Teaching & Learning with the iGeneration

Perspectives, Strategies, and Ideas

John Roberto

Meet the iGeneration! The Internet generation. The iPod, iTouch, iPhone, iPad, iEverything generation. They are the first generation to have grown up with digital tools at their fingertips. They are immersed in a media-saturated, digital, Web 2.0 world. They can get the information they want when they want it, follow an idea in ways that have meaning for them, and jump from one thing to the next as the inspiration hits them. They value communication, collaboration, creativity, and community.

Matt Guevara, KidsWorld Group Life Director at Christ Community Church and webmaster at the Cory Center for Children's Ministry (www.corycenter.org) is a passionate evangelist for digital learning. He observes,

> Research makes it clear that the generation of children in our ministries today is vastly different than any other group of children the Church has sought to reach. They engage and edit media, experiment with culture, and experience community in new ways. They are fluent in the language of technology. They collaborate, teach, connect, and relate using a network of individualized digital tools. They prefer a unique learning experience with parallel processing, multitasking, feedback, and relevance. They navigate the digital world deftly and quickly. They blur the lines between the physical and virtual. They are open to the truth of God's Word.
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> It is clear that this generation is fundamentally different than any generation that the Church has ever faced. This generation requires agile leadership, renewed teaching and learning processes, openness to change, and creative resources. Such change will bring about a completely rewired children's ministry, poised to connect children to the community of faith, teach children the truth of God's Word, and help children grow in relationship with God.

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Larry Rosen, author of *Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn*, observes, "Little research has been done on these preschool and elementary school-aged children, but our interviews with parents of more than 2,000 of them show that they are embracing technology and media much earlier than their older brothers and sisters. To put it simply, children have grown up in an environment where technology is everywhere and much of it is invisible. Most children and adolescents have grown up with the largest storehouse of information in history—the Internet—and from an early age they learned to play online games, send e-mail to grandma and grandpa, and watch videos."

Rosen identifies several distinct traits of the emerging iGeneration:

1. introduction to technology, literally at birth
2. constant media diet
3. adeptness at multitasking
4. fervor for communication technologies
5. love of virtual social worlds and anything internet-related
6. ability to use technology to create a vast array of "content" (web pages, videos, art, photography, music)
7. unique learning styles
8. unique personalities: need for constant motivation, closeness to family, confidence, openness to change, need for collective reflection, desire for immediacy

It is precisely these unique qualities of the iGeneration that portend a new, invigorated attitude toward education. As long as educators understand how to reach these students through all of their technologies and media, they will devour new material as fast as it can be dished out. They *want* to learn, but our current teaching models simply bore them to sleep. Education should excite and stimulate them and it will if we made radical changes in our conceptualization of teaching and learning. This is a generation that learns differently, and unless we recognize and accept those differences, we will turn them off to education. They are ready and willing to be the future, but we have to engage them in ways that we have never imagined could be part of school. (Rosen, 49)

Part 1. iGeneration Learning Styles

The youngest generation in America may look pretty much the same on the outside, but inside they are different. Their brains are adapting to accommodate all the media and technology they spend so much time surrounded by. Many researchers say that they are actually neurologically wired differently than adults. Children are changing in very substantial ways, and they are no longer the people our educational programs were originally designed to teach

In *Understanding the Digital Generation*, Ian Jukes, Ted McCain, and Lee Crocket, identify eight learning preferences of digital learners.

1. **Digital learners prefer receiving information quickly from multiple multimedia sources.** Digital learners operate at twitch speed due to exposure to video games, hand-held devices, hypertext, etc., and as a result, digital learners have had more experience processing data and high speed information quickly than we have. Many of our teachers today haven't had that experience and, as such, feel comfortable processing at the same conventional speed they have learned and taught with all their lives. Imagine how the digital learner feels. After wandering the digital landscape while managing chats, updating Facebook, watching a video, and listening to music, students come to school and are confronted by the awesome power of the projector and the whiteboard.

2. **Digital learners prefer parallel processing and multitasking.** Digital learners like to multitask and absorb through parallel processing. They are comfortable doing several things at once. Multitasking is technically "continuous partial attention," and we all do it. We can be driving, listening to music, thinking about the day and looking at billboard. But with the digital generation, it all happens much faster. We were told growing up that the best way to study was to isolate ourselves from the outside world and its ambient

distractions, and focus solely on the task at hand. Walk into a child's bedroom today, and what do you see? He or she is working at the computer, burning a CD, doing homework, listening to music, and searching online, while managing 14 instant messenger conversations—and still bored.

3. **Digital learners prefer processing pictures, sounds, color, and video before text.** For generations, graphics have been static images accompanied by text for clarification. The images were there to complement the text. Today, advances in interactive digital imagery and animation has put the text into the secondary role. Since childhood, the digital generation has been exposed to TV, videos, and computer games offering high-resolution color images and expressive graphics with little or no accompanying text. These images are powerful enough to get the message across on their own. Digital bombardment has sharpened kids' visual abilities, which reinforces the point that today's students are primarily visual learners.

4. **Digital learners prefer random access to hyperlinked multimedia information.** Many educators provide information in a traditional way—linearly, logically, sequentially, and very left-brained. The digital generation is first to experience hypertext and "clicking around" in electronic applications. This new information structure has increased their awareness and ability to make new connections, freeing them from single-path thought. This is generally a good thing, but it can be argued that hyperlinking may make it more difficult for students to follow a linear train of thought. Their rationale says, "Why should I read something beginning to end and follow someone else's logic when I can explore and create my own?" The truth is that both sets of skills are essential. Following one's own path is important, but so is understanding someone else's logic. We must find a balance.

5. **Digital learners prefer to network simultaneously with many others.** When we were students, we were generally required to work and be evaluated independently of others. Out of school, the primary ways of communication were either face-to-face or by phone. Digital students have grown up with dozens of ways to communicate—cell phones, texting, email, blogs, social networking sites, and Twitter, just to name a few. They need and expect to be able to communicate with others using the digital weapons of mass collaboration.

6. **Digital learners prefer learning "just in time."** Educators are saying you have to learn this "just in case" it happens to be on an exam, "just in case" you might need it to pass the course, "just in case" you may want to become an engineer, or a historian, or a writer. Digital learners, however, want to gain an understanding of what they need to know, but they want to acquire these skills "just in time" to play a new game, play the piano, or something else they don't know how to do. "Just-in-time" learning is about learners having the skills and habits of mind that allow them to learn and adapt "just in time" for that next window of opportunity that opens up to them.

7. **Digital learners prefer instant gratification with immediate and deferred rewards.** Many educators prefer to delay gratification. The idea is that if you study hard and keep focused, you'll eventually be rewarded with a good grade or acceptance at a good school. Are you beginning to understand why digital culture resonates so strongly with today's kids? It provides them with what they need most. Just like we did, they want affirmation, attention, and the chance to distinguish themselves. Video games and digital technology tell the user that if they put the time in, they will be rewarded with the next level, a win, or a place on the high score list. What they do determines what they get. New technology is all about instant feedback, and the feedback is extremely clear.

8. **Digital learners prefer learning that is relevant, active, instantly useful, and fun.** Many educators are compelled to teach strict

memorization of curriculum content in order to prepare students for standardized testing. The aim isn't what it should be—cultivating the higher order thinking skills these kids will need when they leave school. The digital generation is often criticized for being intellectual slackers, when the truth is they are a very intellectual problem-solving group. In fact, many video games contain the complex thinking, spatial relationships, and problem-solving tasks they enjoy. The digital generation wants learning to be useful and relevant. They want to know what connection it has to their world. Most of all, they want learning to be enjoyable.

(Source: "Understanding the Digital Generation" Keynote Presentation, www.21stcenturyfluency.com)

Part 2. iGeneration Learning Experiences

Learning experiences for the iGeneration need to be experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style. Research is demonstrating that they learn more deeply when they apply knowledge to real-world problems and when they take part in projects that require sustained engagement and collaboration. Active learning practices have a more significant on learning than any other variable. The iGeneration is a creative and multimedia generation. They think of the world as a canvas to paint with words, sights, sounds, video, music, web pages, and anything they can create. Multimedia means using multiple modalities to reach these students. They are also a generation of "content creators" who live to create, and given the chance to do so they will merge multiple media into one complex but comprehensive whole.

- Integrate the eight **multiple intelligences** into learning experiences thereby provide a greater variety of ways for the iGeneration to learn: verbal-linguistic (word smart, book smart), logical-mathematical (number smart, logic smart), visual-spatial (art smart, picture smart), bodily-kinesthetic (body smart, movement smart), musical-rhythmic (music smart, sound smart), naturalist (nature smart, environment smart), interpersonal (people smart, group smart), and intrapersonal (self smart, introspection smart).

- Apply research on **learning styles** to learning experiences by incorporating a diversity of learning activities and methods in a learning experience, recognizing that some people learn best through direct, hands-on, concrete experiences, some through reflective observation, some through an exploration and analysis of knowledge, theories, and concepts, and others through active experimentation with the new knowledge and practices.

- Engage the iGeneration in **active, in-depth learning** through well-designed projects, problems, and design tasks that focus learner inquiry around central questions in the disciplines and engage learners in *doing* the work of writers, scientists, mathematicians, musicians, sculptors, and critics.

- Incorporate **project-based learning** which involves completing complex tasks that typically result in a realistic product, event, or presentation. Project-based learning is 1) organized around driving questions that lead the learners to encounter central concepts or principles of a discipline; 2) focused on a constructive investigation that involves inquiry and knowledge building; 3) learner-driven, in that the learners are responsible for making choices and for designing and managing their work; 4) authentic, by posing problems that occur in the real world and that people care about. Encourage the iGeneration to **create,** merging multiple media into one project or expression. Allow children to select the medium of the content: art, music, video, etc. Allow them to personalize the project.

- Engage the iGeneration in **collaborative learning**—working in small, non-competitive groups—where they can discuss and process together what they are learning, work together on projects and activities, and practice and present what they are learning. Learning spaces are organized for learners' participation in a "learning community"—recognizing that learning takes place in a social context and relies

on communication and interaction with others. Create group projects that are done face-to-face and through online collaboration using safe, membership-based virtual environments. Even the youngest children are using online social networks (such as PBS Kids, Club Penguin from Disney, Panwapa from Sesame Street, and MyGrapple from Group Publishing).

- Engage learners in **practicing** and **performing** what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities into the learning experience. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it.

- Develop **visual literacy** in all learners: learning to "read" or interpret visual images and learning how to use visual images to communicate. The need to learn visual literacy arises because images were relatively rare until recently. The rise of electricity made movies, television, and the digital era possible. Visual literacy includes: 1) interpreting, understanding, and appreciating the meaning of visual images, 2) communicating more effectively by applying the basic principles and concepts of visual design, 3) producing visual images using computers and other technologies, and 4) using visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems.

Part 3. iGeneration Digital Learning Tools

Over the last few years, our relationship with the Web has been changing dramatically. Simple new technologies like blogs and podcasts are allowing us to not only create content like text, audio, and video more easily, they are also allowing us to publish and share that content on the Web with very little effort. Instead of a "read only" Web, we're entering the age of the Read/Write Web, where contributing knowledge is as easy as consuming it. Here are several of the digital learning tools that you can use to engage children in creating, collaborating, and communicating. The examples focus on education in school settings, but they can easily be applied to faith formation with children in congregations.

1. Blogs

Blogs are one of the most popular tools of Web 2.0. A blog makes sharing ideas online as easy as sending an e-mail, and that's why today there is a new blog created every second. Bloggers don't need to know HTML or how to get their files online; they only need an Internet connection and something to say.

Blogs have a variety of uses and objectives. They can provide commentary on a specific subject or serve as a personal, online journal. Most blogs combine text, images, and links to other blogs, websites, and related media. Moreover, blogs provide their readers with the capacity to leave comments and remarks. They can be designated as private and allow feedback only from specified individuals.

Blogs are blooming in education classrooms all over the world as more and more teachers discover their potential as learning tools with students of every age. While many refer to blogs as simple online journals, in practice they are much more. They can be tools for peer collaboration, public or private conversation, reflective online portfolios, and lifelong-learning spaces.

Teachers and learners of every discipline are using blogs—to deliver their curricula, interact with experts and peers, and much more. There are history teachers whose students have hooked up with students half a world away to share ideas about the Holocaust; literature students who, with the author's participation, have created online reader's guides for the books they are reading; and math teachers who use blogs to post pictures of geometric shapes so students can identify and discuss their structures. In addition, some schools are building their websites on blogs, encouraging communication and collaboration among teachers, students, parents, and community.

To Get Started (Free Services)

Blogger: www.blogger.com
WordPress: http://wordpress.org

Examples of Children's Classroom Blogs

The Brainwaves (2nd Grade): http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=148947
Mr. C's Class Blog (5th Grade): http://mrcsclassblog.blogspot.com
Kindergarten Tales Blog: http://kdgroom102.blogspot.com
The Kinder Kids Blog: http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=51141

Mrs. Perry's Fourth Grade Class Blog:
http://mrsperrysblog.blogspot.com
The Year Two Smarties:
http://thesmarties2.blogspot.com

Examples of Blogs for Leaders

Catechist's Journey Blog (Joe Paprocki):
www.loyolapress.com/blogs-catechists-journey.htm
Children's Ministry Blog (Christine Yount Jones):
www.childrensministry.com/blogs/childrens-ministry-blog
Edutopia Blogs (various writers on educational innovation): www.edutopia.org/blogs
KidTech Blog (Matthew Guevara):
www.corycenter.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=40475
Ministry-To-Children Blog (Tony Kummer):
http://ministry-to-children.com
The Religion Teacher Blog (Jared Dees):
www.thereligionteacher.com
Weblogg-ed (Will Richardson): www.weblogg-ed.com

2. Wikis

We think of Wikipedia as the epitome of a wiki because it is the most familiar. Technically, a wiki is a collaborative writing space that allows users to read, add, and edit text and files. These files can include sound, movies, and even links to other websites. Children can post ideas and get feedback from other students with whom they are working. They can bounce ideas back and forth expanding or narrowing their original concepts. They can discuss their ideas, share research, and collaborate. And peer editing takes on new meaning when they can discuss improvements in real time.

Wikis are used in the "real world" (outside of K-12 schools) by people collaborating on projects or trying to share things online, such as family information and photos, technical information from users of a product, data from a research and development project, wine expertise, travel journals from abroad, club or specialty information, or projects like collaborative cookbooks.

There are a variety of uses for a wiki in educational settings:

- Resources: publish notes, articles, images, and PowerPoint presentations; embed video and audio
- Activities: publish activities for children to do on their own, with other children, and with their families
- Publish: products of the children's work: words, images, audio, video
- Group Projects: build collaborative pages, start discussions and encourage comments among the children
- Parent Outreach: post information just for parents and at-home activities for children and the whole family
- Student Portfolios: give children their own page to post content and share their work
- Expand Horizons: share and interact with other children or groups across town or around the world

To Get Started (Free Services for Education)

Wikispaces for Teachers:
www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers
PBWorks for Education: http://pbworks.com/content/edu-classroom-teachers

Information about Educational Wikis

TeachersFirst Wiki Walk-Through:
www.teachersfirst.com/content/wiki/index.cfm
Weblogg-ed (Will Richardson):
http://weblogged.wikispaces.com/Wiki+Links

Examples of Children's Wikis

Ms. Lew's Looney Land of Literacy Wiki (Middle School): http://mslew.wikispaces.com
Ms. Jensen's Class Wiki (6th Grade):
https://msjensenclass.wikispaces.com
Ms. Webster's Class Wiki (2nd-3rd Grade):
http://mswebster.wikispaces.com
Mr. Monson's Grade 5 Thousands Project Classroom Wiki: http://monsonclassroom.wikispaces.com
Examples of Educational Wikis:
http://educationalwikis.wikispaces.com/Examples+of+educational+wikis

3. Podcasts (Audio and Video)

Multimedia content creation on the Web increased at the rate of 3200% last year, and it shows no rate of slowing down. From audiocasts to screencasts to video, there are all sorts of ways that students and teachers can take advantage of the easy creation and publishing tools for podcasts.

Podcasting allows children to create audio and video content and distribute it on the Web. Podcasting (audio and video) can be used in a variety of ways:

- producing audio or video reports of projects
- research a topic and produce an audio or video podcast
- doing interviews with people, locally and around the world
- documenting observations on a field trip or museum tour
- creating and distributing a news show or a radio show
- hold a debate
- producing children-written and -read audio books, poetry, or stories
- creating a video to accompany a song
- writing a script for a drama and producing a video

Creating an audio podcast requires a computer, a microphone, and editing software, such as Audacity (free at http://audacity.sourceforge.net) and GarageBand (free with all Macs). The software will allow you to record your show, and then later on edit it. Get hosting for the podcast as it needs a place on the internet to be stored (free hosting at www.PodBean.com). You can even submit your podcast to iTunes, by going to the iTunes music store, and select "submit podcast."

Creating a video podcast and publishing it on YouTube involves making a movie using a digital camera, web cam, or cell phone. Edit your movie with software programs such as iMovie (Mac) or Movie Maker (Windows). Resize the video so it looks best in YouTube. The site accepts QuickTime .MOV, Windows .AVI, or .MPG files at 340x240 resolution. There's a 100MB size and 10 minute length limit. Create a YouTube account. Click on Upload Videos in the upper right corner of the home page. Create a title, description, tags, category, and set language. The more information the better to help people find the video. (To learn how to make a YouTube video go to: www.youtube.com/video_toolbox.)

4. Social Networking

Children are already using social networking sites. First they use them in "friendship-based ways." They stay connected to the people who they know in their physical spaces, such as friends at school, and people they meet through sports and activities. Second, they are using social networks to explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community. In these "interested-based" interactions, they are connecting to peer and adults outside of their physical spaces, people who they don't know but with whom they share a passion. They become at once teachers and learners in these spaces. In both examples, children engage in self-directed peer-based learning that looks very different from most of their experiences in school.

For an example of a children's social network go to **Panwapa**, created by the Sesame Workshop (wwwPanwapa.com). It is an interactive site where children explore the world and its various cultures through creatures and characters that Sesame Workshop is known for. Panwapa leverages the abilities of social networking while being designed from the start as a robust educational tool. It has a teacher's guide, printable activities, and online communities.

Creating a Social Network

Ning (www.Ning.com)

Ning is the leading online platform for the world's organizers, activists and influencers to create social experiences that inspire action. Ning offers an easy-to-use service that enables people to create custom branded social networks. With more than 300,000 active Ning Networks created across politics, entertainment, small business, non-profits, education and more, millions of people every day are coming together across Ning to connect around the topics they are passionate about. Although not specifically created for classroom use, Ning's personalization and privacy settings have been quite successful in education. Teachers can create their own private social network housed within the Ning site. In this way, the teacher can designate who is and is not able to participate in their social network. There are many great examples of schools and classrooms already successfully implementing these sites in the classroom. Ning has been shown to be

excellent for facilitating group projects using those tools.

Examples of Ning Education Sites
http://stjoeh20.ning.com (Marine Biology)
http://107voices.ning.com (English Class)
http://i-classroom.ning.com (History)

Edmodo (www.edmodo.com)
Edmodo is a free social learning network that provides a safe and open interactive space, where students and teachers can interact without having to share personal information. Edmodo is a social networking environment that is friendly for classroom learning. It is accessible online or using any mobile device, including Droid and iPhones. It provides a secure and easy way to post classroom materials, share links and videos, and access homework, grades and school notices. Edmodo stores and shares all forms of digital content: blogs, links, pictures, video, documents, presentations, and more.

5. Collaborative Learning

To engage children in working together on projects and activities, make collaborative tools part of your practice. **Sync.in** (http://sync.in) is a handy tool for collaborating on a document in real time. It's free and there's no registration required. One click opens a new page (with its own URL) where you'll see a chat window and space for word processing. Multiple authors can work simultaneously, and you'll see each other's edits and additions.

Google Docs, part of Google for Educators (www.google.com/educators/tools.html), is another useful resource for managing collaborative work. After students set up free accounts, they'll be able to access their spreadsheets, documents, and presentations anytime, from any connected computer. Students can use Google Docs to view and respond to one another's work while it's in progress. That's helpful for collaborative tasks such as doing peer reviews, sharing notes, or developing a project presentation together.

If students are working together on videos or other projects that are heavy on graphics, they may need a solution for sharing large files. **Drop.io** (http://drop.io) and **Dropbox** (www.dropbox.com) are two examples of file-sharing sites. Some teachers also use these sites for collecting homework and other student assignments.

6. Social Media

Creating a classroom back channel is a new-media strategy for inviting everyone into the conversation. Think of a back channel as a private chat room just for your classroom. When students use an instant-messaging tool like **iChat** or **Twitter** (twitter.com) for micro-blogging, they can pose questions, make observations while watching a video or student presentation, or share a dissenting viewpoint. To spark conversation, you might pose a prompt that students respond to in the back channel. The archived chat offers a valuable artifact that can help you understand what your students are thinking. Tools for creating a secure back channel for the classroom include **Chatzy** (www.chatzy.com). **CoveritLive** (www.coveritlive.com) is a live-blogging tool. (See also: "Thirty Interesting Ways to Use Twitter in the Classroom," www.edudemic.com/2010/07/the-30-newest-ways-to-use-twitter-in-the-classroom.)

7. Presentations with New Media

Once upon a time, being a good presenter meant polishing your public speaking skills. These days, students can choose from a variety of tech tools to help them craft a compelling presentation. **Glogster EDU** (http://edu.glogster.com/) is a classroom-friendly (ad-free) version of a popular site for making multimedia posters. "Glogs" can incorporate text, graphics, images, links, audio, video, and more. Because digital content can go deep and be organized in layers in these online posters, Glogster offers a useful tool for documenting big projects. The site also includes a showcase of student work.

Prezi (http://prezi.com) is an online tool for producing dynamic digital presentations. There's no software needed, which means students can work on presentations from any computer that has Internet access. Unlike other presentation tools that arrange slides in a linear order, Prezi starts with a blank page. You can move between elements however you choose—zooming in, changing directions, or creating new paths between features.

Imagine asking students to display their understanding of history, art, or a controversial current topic by selecting a few key artifacts and explaining their importance. **Museum Box** (http://museumbox.e2bn.org/) enables users to do

just that. Inspired by abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, who carried a box of props to support his anti-slavery speeches, Museum Box is a good fit for projects that ask students to make arguments and defend their choices.

If students are working on complicated projects, they may need help staying organized. **LiveBinders** (http://livebinders.com) allows users to create virtual three-ring binders and organize digital documents in one place. Students might create a single LiveBinder to present one project, or they can combine several projects into a digital portfolio.

8. Apps

Because they work on mobile devices, apps enable learning both inside and outside the classroom. From math games to vocabulary flash cards to anatomy visualizers, there's an app for every subject and every level of instruction — from preschool to higher education. Apps help personalize instruction, address a variety of learning styles, and create highly interactive classrooms. Since most students are familiar with the iPod (and iPhone and iPad) they can start using them right away. (Go to www.apple.com/education/apps for examples of apps for education.)

BCN Multimedia has created a Children's Bible app which contains comic books about the Bible for children of all ages. Every month you can read a new free episode of the Children's Bible in comic or buy the full comic books with all the episodes. The contents of the Children's Bible cover the most important passages of the Old and the New Testament. The Children's Bible is in 7 languages: English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese and Catalan. (For more information go to: http://itunes.apple.com/ us/app/childrensbible/ id341311361?mt=8#.)

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Websites

21st Century Fluency Project: www.21stcenturyfluency.com

Classroom 2.0: www.classroom20.com

Classroom Learning 2.0: http://classroomlearning2.csla.net (*Learn how to use Web 2.0 tools through tutorials on: social networking, wikis, video, podcasting, and educational game sites.*)

Cory Center for Children's Ministry: www.corycenter.org

Digital Catechesis: http://digitalcatechesis.ning.com

Edutopia: www.edutopia.org