

Thriving in Academe

Humor and the Net Generation

We need to get on our students' wave lengths

BY RONALD A. BERK, THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Effective teaching is all about the students—their world, their characteristics, their multiple intelligences and learning styles.

Today's (Inter)Net Generation of college students is so sophisticated with technology that they have been branded as *digital natives*. They are "native speakers" of "digital," the language of computers, video games, and the Internet. They have wires coming out of every part of their bodies, attached to MP3 players, iPods, iPhones, PCs, and all the other tools of the digital age. Faculty are the ones without the wires.

What are students doing with all of this equipment? Yup, you guessed it—they're selling them on eBay. WRONG! They're listening to music, playing PC/video games, talking on iPhones, sending e-mails or text messages, and watching videos and/or TV—typically, all at

the same time. They spend 6.5 to 11 hours per day multitasking.

Instructors, on the other hand, are *digital immigrants*. They have one foot in the past and "digital" is their second language, as they learn, fumble, and struggle with it on the fly. For example, *immigrants* may print out an e-mail or even phone someone to see if he or she received their e-mail. Do you know any colleagues like that?



MEET RONALD A. BERK

What a challenge: *Digital Immigrant* meets *Digital Natives*! YIIKES!! That's scary? And this generational gap will widen with time. What's an instructor to do? Stick around, read this article, and your teaching life, as you now know it, may change forever.

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Tales from Real Life

SEARCHING FOR YOUR UNDERGIRD

Thirty-two years ago, I began using humor in my teaching. Let's be clear. I have never been a stand-up comedian, musician, singer, or Broadway performer. So how did I come up with theatrical techniques for my Johns Hopkins classes? I'll explain. As it turns out, they also undergird the strategies for teaching the *Net Generators*. Ah ha. The plot thickens!

After a stint in the School of Education, I moved to the School of Nursing for a midlife jolt. Soon, it was close encounters of the jolt kind: my clinical skills were rated, on a scale of 0–10, a big fat goose egg. How was I supposed to develop statistics problems with clinical applications?

My solution: make them up. Drawing on my fertile imagination and twisted mind, I created humorous diseases, medications, body parts, and bizarre, but realistic clinical trials. The music, games, parodies, and dramatizations followed. Biostatistics met Broadway and the trajectory of my career changed forever.

My research that followed gave these methods a smidgen of legitimacy. The evidence reported in my articles and books established the links between students' characteristics and multiple intelligences AND humor and multimedia as teaching tools.

I confess that my methods were created initially to cover up my incompetence in clinical knowledge. I've been totally ashamed of this for 19 years, but it's amazing what can result serendipitously from incompetence and scrambling for ways to cover it up.

—Ronald A. Berk
The Johns Hopkins University

Techniques that Connect with Net Geners

Leverage the multimedia resources in your students' world to generate motivation, interest, and attention for them to learn new material from our world.

The *Net Geners* learn differently from previous generations. The latest research indicates these students (1) learn by inductive discovery, (2) are intuitive visual communicators, (3) crave social face-to-face interaction, (4) are emotionally open, (5) respond quickly and expect rapid responses in return, and (6) shift attention rapidly from one task to another. They function at "twitch" speed, thanks to their video game experiences, mastering complex tasks and making decisions rapidly.

However, in school, guess what? Nearly 50 percent of college freshman report they are "frequently bored in class." Unless your course content or activity is on their radar screen, it's as exciting as goat cheese. They live in a complicated remixed, digital, mobile, always-on media environment, albeit, a world of media overstimulation.

Instructionally, these students eschew traditional "talking head," lecture-driven, text-book-based teaching methods. Instead, they want interactivity, team work with active, participative, visual, collaborative, fast moving, quick thinking, rapid responding, emotionally freeing, spontaneous, combustible experiences. A learning environment with anything less will be borrrrrrring.

As the lyrics to the Peabo Bryson and Regina Belle hit song from *Aladdin* tell us, we are entering:

A whole new world
A new fantastic point of view
No one to tell us no
Or where to go
Or say we're only dreaming ...

Your students' world is not better than or inferior to yours; it's just different. When they cross the threshold of your classroom door, they enter culture shock. They're numb with understimulation. How can you or any instructor possibly compete with their world? You can't. The trick is to leverage their worldly elements in your classroom.

Criteria for Picking Teaching Strategies for Net Geners

In picking teaching methods or designing any learning activity for these students, four criteria must be addressed: (1) their world, (2) their characteristics, (3) their multiple intelligences and learning styles, and (4) your standards for quality.

1. Draw on Your Students' Multimedia World. You have to get into your students' noggins and think like them, find out what makes them tick, and view how you teach from their perspective, through their eye-sockets. That means using the music to which they're listening, the videos and TV programs they're watching, and the games they're playing. These activities are driven by their interests and passions as well as their gifts and abilities.

Only by knowing what's in their world will you be able to connect with them, draw on their interests and what they already know, and extend their knowledge base. Pick media sources the students recognize. That information furnishes the connection between their world and the content you need to cover.

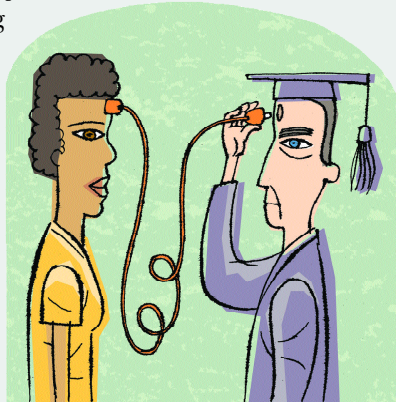
The easiest and fastest method to obtain this information is (are you ready for this answer?): ask them. Conduct a formal survey online or in class at the beginning of the semester, preferably in the first class. The survey takes about 10 minutes.

Pass out two or three 3 X 5 cards to the students. Have them number them. Tell them: "On side one, write your three favorite TV programs; on side two, your three favorite movies seen over the past six months; on side three, your three favorite pop music choices; and on side four, your three favorite Broadway shows." Collect the cards.

Now compile the students' choices. Take side one and create a frequency distribution of the top 10 TV programs. Do the same analysis for the other three sides. The distributions will yield four top-10 lists. This pool is an accurate inventory of potential instructional material from your students' world.

2. Be Sensitive to Your Students' Characteristics. This criterion relates to salient socio-demographic characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, language-dominance, occupations, and whether they're Boston Red Sox fans. You REALLY need to know your students. These characteristics are a must consideration in choosing the right humor, music, videos, games, and other teaching resources. They must be appropriate for your students.

3. Tap Your Students' Multiple Intelligences. According to the latest neuropsychological research, every one possesses 8.5 intelligences and a unique intelligence profile. Traditionally, the content faculty teach is verbal or quantitative in form. Instructors teach English literature verbally and statistics quantitatively. That's the easiest for the instructors, but not necessarily the easiest for



the students to learn. Every student has strengths and weaknesses, and, for example, if Brunhilda isn't strong in quantitative ability, she will struggle in her statistics courses.

Fortunately, students have other abilities or intelligences, including visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal and intrapersonal (equivalent to emotional intelligences), naturalistic, and environmental intelligences. Brunhilda's strengths may lie in visual/spatial and musical/rhythmic, especially opera.

If we could teach by drawing on these intelligences AND quantitative ability, think how much more effective we could be with Bruinhilda. In fact, if instructors adopted this "pluralistic view of the mind," probably every student could succeed in every course. This approach builds on students' strengths first and then develops their weaknesses. Those strengths are their learning styles.

4. Set Standards of Quality for Teaching Strategies and Resources. A portion of the humor in the media, pop music lyrics, movies, and video games students are exposed to contain inappropriate language, offensive content, and/or violence. You need to set criteria for what is appropriate in a teaching-learning context. Prominent areas of concern relate to profanity; obscenity; and put-downs or ridicule of females, racial and ethnic groups, professions, politicians, and celebrities.

We use humor, music, videos, and games to facilitate learning, not impede it. A student who is offended by a joke or clip

will withdraw and fester anger. "Offensive" is a very personal reaction by each student based on his or her own values, beliefs, and principles. Make every effort to reject material that is potentially offensive.

Humor and Multimedia Teaching Strategies for *Net Generations*

There are five major categories of teaching techniques that can match the preceding criteria and promote state-of-the-art teaching strategies for the *Net Generations*:

(1) **humor**, which can foster the instructor-student connection and bring dead, boring content to life;

(2) **music**, with lyrics or instrumental, which can create excitement in introducing topics, demonstrations,

and parodies;

(3) **videos**, using clips from TV programs, movies, and YouTube, which can illustrate concepts, theories, and practical applications;

(4) **games**, real and parody versions that can engage students in learning concepts and reviewing content for exams; and

(5) **improvisation**, which can be adapted as a collaborative learning exercise to develop risk-taking, ad-libbing, role-playing, team building, and critical thinking skills.

There are so many methods you can use across these five categories that any meaningful description is beyond the scope of this article. Step-by-step procedures and research evidence for these methods are already available in my articles, books, CDs, on my Web site, and in the references.

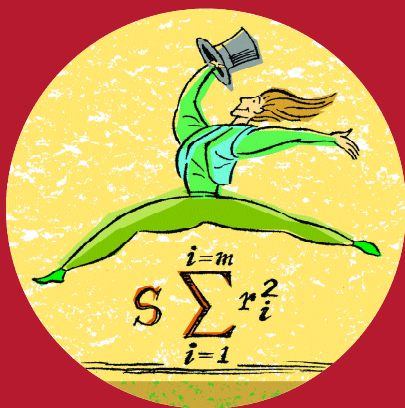
'Offensive' is a very personal reaction by each student based on his or her own values, beliefs, and principles.

BEST PRACTICES

Class Demonstrations Bring Broadway to Your Classroom

Imagine what it would be like to sit in a student's seat and see a group of your students act out an equation, a poem, or a chemical reaction. The visual demonstration of a concept, theory, or process requires students to see the process, solve the problem, or critique the encounter. It taps higher-order thinking skills and four to six intelligences, plus it can resuscitate a dead topic or pump life into boring content.

Wait. Music would help. Six men and six women students prepare to enter. On cue, the women walk to the front of the room to "I'm Every Woman" or "All That Jazz" from *Chicago* with white gloves; then the men jog down to "Bad Boys" or "Gonna Fly Now" from *Rocky* with



hooded sweatshirts. Finally, a single woman walks down to "All by Myself." The class is laughing and on the edges of their seats, which is just where you want them.

A dozen students are lined up across the front of the room with one student on the side. Now they walk through the mathematical process for multiple or logistic regression analysis. The 12 potential predictor students and the single criterion student provide visual representations of the relationships between variables and how predictors are selected. The class thinks through the process by choosing the top three predictors in order. A quantitative presentation follows, which is anchored conceptually in the visual demo.

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ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Discovering Your "Undergird"

Everyone has unique gifts, abilities, and talents that can be applied to your teaching for the next crop of Net Geners.

The *Net Geners* will require you to change how you teach. In fact, you may have to move outside your comfort zone into a new zip code. You will experiment, continue to learn, and, above all else, take risks. A few issues that may be racing through your brain right now are addressed below.

1. If I change jobs, will the *Net Geners* still find me?

Considering their technological skills and resourcefulness, you bet! They will hunt you down like Jack Bauer on 24... OOPS! Wrong question. I misplaced the questions for this section. Oh, here they are.

WE NOW RESUME THIS SECTION ALREADY IN PROGRESS.

2. Where do I begin to change how I teach the *Net Geners*?

It's like eating one of those dinosaurs from Jurassic Park. Once you forklift your filet of T-Rex off your grill, which is the size of Wyoming, where do you take your first bite? It's a tough decision.

Begin with the students' survey. It's easy to administer and it will provide buckets of information on what's going on in their world. The results might also suggest TV programs, music, videos, or games you might want to pursue.

3. How do I identify my own gifts related to the teaching techniques?

Ask yourself a few questions in a quiet, hidden place, where no one will hear you, such as a closet, garage, attic, or woodshed: Does humor come naturally to me in the classroom? Do the students

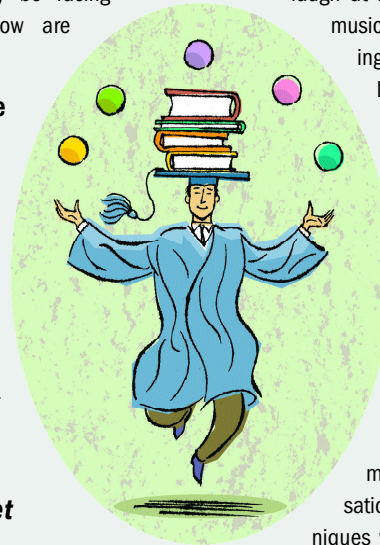
laugh at my jokes? Can I sing or play a musical instrument? Do I have any acting abilities? Do I like to play popular TV games or video games? Am I spontaneous or super-structured in class? Am I actually asking these questions in the closet in the dark? What's wrong with me?

If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, you're in trouble! Kidding. Those "yeses" indicate areas you should consider. Check out the resources available on humor, music, videos, games, and improvisation. Start slowly with any techniques with which you feel comfortable.

Add others gradually as you gain confidence from your students' reactions. If you have special talents, find ways to incorporate them.

Will I appear silly, undignified, or unprofessional using these techniques?

Sure, but that's okay. NO! Remember that you are using techniques that YOU pick and that fit your style and talents. Plus, the work is in the preparation; the execution in class may last 30 seconds. These are systematic techniques measuring specific learning outcomes.



THRIVING IN ACADEME

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