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Think Students are Technologically Savvy? Control-Alt-Delete That Idea

by Kevin Brown

The trend in higher education these days is to speak of students' technological skills as if they are worlds different from those of us who actually teach them. We are the dinosaurs who do not understand how to maneuver in this brave new world of technology, while they are the evolved birds who will live on into the future, singing not their own song, but the one that is on their iPod. Part of this assumption is correct; our students do embrace and use technology in ways that previous generations did not. As Marc Prensky (2001) writes in "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants", "Today's average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV). Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives". However, while they use these technological tools almost constantly (or so it seems), they have not truly learned how to actually operate them, nor can many of them actually use other basic technology, such as word processing software.

While students use tools, such as email and the Internet, on a regular basis, they have no idea how to use them for academic purposes. While debates about Wikipedia rage, and English professors and librarians alike wring their hands at students' lack of information literacy skills (rightfully so, by the way), there is a simpler problem when it comes to students using the Internet. Most students simply know how to go to Google (or whatever search engine is popular, as students have no stake in those debates) and type in the phrase they have written out for their topic. They have no idea how to narrow searches down by domains (or even what a domain is, in most cases), how to use synonyms to find different results, or even how to use the Similar Pages link that might lead them to pages that are, sometimes, similar. Students may know to manage their MySpace page and even be able to paste HTML code with the results of a survey that shows them which character on Lost they are, but that does not mean that they know how to use the Internet.

The same argument could be made for email or even television and movies. Students are always amazed when I tell them that they can use email to get in touch with scholars across the world to find out more information about their topics, and they seem to have no idea that one can actually find examples on television shows that they watch weekly. Granted, it is our job to teach them how to "read" the media, but a useful first step would simply be to acknowledge that it needs reading in the first place. Too often, we simply let them use technology in their writing and thinking without showing them ways to

do so. Similarly, we assume they know about technologies that we take for granted, such as word processing software.

Let's begin with a story about the dinosaurs, those who came of age long before computers could fit on a desk in their offices. When I was working on my Master's degree (1992), the English faculty had just received the first computers in their individual offices, as opposed to a few central computers that they would all share. The graduate director sent someone down to pull me from a class that, thankfully, had not yet started to help him with his computer. One of his files, it seems, had simply disappeared, and it was not saved anywhere, he claimed. Of course, what had happened was that he simply opened a new document, so that it appeared that the other document had disappeared. I pulled it up for him with no problem.

Now let's contrast his struggle with that of a high school student in 1998 at a private, college-preparatory school. He came to his creative writing teacher, saying that his document had been lost and that he couldn't find it anywhere. The teacher went to look at the computer and, indeed, it appeared the file had been lost. The student had not opened a new document, but the screen was completely blank. It turns out that the Enter key had simply become stuck for a few moments, causing the document to have numerous blank pages at the bottom, and the student never scrolled back up to look for the text.

The similarities are so obvious as to need no explanation. However, one may argue that the latter event happened in 1998, almost ten years ago, long before the generation we currently teach, who grew up much more computer literate than the high school students I taught. While it would be nice to think so, our students today are just as inept at using basic programs. For example, whenever I teach our Freshman composition courses, I have to take time to show students how to insert page numbers into Microsoft Word, and most students are completely baffled when I show them how to put their last name with that page number. Perhaps I should simply show them one way to do it, but I always show them two, just to give them options. Their brains are much more in tune with technology, so I assume they can handle it.

Of course, I'm assuming that students even have their documents in a program, such as Microsoft Word, that our computers will read. I get students in my office every semester who tell me that there are no computers on campus that will read their paper. When I try to open it, and I see that they are using Microsoft Works (an oxymoron, if ever there were one), I explain to them that the two programs are not compatible. I might as well be talking in HTML code because they have no idea what compatibility means.

What students know how to do is to use today's technology to communicate with their friends and find basic information that suits their purposes, not ours, and I would like to believe that the purposes

of our classes are different than the purposes of their social lives. In the same way that I do not want students writing in the language of text messaging (and, yes, that has happened), I do not want them to believe that today's technology can only be used for socializing. If we continue to assume that they already know how to use technology and do not truly teach them to engage it, then we have left them with the narrow view of the world they came into college with. And we're all trying to delete that.

References

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Kevin Brown currently resides in Cleveland, TN, where he teaches English and writes. He has published poems and articles on movies and literature in Academe, The Clergy Journal, Jeopardy, Pinyon, The Pacific Review, Nebo, h2so4, 24framespersecond, and Eclectica, among other journals. Kevin Brown <kevinbrown@leeuniversity.edu>

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