

Bridges to the Digital Classroom in Small Schools

Rob Parker, Teaching Principal, Bella Coola Adventist Academy, Bella Coola, BC

Today how do you reach the students in your classroom? Can you compete with TV, Wii, and the internet? Marc Prensky, in his 2001 article *Digital Natives Digital Immigrants* (<http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/default.asp>), points out what may be the biggest problem we are facing in education. “. . . *our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language.*” How do you reach out to these “digital natives”? How do “digital immigrants” communicate with their students? We have to accept that today’s students learn differently. We have to look for ways to add excitement, to add engaging projects.

What is a “digital native” and a “digital immigrant?” A digital native is someone who has grown up in the digital age and speaks and learns the way a computer works. These “natives” have the ability to multi-task, learning material over a broad spectrum but narrow in depth. A digital immigrant is someone who does not multi-task as well and has had to learn how a computer works. They learn less broadly but in much greater depth. A digital native is a first language user while a digital immigrant is a second language user. No matter how much digital immigrants learn, they will always have an “accent” which will be noticed by the digital native.

Today’s students don’t learn in the same way that their teachers did. Digital natives are not attracted to the traditional pen and paper book learning that their digital immigrant teachers grew up with. How do you adjust the required learning outcomes that we are expected to teach when we don’t speak the same language as our students?

In addition to the learning differences between today’s students and teachers is the time required to plan creatively in a way that would make the learning environment a vital and engaging place. We may not have the time to adjust how we teach so that everything is presented using the latest technology. One way that works for me is to assign fewer worksheets and more projects, which has the benefit of not always needing to be high-tech. Each year I look for more activities to add. The bonus for the busy teacher is that while the student is engaged in deeper learning there is less paperwork to grade. As a part of most projects, I have students do research on the internet. It amazes me that they will resist reading 5 pages in a textbook but will gladly read more online (which proves that I am a digital immigrant)! While doing so, they talk to each other, pointing out what they are learning to other students; in other words, they are engaged in active learning.

To encourage my students to share while they are learning, I often let them work together while working on their own project. This way they learn about the projects of their peers as well as their own. You can also let them work in small or large groups. For example, one project I have my students do is to divide into 2 groups then choose an ancient culture we have been studying that year. Each student is responsible for a part (i.e., culture, food, government, etc.) and produces a researched paper. The group then decides how to present the project. Ideas for presentation include costumes, food, pictures,

images, backdrops, music, drama, etc. For students who are more digitally savvy, PowerPoint, blogs, or wikis would be great options. Finally they complete self and group evaluations.

Not all projects have to have digital components in order to engage students, however. Last year I borrowed a project that had been done at my school by Mrs. Cove. The students made and then took care of sugar babies, babies made out of sacks of sugar. They had to take care of their babies for a month, daily journaling about the project. They looked into what babies need to eat and how to take care of them. They wrote up a budget showing how much it would cost to take care of a baby. They were evaluated by their teachers, parents, and by themselves. We even brought one student to “family court” because he was abusing his sugar baby. The court ruled that he had to check in with a “social worker” and had a foster family care for his baby for a short period. I was very impressed by how well the students did. Even the student who didn’t want to be involved realized a lot about what it takes to take care of a baby. Again the students were actively involved in the learning process.

Traditional projects, such as science fairs, can be adapted as well. Last year, in addition to a science fair, we had a social studies fair. Students prepared projects chosen from the curriculum they were learning that year. They prepared reports, backdrops, food, art, etc. We then invited community to come out and check out the projects. The students stood next to their projects, talked about what they had learned, handed out food samples, and answered questions. I even had a student present a demonstration on how to wear a sari. Again I had active learning participation by my students. The beginning of this year had my students asking if we can do the social studies fair again. The fair is not scheduled until June and they are already thinking about what they can do this time.

These kinds of projects require lots of preparation. What is it that you want your students to learn? What will the final project look like? Preparing a rubric ahead of time so the students know what is expected is a good idea. It is also wise to involve them in the evaluation process, evaluating their own work and that of their peers. Finally, whenever possible, involve the parents. Taking the time to plan the projects will save you time in the end when it comes to marking the busy work that we often have our students do. Look for new projects and keep the projects that have worked in the past. Evaluate how the project is working. Does it engage the students? Are they becoming involved in deeper, more profound learning?

The kind of work we do in the classroom is not easy. It takes time, energy, commitment, and more time. And today’s “digital natives” require us to change some of our traditional methods to reach these students that God has placed in our classrooms. We need to explore different ways of teaching the same material? Is there a game that can teach the math concepts? Can you have your students blog during Bible class or make a wiki for social studies. While the challenge is sometimes daunting, the rewards for moving toward the use of more and more technology and adjusting how we teach in the classroom are vast. It could be the difference between our students just making it and truly succeeding in their education and their preparation for the future.