IT Training: Do We Have to Talk the Talk?

By David Starrett

Should we teach kids in the l33t Net language they use? ROFL!*

MY 12-YEAR-OLD SON sent me an e-mail the other day, full of acronyms, numbers, and punctuation symbols that looked more like a foreign language than like English. Such language is common for the younger generation; it's used in e-mail, chat, forums, etc. The same youngster will sit at a computer with multiple instant messenger windows open, an iPod blasting music to his ears, the TV running in the background, and a textbook open in front of him. This is his idea of doing homework. Diana Oblinger, a keynote speaker at the recent Syllabus2005 conference in Hollywood, CA, refers to him as a "Net Generation learner." Others use terms like "Generation-Y," "digital native," or "millennial student." Regardless of terminology, they are referring to someone born in the last 30 years or so, who has always or mostly known a life with computers. More importantly, growing up in a technology- enabled world impacts how these Net Generation students learn, and thus how we teach.

All of us live in a tech-enabled world, and so all of us are impacted by it as learners, as teachers, as workers, and at leisure. At **Southeast Missouri State**, we have begun using the term "21st century learner" to include those digital natives but also we digital immigrants who are influenced and impacted by technology in and out of the classroom. Students today communicate via cell phones, text messaging, e-mail, chat, and instant messenger. They "google" information, and thus have turned the name of a search engine's Web site into a verb.

These students are growing up "wired." They expect instant access to infinite amounts of information. They want it all; they want it now. More importantly, they learn differently, or at the very least, the way in which information is communicated and processed is different for a digital native. The advent of Google and the like have led to an expectation that the right answer will always be found, and in many cases, that it will be the first answer found. This does lead to a concern that while these students know how to get answers quickly, they are not as good at evaluating the accuracy, integrity, or validity of what they find. As such, information literacy has become a hot topic for educators who wish to instruct students on how to locate, gather, verify, analyze, synthesize, and recraft information correctly.

Twenty-first century learners have different expectations of teachers, of the content, of the delivery, and of access to that content. This leaves to the teachers to decide if we should adjust the way we we teach to meet their needs and expectations, and if so, how to adjust or adapt. Finally, if we do concede to the needs of 21st century learners, how far do we go to meet them?

Speak the Language

Communication is probably one of the greatest differences between this generation and previous ones. Multiple means of communication are available and utilized. Each method has its own rules, protocols and languages.

Modes like chat or text messaging require tedious and/or quick input. The use of acronyms (e.g., LOL to mean "laughing out loud"), phonetic characters and words (e.g., k for "OK," ic for "I see," afk for "away from the keyboard," etc.), numbers (2 for "to," 4 for "for," L8r for "later," etc.), and even emoticons (e.g., :-) for a smile) yield dialogue almost unintelligible to the rest of us. These mutations of English show up in e-mail as well, though perhaps to a lesser degree. E-mail etiquette has changed the rules regarding punctuation, capitalization, etc.; even verbal (as well as text-messaging) conversation via the telephone requires a different form of abbreviated English. Students, intentionally or not, expect us to be able to communicate in the same pseudo-language they have adopted. Failure to do so on our part may lead to poorer communication.

This doesn't mean we have to communicate in acronyms, but it may mean that a little effort on our part to understand some common chat language could pay off, as could simply being open-minded and flexible when having to read this eEnglish. On the other hand, it shouldn't require that we start trying to e-mail our students with excessive emoticons, acronyms, etc. By the way (btw), there are

dozens of online chat and/or emoticon dictionaries online (www.netlingo.com is one) that can be entertaining reading.

Aggregation and Wireless Expectation

Collecting material on a course Web site is another way to gear our teaching toward 21st century learners. Smaller units of information play to the information-processing approach these students take. Understanding that from the students' perspective, the answer to everything can be found on Google (and is almost always the first "hit"), can help us understand the origin of some assignment answers. It also provides us an opportunity to stress aspects of information literacy. Of course, certain technologies lend themselves to student expectations of instant information access, anytime, anywhere. Wireless connectivity, of course, is a key element here.

Tablet PCs are a useful 21st century learner technology, as are instant polling devices, PDAs, and the like. These can all provide personalized, convenient, and instant access to information during class time. Important characteristics of these devices are their interactivity and relative ease of use; both play into the hands of digital natives as well as digital immigrants.

What Are the Risks?

Are there risks in trying to adapt to the 21st century learner? That is, should we adjust our teaching to this new learning and communication style? Should we let the wants, needs, and expectations of this new type of learner totally redefine how we teach? Or, should we do "what's best for them," and not change how we teach at all? After all, the world they will enter is still (at least for the time being) dominated by us— the digital immigrants. Wouldn't it be better for students to learn how to deal with us and do things our way? The likely answer is that we need to meet these students somewhere in between, adjusting to their eLearning style, but maintaining some of the traditional approaches that we know are in their best interest

For instance, we can be more understanding and tolerant of their use of acronyms and emoticons in online discussions, yet still encourage them to use standard English to author a term paper. Yet, the facts are these: Today's college grads have little or no memory of a life without computers; non-traditional students have learned to utilize modern technologies in many aspects of their lives; and we, too, are providing technologies to enhance learning and the access to learning. We may be a bit slower in adjusting our teaching to meet the needs of students in the tech-enabled global community, but it's time to catch up. The 21st century learner is here. Are your faculty members ready to be 21st century teachers?