Chapter 18
The Net Generation Illusion: Challenging Conformance to Social Expectations

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ABSTRACT
The thesis of this chapter is that the Net Generation concept has become a powerful meme that influences professional education in ways that can be both distracting and disruptive. We explore the interactions between the Net Generation meme and medical education and identify points of consonance and dissonance between them. In doing so we present a critical response to the idea of a Net Generation, as well as its specific manifestations and impacts on the development of healthcare professionals. A digital professionalism framework is presented as a way to restore balance within medical education, as well as situating it within an increasingly digital social milieu.

INTRODUCTION
This book is predicated on the idea of contemporary youth functioning as a Net Generation (NetGen) that is somehow distinct from their predecessors due to their exposure to and facility with digital technologies. However, the ubiquity and validity of this model may not be as wide as it might seem. This chapter challenges the validity of this model applied to contemporary learners in health professional education. Although the contemporary learning environment for health professionals has undeniably changed following the uptake of digital media (both within professional practice and in its wider social contexts), we suggest that not only can the NetGen meme fail to represent the lived reality of many current learners, it can actively interfere with their education and professional development.

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Our position is not to reject the digital, but rather to find a positive accommodation and balance between the necessary aspects of professional education and the realities of life and practice in a digital society. This chapter is organized in three sections. The first appraises the evidence behind different NetGen models. The second considers the influence of the NetGen meme on learner and faculty habits and beliefs in health professional education, and it proposes a model of digital professionalism to help to address these challenges. We close with an exploration of how we can both improve learning and build better relationships with our technologies through critical appraisal of technological competences and their alignment with the needs of the educational and practice ecologies in which they are expressed.

THE NetGen MEME

We use Dawkins’ concept of a ‘meme’ (1976) as representing cognitive concepts and models that are transferred between minds and adapted across sociocultural contexts. The idea of the Net Generation has taken on memetic qualities; a complex mix of beliefs, interpretations and frames regarding generational capabilities associated with using digital media. More specifically, the NetGen meme is founded on a binary differentiation between a ‘digital native’ youth who are intrinsically able to function in new media environments and their ‘digital immigrant’ seniors who can only aspire to the same levels of ability. The analysis of a literature review for “Net Generation” (using ERIC, PsycINFO, and Academic Search Complete) returned multiple texts that, upon review, cited the same core references (Tworek, 2007). Table 1 summarizes the key texts that created the grounding for the NetGen meme along with more recent publications (Ito, Baumer, Bittanti, Boyd, Cody & Herr, 2009; Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010).

According to this review, the Net Generation idea is based on a mixture of research studies (e.g. Kent & Facer, 2004; Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2005, 2010 and Foehr; Howe & Strauss, 2005; Ito et al., 2009) and theoretical models (e.g. Prensky, 2001; Dede, 2005; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Whilst the theoretical works propose and perpetuate the Net Gen meme, the empirical studies, particularly Rideout et al (1999; 2005; 2010), indicate that although youth are spending more and more time with digital technologies, this is largely for entertainment and social purposes. Youth are not as a result intrinsically “media-savvy” and exposure to media does not necessarily equate with generative, creative or constructive learning outcomes. There are rich media ecologies among some (but not all) youth that cross home and school (work) environments (Kent & Facer, 2004; Ito et al., 2009). The subset of younger generation members who do develop some degree of expertise follows from particular areas of interest (such as photography, astronomy or car repair), where expertise is defined by an increase in technical competence with the tools of the domain (such as programming, audio editing or multimedia design). Considered thus, the NetGen meme is based on limited evidence.

Issues such as diversity of access, equity, attitudes, and depth of media use are obscured if the academic discussion is based on digital natives being intrinsically “able” and the digital immigrants “not able” to thrive in digital environments. There are other contributing factors beyond that of age. For instance, economic factors separate those with access to digital media from those who do not (Grant, 2007). While recent statistics show the economic gap between digital ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ is narrowing, it remains a concern (Statistics Canada, 2009; United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Attitudes towards technology do not fall along generational lines (Parasuraman, 2000; Caison, Bulmna, Pai & Neville, 2008). There are many youth who approach technology with discomfort and insecurity, and there are many seniors who are both capable and confident in digital environ-