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Students as 'Free Agent Learners'

by Dave Nagel

There's a significant disconnect between students and educators when it comes to perceptions of technology in K-12 education, according to Julie Evans, CEO of Project Tomorrow. Evans discussed results of the latest Speak Up Survey Thursday afternoon at the FETC Virtual Conference & Expo. Among the findings: There's a trend toward students using technology to take hold of their own educational destinies and act as "free agent learners."

The Speak Up 2008 report, released late last month, is the latest annual survey focused on the national discussion about 21st century education. The survey this year polled more than 281,000 students, 29,000 teachers, 21,000 parents, and 3,100 administrators and involved 4,379 schools from 868 districts in all 50 states. (According to Project Tomorrow, since 2003, more than 1.5 million K-12 students, teachers, school leaders, and parents from more than 10,000 schools have participated in the survey.)

The 'Digital Disconnects'

What this year's survey found was that "there continues to be a digital disconnect, shall we say, between the way students are learning and living outside of school and the way they're interacting with technology inside of school," said Evans. "In fact, students tell us that they have to power down to go to school, and then, at the end of the school day, they power back up again--a real disconnect in the way students are viewing technology from the adults in their educational lives."

This finding was consistent with findings from previous Speak Up survey reports in recent years.

What are these disconnects?

For one, students see significant obstacles to using technology in schools. They reported that school networks block sites that they need to access, that teachers specifically limit their use of technology, and that there are "too many rules," preventing students from using their own devices, accessing their communications tools, and even limiting their use of the technologies that the school provides.

For another, teachers and students do not view the value of various technologies in the same ways. Students place a much higher value on technology than teachers, according to the research, and do not agree on which technologies would have the greatest impact on learning.

For example, students and teachers were asked which technologies they would include in the

"ultimate school." More than twice as many students as teachers chose online classes; more than twice as many students as teachers chose gaming; nearly three times as many students chose Internet access; and three times as many students chose mobile devices.

And for a third, students and teachers--as well as parents and administrators--see things differently in terms of how well their schools are preparing students for the future.

While 56 percent of administrators said their schools were preparing students well for the future, only 42 percent of teachers said they believed that. But that's much higher than parents, only 32 percent of whom said they thought their schools were doing a good job of preparing schools. Thirty-nine percent of students said they thought their schools were preparing them well for the future. This figure dropped to less than 25 percent among students who identified themselves as advanced technology users.

Students themselves reported that school can make it easier for them to work electronically by letting them use their own laptops, cell phones, or other mobile devices; providing them with unlimited Internet access; and allowing them to access school projects from anywhere.

Evans said the survey results also showed other disconnects as well--between girls and boys, between advanced technology users and other students, and between older and younger students.

Student Technology Trends

So just what are students doing with technology?

According to research, the "big four" activities are gaming, downloading music, communications activities (such as text, IM, and e-mail), and social networking. Among all K-12 students, about 64 percent play games (online, handheld, computer-based). For middle school and high school girls, the No. 1 activity continues to be downloading music. Girls, the survey found, are also the No. 1 users of communications tools, including chat, text, and e-mail. And the No. 1 usage of students' personal Web sites/social networking sites is communications.

On the horizon, the survey found that 38 percent of students in grades 3 through 5 participate in virtual worlds. In grades 3 through 9, 32 percent of students are creating or working with digital media. And 19 percent of middle school and high school students are using collaborative writing tools, such as Google Docs.

In terms of how kids use technology for more traditional educational activities, 78 percent use it to write assignments; 75 percent use it to conduct research; 67 percent use it to access grades and class information; 64 percent create slideshows, Web pages, and videos; and 46 percent use MySpace to collaborate on class projects.

They also play educational games. But, interestingly, the use of technology for educational gaming drops off as students get older. In K-2, 54 percent of students play educational games; in 3-5, 52 percent do; in 6-8, the figure drops to 45 percent; and in 9-12, it sinks to 29 percent.

Students said they see gaming in schools providing the following benefits:

- Making it easier to understand difficult concepts (51 percent);

- Getting students more involved in the learning material (50 percent);
- Allowing them to learn more (46 percent);
- Making it more interesting to practice problems (44 percent);
- Allowing them to "go beyond and try new things" (37 percent);
- Letting them see the results of their problem solving (35 percent);
- And allowing them to direct their own learning (34 percent).

In this respect, students and teachers do have some things in common. According to the research, 51 percent of teachers are interested in learning how to integrate gaming into daily learning activities; 46 percent are interested in professional development; 29 percent are interested in learning promising practices about gaming; and 7 percent are interested in gaming for sharing ideas with other teachers. Only 12 percent of teachers were not interested in gaming at all.

Of those who have some interest in gaming, responses were varied as to its value in education. Sixty-five percent said it appeals to different learning styles; another 65 percent said it increases student engagement. Others said it allows for student-centered learning (47 percent), helps develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills (40 percent), helps develop creativity (39 percent), allows students to gain experience through trial and error (37 percent), and helps students visualize difficult concepts (35 percent).

But perhaps the most significant trend in education technology, Evans said, is the emergence of the student as a "free agent learner": Students want more control over their own learning experiences through technology and want to define their own educational destinies and determine the direction of their learning.

"This free agent learner is one that is technology-enabled, technology-empowered, and technology-engaged to be ... an important part of driving their own educational destiny. To some extent they feel ... it's a responsibility. They also feel it's a right to be able to do that. So technology has enabled this free agent learner. We have the opportunity in education to make sure they're on the right track and to be supportive of their learning experiences."

Next year the Speak Up research will also include a new survey for pre-service teachers. More information about the 2009 survey will be made available at the NECC show. Findings from the 2008 survey can be viewed at Project Tomorrow's site [here](#).

An archived version of the complete presentation by Julie Evans can be viewed at the FETC Virtual Conference & Expo by registering [here](#).

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