Turn On. Tune In. Get Connected!

Connecting children and young adults with electronic materials.

Today's young people live in an increasingly connected and growing electronic environment…

Can you keep up?

"If our children are to excel in a fast-changing, global society, we must harness the technology resources they need to function in a digital age. We must remember our commitment to their future as we set priorities and establish policies on their behalf."

—Dennis Van Roekel
NEA President[1]

93% of youth are online
94% of parents are online

88% of all teens say "technology devices make their lives easier"

—Pew Internet &
American Life Project[2]

The Role of Digital Technology in Childrens' Lives

The importance of technology is at once overwhelming and inspiring – it "plays a significant role in all aspects of American life today, and this role will only increase in the future."[3] Moreover, the proliferation and ease with which digital technology is employed on a worldwide basis creates an implied level of inherent responsibility on the part of parents, educators, and librarians – they must "critically examine the impact of technology on children and be prepared to use technology to benefit children."[4] The current generation of young people are *digital natives*, adept at employing digital content into their lives, whether it be a social networking tool like Facebook or an online creativity tool like a blog, a shared video, or artwork. Keeping current with these digital natives is a certain necessity – one that presents itself with many challenges.

How Do Parents & Educators Keep Up?

Despite the proliferation of digital resources and technological innovation in an increasingly wired world, today's educators face a growing problem: "many schools are not providing the kind of learning environment that can engage… wired students."[5] Hal Stucker presents an action plan for keeping today's digital native young people actively engaged in the classroom and beyond. He suggests that we "focus on what students need to learn… redefine school librarians' roles… articulate a clear, consistent message… create a seamless learning and teaching landscape… set high expectations… create partnerships… [and] tie library standards to others."[6] A focus on students' learning needs can enable librarians and educators to tailor their services accordingly, rather than simply ascertaining their own professional needs. A seamless learning environment, one where librarians are actively engaged in serving the students' needs can provide a level of relevancy, creating an environment that is both collaborative in nature and offering a forum for life-long learning.

Enriching Young Lives With Electronic Materials

How do we provide an enriching environment for today's young people, one that takes full advantage of current and emerging technology and yet encourages an engaging and transformative model for learning? Kathy Schrock suggests "handheld devices and associated gadgets would radically transform… classrooms if properly implemented."[8] Similarly, Marc Prensky "argues that complex games (played at home and discussed in class) would engage… students and educate them to boot."[9] Ubiquitous computing has, in essence, created a learning environment with an almost limitless appetite – as technology continues to advance, so too does our consumption. Jason Johnson, Technology Coordinator of the Lowell School in Washington, D.C.,

offers an approach that emphasizes "five milestones that must be achieved by any institution seeking to create a ubiquity that satisfies both sides of our country's divide… [one that provides] ubiquitous access to resources for students [which] is vital… administrators must insist on the use of technology for administrative tasks… funding must be institutionalized… process improvements should be sufficient for technology use… [and, finally] engagement cannot be the primary justification for technology use."[10] Johnson encourages an acknowledgement of achieving improvement through technology – not just through the creation of visually stunning projects, but by employing technology to all facets of the learning process. This use of technology by librarians and educators proves transformative.

Engaging Youth With Technology

In a world where the traditional classroom seems frequently not in contact with the advancing, ubiquitous computing world that young people live in, educators and librarians need to include electronic materials in lesson plans for today's digital native children. Some examples might include electronic databases that allow young people the opportunity for information discovery in an online environment that exists far beyond the old dusty encyclopedia set. Librarians can devise instructional guides (such as this guide to using NetLibrary: http://tinyurl.com/cbmxc2) for using electronic databases, as well as pathfinders, which are essentially guides to locating resources on particular topics (for an example of a pathfinder, here is one on recycling: http://tinyurl.com/dg4tef). Other ideas might include WebQuests, inquiry-based activities for young people that allow them to interact with Internet-based resources. WebQuests might address a particular problem that students can attempt to solve through a series of tasks that allow them to interact with electronic materials on the Internet (for an example of a WebQuest, see this one on learning where food comes from and how to grow plants: http://tinyurl.com/dy43x6). Available electronic materials are seemingly limitless, from creativity tools such as TuxPaint (http://www.tuxpaint.org), a free online drawing tool for children, as well as online journaling software, among others. Use your imagination – the ideas are almost limitless!

Do you Tweet? Your kids probably do!

Twitter is a free, online social messaging tool to help people stay connected and exchange information in real-time.
A couple of good Twitter feeds to follow & keep you up-to-date are:

@MrMLibrarian: Mike McQueen is the founder of GettingBoysToRead.com.

@janettefuller: Janette Fuller is a teacher, children's librarian, blogger, and general all-around social media guru.

Kidspiration is an interactive software title aimed at children grades K-5. It encourages and fosters literacy skills in a visual learning environment, allowing children to explore and learn words, numbers, and key concepts. This electronic material can be used in the classroom, library, and at home.
See: http://kidspiration.com/Kidspiration

Is There More?

New, relevant information that fosters life-long learning for young people is being provided electronically, whether it be on the Internet, through mobile computing devices, wireless gaming devices, or computer-based software titles. Electronic materials provide an alternative learning environment for all young people – fostering visual learning cues as well as placing traditional teaching methods in a technologically advanced way. Collaboration is a key element – educators and librarians must be willing participants in the process and, in turn, create engaging, enriching, and accessible lessons. Certainly, a total abandonment of print resources is neither likely nor beneficial in today's learning environment. However, utilizing electronic materials in tandem with traditional print materials offers the best of both worlds. Librarians and educators can present a variety of information resources for young people. For example, teaching young people to scrutinize, or otherwise think critically, about the information contained within their textbooks offers an easy entry into the online learning environment, creating a need to use online resources such as databases to compare, contrast, and evaluate the relative accuracy of information across all mediums. As our young people become increasingly tech-savvy, our mission as librarians and educators becomes even more important, offering an effective, engaging, and active forum for learning.

Michael Courtney

References

1. NEA Education Policy and Practice Department. (2008). *Technology in schools: the ongoing challenge of access, adequacy and equity* (PB19). Washington, D.C.: Author.
2. Macgill, A. R. (2007). *Parents, teens and technology*. Pew Internet & American Life Project.
3. National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1998). *Technology and young children: Ages 3 through 8*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
4. Ibid
5. Stucker, H. (2005). Digital 'natives' are growing restless. *School Library Journal*, 51(6).
6. Ibid
7. Lamb, A. (2006). *Building treehouses for learning: Technology in today's classroom* (4th ed.). Emporia, Kansas: Vision to Action Publishing.
8. Johnson, J. (2006). Toward ubiquitous. *Knowledge Quest*, 34(3).
9. Ibid
10. Ibid.