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Professional Resource:

Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn (2010)

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By Larry D. Rosen

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The fundamental premise underlying Larry Rosen's book *Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn*, is that the minds of young students today "have changed – they have been 'rewired'" (3) through their constant immersion in digital worlds. Basing his argument on a whole battery of research about the diverse ways young people use technology, digital media, and social networks, Rosen argues that a "culture gap" has emerged between students (digital natives) and teachers, (digital immigrants). Consequently, in this book, which primarily seems to be aimed at parents and educators who struggle to understand the digital worlds young people inhabit, he makes a case for embracing technology and digital media within the classroom to reach students who are bored by traditional teaching methods.

It appears that for Rosen there is a brave new world of technology for American students, which leads many of them to "*hate school*" (3, italics in the original), where educational strategies have not caught up with the tech-savvy youngsters of today who eat, sleep, and breathe technology. Thus, while historically many reasons might have existed for students to dislike school, in Rosen's view the cause is principally defined in terms of technology use. Not surprisingly, his solution to this challenge is the deployment of technology and digital media to engage students.

In making his case, Rosen begins with an introduction into the digital media worlds of members of the so-called iGeneration (those born in the 1990s and 2000s). Identifying their predilection for using their cell phones, watching TV, playing games and listening to

music simultaneously, he advocates the need to change education by attuning teaching to the rewired behaviors of students outside the classroom. For example, he argues that the use of digital media such as podcasts or videos can give students the opportunity to learn at their own pace and provides them with the opportunity to review the information over and over again. He also offers a roadmap as to how to implement such new technologies in the teaching process (189 - 193). As he puts it, "the educational content is not the problem. It is the delivery method and the setting" (3).

According to Rosen, effective delivery platforms for educating rewired children include video games or virtual worlds like "Second Life" (where people can create an identity and live a virtual life). In his opinion, such technologies disseminate content and prove more engaging through the process of immersion that is required on the part of the user. Rosen compares such immersion to the process that is known to enhance the ability to learn a new language. So entering the world of Second Life, for instance, allows students to experience a Mayan village or the Sistine Chapel in 3D. Since all senses are involved in this process, he claims that using technology and interacting in virtual worlds have become a part of reality or seem more real than traditional forms of classroom engagement to today's students (98).

In general, Rosen seeks to convince the reader that because students are accustomed to technology-driven multitasking in their daily lives, the very expectation that they should unitask and focus on a single task as previous generations of students did, is doomed to failure. And while he acknowledges the fact that multitasking is not unproblematic, the research he cites seems to indicate that the main problem with multitasking is the increased time it takes to complete a task (67.) This fact seemingly poses no problem for

him given his reference to the “often unlimited time to perform tasks in the real world” (76), thereby leading one to wonder if students never have deadlines. In addition, he also suggests that multi-taskers are at least as good as their non-multi-tasking peers or even better. As a result, he underplays research that contradicts this view and suggests that heavy media multi-taskers have difficulties suppressing irrelevant tasks or become easily distracted (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner 2009).

That being constantly rewired may cause health problems also does not seem to figure significantly on Rosen’s agenda. He mentions possible issues such as “reduced visual acuity from prolonged staring at small screens” (206) but ignores other problems. An exploratory study conducted by ICMPA (International Center of Media and Public Agenda) at the University of Maryland’s Merrill College of Journalism, points towards a possible over-dependency on technological gadgets and digital media. In this project, students were asked to go without any media for 24 hours, but many were unable to complete the task and described a sense of being addicted to media (Moeller 2010). This pilot project has been extended on a global scale to include students from China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Lebanon, and Argentina (among others) and the preliminary data show results similar to those in the pilot project.

Further, Rosen also hardly addresses questions of varying technological competency or questions of class and income in mediating access to technology. Instead, quoting personal anecdotes (217) he assumes that students in the United States always find access to computers and to the Internet. And while he mentions possible concerns and problems that are associated with technology and online social networks such as cyber bullying and harassment, sexual predators, and technology dependency, he does not focus on these issues in great detail.

Finally, Rosen’s U.S.-centric vision leaves unanswered questions about the applicability of his claims regarding the “rewired” generation and to what degree technology can enable this generation to learn in a more motivated and engaged fashion, in a wider global context. In China for example, while school kids are increasingly engaging with technology and digital media, they still mainly get educated the old-fashioned way. And according to the latest PISA study that tested student performance in reading, mathematics and science, Chinese students received the highest results in the world while 15 year olds from the United States

came in 20th (OECD 2010). This would seem to indicate that technology cannot be seen as the Holy Grail with regard to engaging students and producing good results.

Rosen acknowledges that being rewired and having access to a plethora of information does not, by itself, offer the key towards a better educational world. Dedicating a chapter to the need for media literacy, he calls for caution in analyzing and digesting information from the Internet and other media platforms and offers a variety of hands-on solutions for vetting information (172 -173). But while he emphasizes the need for credible sources, he ignores the fact that even the best institutions and sources make mistakes or do not explore original data to the full extent. In fact, he, himself, quotes the outcome of a research project by simply referring to a press release (120).

In the end, Rosen’s *Rewired* is a manifesto for the introduction of more technology and digital media in the classroom as tools to enhance motivation, participation and fun while learning. How convincing the reader finds this argument, however, depends entirely on whether he or she accepts his underlying premise of a “rewired” generation that can learn primarily through multi-tasking and technological immersion.

References

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