

Review

Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the way they learn

Larry D Rosen (2010)
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Review

Larry D. Rosen argues for the need to more fully embrace technology and to incorporate digital media when educating young technologically advanced student cohorts. *Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn* is a good introduction to recent research on the use of technology by young people, and the pedagogical potential of utilising the rapid and unique changes in behaviour of this demographic. However, the book lacks consideration of the ethics of such a pedagogical approach in terms of the implications for students' health, labour and other environmental factors.

The unfortunate book cover symbolises some of the contradictions of this text. The fluorescent yellow and pink background together with an iStock photo displaying a ethnically diverse group of young people gazing at books and laptops both smacks of tokenism and a generational veniality of attempting, unsuccessfully, to latch on to something 'the kids do'. A hot pink, bold, lower-case 'e' evokes the e-learning, e-commerce and that other dreaded 'e' associated with 'young people' - ecstasy. Implicitly, this capitalises on both a rising excitement (in this case, technological progress) and fear (of its dangers).

Equally unfortunate is the use of hackneyed labels of Baby Boomer, Generation X, Generation Y/Gen Y/Net Generation/ Internet Generation, and those 'kids of today', the iGeneration of the title, which points to a consideration of generational difference that can sometimes lack depth. Of course, generational difference is the selling point of the book, and to a certain extent it can be hard to avoid such tags. The 'we', 'you', and 'us' referred to by the author are broadly meant to address any educators of youth, which he assumes are Gen Y and older. I read from some of his more astonished or sensational descriptions of youngsters' habits, such as "multitasking madness" (p.87), that he addresses those of his own baby boomer age group. While the book is not explicitly aimed at educators working in the tertiary sector, some of his approaches can be usefully transferred, particularly for the reader wanting a clear, broad overview of current technology such as iPod, iTouch, iPhone, Wikipedia, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Google, chat, and texting, and trends in young people's use of them in and out of classroom contexts.

His argument is sound: it is necessary for education models to change to serve the unique capabilities, aptitude and habits of children who have grown up using technology. Their preferences for multitasking, preferred learning styles, and desire

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to stay socially, virtually connected need to be addressed. However, Rosen repeatedly fails to provide reasoning for the strength of his claim that young people *must* multitask, which is odd considering his extensive citing of research for other concomitant claims.

Rosen does address educators' resistance to change (such as worries about the neurological effects of multitasking and the loss of face-to-face social skills), yet there are some noticeable omissions. For example, when praising the "asynchronous" immersive educational environments such as video games and online learning spaces, there is no mention of the potentially damaging effects that responding to texts, emails and chat "24/7" might have on children's sleep habits and general health (pp.69-70).

While I found the book included significant repetition, for a non-academic reader, perhaps unfamiliar with the technologies he delineates, this is not necessarily a bad thing: as Rosen suggests, repetition is a key to learning. Rosen has provided a clearly written guide for educators interested in current technologies available both in and out of the classroom, and has listed useful resources to get ideas and support when designing new pedagogical approaches suitable for these new technologies.

My central criticism of *Rewired* is the assumed reader and assumptions about young people's access to technology. The book is pitched at any "teachers and parents" (p.1), however it is clear from the research the author draws on, that the classes, students and teachers he discusses are from the United States of America and that the families he describes have access to resources to provide their children with a bedroom that is a "multimedia hub". He does not consider the digital divide: not only globally between developed and less developed nations, but between students from public and private schools. Instead he writes from the flawed assumption that "almost every" or "every" young person is "wired" with wireless mobile devices, mp3 players and computers, and addresses his strategies to the educators and parents of such children (p.84).

While there is a place for this book, I finished it wanting to hear of strategies that are *more* budget conscious and therefore more widely relevant, for pedagogical suggestions with political and social bite. For example, there are innovations such as the solar-powered laptops that can be cheaply distributed to remote indigenous students (Edwards 2009) or Indian villages (Heimbuch 2010). A discussion of these could usefully develop a sense of the broader potential for accessing and incorporating technology in educational settings across a range of contexts, whereas this book caters to those teaching student cohorts who already have (many) privately owned devices. A rejoinder to this criticism would be that this was not Rosen's aim, but I would argue that his aim needs to be explicit and contextualized in books such as these, otherwise, cumulatively, the young people already silenced due to their lack of access to technologies are made more invisible and educational inequities will persist.

Another feeling of disquiet arose as Rosen implicitly endorses the campaigns of organizations such as that of Abilene Christian University, which distributes an iPhone or iPod to all new students in order to "enhance their campus experience" (p.64), without examining the ethical implications of corporate sponsorship in educational institutions. This endorsement is of course not a new phenomenon, and is perhaps relatively more accepted in the United States than Australia, but it is still disquieting.

Further, there is no critique about the environmental and labour implications for educational workers of a broad implementation of media devices in classrooms. Similarly there is little or no critique accompanying his praise of the educational potential of games in the *Civilisation* or *Age of Empires* series. I was left waiting to

hear of the possibilities for students to create their own content and games without, for example, in-built gender and ethnic bias. For a book that is praised as containing “positive, proactive messages” (back cover), I wanted Rosen’s thinking to extend beyond the simple theme that because young people are using and adapting technologies it is necessary to embrace them for educational purposes. I was left waiting for a discussion of some of the more political and cultural implications of this approach.

References

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