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INTRODUCTION

The iGeneration

They have never known a life without the internet, let alone computers, and many don't know a world without mobile phones.

—Sarah Cornish, *Total Girl* magazine

For most of the students gathered in the Davis Drive Middle School library in the late 1990s, school could not have been more exciting. Invited by NASA to participate in a global project, small groups of eighth-grade scientists were following the orbital path of the space shuttle *Discovery* as it traveled around the world. Because the space shuttle's onboard cameras could snap pictures of landforms on Earth, student experts were responsible for using the Internet—a relatively new tool for teachers and students at the time—to track world weather patterns, geographical features, and daylight hours.

When students realized that the space shuttle would be traveling over interesting areas of our planet—the Horn of Africa, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Black Sea, the Aleutian Islands—during daylight hours on a clear day, electricity would ripple through the media center regardless of the time. Students would quickly write up a photo request form and draft an email to NASA. If the request arrived in time—and if it was not buried under a pile of other requests made by different student groups scattered across the United States—the reward would be a digital copy of an orbital photo, something no student of the '70s had ever experienced.

For Dan—the teenage project manager selected by his peers because of his obvious passion for all things digital—the entire project was an experience in frustration, however. “I can't believe how slow these pages load!” he'd shout at anyone who would listen. “If I was at home, I'd have this work done already, and we'd have a better shot of getting our picture requests in on time. The Internet at school just plain stinks.” No matter how hard his teachers worked to remind Dan that he was experiencing something new and unique—“*You're talking to the space shuttle, Dan. You couldn't have done that when I was in school. The Internet didn't even exist. Neither did the space shuttle!*”—he was inconsolable. He was, after all, standing at the leading edge of the iGeneration.

Whether you call them the Net Generation, Generation Y, Generation Z, the Gen Nexters, the Look-at-Me Generation, the Millennial Generation, the Echo Generation, the ADHD Generation, or the iGeneration, the students born between the early 1990s and the year 2000 have taken over our schools—and they are nothing like their predecessors!

Inheriting a world with nearly universal access to the Internet, *iGeners*—a term used throughout this text to describe the children of today's classrooms and tomorrow's workplaces—are almost universally plugged in. Earbuds hang from backpacks, and cell phones are stuffed into nearly every pocket. Instant communication has replaced listening to messages, streaming video has replaced waiting for television shows to start, Xboxes have replaced Ataris, digital images have replaced negatives, and high-speed connections have replaced the dial-up modems that nearly pushed Dan over the edge. Even emailing NASA—so exciting in 1997—would be considered old-fashioned by iGeneration standards.

iGeners see technology as a tool for participating. They follow the lives of peers electronically, posting messages, videos, and pictures for one another in social networking forums like Facebook and MySpace. They join together to tackle video games with players from around the world. They rate everything from their teachers to their favorite songs. They organize around causes and start online petitions. Where their parents and teachers see the Internet as a place for gathering *information*, the iGeneration sees the Internet as a place for simply gathering *together* (boyd, 2008).

Statistically speaking,

- 97 percent of college-aged iGeners own computers.
- 94 percent own cell phones, and 56 percent own mp3 players.
- 76 percent of iGeners use instant messaging for upwards of eighty minutes every day, and 92 percent of those same users report doing other tasks on their computers while engaged in conversations with peers.
- 59 percent of school-aged iGeners are already sharing their artwork, creating videos, designing Web pages, maintaining blogs, and remixing content created by others online.
- 55 percent have created profile pages on social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace, and 47 percent have posted images on photo-sharing sites where others could comment on them. (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Lenhart, Madden, Smith, & Macgill, 2007)

You know what the iGeners look like in your classrooms. They're the ones willing to experiment their way through anything, confident that trial and error can crack the code better than reading manuals or following directions. They're turning to the Internet first and the library second when assigned research projects. Their minds are working fast, but not always as deeply or as accurately as the adults in their lives would like (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).

To you, iGeners seem like professional infosnackers—flitting through sites looking for information that is easy to access, loading their papers with citations from Wikipedia, and filling their writing samples with Internet shorthand. Text-heavy passages intimidate iGeners, who are more comfortable with images and videos as sources for learning (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Graphic novels, manga, and magazines have replaced novels on the iGeneration's bookshelves.

iGeners are more emotionally open than anyone from previous generations. They're comfortable building relationships online, sharing the kind of information that makes their parents uncomfortable. They like working in teams better than working alone, and they use digital opportunities for interaction to try on new identities and personalities. The introverts in your classroom often become extroverts online, finding safe opportunities to connect with peers—both in their community and around the world. For iGeners, technology is less important than the action that it enables. They're passionate about networking with others; digital tools simply make that passion possible (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).

Portable—and instant—communication is what matters the most to iGeners, who crave interaction and tune out the teachers who aren't engaging or whose classes move too slowly (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Often bored in school, iGeners spend their days texting under their desks, snapping pictures and recording videos with their cell phones, and (im)patiently waiting for the bell to ring so they can plug themselves back in.

And if you're like many of today's teachers, the students of the iGeneration may have you completely frustrated!

The Dumbest Generation

For Dina Strasser, seventh-grade teacher and author of the widely acclaimed blog *the Line* (<http://theline.edublogs.org>), the technology-driven lives being led by today's students carry costs that few educators or parents have ever really taken the time to consider. Students who are constantly connected end up disconnected, Dina argues, losing out on "real" experiences with other human beings or the environment around them. Local issues become irrelevant to teens that see the world as their audience. Ignoring diverse opinions is easy online.

"My worry is the fundamental concept of aloneness the Internet fosters," writes Dina, "disconnected not only from each other, but from our physical world. In terms of our *actual* human needs . . . the idea that we are, and can exist healthily, completely under our own steam is a pure falsehood. It's that simple" (Dina Strasser, personal communication, March 30, 2008).

Tom Huston—the senior associate editor for *EnlightenNext* magazine—agrees, arguing that anyone under the age of thirty tends to swim in superficiality. "Members of my generation," he writes, "lock and load our custom iTunes playlists, craft our Facebook profiles to self-satisfied perfection, and,