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**Keeping up with the Facebook and MySpace Generation: What Counselors Can Do**

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*Based on a program presented at the ACA Annual Conference & Exhibition, March 26-30, 2008, Honolulu, HI.*

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Dick and Jane, principal characters of the 1950’s reading series, set a standard of behavior for the lives of American children. They carried lunch boxes as they walked...
through safe neighborhoods to a school where everyone looked like them. Dick and Jane went home and played baseball with their dog Spot, as their stay-at-home mother made dinner in her frilly apron. They finished their homework and then watched black and white television. Dick and Jane grew up with the Disneyesque lifestyle portrayed in the film *Pleasantville*.

Unfortunately, these heavily used school readers gave American children a distorted view since only a minority of people lived this idyllic suburban life without the intrusions of the modern world. Students of this era watched futuristic movies and television shows only to find that those visions have become reality: the Dick Tracey wristwatch two-way radio/television, Star Trek communicator, and portable music. Had Dick and Jane continued as a reading series into the Millennium, their lives would have been very different from the isolated, limited life they led; however, many adults still prefer that life instead of our technology-heavy world.

**The Technology Explosion**

Experience with technological innovations suggests that there is a significant span, often as much as 30 years for new technology to be fully integrated (Horrigan, 2007); that was before technological innovation occurred in the rapid succession of the post-modern era. Counselors and many other adults remain among those behind the curve in the use of technological innovations. According to Prensky (2001) who coined the following terms, technology users can be categorized into:

*Digital natives* – native speakers of the new digital language who grew up in a world where these technologies have existed. Evidence indicates that technology has changed how their brains work.

*Digital immigrants* – people who have “immigrated” to new technologies but, like immigrants learning a new language, retain an accent that often hinders communications with “natives”.

*Early adapters* – people who find new technologies, try them, and integrate them into their lives.

Stand outside most high schools or on college campuses and you will see students on cell phones, using Internet-capable handhelds (formerly known as phones), and laptop computers. According to the Yankee Group (2007), “72% of US teens are actively logging onto social networking web sites and 20% of US teens are already browsing the mobile web on a regular basis.” Our fears that technology will isolate us may be unfounded. Humans have a need to connect and stay connected to others, just in newer ways.

In the 1960’s the media visionary, Marshall McLuhan proclaimed “the medium is the
message”. He predicted a future altered by innovation even before the creation of the Internet and personal computers. Now, technology and knowledge increase at an exponential rate, making new communication ideas obsolete nearly as fast as they occur. The cyberspace world of students is limitless with estimates of 75 million Facebook and 100 million MySpace users. Students can search for anything, anywhere, at anytime on the Internet learning more on websites in an evening at home than all day in school. Many cannot imagine what it was like BG (Before Google). Can school counselors and teachers keep pace with the evolving student brain and infochanges that have transformed our new generation of digital natives?

A few years ago the authors conducted a presentation called Dinosaurs or Future Travelers: Rekindling the School Counselor’s Flame. Counselors were exhorted to reinvent their profession in order to avoid being left behind in the transformation of schools. Today counselors need to make a giant leap into the techno-world of students. This online world has dramatically changed the nature of childhood and adolescence, and the way students communicate with others. Students now face a future where the only constant is change. Counselors must keep pace by embracing technology and, if we are not able integrate all aspects that digital natives use, at least we can understand their language.

**Digital Native Vocabulary**

Some important technology terms that will help readers unfamiliar with these innovations are offered:

*MP3 player* – a portable music and video storage device that allows the user to download music files. Examples include the iPod and a host of newer devices manufactured by other companies.

*Handheld device* – usually a multifunction device containing a phone (and phone storage features), pda (personal digital assistant), calendar, and email and Internet browsing capabilities. Some new devices include media storage (photos, videos, and music) making them an MP3 hybrid. Examples are the Blackberry, the Palm Treo, iPhone, and individual cell phone providers’ versions.

*Google* – the major search engine for the World Wide Web (WWW). It has become a verb, as “to Google” or search for something.

*Web 1.0* – a synonym for the World Wide Web.

*Web 2.0* – the web as a platform for a multitude of sites and programs without boundaries. This is emerging in the current World Wide Web.
Social networking website – online sites that allow people to connect through various criteria such as activities, interests, and alumni. The most popular examples include Facebook and MySpace.

Chat – the ability to conduct synchronous conversations (messaging) through online texting including instant messaging and SMS text messages. These chats may take the form of Video chat (live, real time video conferencing on a personal computer including programs such as iChat) or Voice chat (live, voice conversations over the Internet through the personal computer popularized by such companies as Skype).

E-mail – short for electronic mail, the most popular form of Internet communication in Web 1.0, is on the way to obsolescence as a result of such features as Chat and Web 2.0.

Friends – people designated on a social network site who are able to view a person’s photos or read postings. They usually become friends and can see a person’s profile because you sent them a “poke”, “message”, or “friend request” and they responded.

Blog-- site with chronological postings, often like an online diary of the blogger or others who provide entries on the site. Once limited to text, blogs now contain art, photos, music, or other creative medium.

Information Acquisition Has Changed

In a New York Times Op Ed essay, Tenner (2006) noted that in 1898 when Harvard dropped Greek as an admissions requirement, academic decline was predicted. Shortly after the telephone’s invention, critics pronounced the death of writing. In the 1950’s and 1960’s all our knowledge worth sharing could be found in the slim volumes of the World Book Encyclopedia. Wikipedia is today’s World Book, dynamic, collaborative, and evolving as fast as one can click the enter key. The computer has catapulted children into rapid learning and information processing. Calculators eliminate tedious cognitive processes moving students through multi-step math problems that would take pages to work out with a pencil and paper. Students tell us traditional classroom instruction is dull, linear, and slow. It will take some time for teacher training programs to endorse the benefits and positive skills of children multitasking communication, information seeking, analyzing, and social networking simultaneously.

Today, Facebook and MySpace are the social lives of adolescents; who can be anyone they want to be on these sites. The quiet, shy student can become popular overnight with an alter ego. Adolescents reinvent themselves every day, not through developmentally appropriate friendships and supervised clubs and teams, but by playing out their lives or pseudo lives to anyone with access to social network websites. They achieve instant
fame, instant friends, instant boyfriends or girlfriends, and instant vulnerability by opening their developing inner lives to the world and to predators.

There are other negative consequences of technology that include:

- The ability to get any number of college application essays designed to match your personality and grades from the Internet
- Becoming obsessed about touring every possible college option online
- Going on Facebook to get the inside scoop on partying, drugs, sex, and cheating
- Attending online high schools where home-schooled students do not need to leave their living room couches
- A decline in the number of college graduates capable of interpreting complex texts from 40% in 1992 to 31%, as reported by The National Center for Educational Statistics (2005)

The use of the Internet and technology is not all negative. Consider some of the positive outcomes of technology:

- Students take a virtual tour of colleges on line, add to a blog, and talk with other students or admission representatives
- Freshman lecture halls of 600 students are replaced by more intimate online classes where regular dialogue with the professor and fellow students is required
- Digitized documents provide access to primary sources that were previously unavailable to most students
- With a few keystrokes a skilled student accesses databases for research purposes in a fraction of time that it once took
- Friends save a teen’s life when Internet friends came forward, worried about suicidal emails

Technologically rich environments are rapidly changing the brains of our children. According to Martin Westwell (n.d.) of The Institute for the Future of the Mind at Oxford, “You are who you are largely because of the way brain cells wire up in response to the environment and the things you do.” Parents and teachers know that today’s students are faster problem solvers. Prensky (2001) observes that research is indicating that current students’ brains have changed and their thinking and processing of information is different from previous generations.

In the next century MySpace and Facebook may be the anthropological artifacts examined to understand today’s social and cultural changes. The impact of the most popular social networking sites has been the subject of cover stories and special awards by major news magazines. They applaud the positive impact of Web 1.0 both on individuals and the global sense of community. On December 26, 2006, Time Magazine named the new American icon “You” as the person of the year, crediting You as the originator of the new “digital democracy”. Time placed a mylar mirror on its magazine
cover to reflect the reader’s image.

McLuhan predicted the impact technology would have in the creation of the global village. Although Web 1.0 has had a revolutionary effect on the world, Web 2.0 is beginning to make drastic changes in the global society through online communities or “digital neighborhoods”. Social network theorists predict that Web 3.0 will impact social communities as more people indulge in online “game worlds” and “alternative universes”, creating alter egos complete with friends, homes, and pets. Students’ social lives on MySpace have evolved into a digital native culture with Internet friends and confidants in online neighborhoods and playgrounds. In addition to buddies they have in their classroom, students have potentially thousands of cyberfriends online.

Howe and Strauss (2000) in Millennials Rising compared Millennials to second-generation immigration patterns, blending countries of origin, culture and education. Students are not living in isolation on their computers; they are connecting with people across the globe differently from previous generations. How can parents support and nurture children’s Internet friendships when traditional issues no longer apply? Who are you going with? What time are you coming home? You need to bring your friend home. Parents may never meet their children’s friends; maybe teens won’t either but they have real, valued cyberspace relationships.

First Columbine, and later the Virginia Tech tragedy, underscored the importance of cell phones and Internet capable handhelds for student communication. The Virginia Tech student news staff relied on MySpace, blogs, and text messages to verify the deaths of student victims. Hundreds of thousands of students online mourned with the students at Virginia Tech using the same Internet tools that older adults feared would strip students of their capacity to be human.

How Counselors Can Be Prepared

The digital divide has widened between those who use technology and those who do not, especially across the generations. While people born after 1985 cannot remember a time when a personal computer did not exist, the authors and older Americans vividly recall their first color television, push button telephone, hand-held calculator (which could only add, subtract, multiply and divide), and their first desktop computer. Counselors must become more technologically savvy in order to know what students are doing and how they are connecting to others. Counselors need to understand that student Internet friendships are real, committed relationships fraught with the same dangers as blind dates and unsupervised high school parties.

Counselors have a moral responsibility to keep pace with the evolving student culture. To avoid the path of extinction, like dinosaurs, counselors must change to help young digital natives and to help themselves to become future digital immigrants. The following counselor recommendations may help parents and students, beginning with activities to
prepare themselves to help others.

For counselors:

- Be open to learning about technology from students or continuing education programs
- Buy and use technology even if you are uncomfortable and need to ask a child how to use it
- Instant messaging and Internet video chats are something you must be capable of doing
- Develop a set of technology competencies that you must achieve with specific deadlines to avoid digital procrastination
- Open a Facebook account and post information for counselees
- Begin developing guidelines and rules to assist parents and schools in their efforts to establish standards for the ethical use of technology
- Recognize that new technological devices that are not yet imagined will come along soon
- Be open to constant change

For students, counselors will need to:

- Teach them how to relate in face-to-face situations
- Be aware of the potential leakage of online chat shorthand into college applications and formal writing
- Help to balance in-person and online relationships and activities
- Increase awareness of the anonymity of the Internet and its use as a predator’s playground
- Teach students how to protect their identity online with the same vigilance that they would use if a stranger tried to enter the back door to their home
- Prepare them to complete online college applications that insure the application is an honest and accurate representation of the applicant

For parents/guardians, counselors will need to:

- Help them cope with rapid social change brought about by technology
- Help parent groups establish developmentally sound social norms and rules for Facebook, MySpace, cell phone and Internet use
- Teach parents how to access and use social networks, and communication devices through continuing education classes, workshops and parent-student programs
- Help them accept evolving child-parent e-communication by text messaging even if they are not comfortable with the process
- Use e-communication with parents to model safe, ethical behavior
- Create opportunities to preserve and promote regular parent-child face-to-face
Conclusion

Technology has created a number of issues and anxieties in the modern world. Will children lose the skill to relate face-to-face, or can this new social anthropological development make them more personally connected? Simon Smith (2006), editor of *Betterhumans*, presents an optimistic view of technology:

…too many people have a narrow view of history in its arc from past to present to future. Humanity as we know it exists as a blip in time. If we can survive by properly directing science and technology, where we're going will be far more interesting than where we've been.

Clearly, not all results of technology use are positive. However, counselors cannot hide from technology or allow the digital divide to leave them behind as innovations are continuing to be adopted. Only time will help us grade the report card for communication technology. What if Dick and Jane were still characters in today’s readers?

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**VISTAS 2008 Online**

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