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Digital Millennials
Paul DeVries
Submission for Café Gold Medal Classroom

If you haven't noticed yet, our incoming freshmen are no longer experiencing the same K12 that most of us probably did. They are digital natives, a generation fostered in a world that is dominated by technology. They subsist perpetually coupled to a digital persona manifested by I-Phones, cell phones and Blackberries. Each is making an unspoken statement, one that we all should be listening too. As the parent of a sixteen year old high school sophomore I've seen firsthand how our lives are so different, and despite my best efforts to remain cool and hip, I just can't keep up. At sometime we have to admit that we are different, very different! Though I hear dissent in the ranks, those readers dismissing my writing as the mere meanderings of a scorned parent and teacher consider the following.

The average college freshman has spent nearly 10'000 hours playing video games and another 10'000 with an appendage cemented to a cell phone. Television has also played a surrogate role with 20'000 hours of sequestered entertainment, diminishing an already short attention span. Texting, another millennial phenomenon has the typical student sending and receiving over 200'000 text messages before entering college. To my surprise, most of my students started to laugh when I shared this with them last week, suggesting that the number was undoubtedly a good deal higher.

One complaint I hear time after time is how our millennials no longer possess adequate communication skills. They are communicating, just in a different way! During a recent in-service a sophomore student was able to answer an instructor's question by just using her cell phone. Not necessarily earth shattering until you consider the answer came in real time from a student in China, oh and it only took her 15 minutes. I'm not naïve to think that all this communication is pertinent to the global workplace, but according to the last U.S. secretary of Education, none of the top ten jobs that will exist in 2010 existed in 2004.

When it comes to computers the numbers tell a similar story. Over 70% of 4-6 year olds have some sort of digital access, with 68% of 1-2 year olds utilizing screen media for an average of two hours per day. As our fledglings get older the numbers only seem to increase. In a recent Educause survey of 27'000 college students found that 73.7% owned a laptop with 98.4% owning a computer of some distinction. An unexpected revelation found that only 50% of those actually used them in class.

I'm sure most of us would argue that we're doing our best to reach our students. Unfortunately the statistics depict a much different picture. The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that during the past school year only one out of four students graduated high school. Upon questioning only 28% of those graduates believed high school was meaningful, with 39% believing their education would have a bearing on future success. These numbers become even more disturbing when you consider these were comments from graduating students. What would the non-graduates have said? It's

shocking to note that Detroit and South Carolina have a 75% and 44% dropout rate. So do you still believe we are reaching our students?

Our students and children are growing up using digital technology as a conduit to define their very lives. They are connected on a global scale, communicating and searching at the speed of light. We can no longer ignore the elephant standing in the corner of the room. We need to find ways to incorporate this technology into our classrooms and curriculum, and connect to our students in a world that they are experiencing, not a world that we experienced, if we don't students will look elsewhere. Google has over 2.7 billion searches per month; conversely the average student only asks a question in class about once every ten hours. Their asking questions; it's just not to us!