Chapter 10

Critical Insights: Net Generation, Wikis, and Group Collaboration

Maureen Ebben
University of Southern Maine, USA

Russell Kivatisky
University of Southern Maine, USA

Daniel A. Panici
University of Southern Maine, USA

ABSTRACT

Harnessing the potential of technology for increased student engagement may be a key strategy of teaching and learning successfully with Net Generation students. Interactive technology, such as wikis, may serve to foster student engagement, collaboration, and learning. Yet, relatively little systematic classroom-based research demonstrates the effectiveness of wikis or articulates students' perceptions of its use, especially in the context of higher education. This chapter offers case study experience with wikis to address this gap, and offers critical insights about how Net Generation students perceive and use technology in learning. Three main questions are explored in this chapter: (1) What are students’ perceptions of technology in teaching and learning in general? (2) What are students’ perceptions of wiki technology in teaching and learning, specifically? and (3) What are students’ attitudes about group work and collaboration? Pilot data and post-wiki survey results suggest students have widely varying experiences with technology, and hold strong views about the use of technology in instruction. Five critical insights as to best practices for teaching and learning with wikis are offered. Results from this investigation identified three fascinating contradictions in student behaviors and perceptions regarding group work and collaboration that are ripe for further study.

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INTRODUCTION

“Digital natives,” “Millennials,” “Neo-millenials,” “the Net Generation,” these labels mark a generation for whom technology is both vital and invisible. Most student members of the Net Generation grew up experiencing communication as interpersonal, global, networked, and instant. For many, the world and its knowledge have, literally, been at their fingertips. They are a distinctive generation, known for their interest in learning and achievement, autonomy and self-direction, networked lifestyles, predisposition for collaboration and connection, and preference for learning that provides hands-on engagement (Barnes, Marateo Ferris, 2007; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).

Technology has afforded many of the Net Generation relative freedom and independence to explore their world and seek information, whether Skyping in real-time with friends from across the planet, trying out new identities in virtual spaces, or searching for answers about interests and passions. Further, some of the Net Generation possess a comfort level with creating and coordinating content, and putting it out into the world for others to view, critique, and share. They maintain YouTube channels, write blogs, moderate online discussions, co-create video animation, hold online contests, and engage in other collaborative activities.

What do these habits of technology use mean for teaching and learning with the Net Generation? While these are social uses of technology, the question becomes, how do Net Generation students use technology in their learning, and how do we, as educators, best use technology to enhance learning for Net Generation students?

Technology, Engagement, and Learning

Harnessing the potential of technology for increased student engagement appears to be a key aspect of teaching and learning successfully with Net Generation students. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2009) reported use of “interactive technologies were positively related to student engagement, self-reported learning outcomes, and deep approaches to learning.” Further, the report stated: “Students who use interactive technologies are also more likely to say their campus environment is supportive, and contributes to their knowledge, skills, and personal development” (p. 1).

Interactive technology, such as wikis, may serve as tools to increase student engagement and, hence, learning. When used in instruction, wikis may facilitate student interaction and involvement with course materials, encourage collaboration with others, foster digital literacy skills crucial for the twenty-first century, and help students understand and enact their roles as creators and critical users of knowledge and information (Hamid Chang & Kurnia, 2009; Hargadon, 2010; Shapiro & Gonick 2008). Walsh (2010) suggests there are three frequently ballyhooed benefits of collaborative technologies: improved student collaboration, the deconstruction of the authoritative structure characteristic of the traditional classroom environment, and the building of professional expertise. However, relatively little systematic, classroom-based research demonstrates the effectiveness of wiki technology or articulates clearly students’ perceptions of its use, especially in the context of higher education. Walsh (2010) argues that although many educators have been teaching with wikis and other collaborative technologies, “few have reported the results of these efforts” (p. 185). This chapter offers our case study experience with wikis as a way to address this gap in the literature. In addition, this chapter presents insights about how Net Generation students perceive and use technology in learning. Thus, this project explores both sides of technology use: the learning (student) side, and the teaching (instructor) side.

Three main questions served to animate this project: (1) What are students’ perceptions of technology in teaching and learning in general?
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