Digital Kids:
Preparing Students for a Future We Can’t Predict

Kelsey Madges

EDT 786: Educational Technology

Professor Maggie Veres
Digital Kids:
Preparing Students for a Future We Can’t Predict

Bring up technology in education and you are likely to get a variety of responses. Some educators open the doors wide, beg for the new tools, and set right to work finding the most enticing and effective ways to put them to use in their classrooms. Some, as Ian Juke pointed out in his 2006 podcast, grudgingly accept technology and end up subverting it, by using technology tools to do the same old things they’ve always done. Some cross their arms and stamp their feet like petulant children, slam their doors closed, and raise battle cries of, “This is the way we’ve always done it!” and, “If it was good enough for me, it’s good enough for them!” It is time for us to decide which of these educators we want to be and we can begin by asking what we wish to offer our students.

A New Type of Learner

Whether we like it or not, the children in school today are not the same as we were. Their entire world is different. Today’s students are, “native speakers of technology, fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet,” (Prensky 2005, 2006, para. 4). We are teaching a different population of students and, in their way, they speak an entirely different language. Every waking moment of their day, children are faced with many modes of entertainment and communication vying for their attention. Tools we couldn’t have fathomed are accessed at the touch of a button, and new technologies become available every day. Marc Prensky points out that, “Every single student we teach has something in his or her life that’s really engaging – something that they do, that they are good at, something that has an engaging, creative, component to it,” (2006, p. 2). Schools are competing for their attention and it is time to take
advantage of technology to make the time in school just as engaging as the time students spend after school. This competition for student attention is not going to get an easier and yet our schools seem to be frozen in time. While I still believe in teaching our children to value education, I also think I’m going to have to get over the notion that children are going to pay attention to an irrelevant, uninteresting, archaic model of school just because they are supposed to. As Marc Prensky points out, schools must engage learners, or run the risk of enraging them (2006).

Knowing or Learning?

The body of human knowledge is expanding so rapidly, we cannot image that it is remotely possible to know everything. And with information so readily available, many traditional school assignments ought to be rethought. “Any number of old-school assignments – memorizing the battles of the Civil War or the periodic table of elements – now seem fairly absurd. That kind of information, which is poorly retained unless you routinely use it, is available at a keystroke,” (Wallis, Steptoe, 2006, p. 4). Does this mean that students should not study these topics? Of course not, but we need to adjust the angle, the approach; memorizing a list of Civil War battles does not mean a student actually knows anything about the causes or effects of the war. As Ian Jukes discussed in his podcast, we need to put the content in context, use tools for authentic tasks, and concentrate as much on the process as the problem (2006). Education should not be about how much stuff we can stuff into young minds; rather, we need to help students learn how to recognize problems, locate and evaluate information, and use what they’ve learned to offer solutions. “It’s time for education leaders to raise their heads above the
daily grind and observe the new landscape that's emerging.” (Prensky 2005, 2006, para. 1).

Who’s In Charge Here?

Teachers have traditionally been the gatekeepers to knowledge. Here is another area where shift is happening at an alarming rate. And, according to Ian Jukes, it all began when Gutenberg invented the printing press, essentially bringing books – and information access – to the masses (2005, p.3-4). Teachers must begin to rethink their roles. Students are so comfortable with media delivery and communication in a multitude of digital forms, but do they really know how to use the technology for learning? That is where teachers come in, and it is exactly why we need to see our classrooms as learning communities. Teachers and students can forge a partnership. Rather than marching out in front, the teacher must work alongside. If we make appropriate adjustments, “the learner decides when they want to learn, where it’s presented, and how it’s presented. The learner becomes actively involved in the process. This is a radical shift in thinking away from the traditional teacher/learner relationship and educational delivery systems must now increasingly adjust to the consumer,” (Jukes, 2005, p. 28). It is this part that teachers find so unnerving. Where do we belong if not at the front of the room?

Not only are teachers dealing with this shift in power, they also need to contend with the unfamiliar landscape of emerging technologies. To facilitate the accomplishment of content area goals and learn each new tool that comes along seems simply impossible. The good news, according to Marc Prensky, is that we don’t have to figure it out on our own; “As 21st century educators, we can no longer decide for our
students, we must decide with them, as strange as that may feel to many of us. . . Our brightest students, trusted with responsibility, will surprise us all with their contributions,” (2005, 2006, para. 12). We don’t necessarily have to learn everything about the tools, “Encouraged to share their expertise, students can be a teacher’s best resources for suggesting better access to technology, defining the kinds of technology that teachers should be using in the classroom, and showing teachers how they can use specific hardware and software tools to teach more effectively,” (Prensky, 2005, 2006, para. 14). Prensky’s vision for the role students can take in charting the course of their own education shows how powerful teacher-student partnerships can be.

Facing an Uncertain Future

We cannot deny that we are citizens in a global society, but with schools that look much like they did decades ago, are we preparing students for the connected world in which they will work and compete? As Catie Curtis sings, “This big blue ball is shrinking and I don’t know if that’s good / But for better or for worse now this whole world’s our neighborhood,” (2006). In his podcast, Ian Jukes implores us to consider what is best for our students’ futures and not for our own comfort zones (2006). Too often we are providing, “Yesterday’s education for tomorrow’s kids,” (Prensky, 2005, p. 3). In From Gutenberg to Gates to Google (and beyond), Ian Jukes quotes former Secretary of Education Richard Riley as saying, “the top ten in demand jobs for 2010 do not exist today – that as a result, we are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems that they’ve never been introduced to,” (2005, p. 28).
If our schools, in their current state, are not preparing students for the future they will face, then what should we be focusing on in school? In TIME magazine, Wallis and Steptoe suggest a set of 21st century skills students must have including: “knowing more about the world,” “thinking outside the box,” “becoming smarter about new sources of information,” and, “developing good people skills,” (2006, p. 2). We must teach a new kind of literacy, thinking skills which will help our future leaders navigate a maze of information and participate fully in our global society.

Where Do I Fit In?

I understand many of the things that make teachers reluctant to move forward in terms of technology and education. Change is difficult and often terrifying. Is there enough money? Is there enough access? What about the tests? How do we know we’re moving in the right direction? Despite these questions, I know we need to change.

Do I have it in me, I wonder, to be one of the “committed sardines,” (Jukes, 2005, p. 44)? I feel like I understand how critical the need for change in education is. I want to embrace new technologies and figure out the best ways to use them. As a future library media specialist I believe I will be in a position uniquely suited to help lead the charge toward a school that truly meets the needs of its children. I am energized by the words of Ian Jukes, Marc Prensky, and the many others who are committed to steering our craft in a direction which will truly prepare children for any future they might face. As educators, I know it is time to take the best of what we already do well and combine it with the opportunities technology will continue to afford us.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” -Margaret Mead
References


http://web.mac.com/iajukes/iWeb/thecommittedsardine/Handouts.html


http://www.time.com/time/magazine/printout/0,8816,1568480,00.html.