

A Curious Thing Happened the Other Night

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A curious thing happened the other night. It was the first day of student-led presentations in my third year evolutionary psychology class. Several students had their wifi-enabled laptops open. I place the class PowerPoint presentations on the course website so that they can download them and make notes during class. From my vantage at the back of the class, I noticed that many had these presentations open, but that most had other screens open too. Some were working on assignments. Others were checking their email. Google was ubiquitous. Instant Messenger and YouTube appeared on more than one screen. All this non-class activity surprised me.

The scientist in me quickly came up with four hypotheses to explain all this activity. Hypothesis 1: Boredom. Students are so bored with traditional classroom activities that given the chance to seek outside stimulation they will tune out and log on. Hypothesis 2: Efficient Multi-tasking. The current generation of Millennials is so adept at multi-tasking that the parallel streams of entertainment, surfing, and communication do not interfere with their classroom learning. Hypothesis 3: Learning Enhancement. The students are enhancing their in-class learning by seeking other sources of information on the topic. Hypothesis 4: Intermittent Attention. The students are engaging in more than one of the above explanations but at different times: they listen when things get interesting; they surf when things get dull. I do not know which hypothesis is correct, but I am curious to find out. Researching it will not be easy. I've noticed that when I walk around during a lecture and peek at student screens, I catch the last milliseconds of a screen being minimized. Covert operations are happening under my nose.

Marc Prensky has a term for people raised in an age of ubiquitous technology: "digital natives". They are earlier adopters, better multitaskers, and savvier users of technology than their professors, who are typically "digital immigrants" (digital hippies?) in this strange new land. It is characteristic of digital immigrants that they speak with a digital accent. Here's a test to see if you have a digital accent: you've never used a [wiki](#) or edited one; you don't [blog](#); you haven't joined the 43 million users of [mySpace](#); you have no clue what [RSS](#) means; you think [Flickr](#) is spelled incorrectly; you buy an entire CD to get one song; you have a flashing 12:00 on your VCR; you still own a VCR.

I feel like a second generation digital immigrant. I was educated in the old world ways, but now I am an educator in the new. Recently, things seem to have gotten a little disorienting. For all I know, my students are writing salacious notes to each other or playing Internet poker while gazing at me, now and then, with faux concentration as I discuss in old fashioned linear narrative, the nuances of natural selection. The traditional hierarchy of expert professor and novice student has become destabilized. If a student asks me a particularly difficult question, they can now challenge my answer by researching other knowledge sources in real time. Or perhaps they will seek the answer without even asking me at all. If I say, Darwin said that natural selection is about the survival of the fittest, they can correct me by saying that actually it was Herbert Spencer who coined that phrase. I just confirmed that on Wikipedia.org. While there, I also

discovered that Spencer suffered from chronic fatigue, erratic sleep, stress, and underdeveloped lungs. Survival of the fittest, indeed. But I digress.

So what do all these observations have to do with the scholarship of teaching and learning? Just about everything. I don't know that educators have quite comprehended the subtle and pervasive shifts in knowledge acquisition happening all around them. I don't know that we quite understand the complexity and fluidity of technology-mediated learning styles. I don't know what effect all this is having on our learner's ability to focus attention and think long and deep about an idea. I don't know that we are fully utilizing the opportunities for rich and parallel learning that ubiquitous technology affords. Should such technologies be controlled or embraced? How should digital immigrants, with their digital accents, modify their teaching to enhance how digital natives learn? Simple answers are elusive, but I do know that the research findings will be provocative. In the meantime, I must end this piece - my email just alerted me to a new message.