Old folks and technology

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John Lubbock, a 19th century astronomer, once wrote:

> *There are three great questions which in life we have to ask over and over again to answer:*
> *Is it right or wrong?*
> *Is it true or false?*
> *Is it beautiful or ugly?*
> *Our education ought to help us to answer these questions.*

I think of those words often when I hear educators worry about kids being more adept and comfortable with technology than those of us who were growing up when the earth was still cooling.

It's hard not be humbled when a situation like this occurs as related by Monica Campana of Palm Coast, Florida, on LM_Net:

> *Last month Google was blocked by our district because kids were doing image searches and actual pictures loaded on Google image search hit page that aren't blocked by our filter. Safe search in Google can be turned off by the kids. I vented, fumed, researched, emailed Google, but finally gave up and taught the kids how to use a few other search engines. One week later one of my seventh graders pulled me aside and whispered that we could still use www.google.ca - the Canadian version of Google, as of yet still not blocked. I had to laugh because I should have asked the kids in the first place.*

Many of us turn to those younger than us for technology help. (Older I get the more it seems like the more young people there are around all the time!) When I need help editing a digital movie, I turn to my 16-year-old son. He downloads movies, burns CDs, and uses IM to visit with folks around the world. If I need help getting the networked printer to work in the office, our 20-something network coordinator is the one I ask. When her fingers fly through the control panels they are a blur. Hands down, kids can do the technical stuff and are more comfortable with much of this stuff than I will ever be. And my VCR DOESN'T blink 12:00 either.

In *Growing Up Digital* (McGraw Hill, 1999) by Don Tapscott calls the kids who have grown up with a mouse in their hands the Net Generation. Of these Net-Geners, he writes, "For the first time in history youth are an authority on an innovation central to society's development." I am not exactly filled with hope for the future when I think that the young, spiky blue-haired guy with more studs than a Minnesota snow tire is leading cultural change. (Darn, that sounded just like something my grandfather might have said!)

What I hope we don't forget is that the same great issues of education that Lubbock identifies are still with us today and are perhaps more important than ever. When our students download music, we need to be there to ask if there is a copyright question involved (right or wrong). When they find sources of information on the Internet, we need to be there to ask them if the information is credible (true or false). When they put graphics into their presentations, we need to be there to ask them if those visuals contribute to the message they are trying to get across (beautiful or ugly). I like to think the questions we can help answer are more important in the long run than "How do you create a new background on a slide?"

We need to help make sure our students not only know how to use these new electronic marvels, but use them well. A short list of tools is below with some of the sensibilities about their use with which we geezers can still help:

Some technologies	**Some things with which old people can still help**
Spreadsheets	Math sense, numeracy, efficiency in design
Charting and graphing software	Selecting the right graph for the right purpose
Database design	End user consideration, making valid data-driven decisions
Word processing	The writing process, organization, editing, grammar, style
Presentation software	Speaking skills, graphic design, organization, clarity
Web-page design	Design, writing skills, ethical information distribution
Online research	Citation of sources, designing good questions, checking validity of data, understanding biases
Video-editing	Storyboarding, copyright issues when using film clips and audio
Chat room use/Instant messaging	Safety, courtesy, time management

No matter how sophisticated the N-Geners are technologically, in matters of ethics, aesthetics, veracity, and other important judgments, they are, after all, still green. By virtue of our training and life experiences, we can apply the standards of older technologies (the pencil, the podium, the book) to those which are now technology enhanced. And we'd better. Given the choice of having Socrates or Bill Gates as a teacher, I know whom I would choose.

Increasingly the teachers and librarians who can survive and thrive in schools ever more permeated by technology will need to view themselves as "co-learners" in many learning experiences. Remember that "life-long learning" applies to us as well as the kids.