Blue Collar Technology, White Collar Burden: The Gap between Students and Teachers in the Use of Everyday Technology

Leanne Roberts, M.Ed.
Ron Hayes
Ryan Nigro
Mercyhurst College

As the American education system enters a new century, the prevailing view among teachers and administrators is that technology has become and will continue to be an essential component of a well-rounded education. The burgeoning body of research on the many issues involving technology in the classroom goes far in examining teacher-centered, pedagogically-oriented themes. However, comparatively little research has been done to explore the technology gap that currently separates students of today from their teachers and the ramifications of such a gap on educational outcomes. In this poster presentation the authors will consider the comparatively unexplored phenomenon of “everyday technology,” i.e., the Internet, mp3 players, handheld video games, digital/video cameras, instant messaging, and even cell phone options like cameras and games, commonplace among students yet alien to many teachers. We will address the onus current teachers must put on themselves to become fluent not only in the lingo of teen technology, but in the function, operation, and overall role of such technology in the lives of their students.

As child psychologist Ruth Peters notes in her recent USA Today Op/Ed piece, “[t]he bold promise that the Internet would greatly improve children’s lives now seems questionable on the surface, at least.” Citing unsettling headlines involving the predatory pitfalls attendant in Internet usage along with survey statistics delineating percentages of parents unhappy with their children’s online habits, Peters’s assertion isn’t that the Internet is dangerous but rather that the greater risk lies in parental overreaction to such disturbing statistics (Peters, 2003). The message clearly is that the Internet has a place in the classroom: it is a tool to be exploited and, like any tool, is inherently hazardous in the hands of the inexperienced, specifically children. But the importance of the Internet to students, as a tool certainly, but also as entertainment, is educational capital often wasted or misspent by uninformed teachers. Strategies that incorporate technology kids already know how to use, such as surfing the Web to complete a WebQuest for example, are quickly becoming recognized as best practices in many academic circles.

Similarly, the ubiquity of cellular phones, mp3 players and instant messaging programs has brought technology to the forefront of students’ lives. In short, the ease with which a great many of today’s student population can program a cell phone or find and download an audio file of their new favorite song demonstrates a definitive permeation of technology into the fabric of students’ lives. Suggestive of Howard Gardener’s theory of Multiple Intelligences, the savvy with which young people manipulate new technology is akin to the kind of “second nature” intuition one develops in learning to drive an automatic transmission. Unfortunately, too few teachers share this trait with their students. More often than not the person in charge of the classroom can fully comprehend the mechanical steps necessary to drive down the street in a five speed but are struck dumb when asked to define Napster, much less discuss the ethical and legal
issues incumbent in a technology-based case that yet today has the makings of an excellent social studies lesson.

This poster presentation will limit its focus to four primary components of technology popular among American high school students: instant messaging, use of the Internet as entertainment as well as research, mp3/digital audio players, and cellular phones. The poster will include the results of a survey conducted among teachers in Erie County, Pennsylvania in which urban, rural, and suburban educators rated their knowledge of and familiarity with technologies identified by this study as commonplace among school age children. The purpose of the survey will be to substantiate the assertions made in this project and to suggest a means of making the everyday technology that remains so readily accessible to today’s student body equally accessible to educators in classrooms everywhere.