

Teaching Generation M

**A HANDBOOK
FOR LIBRARIANS
AND EDUCATORS**

Edited by

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Introduction

The Myths, Realities, and Practicalities of Working with Gen M

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GEN M AS A DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP

"Generation M" ["M" for M(edia), M(illennials), M(obile), M(ultitaskers), M(ultisensory)] is the name applied to young adults born in the early 1980s through the mid-to-late 1990s. Many factors differentiate members of Gen M from their predecessors. One of the most significant is that they are the first generation raised in an era of personal and real-time global information sharing. Conventional wisdom has it that Gen M community members are constantly connected, early adopting, techno-savvy multitaskers who enthusiastically embrace new technologies and weave them into the fabric of their daily lives. There are real reasons for the stereotype of a wired, techno-savvy high school student or college undergrad, yet we understand that the stereotype masks a more complicated reality. The authors in *Teaching Generation M: A Handbook for Librarians and Educators* respectively explore the complicated and various "realities" for members of Gen M, as well as for those who live and work with them.

Arguably, Gen M's connectivity has created a global youth culture

that, as a community, has already impacted culture, politics, and economics. One example is music. Recently, this multibillion dollar industry began to radically change the way it markets, delivers, and promotes musical artists and their products in response to new technologies as well as the changing expectations and purchasing power of the Gen M population. Younger Gen M consumers want to purchase music in digital/downloadable format, and artists can self-promote and hit niche markets through MySpace and YouTube in addition to publishing their music within different mediums on the Web. Rather than relying on more traditional media outlets, Gen Ms worldwide seem to turn to the Web for news and trends while undeniably creating significant trends of their own. They may naturally begin turning to that same source for other kinds of information, such as formal education, scholarly research, and support for their ideas. Without the information and media literacy guidance of educators and librarians, for instance, they may find what appears to them to be legitimate source material and unquestionably accept it as truth (Larkee, Chapter 19).

The Simmons' National Consumer Study (re-named Experian Simmons in 2008), which "uses a patented, multi-frame sample design (U.S. Patent No. 7,246,035) to produce representative measures of consumer behavior and attitudes to products, brands and media among all American adults" (Experian Simmons, 2008), revealed some interesting data in its fall 2005 annual survey—data that may indicate a highly visible minority who represent prevailing assumptions about Gen M, at least Gen M adults. According to the 2005 survey, the Gen M adult population consisted of 18-to-24-year-olds born between 1981 and 1987 and represented 11.3 percent of the total adult group. Simmons reported that only 31.8 percent of Gen M adults had used instant messaging in the previous 30 days, and only 24.4 percent had used the computer to download music (Simmons, 2006). Obviously, then, not all of Gen M members have calloused thumbs and wires sprouting from their ears!

The Digital Youth Project even goes so far as to suggest that the strong relation between generational and technology identity is "an equation that is reinforced by telecommunications and digital media corporations that hope to capitalize on this close identification" (Ito et al., 2008: 4). So, who are the members of Gen M, really? Many myths, realities, and practicalities arise for educators, librarians, and technologists working with Gen M teenagers and young adults in educational and workplace settings. This book is an effort to acknowledge a generation, as well as to

make bona fide strides in showing how to use new media and technology for potent learning.

TECHNOLOGY UNITES . . . AND ALSO DIVIDES GEN M

In the early 1960s, media critics, Marshall McLuhan chief among them, began using the term "the global village" (McLuhan, 1964; Wolfe, 2004) very much in reference to television that was seen as a common window into the world. However, with the Internet, the global villager has a mouth as well as eyes and ears because the medium allows for two-way communication and potentially a much more empowered voice in the village. In this global village perspective, humankind is united through technology, a unification that has the potential for good, when it allows intellectual freedom, or evil, when it allows the rise of totalitarian governments. The current globalization of popular culture among teens and young adults serves as evidence that the global village has truly arrived, and many of its inhabitants are Gen M. The long-term effects of the global village on personal and intellectual freedom are yet to be determined, but Gen M's immediate impact can be felt in the speed with which trends in music, fashion, and consumer goods circulate worldwide among the youth community. This cross-cultural impact happens through sharing and updates on personal blogs, social sites like Facebook, and in online discussions below news stories. This speed may be determined by the click of a mouse or the flick of a thumb on a cell phone keypad. There are many kinds of microphones and many kinds of speakers from which the village's voices can be heard.

The rise of a global youth culture is tied to the creation of the Internet and the rise of personal computers. However, it is important to acknowledge the existence of a digital divide between subcultures in the population—those who have easy access to information technology and those who do not. While worldwide personal computing and connectivity via the Web are increasingly the norm, some populations are excluded from thriving aspects of contemporary life like commerce, education, and politics because of their lower socioeconomic status. With the sudden economic realities that have changed our global financial outlook, we each may have entered a lower economic status. For some members of Gen M, access to technology and new media are limited by socioeconomic factors. Perhaps surprisingly, school does not always level that inequity of access. The National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES) reports that only 88 percent of students in inner-city schools can go online compared with 95 to 98 percent of classrooms in non-urban schools (Bausell, 2008). Access to new media and technology is just one factor in creating a digital divide for Gen M students. While contributors to this book embrace various technologies and pedagogical strategies and offer real and practical encouragement, it may be the case that many educators do not employ much new technology or media with curriculum and teaching. There is a rise in the popularity of \$300 NetBooks, fairly inexpensive phones far more powerful than the supercomputers of the 1970s, free Open/Source software, and cloud computing sites, where Web applications provide free-to-the user advertising supported services (Vilic and Lackie, Chapter 13; Pressley, Chapter 14). We see that, despite our financial outlook, we may still be able to meet Gen M's needs in terms of hardware and software.

With its capacity to unite, new technology can create other class divisions, including within Gen M itself. In *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky discusses a socioeconomic divide among teens' use of social networking and says "... technology doesn't free us from social preferences or prejudices" (2008: 224). Shirky cites the work of social network scholar danah boyd (who does not capitalize her name) demonstrating that Facebook and MySpace reflect divisions in the larger American class structure. Started as a site for college students, Facebook eventually allowed high school students to participate in its social network as college-bound students, while MySpace was a place for "kids who are socially ostracized at school because they are geeks, freaks, or queers," in boyd's words (Shirky, 2008: 225).

There is also a generational divide defined by use of technology that socially and educationally separates adults from younger people. This generational divide seems responsible for a phenomenon that creates what David Buckingham characterizes as a "digital divide" between in-school and out-of-school use" (Ito et al., 2008: 4). Worrisome, as well, is the apparently increasing gap between children's everyday lives and the emphases of education systems (Ito et al., 2008; D'Angelo, Chapter 5).

Another concern here is that not everyone in Gen M embraces new media in the same way and, as a result, there may be another digital divide emerging, different from those defined by income, location, or generation. The new divide this creates may be one of choice, disinterest or neglect. However, the effect is the same—members of the generation falling outside the cultural or social expectations of that generation. In this case, the gap is between those members of Gen M who participate

in social technologies, connectedness, and omnipresence and those who do not. Without participation in the most common activities of their generation (e.g., blogging, Facebook, or texting), some Gen M members may appear to be disconnected with their peers. Therefore, this new kind of digital divide could result, separating the "opt-ins" from the "opt-outs."

SEPARATING MYTH AND HYPE FROM THE REALITIES OF GEN M

The potential of many Gen Ms to use technology effectively so that they can easily and efficiently learn, inform, and share does seem phenomenal (Sweeney, 2006). From a very young age, Gen Ms have existed with technology and been exposed to the ideals of new technologies like social networking and the "Read/Write Web." They also have grown up in constant connection through texting, e-mail, and microblogging. Gen Ms might well regard using these technological tools much the same way that earlier generations thought about pencil and paper, chalkboards, and face-to-face conversation as the primary forms of exchanging information (Sweeney, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). The chapters in this book, however, remind us that we cannot generalize or assume that all Gen Ms are uniformly information literate or media literate; nor can we assume that all Gen Ms will have the ability, desire, or interest in using new media and digital tools simply because of generational and cultural possibility (Harris, Chapter 1; Dawson and Campbell, Chapter 2; Avery, Chapter 3).

Because of their characteristic willingness to share their information with the world through new media, richer qualitative and more empirically sound quantitative data-based generational discoveries may be easier with Gen M than any generation that came before it (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). While friending (digitally befriending) is often a prerequisite to admission, social networks allow digitally active Gen M authors to permit themselves to be discovered in wholly new and public ways, allowing their lives, or the parts of their lives they wish to openly share, to be more readily consumed (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007; Klapperstuck and Kearns, Chapter 6; Bridges, Chapter 7). Publication, in its variety of forms, is not so much a possibility as it is a probability (Klapperstuck and Kearns, Chapter 6; Rousseau, Chapter 11; Garwood, Chapter 16). As a result, research is apt to benefit greatly from the digital sharing so closely associated with Gen M. However, we

are finding that despite the generalities about Gen M, like “impatient” and “technologically savvy” (Sweeney, 2006), those generalities are often contingent on the availability of technology as well as the willingness to use it. In addition, Gen M members are sometimes found to be no more or less impatient or technologically savvy than older adults (Thomas, 2008).

GEN M MYTHS

Probably the most common myth about Gen M is the pervading sense that all members are similarly technologically astute and connected. One widespread belief is that all Gen M students are technology aware, information literate, and Read/Write Web literate (Sweeney, 2006; Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout, 2005). Apparently, if you are a 20-year-old, you spend your days blogging, gaming, correcting Wikipedia articles, and updating your status on Facebook, LinkedIn, FriendFeed, and/or 20 other social networks (Bridges, Chapter 7; Knapp, Chapter 9; Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout, 2005; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007; Sweeney, 2006). Gen M members are often believed to have Internet-capable cell phones, omnipresent high-speed Internet access, and an innate sense of Netiquette in both the private and public realms in which they appear (Klapperstuck and Kearns, Chapter 6; Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout, 2005; D’Angelo, Chapter 5). That is, except when they do not have access, do not know what to do with their connectivity, or choose not to be connected (Avery, Chapter 3; Klapperstuck and Kearns, Chapter 6; Vaidhyanathan, 2008).

This kind of empirically controversial argument about the technical birthright of Gen M is no different than arguing that older people do not get technology or that YouTube or Facebook is more effective at entertaining people than it is at teaching people (Vaidhyanathan, 2008; Bridges, Chapter 7; Anderson, Chapter 8). For example, Gen M students may or may not be visual learners who are stimulated by the video-based content that they watch so much (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout, 2005). They may or may not be driven by the kind of verbal learning that takes place in traditional classroom settings; instead, Gen Ms may be highly motivated by blogging or by social networks and information databases (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007; Taylor, Chapter 4; Avery, Chapter 3; Dawson and Campbell, Chapter 2). They may be most readily engaged by the boundless, navigable style of content and media that

they have become accustomed to in the plastic, hyper-realistic gaming worlds that have exploded in popularity during their lifetime (Schiller and Svensson, Chapter 10). They may be more effective at learning in kinesthetic environments, in which case all of the online social network opportunities in the world will likely be ineffective in comparison to a pickup game or a traditional classroom with chairs in a circle. However, due to the assumed need for electronic stimulation (Wallis, 2006), they may believe that in order to belong to their generation they have to leave the circle of chairs behind.

GEN M REALITIES

Sweeney tells us that these impatient, experiential, digital natives are always connected, and need to stay that way (Sweeney, 2006). Thomas counters that technology can add to this perceived impatience and that Gen M is no more impatient than older adults (Thomas, 2008). The reality is that generalizations are flawed, and though there may be a stack of data saying that people of a certain age have certain dispositions, a sample of ten people of that age may render examples to the contrary. It is highly dangerous, as the controversy in the literature suggests, to predetermine the emotional affect, technological capability, or information literacy of a person based on when he or she was born (Thomas, 2008; Vaidhyanathan, 2008; Dawson and Campbell, Chapter 2).

Consider again the Simmons National Consumer Study. Simmons found that of all adults who reported libraries as their primary source for accessing the Internet, only 25.9 percent were from the Gen M population (Simmons, 2006). Gen M adults may or may not use technology beyond social networking sites or snapping photos with a smart phone, but the Simmons’ study certainly indicates that they are in or are using libraries and so they can and must be reached there.

Simmons’ National Consumer Study provides more hard numbers to pin down some realities. Almost one-third (31.8 percent) of Gen M adults use instant messaging. And the overall number of Gen M adults who had no online activity in the last month was about the same percentage as the other age groups surveyed: 12.1 percent for Gen M; 13.1 percent of adults aged 25 to 49, and 19.9 percent of adults over age 50. Statistically speaking, these percentages are surprising given what we have been told or assume about this generation. Perhaps this may lead educators and librarians to think that Gen M is average when compared with other

generations. About one half of all Gen M users access the Internet in more than one place, like home, school, library, and work.

The Simmons Study also addresses Gen M's attitudes toward multitasking (of which they are often accused!). When asked if they agreed with the statement, "It is important to juggle various tasks," only 56 percent agreed with the statement, which gave them an Index of 89 (below average). Considering that the "M" in Gen M has been said to stand for "multitasking," it is interesting to see that only slightly more than half agree that it is an important skill, at least Gen M adults, anyway! Therefore, caution must be taken when speaking about this (and any other) cohort. Not all members of Gen M are technologically motivated and inspired. Some just like to text and socialize because it is fun and cool.

Because of the cultural norms of searching and owning what they find, modifying and mashing up what has come before, and readily making use of that which is available, Gen M's relative understanding of copyright, intellectual ownership, and economics of creativity will be interesting to compare with other generations (Anderson, Chapter 8; Sweeney, 2006; Avery, Chapter 3). The teaching, learning, and understanding that must take place to convey the importance of ethics in relation to information may be one of the largest tasks for librarians, teachers, and technologists working with Gen M (Joiner, Chapter 18). As an extension of their GoodWork Project, Howard Gardner and fellow researchers at Harvard University's Project Zero are delving into adolescents' sense of ethics and fairness related to their own and others' conduct on the Web, and preliminary findings suggest adolescents' ambivalence, even indifference, about what is fair and ethical use and conduct (Viadero, 2008). Another concern of researchers in the GoodWork Project is that students "often underestimate the size of the communities that have access to their personal information online, or they have difficulty mastering the controls on social networking sites that prevent unknown visitors from seeing that information" (Viadero, 2008: 12). The implication is that, despite Gen M's exposure to new media and technology, they might not be safe or savvy users. Working in smaller learning groups with digital components in a safe academic environment may also help to build this skill set, likely a life skill moving forward (Morrison and Webb, Chapter 15).

It is very clear that "M" for mobile also describes this generation who have a lot of exposure to media and often take it with them, where previous generations left it in the car or living room, which may breed

a familiarity with media unknown to previous generations (Vilic and Lackie, Chapter 13; Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout, 2005). Because of the increased shorthand of Short Messaging Service (SMS) writing, the casualness of posting and pseudoblogging, and the relaxed writing styles associated with e-mail and other primary forms of writing today, it might be interesting to study those influences on Gen M writers in situations that traditionally call for more formal writing styles (D'Angelo, Chapter 5; Klapperstuck and Kearns, Chapter 6), for instance, the style of writing necessary for research papers or theses.

It is evident that the rigors of scholarship, both in writing and researching, are an acquired taste. No matter how many discussions, disclaimers, or pre-essay warnings are given about the use of non-peer-reviewed articles in their scholarly work, Gen M students may still go with what is most comfortable to them, resorting to Google and Wikipedia to begin their research journeys, even if the Google sites and Wikipedia articles themselves do not ultimately make it into the students' actual bibliographies (Fontenot, Chapter 17; Knapp, Chapter 9; Taylor, Chapter 4). As educators, librarians, and trainers, we must take all the potential realities into account when dealing with this user population.

GEN M PRACTICALITIES

Gen M is highly exposed and connected with media—even those who are less likely to work with computers or the Internet generally have access to media, such as television and movies (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout, 2005). As a result, educators, librarians, and employers may be able to make a more solid reach for commonality with members of Gen M by focusing on media and media literacy first as a way of making a connection, and then building that out into a more holistic sense of information literacy (Abram, Chapter 12; Avery, Chapter 3; Dawson and Campbell, Chapter 2). However, as the realities of the potential to become an instant celebrity on sites like YouTube emerge, members of Gen M must struggle with issues that go far beyond information literacy into issues of copyright, privacy, and public restraint. In the case of creating original content, perhaps more pressing at the moment is the idea that participation in the media sites requires more than just a browser—it may require a camera, a microphone, a Webcam, and someone to help in the library or classroom to coordinate, train, facilitate, or assist in a student media event—is there still (or was there ever) a budget in your

institution for such things? This may be the first question you will need to answer before using media to engage Gen M, or considering the macro issues of copyright, self-image, or digital social presence (Harris, Chapter 1; D'Angelo, Chapter 5; Klapperstuck and Kearns, Chapter 6; Bridges, Chapter 7; Rousseau, Chapter 11; Garwood, Chapter 16).

Despite the digital and generational divides between Gen Ms and their educators and librarians, there seems to be, more than ever, a need for parents, teachers, and librarians to help this younger generation explore new learning adventurously and smartly and to effectively build a strong foundation so that they can be successful in a world of too much information and stimulation, and ever-present technology and advertising (Abram, Chapter 12; D'Angelo, Chapter 5). The Digital Youth Project is deeply concerned about what it perceives as a lack of adult appreciation for youth participation in popular culture that "has created an additional barrier to access for kids who do not have Internet access at home" (Ito et al., 2008: 36). In some ways, Gen Ms have been abandoned by their elders at home and at school who are fearful, frustrated, or both about new media and technology and thus cling to teaching techniques and modalities that are culturally inappropriate and instructionally irrelevant.

Regarding educators' professional development around technology, it has been suggested that once educators can send e-mails and make electronic presentations, many school administrators consider their schools "technology-using" and no longer needing professional development in technology (Borthwick and Pierson, 2008: 20). Research supports the notion that educators who are more actively engaged with their own teaching and learning and integration of technology help their students to become more engaged in their learning, but many educators have yet to be compelled to change basic teaching and learning practices significantly to incorporate technology with curriculum, teaching, and learning (Borthwick and Pierson, 2008). As educators and librarians, the chapter authors describe their experiences connecting technology and pedagogy, especially in the later sections of this book. Their experiences serve as models of developing effective pedagogy first, and then adapting technology to its purposes—learning and accomplishment.

LEARNING AND ENGAGING DIFFERENTLY

Gen M is many things. Individual members of this cohort could be multitaskers, tech-savvy, disinterested in technology (except as a means to an end), impatient, or agents of social change. For those of us who work with these teens and young adults, we have every reason to be excited about the possibilities of what they bring to our educational settings.

What educators, librarians, and technologists must remember is that within the spaces where we learn and work with students and colleagues, there exists a constellation of generations. Designers of learning spaces must keep this at the forefront of their thinking when choosing lighting, furniture, and technology, as one size does not usually fit all, and this is just as true for online or distance learning spaces (Vilic and Lackie, Chapter 13). Emerging research and the work in this book suggest the profound potential for new media and technology to advance intragenerational and intergenerational learning and innovation. The authors in this book discuss and demonstrate how various modalities of teaching and learning address the needs of diverse learners—those who are tech-savvy, those who are not, and everyone in between, regardless of generation of birth.

Just as all educators have always done, we must learn who our students are so we can best help them learn. In order to continue to customize the experience for all those we serve and teach, we must challenge ourselves to work differently. Given the differences among generations and advancements in technology, this book's editors and chapter authors give us a glimpse of how we might begin to understand Gen M and work better—and differently—with them.

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