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Learning in a digital age

The world has quickly become digital, and the younger generations are leading the pack with technology that just may make some other items obsolete. As pre-teens and teenagers routinely turn to digital devices for entertainment and schoolwork, the face of education may change as well.

In the past students toted notebooks (the paper kind), pencils, pens, and folders to school. Today, students carry digital devices like computer tablets, notebooks (the electronic kind), smart phones, and other digital devices to the classroom. Furthermore, texting and instant messaging have replaced traditional modes of casual conversation.

Another item that may go the way of the dinosaur is the printed book. Students can now carry an entire library worth of reading material on a slim e-reader device or on the many other evolving tablet-type machines. There may be a day when one no longer browses the aisles of the school

library for a book, but only downloads the text instantly when needed. Some textbooks are already offered in digital format, and some school systems and teachers may opt for the convenience of digital devices.

Little data exists as to just how many schools have policies allowing the use of cell phones and other digital devices in class, but handheld devices are not available in the classroom every day. But things can change in a short period of time.

Digital Advantages

There are many advantages to going digital. Typing tends to go faster for adept keyboard users, which many youngsters have become since they've essentially grown up with computers in the household. This makes note-taking easier. When notes and assignments are saved to a computer, there's less likelihood of them getting lost, especially if important files are routinely backed up. Data saved on a computer can easily be manipulated into a number of different formats, potentially making it easier to study. Bodies of text can be transformed into charts or pie graphs with many word processing programs. Students can cut and paste important quotes or examples into essays and the like, saving time on homework.

In terms of streamlining backpacks, digital readers and other devices eliminate heavy books and notebooks. This can be seen as a big



plus to students who have grown accustomed to carrying around 20+ pounds on their backs from a very young age.

As many teachers turn to online resources, such as e-mailing and posting assignments on a personal Web site, students almost have to keep up with the times with some sort of tool that has Internet access.

Digital Disadvantages

On the other side of the equation, going digital does have some disadvantages. The decline of penmanship is one of them. In a digital era, people are less likely to write letters by hand or keep up with penmanship in other ways. Some children don't know what cursive handwriting is and may never learn how to sign their names in "script," which was a common lesson for other generations.

While digital communication does promote social interactions on some levels, there are some who argue that spending too much time staring at a screen and keyboard compromises the social aspect of going to school and learning in a classroom. Today's youth are less likely to "talk,"

choosing to "LOL" and "TTYL" through texting.

Having a wealth of information available on the Internet opens up students to many disreputable sources of content. Some common online encyclopaedias are written and edited by regular people who may not have the accurate details of events. Also, having content that is easily cut and pasted opens up the temptation for plagiarism and blurs the lines of how to attribute information to a source correctly.

Digital devices may be great learning tools, but they also offer a number of distractions to students. When a student is supposed to be taking notes on a laptop in the classroom, he or she might be downloading music, updating social networking sites, streaming video, or checking celebrity gossip.

Classrooms are evolving and so are students. Learning is very different from the way older generations may have learned. Whether the presence of digital technology helps or hinders remains open for debate.

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