

Due August 30, 2008

Multimedia and Internet @ Schools Nov. / Dec. 2008 Issue

Focus Groups with Young Learners: What are they really doing?

by Stephen Abram

How well do you know your young charges? What do your students do in their so-called spare time? How do they do their homework? Where? What's the environment like? Can you say with confidence what the PC penetration is in your classes or school? Is your visual picture of your learners doing their assignments, homework or papers accurate? How about your classroom colleagues?

These are important questions. I observe that much behaviour in the teacher-librarian, media specialist community is too often driven by opinion and no data. And every class, every school, every library club, every community, is, or can be, different. However, when we are attempting to empower our learners to excel it is incumbent on us to have an informed view of the technological our students. And, make no mistake there is a subterranean culture of students that doesn't always show itself to the adult world. I am a bi fan of the television animation series *South Park*. It captures this world of youngsters in a humorous but scary way.

So, I thought that I would invest time in this month's column on providing you with a starting point for checking out where your students stand in the technological spectrum. I casually and formally survey students all the time. I do this from the earliest grades right through secondary and higher education. I need to know

Surveying students

There are a few ways you can do this. You can ask a few questions when classes or groups visit the library. You can create and administer formal focus groups with randomly selected participants. You can ask kids casually as they enter or exit the library / resource center or out in the field. (A simple tally list on your desk might be enough.) You can test survey questions with your own kids or neighbors. There are inexpensive online survey tools like SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang. These have the advantage of doing the calculations and charts for you and save a lot of time! You could choose to do a whole school survey with these tools at very little cost. For all types of surveys you need to be aware of the ethical and legal considerations. Check and follow your school's or board's rules or guidelines. Sometimes you can arrange a partnership with a local LIS or teacher education program to help. I'm not suggesting that you go overboard.

Sometimes a few non-intrusive, informal questions will get you what you need. You just need to be that dog with a bone. Ask and keep asking. Keep notes. Consider having a survey question of the day on morning announcements and sent to the office with the attendance sheets. In a month you'll be twenty questions better informed in addition to demonstrating and modeling a research-oriented culture at the school.

So, as I encounter students of all ages, here are some of the questions I've been asking. I ask them a set of questions that to most probably seem just a question from an interested adult. Sometimes I focus on reading. Sometimes the focus is gaming, the web, searching, homework support, favourite websites, or whatever. I always do it casually and I never evaluate or criticize their responses or they'll clam up. Their reality and experience is valid and who am I to judge?

Communication

- How many of you have your own cell phones?
- How many of you text message or TXT on your phones?
- Have you got a favorite ringtone?
- Have you ever phoned someone for homework help on your cell?
- Do you have a personal phone number or use the family number most?
- Do you have a personal e-mail (which one – Hotmail, Yahoo Mail, Gmail, etc.), instant messenger address (AIM, MSN, etc.), Facebook/MySpace mail? How about your friends?
- What do you do most – call, e-mail, text or IM?

Technology

- How many of you have your own laptop? What do your siblings have?
- Where do you keep it?
- Do you have an iPod or other MP3 player?
- What music do you like? Where do you get their music? (CD's, friends, MySpace, websites, LimeWire, iTunes, etc.)
- How many PC's are there in your home?
- How many of you have access to the Internet at home?
- Do you use the web other places than at home (friends, relatives, school, public library, school library, clubs, etc.?)
- If you don't have it at home, where do you use it (friends, relatives, school, public library, school library, clubs, etc.?)
- How would you compare your friends or home PC's and Internet to the schools? The public library's PCs?

Gaming

- How many of you have a Nintendo Wii?

- PlayStation 3?
- PlayStation 2?
- Nintendo Cube?
- XBox 360?
- PSP?
- DS?
- GameBoy?
- Have you ever gamed or done a tournament at school, a club or the public library?

Social Networks

- How many of you play Club Penguin?
- How many of you play Webkinz?
- (Over 13) Do you have a MySpace page?
- (Over 14) Do you have a Facebook page?
- How many online 'friends' would you estimate you have?
- Do you know all of them face to face, in person?
- Have you ever asked or sought homework help online using your MySpace or Facebook?
- Have you ever had a song, TV show or website recommended to you through MySpace or Facebook?

Content

- What are your favorite websites?
- Do you use other search sites other than Google?
- What do you like / hate about Wikipedia?
- Do you have a favourite YouTube video?
- Have you ever watched a full TV show on a PC?
- Do you listen to music online?
- Have they ever created their own content online?
- Have they got a blog?
- Have they got photos online (Flickr, Facebook? MySpace? Where?)
- Have they posted music? Poetry? Lyrics? Video?
- Do they share their creations with friends? How?

Sensitive Topics (Handle with care)

- Have you every heard a story about anyone bothering someone through the Internet, e-mail, IM or MySpace?
- Have you every heard a story about bullying on the Internet?

The students can get all excited and star to shout out different websites, favorite games. Let it roll. Sometimes you just have to put the questions aside and see

where the journey takes you. The sample questions above are in now way an exhaustive list, they're just ones that I find useful to generate a conversation with kids and young adults. Then I can learn. The teachable moment is for me, not them.

Want to have some real fun? Administer (gently) the same questions to your teaching colleagues. Be subtle. Oooooooh! How prepared are the adults in our schools to understand the students current context. Are we ready? Is there a gap between them and students? Is there a perception gaps as well? Are we preparing students for the world they'll encounter or one that we imagine based on our own past experiences? Some schools are ready. Most aren't. It can get really interesting.

Now you can compare your results to national and local results. Check out the studies published on the Pew Internet and American Life Project website. From there you can see what the current surveys are showing for home technology penetration and by generation and demographic sector. I also try to post links to other research studies that I find useful on my blog, *Stephen's Lighthouse*. Just remember that average isn't normal. Your learners reflect their reality and that's what you have to build on as a foundation.

What does this have to do with libraries and education?

Everything! Understanding the learner and being learner focused means understanding the whole learner and their technology and social environment too.

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