



Spectrum

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Millennials – Our “New Students”

Born between 1982 and 2000, Millennials are the most diverse generation we have had to teach, thus our approaches to teaching must be diverse. Millennials expect to be engaged in their learning; they do not do well being passive learners. If we (as faculty/university) don't have technology that will be part of their learning, they will go elsewhere where they can be engaged with and interactive with technology (Starlink, 2004). Millennials perceive a sharp contrast between their comfort level with technology and that of their teachers (Starlink, 2004). These technologies include computers, email, and the Internet.

The trend toward Millennials using notebook and laptop computers rather than desktop computers reflects their preference toward a more portable learning environment. Email is being used to communicate with peers and set up meetings, clarify course information and expectations. The Internet allows students to “express ideas that they would not have voiced in class” and is the preferred method of conducting research (Starlink, 2004, p. 10).

Traditional approaches to teaching may not address the learning style preferences of the Millennial student. Lectures and traditional classroom and laboratory environments, albeit typical (and comfortable) from an educator's point of view, can be enhanced through online and electronic modes (Starlink, 2004).

Jason Frand, as cited in Starlink, 2004, presents several attributes of students who have grown up with technology, including these that may influence the way you teach:

- **“Computers are not technology.”** Computers, the Internet, and the WWW are as much a part of Millennials' lives as telephones and television are to the rest of us.
- **“Reality is no longer real.”** Original images can easily be changed using digital technology and receiving email from an address may not come from the owner of that address.
- **“Doing is more important than knowing.”** Knowledge is no longer perceived to be the ultimate goal (the half-life of information is so short). Results and actions are considered more important than the accumulation of facts.”
- **“Learning more closely resembles Nintendo than logic.** Nintendo symbolizes a trial-and-error approach to solving problems; losing is the fastest way to mastering a game because losing represents learning.”
- **“Multitasking is a way of life.”** Students are comfortable engaging in several activities simultaneously. Working on homework with music in the background while talking on cell phones that allow instant messaging is how Millennials get through the day.
- **“There is zero tolerance for delays.”** Millennials were raised in a just-in-time, service-oriented culture. They expect and demand quick turn around in today's 24x7 culture and don't easily accept delays.
- **“Consumer and creator are blurring.** In a file-sharing, cut-and-paste world, distinctions between creator, owner, and consumer of information are fading. The operative assumption is often that if something is digital, it is everyone's property.” (Starlink, 2004, p. 10-11).

Our students represent backgrounds as diverse as the subjects we embrace and are scrutinizing the way we teach, the way we communicate, and the way we interact with them. Let's be at the forefront of those who will meet the needs of our “new, digital students.”

Resources

Newton, F. (2000). *The new millennial university student*. <http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/teach/first/newstudent.htm>

Starlink. (2004). *Educating the NetGen: Strategies that work. Participant Packet*. <http://www.starlinktraining.org/packets2004/packet129.pdf>

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Inside this issue:

Millennials – Our “New Students”	1
Blackboard Upgrade Brings New Features	2
Call for David Raymond Grant Proposals	2
RSS: Website Updates Delivered Directly to Your Computer	3
Call for Faculty Development Grant Proposals	3
Call for SPS Development Grant Proposals	3
The Issue of Web Accessibility for Instruction	4

Deadlines to Note

David W. Raymond Grant – March 20, 2006
Faculty Development Grant Proposals – April 7, 2006
SPS Development Grant Proposals – April 21, 2006

The NIU Blackboard Administrative Team worked diligently throughout the summer and fall testing Blackboard upgrades for release to campus users. As a result, the December 20, 2005 upgrade to Blackboard 6.3 was a smooth transition that introduced the Blackboard portal and several new features that will make teaching and learning with Blackboard more efficient and effective.

Blackboard Portal



The portal allows faculty, students and potential students access to many resources without actually logging into the Blackboard system. Links to student and faculty help sites are highlighted services, and a link to the NIU Online website will make accessing information about online courses more readily available.

Adaptive Release

At the top of the list of new academic attributes is Adaptive Release, a feature that allows faculty members to set “rules” for assignment release. An example might be as follows: faculty do not want students to have an assignment until they complete a pretest; they can set a “rule” that prohibits students from accessing the assignment until they have satisfactorily completed the pre-test. Faculty can even determine a range of scores the student must achieve on the pre-test before being allowed to access the assignment.

Communication Within Blackboard: Messages

Messaging is a new communication feature that provides a way to send messages among faculty and students within the Blackboard system. Since the Blackboard email system does not keep a record of sent mail, many users have been asking for a way to track messages sent to students. Users must remember to check their messages when accessing their courses, as the messages are not broadcast beyond the Blackboard system.

Sampling of Other New Features:

- The testing and survey tools in Blackboard 6.3 are expanded to include a variety of new question types.
- The grade book now allows for a running total of points rather than a total based on the number of points for the entire semester.
- The new glossary feature has real promise as a means for developing a course vocabulary list that is easy to create and access.
- Added customization of the NIU page will more fully personalize users' initial Blackboard layout.

Faculty Development has been updating the online Faculty Help materials to reflect these changes. Find Faculty Help online at: <http://www.blackboard.niu.edu>. Our spring workshops will also highlight these new features. Watch for them on our monthly flier or check online at: <http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/events/current.htm>.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS FOR DAVID RAYMOND GRANT

The David Raymond Grant for the Use of Technology in Teaching funded by former trustee, Mr. David Raymond, NIU Foundation, and the Office of the Provost provides a \$2,500 grant to the faculty member with the best proposal for incorporating new technologies into his or her teaching. Tenured and tenure-track faculty are eligible to apply for the grant. Applicants must describe a project that incorporates instructional technologies in the teaching of a course or the preparation of supporting materials for a course according to the proposal format. The proposal must include a budget for the project and a letter of support from the chair of the applicant's department, school or division. Five copies of each proposal should be submitted to the Grant Review Committee, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, Adams Hall 319, by March 20, 2006. For proposal format and additional information about the grant, check <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/development/grants.htm> or contact facdev@niu.edu.

The Internet has truly revolutionized the way in which information is disseminated. It's no surprise that an increasing number of educators and students alike are depending on the Internet for access to information necessary for both their personal and academic lives. What if there were a way to automatically receive updates from 5, 10, or 50 of your favorite websites without ever having to manually visit these websites? RSS now makes this possible!

What is RSS?

RSS, commonly known as Really Simple Syndication, is a popular method for sharing content without requiring readers to continually visit a website to see what's new. RSS feeds contain headlines and links to web pages that contain additional information. These feeds are created using XML, a universal scripting language for Internet documents.

How can RSS save me time?

RSS makes it possible to receive information updates from your favorite websites, delivered directly to your personal computer. Rather than having to personally visit numerous websites to check for new updates, a software tool called an aggregator or news reader can be used to subscribe to RSS feeds. You can decide how often you would like your news reader to check the feeds you subscribe to for updates. Your news reader displays the various updates you want to see, when you want to see them, in one central location.

How can I receive RSS feeds?

Various desktop and web-based software applications known as aggregators, news readers, or feed readers can retrieve, update, and display RSS feeds from a wide variety of sources. A number of news readers are available to download at no cost, each varying slightly how they look and act. One popular, free, and easy-to-setup RSS feed reader for Windows computers is FeedReader, available to download from: <http://www.feedreader.com>. For a list of additional news aggregators, please visit: <http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/resources/feedreadersdir.htm>

How do I know if a website offers RSS feeds?

RSS feeds are not available from all websites. Those that do offer them employ a variety of indicators to inform visitors of the availability of RSS feeds. Generally, any button or text link that includes "RSS," "XML," or "ATOM" indicates that a feed is available.

Two small rectangular buttons: one with "RSS" in white on an orange background, and one with "XML" in white on a dark blue background.A rectangular button with "RSS" in white on an orange background and "SUBSCRIBE" in white on a dark blue background.A rectangular button with "2.0" in white on an orange background and "RSS" in white on a dark blue background.A rectangular button with "ATOM" in white on an orange background and "FEED" in white on a dark blue background.

Any of these buttons may be used to indicate the availability of RSS feeds.

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center now offers NIU faculty and staff several different RSS feeds. By subscribing to any of the following available feeds, faculty and staff can be assured of receiving the corresponding news and updates as soon as they are released.

-  FacDev News & Announcements
-  Faculty/Staff Program Schedule
-  GTA Program Schedule
-  Teaching with Blackboard at NIU

For more information or to sign-up for NIU Faculty Development RSS feeds, visit:
<http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/rss>

CALL FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT GRANT PROPOSALS

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center is offering grants of up to \$2,500 each annually to regular, continuing tenured or tenure track faculty. The purpose of the grants is to encourage and support faculty development activities that directly benefit the applicants' departments, colleges and/or the university. Equal matching from the applicants' academic units or appropriate external sources is required. Five copies of each proposal, including the proposal cover sheet, accompanying letters of support and other relevant documents must be submitted to the Grant Review Subcommittee, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, Adams Hall 319, by Friday, April 7, 2006 for activities scheduled between July 1 and December 31, 2006. Complete proposal guidelines and cover sheet can be obtained on the Web at <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/development/grants.htm> Faculty who plan to submit proposals by the April 7th deadline and need more information are encouraged to register and attend the grant writing seminar that will be held from 12 to 1 p.m. on Thursday, March 9, 2006. To register online, go to <http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/forms/fsprog.htm> or email facdev@niu.edu.

CALL FOR SPS DEVELOPMENT GRANT PROPOSALS

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center is offering grants up to \$1,000 each to Supportive Professional Staff (SPS) pursuing professional development activities that benefit the individuals as well as their academic units. Candidates must have completed a minimum of two years of at least half-time employment as SPS at NIU. For proposal guidelines and other relevant information, check <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/development/grants.htm>. Five copies of each proposal, including other relevant documents, must be submitted to the SPS Awards Committee, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, Adams Hall 319, by Friday, April 21, 2006 for activities proposed between July 1 and December 31, 2006. SPS who plan to submit a proposal by the April 21st deadline and need more information are encouraged to register to attend the SPS Grant Writing Seminar from 12 to 1 p.m. on Thursday, April 6, 2006. To register online, go to <http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/forms/fsprog.htm> or email facdev@niu.edu.

In developing course content, faculty are always faced with the challenge of designing materials that engage all learners. While this challenge exists for faculty in a classroom setting, it is doubly difficult in an online environment. Strategies that may have been successfully implemented in a classroom may not be easily transferred to the web and still allow for universal access.



Web accessibility involves the practice of making web pages accessible to all users, especially those with disabilities. While the issue of web accessibility is salient to students with disabilities, (visual, hearing, physical, cognitive and neurological), accessibility is also relevant to students without disabilities (ex. students with differing learning styles). While there are a number of adoptive tools that can facilitate web accessibility, this article will focus on simple strategies that faculty can use with little effort.

Universal Design

Universal Design (UD) is one strategy that can facilitate accessibility. UD is defined as the design of instructional materials and activities that make the learning goals achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities to hear, see, speak, move, read, write, understand English, attend, organize, engage, and remember (Danielson, 1999). Applying UD requires flexible means of representation (i.e., presenting material in varying formats), expression and engagement. This primarily 'student centered' approach seeks to accommodate the diverse needs of students rather than faculty.

Instructional Strategies

While it is essential to develop and provide material that stimulates a variety of sensory and cognitive modalities, it is equally important to understand how this content might be received by an online audience. Because of factors that can compromise the successful distribution of instructional material, a few intervention strategies will be offered:

- Individuals who rely on screen readers (i.e., hardware and software that produces synthesized voice output for displayed text and keystrokes) can be stymied when a website navigation system is complex and inconsistent.
- Screen readers will not be able to process graphic images unless there is an accompanying alternate text (alt tag) to describe it. Faculty should determine the value of including select images and provide complete descriptions of each web image.
- Another barrier to accessibility is the use of tables and frames, both of which represent problems for the user of screen readers. For example, a screen reader may read the contents of a table linearly, even though the original intention may have been to read horizontally. A narrative summary of the content is more accessible.
- Navigational information should appear at the top of each webpage, not only to display important information in a prominent location, but also to facilitate navigation for students unable to use a mouse. Students with visual disabilities may face another barrier to navigation when screen readers attempt to process hyperlinks simply labeled 'Click Here' rather than describing their destination.
- The use of colored text to communicate a sense of importance may also present a problem for students with visual disabilities. For example, individuals with color blindness may be unable to perceive or distinguish the color of 'red' text faculty used to 'communicate' the urgency of an important upcoming event (ex. exam, assignment due date). In addition, selecting poor color combinations for contrasting text and background can represent a barrier for students attempting to read content (ex. light yellow text on a white background).
- In the use of multimedia material, video should be accompanied by closed captioning of the audio portion, subtitles, or a downloadable transcript of the program. Recognizing the importance of including these features is also beneficial for students who have neither visual nor audio disabilities but who have a learning style preference for written text. Faculty should also be aware that placing too much material on a website or having it poorly organize can be both confusing and frustrating for students who may be seeking clarity and order.

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Centers offers a number of workshops over the academic year that address web accessibility issues. For information about registering, please contact facdev@niu.edu.

References

Assistive Technology Glossary (2005). Accessed on 01/20/06 at http://www.education.uiowa.edu/icater/at_glossary.htm

Danielson, L. 1999. Universal design: Ensuring access to the general education curriculum. Research Connections.

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