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4 Ways to Engage Today's Generation of Student

by Andy Masters

Each year, every faculty member becomes one year older. However, the average age of each incoming student remains the same. This presents a challenge: *How can we keep the communication and learning gap from expanding more and more as time goes on?*

When traveling to a foreign land, it is well-known practice to brush-up on the culture, customs, and lingo to effectively communicate. We need to understand the culture, customs, and lingo of today's student in order to effectively educate. So, who is today's generation of student, and what is their reality (*besides watching reality TV every night?*)

The reality is this: We've now graduated from the MTV Generation to the A.D.D. Generation—where the average music video or commercial targeted at students change at a dizzying one frame per second, because producers know young viewers will zap them out otherwise. This generation has been granted endless satellite channels, websites, text messages, and iPod music choices to constantly zap through daily. This makes the challenge more difficult than ever for faculty to maintain the interest and attention of the wandering student.

Alas, here are a few great tips for faculty on how to better engage today's generation of student:

1. “Bring Cool Careers and Majors to Life”

One reason why students fail or are disinterested is because they don't see the connection between today's lesson and what they really want to do someday. The more we can close that gap--to illustrate classroom relevance to their world--the better we can engage students and keep their interest.

The prospect of getting a job and working 40+ hours per week for the next 40 years doesn't exactly breed excitement in this generation. However, they can get excited through examples of “cool” young people in their field who are very successful doing something they LOVE for a living.

While we typically associate celebrities as movie stars or athletes, there are celebrities within almost every field. For example, in the world of culinary arts, Guy Fieri is a “cool” celebrity. Guy is a TV personality from the Food Network, and spokesperson for the restaurant chain T.G.I. Fridays. He makes food, cooking, and culinary arts “cool.” Josh Bernstein of the History Channel's “*Digging for the Truth*” and Discovery Channel's “*Into the Unknown With Josh Bernstein*” makes history and archeology exciting and interesting, especially to those who never believed such topics were exciting and interesting before. Even MSNBC television personalities such as the politically branded Tucker Carlson, and Jim Kramer of “*Mad Money*” (while not necessarily young), do give an eye-catching flair to the otherwise “boring” world of politics and finance.

Success stories may also include a recent alum, a prominent figure from the locale/state, or even a friend of the professor—which can help bring careers to life at the personal level. Show their picture in class. Visit their website. Share a behind-the-scenes interview of their quick road to the top. Invite them to speak on campus.

Continually citing young and unique success stories students can relate to are important. Not only does this make learning more interesting, but it just may ignite the “I

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wanna just be like them...” philosophy with our students, which in turn can ignite a new focus on their academic goals.

2. *“Find Clever Opportunities to Integrate TV/Movies/Pop Culture ”*

Is it important for students to understand the long history of business, psychology, leadership, etc? Absolutely. However, seeking out opportunities to supplement historical principles with books, movies, or music of today can definitely help bring the learning process to life. Cite a chapter, or even a paragraph or quote, from a source written since 2000 by someone 30 years old or younger on the topic, and you’ll be amazed with the attention, interest, and results.

One great example is the book “Campus CEO: A Student Entrepreneur’s Guide to Launching a Multi-Million Dollar Business,” written by Randal Pinkett, a sharp young professional who was a winner on the Donald Trump television show *“The Apprentice.”* This book includes many old-age, proven business principles from books written 50 years prior. However, which do you think is more appealing to read for today’s student? Which lessons will resonate more?

Any reference to reality television, video games, or downloaded music for their Ipod can immediately raise their attention antennas. So, what do we mean by reference? A reference can be sharing a marketing article on the X-Box product, or a fresh class case study on a company such as Apple, or a statistical exercise on average the number of text messaging characters transmitted by the average college student per day. Have fun with examples from *their world* which can be used at every turn.

Which movies dominated the box office this year? Did you see any of them? Are there any scenes from popular movies of the last 5 years that relate to communications, or psychology, or even anthropology or criminal justice? Of course! Opening a class discussion based on a recent film can easily beat a discussion of a copied magazine article originally published back in 1981.

3. *“Use the Internet and Technology In Ways that Speak Their Language”*

As a great rule of thumb, less instances of distributing photocopied magazine articles and more instances of citing article links on that magazine’s website is a good thing (*not to mention the environmental impact and cost-savings*). The words *“check out this website”* will probably elicit a more positive response than the infamous *“take one and pass it down.”* The Internet is the virtual home of this generation. They’ll be online later anyway, so they might as well be surfing something productive (*a.k.a.—your subject matter!*) Further, beyond just articles and websites, what blogs within their field or subject can they participate in now as students?

Always stay on top of how technology is affecting your field, and be eager to share such information with your students. Students *want* to hear about this. For instance, consider a culinary arts professor who begins class by mentioning: *“Here is a website where you can download your favorite recipes onto your iPod for free.”* Student responses might include thoughts such as: *“Wow, I learned something I can actually use—which is pretty cool”*, or *“my professor is actually on top of what’s going on in their field, instead of teaching the same class the same way for the last 20 years,”* or perhaps most importantly *“I actually believe I’m getting a cutting edge education by attending this college. It’s preparing me for my future.”*

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YouTube has a world of possibilities in the learning community. Within moments, a drafting or engineering student can view the design and construction of an NFL stadium using time lapse photography, while a biology student can view computer animation of photosynthesis. At almost every turn, any professor can add “And tonight, go to YouTube and watch the Martin Luther King ‘*I Have a Dream*’ speech, as well as the 1969 landing of Apollo 11 on the moon. We’ll discuss next class.” Instead of reading about things or hearing about things, students want to see things with their own eyes, on their own computer.

Facebook and Twitter are often intimidating entities to faculty and staff. However, this is their world. So, is there any way to capitalize the popularity of such social networking sites in a positive way within the learning experience? For instance, take those young success stories previously mentioned. Chances are high they can also be found on Facebook and Twitter. Why not have students visit their page to learn about their background and how they became successful so fast? Facebook now boasts more than 130 million active users (users who have visited in the last 30 days), and is also being used more and more frequently for educational, career networking, and business purposes, as well. It’s here to stay.

Discuss with other faculty on how they might be incorporating any of these technologies in class, and understand what works, and what doesn’t. Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “*The medium is the message.*” We now have a wonderful new set of tools and technology at our disposal to “Wow” students with our message, and make learning more effective, powerful, and fun.

4. “*Use Humor and Have Fun in the Classroom*”

Certainly, the job of an educator isn’t to entertain. It is to educate.

However: *Do you remember a teacher who didn’t just teach a class, but impacted your life? Did you feel as if they could relate to you, and could even make you laugh? Did you have fun in their class, and look forward to attending each day?*

Zig Ziglar, one of the most successful motivational speakers in history, knew the power of incorporating humor in his presentations. Throughout his career, Zig would strategically place some type of wit, joke, or funny example every seven minutes during his presentation, no matter the audience or topic. As he studied, attention span begins to dip as time between jokes lingered. People pay attention because they don’t want to miss the next joke!

So, what if you’re not that funny? Here are a few tips: Go to Google or Google Images, and search under “Business humor,” or “Funny Biology,” or “Funny Advertising.” Use the Google Alerts tool to tag such phrases, so that you can receive emails when cartoons, articles, or blogs are posted on such phrases. This same search can also be used for YouTube clips, which has seemingly captured every funny moment in the history of mankind (or at least, *their* mankind).

Keep an eye out for funny articles, or even comical things on television, that might have some direct or even indirect relevance to the subject. Did you see something funny on Jay Leno’s “Headlines” segment, but you didn’t have your TIVO running? Simply go to nbc.com where you can retrieve any such headlines from previous episodes. Also, be sure to reference the sarcastic hit book “Non Campus Mentis: World History According to College Students” by Professor Anders Henriksson for immediate classroom comic relief.

When applicable and appropriate, allow an environment where students are encouraged to have fun in group projects or class exercises together. No one can articulate cool and funny lingo to students better than other students. “Make learning fun” is one

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principle that holds true no matter the generation. Teaching can be much easier when students *look forward* to coming to class.

Like anything else, these tips may not work *every* time, but give them a shot.

Faculty members should challenge themselves to reach out and incorporate *something* for today's generation of student once per week. *Anything*. Maybe an example from a recent movie or an industry-related joke. Perhaps a statistics exercise in text messaging. Or, possibly posting a weekly career spotlight of someone under 30 who is successful within the field. This could be an inventor of new software, an award-winning local entrepreneur, or a host of a new program on Tech TV. Students will pay attention, and be more inspired to learn than ever before. Certainly, you just might make teaching more fun, interesting, and enjoyable for yourself, as well.

***About the Author:* Andy Masters presents entertaining and inspirational programs for Faculty, Staff, and Students across North America. He has written 4 books and earned 4 degrees, including an M.A.-Human Resources Development and an M.A.-Marketing from Webster University. Andy is a member of the National Speakers Association (NSA), as well as numerous educational organizations. Visit www.andy-masters.com or email andy@andy-masters.com for speaking availability.**

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