

LIBRARY SERVICES ON THE CUTTING EDGE: REACHING THE NET GENERATION

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The 21st Century has brought with it a new kind of student whom we call the “Net Generation.” These are students who, for the most part, have been using computers and other even newer digital technologies for most, if not for their entire life. The Net Gen is not strictly a generation; rather, they are generally between the ages of 18 and 29. They use technologies socially and in their studies that many older faculty—who were first introduced to computers during their graduate studies or later—had not even imagined when we were their age.

The average age of Hostos students continues to go down. In 2000, average student age was just under 30 years old. In the Fall of 2007, it is 26 years old, while entering freshman today average 22.7 years old. In fact, by Spring 2006, 70% of Hostos students were under 30. The Net Gen approach to study, communication, research and creating knowledge is different than that of many faculty members in some interesting and challenging ways. This essay briefly describes what is known about the learning styles and preferences, study and research habits, of the Net Generation, and focuses on how Library faculty are evolving approaches to library service and instruction to include the Net Gen in ways that truly support their needs.

A CONCISE PORTRAIT OF NET GEN STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Net Gen students like to learn by doing, figuring things out for themselves. For example, they are not afraid to teach themselves new systems or technology without consulting a manual. These students are more likely to prefer learning from visual cues than from text-only sources: graphs, pictures, charts; anything that provides a visual cue to understanding. Net Gen students crave interactions; they prefer to learn and study collaboratively and in groups. They are focused on getting complete, instant results, rather than engaging in the more traditional “one step at a time” processes most faculty and librarians are familiar with. As Lippincott observes, “Net Gen students want not just speedy answers, but full gratification of their information requests on the spot, if possible.”¹ Net Gen students are comfortable multitask-

ers, as well as confirmed users of hand-held electronic devices. For example, many prefer text messaging to using a phone to communicate.

NET GEN STUDENTS AND THEIR RESEARCH HABITS

Net Gen students are used to depending on Google and other search engines that provide them with information from the web from a simple—but not very sophisticated—global search approach. They tend to begin their research on the web, rather than to consult library web pages, catalogs and databases. For all their technological facility, they do not understand the importance of evaluating the quality and appropriateness of information found on web sites, nor do they have the skills to do so, unless we teach them.²

The research habits just described present certain challenges to the way academic libraries and Library department faculty have interacted with students in the past. Library faculty must adapt or evolve our interactive and instructional styles as well rethink how the materials, space and technologies offered in the library are configured.

Academic libraries can adapt to help Net Gen students do better research and understand the Library's collections better. Libraries can offer more multimedia resources. Students today are familiar with visual and multimedia from the web, computer games, social networking web sites (such as Flickr, MySpace, Facebook and many others that allow members to incorporate photos, videos, animation and music into their own web pages or blogs, email, or even instant messages). For courses taught using Blackboard, the library can add links to course-specific online tutorials, and subject guides, videos and podcasts. For example, links can be added to an American History pathfinder of useful resources right into the Blackboard course site. This strategy brings the information to the place where students are engaged in the course work. Libraries can also incorporate visual cues, redesigning, if necessary, the Library's web site so it fits more with Net Gen learning styles. Libraries can, for instance, create interactive maps for showing where resources are located, graphic displays and other visuals to convey important information for students.

A good way to ensure success is to invite students to join design teams to make the way the library displays its resources more responsive to the way Net Gen students seek and find the resources. Libraries should continue to use workshops and other instructional methods—and to experiment with formats—to teach the evaluation of web resources, research techniques, and policy issues such as copyright, plagiarism, intellectual property, and privacy issues.

REFERENCE SERVICES FOR NET GEN STUDENTS

Many Net Gen students have become convinced (oftentimes mistakenly) that answers or results can be found instantaneously. Instant high quality "answers" can sometimes pop up, but most students type a few keywords into an Internet search engine and come up with the "answer" in the form of links to web sites—which they too often use uncritically. Despite their somewhat faulty reasoning, it is possible for Library faculty to offer some of our traditional reference services in ways that appeal to Net Gen students and fulfill their impulse to seek and find help fast, when and where it is needed. Net Gen students like self-service, interactive web sites and they like new ways of getting help with research, wherever they are studying. There are

two important ways that reference librarians can support the Net Gen's research and study habits.

First, librarians can offer students reference help where they are studying—by using E-mail and chat (Instant Messaging) services in addition to the usual reference desk phone number. If a student working in the computer lab or at home is having difficulty deciding which database to use for a particular assignment, for example, s/he can send an instant message to the reference librarian and get help in real time.

Second, librarians can add links to short interactive tutorials on how to find information, or how to judge quality information resources to the relevant Library web pages. This process can be as straight forward as using part of the Library home page to highlight a “resource of the week” to better publicize information content that could assist students in their assignments.

THE TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC LIBRARY VS. THE INFORMATION COMMONS

Since the Information Age dawned in the 1990s, affecting the way information and materials are accessed and delivered, academic libraries across the country have been creating new environments that integrate information technology, tech tutors, new kinds of study and collaborative work spaces with the traditional reference desk and stacks. These new spaces are welcoming to students who want to relax, study quietly and, when they need to, to collaborate, find help, create knowledge and communicate with their peers. This new academic environment is often called an Information Commons. Joan Lippincott's chapter in *Educating the Net Generation* advocates for this new model.³

This past September the Hostos Library unveiled its new Information/Learning Commons comprised of four venues: the Hostos Academic Learning Center (HALC), Academic Computing Center, Faculty Development Center, and the Library. The Library's former Reference Room was redesigned to house the ILC and we have been creating new modes of service and instruction with the Net Gen—and all other students—in mind.

In response to our students' needs, we have redesigned our library website to be more user friendly. We created Chat (Instant Message) and E-Mail Reference—available with a click of the mouse from the Library Home page or by text messaging via AOL, Yahoo or MSN Messenger. We also created an E-Reserve system so that faculty can provide students with articles in electronic format, accessible for viewing and printing from any computer workstation, or from off-campus. Students can now use an online system to request books from other CUNY libraries. New online feedback forms for students, faculty, staff, and administrators have been created, as has a bilingual CUNY Information Competency Tutorial and an online sign-up system for our Open Workshops.

We have also created a video and DVD lending collection for students who, until now, have not been able to borrow films or other audio visual materials. We have created a “What To Read” web page (See “Our Collections”). This new addition to our web site features books Library faculty have selected and we now feature them at the Hostos Library group pages on “Library Thing,” a free web service for organizing and sharing information about books and reading. Students and anyone else can join the Hostos Library group, open their own Library Thing web page and collect/recommend books they enjoy or that are useful in their courses. Library Thing is an

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example of Library 2.0 technology that provides interactive, user-friendly web sites that Net Gen students are familiar with.

The Hostos Library and its faculty have undertaken many changes since the new millennium. We continue to evolve because academic libraries must do that. The way information is stored, organized and retrieved changes continually: the way instruction is offered must also change as we observe and analyze student information-seeking behavior.

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Library

ENDNOTES

- 1 Joan Lippincott, "Net Generation Students and Libraries," in *Educating the Net Generation*.
- 2 Numerous articles have been published on the subject of students' use of the web for research and their lack of understanding that web documents must be evaluated critically before using them. Most studies cite a need to teach students about evaluation of resources. See, for example: Grimes, Deborah J. and Carl H. Boening. "Worries with the Web: A Look at Student Use of Web Resources." *College and Research Libraries* 62.1 (January 2001); Wang, Yu-Mei and Marge Artero. "Caught in the Web: University Student Use of Web Resources." *Educational Media International* 42.1 (March 2005): 71-82; and Thompson, Christen. "Information Illiterate or Lazy: How College Students Use the Web for Research." *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 3.2 (2003): 259-268. For an interesting departure from the accepted rationale for students' failure to evaluate web documents, see: Manuel, Kate. "What Do First-Year Students Know about Information Research? And What Can We Teach Them?" in *Currents And Convergence: Navigating the Rivers of Change: Proceedings the ACRL 12th National Conference, April 7-10, 2005*. Ed. Hugh Thompson. Minneapolis, MN: 2006. pp. 401-417. For an excellent report on college students and the Internet, see: Jones, Steve. "The Internet Goes to College: How Students are Living in the Future with Today's Technology." *The Pew Internet & American Life Project* (Sept. 2002). Accessed on April 22, 2008: <http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_College_Report.pdf>.
- 3 Other publications that describe the theory and design of Information Commons are: Sinclair, Bryan. "Commons 2.0: Library Spaces Designed for Collaborative Learning." *EDUCAUSE Quarterly* 30.4 (2007): 4-6. Available at: <<http://connect.educause.edu/eq/index.asp>>; and Beagle, Donald Robert. *The Information Commons Handbook*. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2006.