Blog

A*re Educational Games an Effective Use of Classroom Technologies and Dollars?*

It's Nature vs. Nurture – again. School budgets are tight and everyone is second guessing the use of expensive technologies in the classroom. Are they worth it? The answer is not as obvious as you might think.

Consider the following: What is the best way for you to learn? Are you a visual learner? Do you remember things you hear more easily? Or do subjects make more sense for you when they're linear and logical? The answer can range from none of the above to all of the above. Obviously, everyone has their own sensibility about what works best for them. The modality (or method) that we each resonate to is a mixture of Nature & Nurture. Nature, because genetics play a part and Nurture because different cultures, socioeconomic status, even religions, help shape the way children learn. As adults, we experience the same thing. Some like to read the lyrics of a song to learn it, others need to hear it so they can retain it, still others want to move to the music.
Howard Gardner cites eight elements that help refine the ways in which we learn:

- Linguistic/Language
- Logical/Mathematical
- Musical
- Spatial
- Bodily kinesthetic
- Interpersonal
- Naturalist

Most children are a combination of the above modalities. Educational games are designed to cover the entire spectrum of styles so that individual learning is maximized for each child. Oftentimes, these games introduce modalities some children have not yet been exposed to. The result can be a quantum leap for learners who were struggling with traditional teaching methods.

So if you were to observe a classroom featuring some very cool learning technologies, one of the things you would see is that most kids are totally absorbed in what they're doing. Desks are generally collected in a pod – with kids facing one another so that each 'team' can more readily communicate as they explore a subject. One child might be looking up ancient architectural techniques and math as it relates to the Roman Coliseum, another might be exploring the different social laws of the day, as yet another sets about creating a 3-D map of the building itself.

Sounds like fun, doesn't it? Immerse kids in exciting subjects, allow them to learn at their own pace, support their ability to work with one another. So what's the problem? It turns out that test scores don't corroborate the anecdotal evidence. Those championing the cause of standardized testing point out it is currently the only way to test proficiency. The more broad-based skill-set that computers develop cannot currently be accurately measured.

Tom Vander Ark was the former executive for education at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. He also puts his money where his mouth is by investing in companies that evolve educational technology. He believes that the historic rate at which classrooms are becoming computer-centric is one of the biggest things happening in the world today. That said, he aptly defines the paradox of whether the return is worth the hefty capital investment for schools. When it comes down to crunching the numbers and proving results he says, "We better put up or shut up."

Supporters claim that educational games provide hard data in the form of individual metrics. Teachers can evaluate results and identify what kind of learning serves each child. They can also target problem areas that can be addressed through manipulation of the game technology rather than through negative feedback. Additionally, this is knowledge that can be shared with parents and foster a feedback loop of support at home as well as in the classroom. The question remains. Are school districts drinking the Kool-Aid about the benefits of high level, high price technology? Tell us what you think.