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Connecting the Disconnected: Pedagogy Goes Digital Native

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I remember the first time I encountered Twitter--everyone's favorite, love-it-or-hate-it microblogging miasma. I dismissed it as many do; it was too callous, too "mainstream," too much about **#twerking** and not enough about **#OnlineLearning**. Then a few years back, I was teaching a composition course when word came in that a tornado had just swept through Joplin, Missouri, where many of my spouse's family lived. Immediately, we stopped class to pause and reflect, looking for any sources that could give us information about loved ones. The traditional narratives of local news and The Weather Channel told us nothing. Then some students pointed out that people living there were **#LiveTweeting** video of the tornado's destructive path, complete with videos of what used to be the south side of the city, now a stream of rubble and destruction. In this brief and sobering moment, my students and I collectively realized that online education, even through the seeming banality of Twitter, was real and profound. And like all tools, Twitter was more than a steady stream of Miley's latest shenanigans; it had powerful pedagogical implications as well.

The reality is this: we must redefine online pedagogy as here to stay. Is it any wonder that popular culture pedagogy is moving more from a focus on liberation pedagogy to a commodity based one? While traditional "brick and mortar" course enrollment has flattened or even dropped recently, online courses continue to see increased enrollments. In the case of the university system I'm in, we've seen an overall drop in enrollment of 10-15% since 2010 but an increase in online sections of over 30%, and we know the reason, in most cases: as tuition increases and salaries remain flat, more students are forced into full-time work, relegating their degree programs to the virtual realm. In addition, the bulk of our students are now digital natives, at least as comfortable with online interactions as they are with face-to-face ones. It's no surprise then that their preferred method of learning is an asynchronous, virtual one.

The challenge is for us to reflect on better ways to adapt our courses to meet the needs of our students, ourselves becoming members of the Digital Communities. This may seem foreign to GenX and Baby Boom professors, who still look at email as a modern mode of communication and Facebook as our primary digital connection to the world. Our pedagogical challenge then is to speak the language of the **#DigitalNative**, to overcome what Prensky calls our "accents" as digital immigrants and still be able to operate with authority. Social media can play no small part in this, as can allowing the use of smart devices in the classroom, something many of us have been reticent to do.

So as we continue to reflect on **#BestPractices** and **#LifelongLearning**, the challenge is to question our assumptions about what makes for effective learning environments for our current students. As a “digital immigrant” myself, I find myself chaffing at the thought of students punching away on their iOS device as I am conducting a lecture, until I realize they are **#tweeting** key points or taking notes in **#GoogleDocs**. Each generation of educator must learn to adapt to our upcoming learners to help ensure **#lifelonglearning** happens for teacher and student.

As popular culture scholars already know, there is a growing intersection of popular culture and the global classroom, helping teachers ground content in the relevant and topical and thus making materials more relatable and accessible to students. This need is even more important in online pedagogy, when disengagement is the biggest complaint that students have about the virtual environment. As an educator, I can think of no greater challenge than to connect the disconnected, as Prensky puts it, and popular culture is one of the finest ways to do that. Of course, that means to retrain ourselves, especially in the **#flippedclassroom** or **#onlinelearning** environment, where educators themselves may perceive themselves to be educationally challenged. Perhaps the best way to look at this is through the lens of **#gameculture**, whereby we attempt to **#gamify** our classroom in a way suited to our video culture learners. Who wouldn’t want to learn English, Sociology or Math if they are presented in the context of the Lannister Vs. Stark struggles of **#gameofthrones**? Or perhaps science would become more accessible if **#sheldoncooper** was our avatar for learning physics or chemistry?

If we can engage in our subject through contemporary topics that invigorate and excite our students and ourselves, that’s half the battle right there, tornados or not.

AUTHOR BIO:

Kurt Depner is an Associate Professor of English at New Mexico State University - Dona Ana, where he spends his time teaching his students about social media and zombies. He also works with his schools cultural diversity committee to expose his community to cellos, drumming, drag culture, ska, and the world outside own yards

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