Teaching Generation NeXt:
A Pedagogy for Today's Learners

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Faculty struggle to effectively teach our traditionally aged students from Generation NeXt. They are different, and different kinds of learners, than anyone higher education has experienced in the past, and there is ample evidence of a growing divide and mismatch between faculty and students in teaching and learning (Coates 2007; Schroeder 2004). Our students' academic preparation and expectations, consumer orientation, esteem and importance issues, and use of technology are challenging traditional educational practices (Taylor, 2005, 2006; Twenge 2006). "Old school" methods, especially the all too common lecture on content to passive learners, are proving less and less successful in bringing students to appropriate learning and developmental outcomes (Bok 2006; Shulman 2005a, 2005b; Tagg 2004; U.S. Department of Education 2006). Workplace readiness outcomes are often poor and are coming under increased scrutiny (Grossman 2005; Hersch and Merrow 2005; Levine 2005; Taylor 2007).

This generation of digital natives has caught educators flat-footed (Prensky 2001a, 2001b; Tapscott 2009). Pedagogies of activity and engagement, especially those that use recently available Web- and technology-based tools and resources, can be more effective but are often not gaining significant levels of use in most schools. Few schools, beyond making online course management systems available, have truly leveraged students' digital preferences and available online-anytime resources toward learning goals. Most classrooms still resemble those described by Lion Gardiner, who states that the college experience for most students comprises a loosely organized, unfocused curriculum with undefined outcomes, classes that emphasize passive listening, lectures that transmit low-level information, and assessments of learning that demand only the recall of memorized material or low-level comprehension of concepts (1998). Unfortunately, lecture-based classes transmitting low-level information might actually reduce students' ability to think critically and are still the norm at most colleges.

If the traditional methods are not bringing about the traditional results with these learners, better approaches must be considered. This paper addresses the disconnect between today's learners and current common teaching practices, and describes a comprehensive, effective, practical, and accessible teaching and learning model grounded in increasing student activity, engagement, and use of technology to improve relevant learning outcomes.

Improve Students' Future Orientation

Class content, the uses students have for that content, and the skills students are expected to develop should relate to students' goals. Today's consumer-oriented, outcome-oriented students are engaged at the affective level only if they can see a future utility, benefit, or relevance from their learning. Helping students see themselves in, and better identify with, future vocational and professional roles can thus connect learning to meaning. A future orientation also can improve student persistence as students better see educational success as necessary for them to reach future goals.

Identify Class Goals

Many faculty members who spend significant amounts of time delivering and assessing content-level or knowledge-level learning can benefit from identifying and articulating class goals around the utility of content and the values of these uses and skills. Students are more likely to learn content and applications if they see what they can do with the information and skills, why these uses matter to them and others, and how these applications can benefit them. Faculty can then use active techniques to allow students the opportunity to link the class goals to their personal goals. Linking class and student goals can improve compliance as well as learning outcomes for these more discerning students. "No information without application" should be the credo in all classes.

Improve Student Understanding of Class Expectations

People expect what has worked for them in the past to work for them in the future. Students expect the level of academic effort they showed in high school to lead to success in college, which is rarely the case except for the most advanced high school graduates or in the least demanding college classes. Many classroom, compliance, and learning issues can be understood as a failure to make academic expectations clear. Faculty are well advised to not assume that students understand college academic expectations in general, or for their class in particular, and to take time early in the semester to make class expectations clear. Rewards (in the form of points) and consequences (in the form of penalties, lost points or learning opportunities) should be spelled out for both the mechanical expectations, such as preparation, attendance, and participation, and for the learning outcomes.

Move Content Learning Out of Class

Too much time in most classes is spent delivering content; time that can be better spent helping students actively identify the uses of the content, learn skills, or identify why the learning matters to them. This model moves faculty from the traditional pedagogy of delivering content in class and expecting students to apply it out of class, to moving the content out of class and facilitating the application of content under the guidance of the professor during class. In this digital age, most information at the content level is available and can be readily accessed by students out of class as a component of class preparation. In addition to the traditional textbook, which is now often self-augmented with CD, DVD, and online learning resources, sites like YouTube.com, merlot.org, and the online university portals at iTunes offer a wealth of resources. Government, professional, and not-for-profit organizations, as well as subject-specific sites, can offer online content to replace the traditional lecture delivery and are often more current and highly connected with real-world applications. Students may be more likely to access tech-sophisticated sites (as opposed to studying the textbook, which they are traditionally and anecdotally loath to do), as anytime learning on the Web via online resources better matches their digital learning styles, and the ability to view or listen to the explanation multiple times can help learners who need repetition (Coates 2007; Prensky 2001a, 2001b).

Instructors may believe that it is their responsibility to explain course material, not just identify where it is available. Creating customized out-of-class content has never been easier for faculty, or more appropriate for students, even for highly complex and technical topics and subjects. Creating an MP4 recording, placing a voice-over narrative on presentation software, or making a voice recording that students can listen to using their iPods can offer students the benefit of the instructor's best explanation without using valuable class time. In sum, class time is too valuable to spend delivering content, which is, or can be, available elsewhere.

Create the Necessity of Preparing for and Attending Class

Scheduled class meetings are the central part of the educational process and the most significant learning opportunities for students, yet they are often dreaded by students who may describe them as boring. Faculty are not encouraged to offer points for attendance, but instead to award points for class preparation, which can only be obtained by attendance. Enticing students to prepare for class may be easier if that preparation is more attractive and meaningful to the learner: students may more likely watch a podcast than read the text. Instructors must make assignment expectations very clear (not "watch this video," but instead "answer these ten questions") and clarify the benefits of preparation (points, more effective learning) and costs of the lack of preparation (loss of points, inability to move into activity portion of the class or participate in group work), and they must be willing to clarify, but not to deliver, the content to greatly increase the likelihood that meaningful class preparation becomes normative student behavior.

Checking that each student has prepared for a class meeting by completing the specific assignment becomes a central class dynamic, and it must be the first, necessary domino in student success every day in every class by establishing each student's readiness to participate in other class activities. This can be accomplished before class time by requiring students to e-mail the assignment to the instructor, comment on a blog or wiki, or respond to questions on class management system software; or it can be accomplished at the start of each class session by having students show the instructor the completed assignment when they enter the class, or having students take a quiz. This is an excellent use of a classroom response system, which can even record the quiz results for automatic grading. The use of these "clickers" in the classroom is proving a powerful tool in increasing student engagement, even in very large classes (Bruff 2009; Caldwell 2007; Duncan 2005).

Increase Classroom Learning Activity and Engagement

If there is a truism in higher education, it is that student activity increases learning (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005). The case for moving from the teaching model of delivery to an active model of facilitating learning has been made frequently and convincingly, though apparently not persuasively (Barr and Tagg 1995; Gardiner 1998; O'Banion 1999). People have known for a long time that college students learn more when they're actively engaged in learning via hands-on practice and other means, but many professors don't want to and don't have to adopt these methods (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005). Higher-order and lasting learning will never be effectively reached by passive students who spend class time listening to faculty deliver content.

In the model described here, class content at the knowledge level is moved out of class to free class time for active learning to help students move to the higher learning and process levels of skills and values, behavioral applications, and the affective level of caring, or Bloom's application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels (Bloom et al. 1956, 186–193). There is a wealth of literature available on active learning techniques in and appropriate to every subject area. While the techniques will look different across subjects, the processes are very similar (Manzur 1997). To help students understand content, let them actively teach it to another person. To help students learn a skill, let them actively practice it, with someone observing for accuracy. To help students come to care, value, or see worth in a subject or skill, let them actively identify how it will benefit them in the future and actively articulate this belief in benefit to another person. "No passive students" should be the expectation during class time.

Improve Assessments and Accountability

As instruction moves from the traditional faculty delivery-of-content process to a student-construction-of-learning model, instructors also need to move from a reliance on summative assessments of learning outcomes to assign grades to ongoing formative efforts to monitor and measure the efficacy of instruction and students' movement toward learning outcomes. This movement from assessment of learning to assessment for learning is replacing traditional outcomes testing and leading to a deeper, more lasting, and higher-level learning, and to students' ability to make meaningful application of their learning. Classroom response systems are proving very useful in helping monitor ongoing and emerging student understanding and learning, their effectiveness limited only by faculty creativity and their use generally liked by digitally oriented students (Bruff 2009; Caldwell 2007; Duncan 2005). Low-tech techniques like ungraded quizzes and private response opportunities can be effective as well. Any ungraded anonymous opportunity to allow all students to let instructors know their ongoing understandings or skills, or lack thereof, will be appreciated by students and helpful to the willing instructor.

Formal graded assessments of student learning are moving from testing the traditional regurgitation of content to more meaningful summative assessments of deeper, more lasting, and higher-level learning, and of the ability of students to make meaningful application of their learning. Though much more difficult than developing and grading traditional objective tests, these more meaningful measures offer faculty powerful feedback on their methods and deeper learning opportunities for students.

Improving the outcomes of higher education is becoming required by all of higher education's constituencies: accreditors, employers, governments, funders, parents, and the public at large. It is hoped that the model described here will contribute to meeting this increased accountability through recognizing and appreciating traits of our learners, leveraging technology, and increasing student activity, all to the ends of helping students identify personally relevant uses for academic content, develop meaningful skills, and come to value their learning. As faculty teaching the learners from Generation NeXt, as well as the other students we serve, we must use the best available resources and methods to help develop successful graduates and lifelong learners equipped to contribute to and benefit from the domestic and international world of the third millennium.

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