



Article Series on Learning Impact

The Challenge of Educating Today's Digital Natives

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Data compiled by [Project Tomorrow](#), based on surveys completed by more than 3.5 million students, faculty, parents and administrators during the past decade, shows that today's students are increasingly interested in learning although their curiosity may not necessarily align with what's being taught in today's schools.

"I think one of the things that is so interesting about today's students is that many are using digital tools and resources to become self-directed learners," said Julie Evans, CEO of Project Tomorrow. "What they are telling us is that while they are interested in all sorts of things about the world, in many cases, those topics aren't covered in their traditional educational environment. It is imperative that today's educational institutions, including both K-12 and higher education, realize they are no longer the only bastion of knowledge for today's learners. Accepting this new reality will in many ways mandate that schools and colleges change the way they are approaching teaching and learning, and the way they are interacting with their students."

Evans will lead a panel discussion at IMS Global's [2014 Learning Impact Leadership Institute](#) in New Orleans May 5-8. Included in the panel discussion, *Students Speak Up: What Everyone Should Know*

About Students and Digital Learning, will be several K-12 students from local Louisiana schools as well as Travis Allen, a college student and founder of [iSchool Initiative](#), who will share their differing experiences and expectations for the use of educational technology.



Julie Evans, CEO of Project Tomorrow

When Project Tomorrow conducted its first Speak Up survey in 2003, Evans said their goal was to collect the ideas of at least 5,000 K-12 students about educational technology. "We had 210,000 students take the surveys that first year. We realized that there was this pent-up demand for students to share their ideas and thoughts, not only about the frustrations they were having using technology in school, but with their vision of the future, what they were thinking about, and how they envisioned how technology could help them achieve their goals. Based on that initial response, we institutionalized Speak Up as an annual event and added more surveys not only for K-12 students, but for parents,

teachers, administrators, librarians, technology leaders, and this year, for the first time, we also polled community leaders.”

Evans said the national Speak Up findings are shared regularly with community, policy, business and education leaders nationwide to inform their efforts to improve education. Most importantly, schools and districts that respond to the surveys get a free report from Project Tomorrow that documents all of their individual stakeholders’ responses and the national data to use for benchmarking and comparatives. And twice yearly, the non-profit organization shares its findings with federal policymakers and education associations in Washington, DC in a series of high profile congressional briefings as well as with many state legislative offices. “It’s been very interesting to see, for example, where some state legislatures were reluctant to endorse online textbooks or consider competency-based online classes because of fears about parental backlash. Some of the Speak Up data, especially from students and their parents has been the impetus for changing their minds about the expectations for using digital tools within learning. You can’t beat the power of local data.”

While all K-12 and college students today enjoy some familiarity with technology, Evans said their data shows that the leading edge of the truly digital native student today is at the 8th grade level. “What we’re seeing is that it’s the middle school students and younger that are actually more digitally native, not only more comfortable using technology, but that they are fully taking advantage of this technology to supplement their education. We’re seeing about a third of middle school students that tell us they are doing self-directed learning outside of school using some type of digital resource.”

Evans said one “light bulb” moment for her occurred during a panel discussion when a high school student named Chris talked about an online physics course he was taking through a community college to supplement what he was learning in his traditional AP high school class. “He wasn’t taking it to pad his resume, he wasn’t taking it for the grade, he was taking it because he was really, sincerely interested

in the topic. When I asked him what his physics teacher thought about him taking this online class, he looked at me like I was a crazy person and said: ‘Well, I didn’t tell him. Was I supposed to tell him?’ Here was Chris, walking into this face-to-face class every day with this teacher who probably thought he was the king of physics. The perception that these students were coming to class every day as empty vessels and their teacher needed to fill them with physics wisdom was not the case,” said Evans.

“We’re continuing to see that trend. We are seeing it right now in middle school students taking math classes online as a supplement to their traditional math classes. Most notably, Algebra, because of their concern for the achievement that needs to happen with Algebra as a gateway class to other classes in high school. I think that’s interesting, both from the standpoint that the students feel empowered, and the technology has enabled them to do this, and the students also feel the need to supplement their traditional education. And then again, the schools and districts, teachers even, may not even be aware that it is happening.”

Although schools and platform providers would like to identify the one mobile device to put in the hands of students, Evans said the data shows that students continue to use a variety of platforms and devices to serve a varied set of learning goals. “The kids are very device agnostic. What is most important to them is to use the right tool for the right task. So, for example, the students tell us that while a tablet may be their preferred device for taking notes in class, their smartphone is still their go-to tool for social networking and communications and a laptop fits the bill for creating presentations for schoolwork.”

“With students’ thirst for knowledge continuing to increase both inside and outside the classroom, and with the growing number of platforms for accessing that knowledge, Evans said the need for the seamless exchange of information across devices and applications has never been greater,” said Julie Evans, CEO, Project Tomorrow.

With students' thirst for knowledge continuing to increase both inside and outside the classroom, and with the growing number of platforms for accessing that knowledge, Evans said the need for the seamless exchange of information across devices and applications has never been greater. "This whole idea of learning that is enabled and empowered by technology is still evolving. And we believe that it's really important for the student voice to be an important part of that conversation. There's a lot that schools, districts and vendors can learn from listening and observing how students are not just adopting technology, but also adapting it to meet their educational needs.

"To some extent, I think that we were a wake-up call, beginning in 2003 with our first survey, in providing data that showed students had good ideas, not just about how they would like to bring their phones to

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school, but that students really had ideas about how that phone, and subsequently the tablet and other devices, could be used to impact their learning. As the schools and districts started to dive into their local Speak Up data, they began to realize there was something very powerful about engaging student voice and using it appropriately. Not just asking students their opinion, but using that data to shape the way they were thinking about either technology initiatives or different learning initiatives. The other wake-up call was the role of parents. We now have a new wave of digital parents; they've kind of grown up using a lot of this technology. So they are also placing new demands on schools and districts, changing their way of thinking about the use of technology."

Rob Abel, CEO of IMS Global, said the data collected by Project Tomorrow only serves to reinforce the need for new approaches to teaching and learning and for incorporating the use of technology in that process. "The mission and objective of IMS has always been to advance technology to the point that it enables education innovation to flourish and true learning to take place. We are pleased to have Ms. Evans kick off the 2014 Learning Impact Leadership Institute by sharing the results of the 2013 Students Speak Up survey, which validates that the work of the IMS community is on the right path."

About IMS Global Learning Consortium

IMS Global is a nonprofit organization that advances technology that can affordably scale and improve educational participation and attainment. IMS members are leading suppliers, institutions and government organizations that are enabling the future of education by collaborating on interoperability and adoption initiatives. IMS sponsors Learning Impact: A global awards program and conference to recognize the impact of innovative technology on educational access, affordability, and quality. For more information visit www.imsglobal.org or contact info@imsglobal.org.

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