

Chapter 12

Authentic Tasks: The Key to Harnessing the Drive to Learn in Members of “Generation Me”

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of whether one thinks of today's higher education students as “digital natives” or members of “Generation Me,” it is obvious that traditional instructional methods are failing to engage them adequately in developing the kinds of higher order learning outcomes necessary in the 21st Century. These outcomes should encompass the conative learning domain as well as the traditional cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. This chapter describes a set of ten authentic tasks learning design principles that can be used to create and support the kind of engaging learning experiences that today's learners must have if they are to achieve a full range of cognitive, affective, conative, and psychomotor outcomes for the 21st Century. A case study of a graduate level online course that exemplifies these design principles is described. Responding to the needs of Generation Me learners requires far more of a pedagogical revolution than it does the widespread adoption of Web 2.0 technologies.

INTRODUCTION

For us, the term “Digital Natives” represents an overly simplistic portrayal of the younger students enrolled in today's colleges and universities. Prensky (2001a, b) coined the term “digital natives” to describe a new generation of students who are native speakers in the digital language of the Internet, video games, cell phones, and computers,

and distinguished them from “digital immigrants” who are members of an older generation of students and their teachers who were not born into a society where digital technologies were as ubiquitous as they are now. One problem with Prensky's definition of “digital natives” is that it seriously over-estimates the information literacy of the digital natives as opposed to their technological fluency. As Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) noted:

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Having grown up with widespread access to technology, the New Gen is able to intuitively use a variety of IT devices and navigate the Internet. Although they are comfortable using technology without an instruction manual, their understanding of the technology or source quality may be shallow. (p. 2.5)

In 2009, Prensky himself admitted that the distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants was becoming less relevant. However, Prensky and others (cf. Tapscott, 2008) still appear to us to over-emphasize the technological advantages of the world in which the new generation of students have lived while underestimating the enormous changes in the social, economic, and environmental aspects of their world. In light of this, we prefer to use the term “Generation Me” (GenMe) created by Twenge (2006) to describe the majority of students born since 1990 that are in or about to enter postsecondary education in the second decade of the 21st Century. Although GenMe is usually thought of as an American construct, it can be extended to encompass young people in most developed countries in Europe as well as to Australia and New Zealand. Based upon rigorous research studies going back to the 1950s and extending into the early 2000s, Twenge (2006) presented convincing evidence that most of today’s young people, especially in the USA, have been raised to think that they will be highly successful, even stars, although the reality is that they will find it harder than ever to get into and afford the best colleges, find a high-paying, personally-rewarding job, and buy a decent home. On her *Generation Me* book website, she summarized the plight of GenMe as follows:

Today’s young people have been raised to aim for the stars at a time when it is more difficult than ever to get into college, find a good job, and afford a house. Their expectations are very high just as the world is becoming more competitive, so there’s a huge clash between their expecta-

tions and reality. (<http://www.generationme.org/aboutbook.html>)

Twenge (2006) made her observations about GenMe two years before the current global financial crisis became evident. If her predictions seemed dire then, they are even more so now. Twenge (2006) painstakingly analyzed the results of studies that involved adolescents and college students completing well-designed, validated questionnaires in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and today. This enabled her to compare, for example, the attitudes of the Baby Boomer generation expressed when they were adolescents with the attitudes of GenMe expressed during their adolescence. This approach distinguishes her research from the majority of generational studies that have relied upon respondents such as Baby Boomers’ reporting memories of the attitudes they held in their younger years or on interviews with students selected from elite groups (cf. Howe & Strauss, 2000).

A sample of Twenge’s (2006) findings derived from data collected from 1.3 million young Americans since the 1950s include:

- In 2002, 74% of high school students admitted to cheating whereas in 1969 only 34% admitted such a failing.
- In 1967, 86% of incoming college students said that “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was an essential life goal whereas in 2004 only 42% of GenMe freshmen agreed.
- In 2004, 48% of American college freshmen reported earning an A average in high school whereas in 1968 only 18% of freshmen reported being an A student in high school.
- In the 1950s, only 12% of young teens agreed with the statement “I am an important person” whereas by the late 1980s, 80% claimed they were important.
- In the 1960s, 42% of high school students expected to work in professional

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