolescence, this generation has an even greater need to be taken seriously and to be measured for their ideas rather than their age.

Investigation. Tapscott sees N-Geners having a keen sense of investigation, seeming interested in how to make technology do the things they need to happen. They have an equal interest in how technology works. For example, they are not satisfied to use another

person's website for link information. They must create their own web pages and links. Many N-Geners show this sense of investigation by spending much time "hacking" their way through sophisticated programs and websites.

Immediacy. N-Geners live in a "real time" world. Previous generations may have taken weeks to get a response to a mailed inquiry, but technology provides ways that responses can be made immediately. This leads some to believe N-Geners seek immediate gratification. At the least, N-Geners experience a world where things can happen fast, so they expect things to happen fast.

Sensitivity to corporate involvement. Tapscott believes that as N-Geners have shifted from a broadcast-based to an interactive mentality, a turning away from media monopolies has occurred. The broadcast media of television and radio dominating the previous generation allowed only limited, sanctioned expression, but the Internet allows freer expression of ideas and in ways which rival the once-dominant corporate broadcast media. Hence, N-Geners have developed sensitivity and suspicion toward corporate interests.

Authentication and trust. N-Geners will live and work in a world where authentication and trust are important. Many of them understand the Internet's ability to provide a rich environment for fraud, inaccuracy, and deception. So, N-Geners will develop means to establish and secure authenticity and trust of information. Though many can discern when TV or radio is selling a product, it is more difficult to apply this discernment to new Internet-based media. As the N-Gen grows in Internet experience, they will develop more sophisticated "ways of knowing" and understanding this medium.

Tapscott examines implications of the N-Gen on education and learning. He predicts education will shift from a broadcast type of learning (e.g., teacher in front of classroom) to a more interactive learning facilitated by technology. Approaches to learning will become less linear and sequential and more hypermedia-driven; less teacher-centered and more learner-centered; and less instruction-oriented and more discovery-oriented. The teacher will be less transmitter, more facilitator.

Tapscott sees N-Geners experiencing life much differently from their "baby boomer" parents, focusing less on broadcast media and more on interactive Internet-based media. They will work, play, and learn using the computer as an interface for these activities. While we should not overgeneralize to the impact of this on all children of this generation, technology will shape its values, ideals, and interests. Those working with children must prepare to understand better the technologically dominant world in which they live. 