A Vision for the Net Generation Media Center

By Doug Johnson

Doug Johnson has been director of media and technology for the Mankato (Minnesota) Public Schools since 1991. He is a veteran author whose works have appeared in books, journals, and magazines. Johnson serves on ISTE's board of directors and as a volunteer columnist for L&L.

My son Brady is different—and I mean that in only the nicest way. Born in 1986, he has never lived in a home without a computer, he began creating hyperstacks that sang and danced when he was five, and he had access to the Internet starting in elementary school. The computer to him is about as remarkable as indoor plumbing is to me. He is constantly "connected" by iPod, cell phone, keyboard, digital video camera, or game controller to the very technologies I too often find intrusive and puzzling.

Educators Diana and James Oblinger report similar observations about their own school-age children in the first chapter of the 2005 online book *Educating the Net Generation* (http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen/). They ask, Just what is it with these always-connected, multitasking, digitally oriented kids born since 1982, now commonly called the "Net Generation"?

The second chapter of the Oblingers' book sets out to answer that question by summarizing the findings of 30-some studies about the characteristics of this demographic, especially in terms of how they learn and how they relate to technology. It's an interesting and important read for all educators, but especially for library media specialists.

Some of the findings are not terribly surprising: 96% of Net Genners have gone online, and 94% have used the Web for research. They see technology as "embedded in society," a primary means of connection with friends, and helpful in solving both personal and academic problems. They spend more time using digital media than watching television. They seem more comfortable and adept with the newest technologies than the adults who surround them. These kids expect fast communication responses, tune out when things aren't interesting, and may be more visually than verbally literate. For them, technology is a tool for learning on any topic they choose. (Are you reading anything you don't already know from the media or from personal observation?)

What caught my eye was that the studies also showed another side of this group, one far less publicly acknowledged. Our current crop of students believes "teachers are vital," "computers can't replace humans," and motivation is critical in learning. They like group activities, believing building social skills is a part of schooling. They identify with their parents' values. And they are achievement oriented, feeling it is "cool to be smart." And although they are fascinated with new technologies, their knowledge of them is often "shallow." (Who actually maintains the computers in your home or school?)

Finally, the studies point to how this generation learns—or likes to learn. Our current crop of students with their hypertext minds like inductive discovery rather than being told what they should know. In other words, they want to learn by doing rather than simply listening or reading. They enjoy working in teams, on "things that matter," often informally, and not just during school hours. And given their quick response requirements, they need to be encouraged to reflect.

It is my firm belief that schools will be more productive if educators acknowledge the unique attributes and preferences of the Net Generation and adapt educational environments to suit students instead of trying to change their basic natures. So what are some implications for NG (Net Generation) library media centers?

To a large degree, media centers may be the most NG-oriented places in schools. Our information resources and access to it continue to move from print to digital, and the Net Generation is responding. In the September 2004 issue of *L&L* Donna Baumbach, Sally Brewer, and Matt Renfroe discussed "What Should Be on a School Library Web Page?" Their article dealt with this shift in detail. General categories of information resources that should be on the "virtual" media center's Web site included:

- online catalogs for not only your school media center but also other libraries your students might use
- reference resources and assistance
- curriculum connections
- literacy connections
- general information about your media center

It's a given that NGs are drawn to digital resources and we need to provide them, but two other areas also deserve attention if we are to meet all the needs of today's kids.

The Physical Facilities

Although many students today are connected virtually using cell phones, IM, and e-mail, they still congregate at local coffee shops, malls, and movie theaters. Online presence has not replaced physical presence in these kids' lives. Does this mean the media center as a "room" in the school is still important to the NGs? I believe yes, as long as we can answer the question of what will keep it relevant to them.

Given their preference to work in groups, the NG media center should provide spaces for collaboration on school projects and socialization. It should contain the tools necessary for the production of information, not just its consumption—computers with the processing power and software to edit digital movies and photographs, scanners, and high-quality printers and projection devices—and, of course, assistance in the use of these tools. Networking hardware and those employees who maintain it also need a home, and the NG media center can provide it; most media centers have a central location in the building and secure spaces. It could be the hub of the school, not just philosophically, but physically.

And taking a lesson from today's bookstores, the NG media center should provide spaces where kids and teachers want to be. It should have comfy chairs, and be a friendly atmosphere, low-stress, safe, and forgiving—and yes, in high schools, an in-house coffee shop. Spaces for story times, puppetry, plays, and games along with computer stations with age-appropriate software and Web sites are just as important in elementary schools. If the "room" is not a wonderful place to be, students and teachers will stay on the Internet or in the classroom. Period. (And given the rise in online schools, is there a lesson here for classrooms as well?)

In creating what is commonly being referred to as the "hybrid library," we can't ignore either the electronic or physical resources we offer students.

In my column in the December/January 2005–06 issue of *L&L,* I'll continue this discussion, examining the attributes of NG media specialists and the learning opportunities they provide. Stay connected!