

THE CLASS OF 2022: How Will We Meet Their Needs and Expectations?

By Elizabeth Haynes

This year's kindergarten class will graduate in 2022, and recent history indicates that those 13 years will likely bring an ever-increasing pace of technological change. Those wiser and more knowledgeable have said that predicting technology that far out is an exercise in crystal ball gazing with about as much validity. However, if we look at the background that many of these children bring with them as they enter school, and at how technology is likely to change in the next few years, we can make some assumptions about where we are headed and how school libraries will need to reach out to meet their needs.

IT'S A HIGH-TECH WORLD FOR A KINDERGARTNER

What are some of the experiences these children have had by the time they entered kindergarten

this fall? How have those experiences shaped their view of the world?

- Some have never seen a videocassette.
- Many live in homes that do not have landline telephones.
- More than a third of them have a television in their bedroom (Vandewater, p. e1010).
- At least a quarter of them have used a computer on a typical day (Vandewater, p. e1011).
- Four-fifths of them live in households with at least one computer (Vandewater, p. e1010).
- They can (and do) learn to use a mouse and navigate easily on a computer to find what they need or want.
- They can use a remote control to operate a television or media player and can load CDs and DVDs.
 - A few already have their own cell phones.
 - Reading aloud/being read to is still valued by parents and children.

- Many have their own books.
- They enjoy listening to music.
- Almost a fifth of them have played console or hand-held video games (Vandewater, p. e1011). Even more of them play games on a computer.
- They expect their toys to “do something.”
(The figures given above are from 2007—the percentages likely would be higher today.)

We can debate whether or not the environment in which these children are growing up is a good one, but the fact remains that it is reality.

These children are immersed in a world of technology—even those on the wrong side of the digital divide almost always have access to television and are likely to live in a home with cell phones. This has shaped the way they view the world and expect to interact with it. But when they come to school do they find the technology they are used to? Should they? How do we, as librarians, provide instruction, materials, and access that capitalize on the knowledge that these students bring? How can we guide and instruct them in efficient, ethical, and fulfilling use of these technologies? How can we make our libraries educational yet relevant

and fun places for the post-millennial generation? The answers to those questions are determined by many factors, not the least of which are budgetary constraints, personal teaching styles, training (or lack thereof), and personal philosophies.

WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN TO BE A DIGITAL NATIVE?

Much has been written about digital natives vs. digital immigrants. But being a digital native is more than being able to learn and use technology intuitively. It also implies a mind-set, a “language” or “culture,” if you will, that those who are digital immigrants have a hard time learning and



“Being a digital native is more than being able to learn and use technology intuitively. It implies a “language” or “culture” that those who are digital immigrants have a hard time learning and understanding.”

understanding. A story related by Zevenbergen illustrates this. A six-year-old boy (in Australia) told his mother he was going to play cricket with the boy next door. This happened several afternoons in a row before the mother, who thought her son was outside playing, discovered that the boys were playing cricket on an Xbox. The boys’ conception of playing cricket was quite different from that of adults and involved digital interaction rather than physical activity (Zevenbergen, p. 25-26).

What does the future look like for these children in terms of digital technology developments? It seems relatively safe to say that mobile and hand-held technologies will become even more dominant. The development of cloud computing means that small devices will have access to applications and files that could previously only be stored on hard drives with hundreds of gigabytes of storage. Hand-held devices will be capable of meeting most communication, information, and entertainment needs and laptops or desktop computers may only be used for larger projects that require greater visualization than a small screen can provide. The day when textbooks will reside on electronic readers along with recreational reading titles might not be too far in the future. Wireless Internet access will become even more ubiquitous than it is now. These and other trends are discussed each year in the annual *Horizon Report*, which has a K-12 edition (Johnson, et al.).

IMPACT ON THE ELEMENTARY MEDIA PROGRAM

What does all this mean for elementary school libraries? As noted earlier, many librarians are constrained in their use of digital technologies by lack of money, school policy, Internet filters, aging equipment, uncertain connectivity, and other factors. However, these can be looked at as opportunities rather than challenges. Today’s students are used to interactivity—with their toys, on the computer, and in their games. Even low-tech activities can be planned to provide a maximum amount of interactivity and collaboration. Where possible, the use of high-tech tools such as smart boards, clicker technology, and online collaborative activities can be used. If Internet filters preclude using online blog and wiki sites, see if similar software can be loaded on a school or district server so that students can use them collaboratively. Activities

that incorporate problem-solving and require hands-on application extend the skills that these students have exhibited in learning computer navigation, playing digital games, and figuring out remote control technology.

Kindergarten and primary children can do more with digital technologies than you may expect. Kindergartners can learn presentation software such as PowerPoint. Using word processing software can enable younger children to write more easily and fluently. Educational digital games can hone problem-solving skills. Even younger children may be adept at interacting with simulated and virtual environments. Many are at home manipulating avatars, thanks to the popular Wii game system and other games. But the librarian also needs to design activities that are related to real life. The *Horizon Report* points out that real-life learning experiences don’t occur enough in schools. Such experiences need not always be high-tech. “Use of technology tools that are already familiar to students, project-based learning practices that incorporate real-life experiences, and mentoring from community members are a few practices that support increased engagement” (Johnson, et al., p. 7). And, of course, engagement leads to increased learning.

What will school library collections look like in the near future? One school in the news reacted to the challenge of ever-increasing digital technologies by totally doing away with books. Even the most die-hard “techies” in our ranks would find that solution extreme. But increasingly school librarians are changing from “keepers of the books” to information managers who assist students and teachers in finding and using information in the most appropriate sources and formats, whether print or digital. Hand in hand with that is our mission to promote “reading as a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment” (American Association of School Librarians, p. 21). It’s my belief that the hard-copy book will still lend itself to that goal for some time to come. Still, online information sources and the Google scanned books project may make many of our print information sources obsolete.

CHALLENGING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

As educators we cannot assume that these children think and learn in the ways that we thought and learned. In many ways their “culture” is alien to

us. It requires a shift in our own mind-sets to adapt our practices to meet them where they are and engage them in educational activities that will be meaningful. We must always be challenging our own assumptions about what is right or best for our students. The world in which they will grow up to live and work will be vastly different from anything we have experienced or, possibly, can even imagine. Yet we are the ones who are charged with preparing them for that world. It will take all of our imagination, creativity, and ingenuity to do so. 🌈

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

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