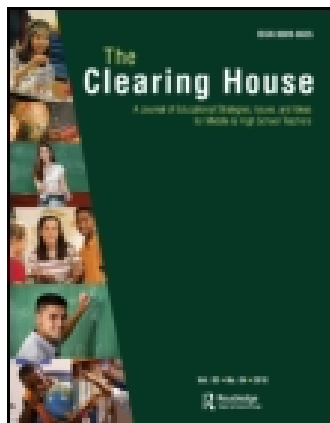


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The STORRI Method: A Strategy for Exploring and Integrating Youth Culture into the Classroom

ANTHONY D. NEELY

Abstract: As teachers progress in life and career, generation gaps may begin to appear that decrease not only the effectiveness of interaction with students but also the ability to produce generationally relevant course content. Situated in a framework of socioculturalism (Vygotsky 1978), this article presents The STORRI Method—a strategy for exploring and integrating youth culture into the classroom. STORRI is an acronym for the six iterative steps of the method: *survey, talk, observe, research, reflect, and integrate*. Each step of The STORRI Method is discussed with numerous corresponding examples, and best practices are offered for use in the classroom setting. A case narrative is also provided to demonstrate The STORRI Method's use in a high school level U.S. government course.

Keywords: student engagement, youth culture, generation gap, classroom practice

"Let's play a game, Mr. Reynolds," a student proposed. The student explained that she would show her teacher pictures of famous celebrities throughout the past 20 years and see how many he could accurately identify. Believing this would be an easy challenge for a self-described *hip* high school teacher, Mr. Reynolds agreed to play. "Michael Jackson. Jennifer Aniston. Oh. Oh... what's Uncle Phil's name from Fresh Prince? James Avery!" The teacher laughed at the ease with which he was able to name the cultural icons. However, once the student began showing Mr. Reynolds photos of more recent celebrities, his confidence quickly dissipated. "Pass. Skip. Is that...? No. Who is Lorde? What's a Skrillex?"

As shown in this vignette, there comes a point in many educators' careers when they begin to lose touch

with youth culture and the daily lives and interests of adolescents (Bennett 2011). To comprehend why this phenomenon occurs, one must first understand generations and generation gaps. Each person is born into a socially constructed age group called a *generation* (e.g., baby boomers, generation X, millennials, generation Z; Codrington and Grant-Marshall 2005; Strauss and Howe 1991). Although there are unique interests and norms within each generation, members share a common identity based on sociocultural phenomena that occur during adolescence including, but not limited to, major world events (e.g., the assassination of President Kennedy, the election of President Obama), technological innovations (e.g., color television, broadband wireless Internet), and pop culture icons (e.g., The Beatles, Kanye West) (Berl 2006; Codrington and Grant-Marshall 2005; Straus and Howe 1991). Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2005) contend that the rapid rate at which society and technology change provides each generation with its own set of unique experiences, world views, and behavioral norms.

Generational theorists suggest that as people age they are likely to experience a *cultural blackout* (Crepes 2008), or period in life in which they become disconnected from the cultural trends emerging from younger generations. This results in discontinuity between the interests, beliefs, and behaviors of older generations (e.g., teachers) and younger generations (e.g., students). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as a *generation gap* (Codrington and Grant-Marshall 2005; Falk and Falk 2005).

Membership in an older generation should by no means be considered a deficit to one's worth or abilities; however, teachers need to be aware that unaddressed generation gaps may negatively influence not

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only teacher–student relationships but also students' perceived relevance of curriculum and instruction (Berl 2006; Codrington and Grant-Marshall 2005; Prensky 2010; Tapscott 2009). Dysfunctional teacher–student relationships and perceived irrelevance of content and pedagogy may result in classroom conflict, producing negative outcomes for both teachers and students. Studies have shown that conflict in the classroom influences an educator's sense of well-being (e.g., decreased job satisfaction and increased career burnout; Chang 2009; Spilt, Koomen, and Thijs 2011), as well as a student's engagement, achievement, and behavior (Roorda et al. 2011; Wubbels and Brekelmans 2005).

In the modern school culture, which emphasizes high-stakes testing, Common Core curriculum, and ever-increasing extracurricular demands, the thought of exploring and incorporating youth culture into the classroom can be burdensome to an already overextended teacher (Prensky 2010). However, with assistance, exploring the culture of younger generations can be a wonderful and rewarding adventure. To help guide teachers on this journey, this article presents The STORRI Method as an iterative strategy for navigating the exciting and multifaceted world of youth culture. Before discussing the steps of The STORRI Method, it is important to address the theoretical framework on which this strategy is built.

Theoretical Support for The STORRI Method

In addition to generational theory, discussed earlier, The STORRI Method is built on the theoretical foundation of *socioculturalism*. Conceived by Russian scholar Lev Vygotsky, socioculturalism proposes that culture is actively co-constructed by the exchange, transformation, and reintroduction of knowledge within social spaces (Gavelek and Raphael 1996; Harré 1984; Vygotsky 1978). Although some social constructions are fairly static and unlikely to change during extended periods of time, others are dynamic and ever evolving (Codrington and Grant-Marshall 2005). For example, while multiple generations maintain the social construction that an object with four legs and a flat surface on which to place other objects is called a *table*, popular music genres, clothing styles, technology, and various other elements of culture are generationally contextualized. This is important for educators to consider because researchers propose that students' levels of engagement in the teaching and learning process is directly connected to their perceptions of content being relevant to their own lives and interests (Corso et al. 2013; Prensky 2010). Thus, teachers' *cultural blackouts* may negatively influence their ability to minimize cultural friction and design culturally relevant curriculum, resulting in decreased school engagement, academic achievement, and desired behavior among students, as well as frustration and burnout for teachers.

Although conceptual models, such as Flory and McCaughtry's (2011) *cultural relevance cycle*, have proposed ways of increasing the cultural relevance of content, they have generally focused exclusively on students' racial or ethnic cultures, overlooking students' generational cultures. Additionally, these models have opted for broad overarching frameworks as opposed to step-by-step strategies to guide educators' exploration and integration of students' cultures into the classroom. This article contributes to extant literature in this field by providing a strategy to help teachers determine: (1) what youth perceive as generationally relevant and (2) ways of integrating youth culture into secondary-level classrooms in order to decrease generation gaps and increase student engagement.

The STORRI Method

The STORRI Method is a six-step strategy designed to guide teachers' exploration and integration of youth culture into secondary-level classrooms. STORRI is an acronym representing the steps of this iterative strategy: *survey, talk, observe, research, reflect, and integrate*. As an iterative process, these steps may be procedurally repetitive, fluid, or they may even occur nonlinearly (Repko 2008). In other words, The STORRI Method is flexible to meet teachers' needs. Thus, if teachers do not wish to conduct surveys or perform research, they are still able to talk with students, observe the world around them, reflect on acquired insights, and integrate findings into the classroom. In what follows, the six steps that comprise The STORRI Method are discussed.

Survey

In the first step of The STORRI Method, *survey*, teachers gather data about youth culture from the class at large through nonverbal activities (e.g., questionnaires and interest inventories). Students' responses serve two overarching purposes. First, data collected via survey measures allow teachers to better understand trends within the class as a whole by seeking out commonalities among participants' responses (e.g., a large number of students may enjoy Dubstep or may be drawn to a specific brand of clothing). Second, surveys allow teachers the opportunity to gain insights regarding the personal interests of individual students (e.g., Jermaine enjoys *Dr. Who* and Krissy is currently reading *Divergent*). It is often easy to stereotype students based on their behavior in class, clothing styles, or network of friends; however, it is not until teachers provide students a platform in which to share their interests and passions that students' true identities can be known (e.g., the class clown's favorite television show may be *Downton Abbey* or the cheerleading captain may aspire to become a professional mixed martial arts fighter). Sample survey questions may include, but are not limited to: *Who are your three favorite bands/musicians? Who*

is your favorite character on television? What are your most visited websites? What would you like to see changed in our community? What concerns you most about the future? As a best practice, survey items should prompt students to provide explanations and details supporting their responses, thereby offering the teacher greater insight into students' thoughts and perceptions about youth culture.

Talk

During this step of The STORRI Method, teachers utilize opportunities to discuss youth culture with students through individual conferences, focus groups, or large-group discussions. Topics of discussion may be derived from other steps of The STORRI Method (e.g., survey responses, teacher observations, research findings). Discussions with students should focus on expanding teachers' knowledge of youth culture and gaining insights from students regarding its integration into the classroom. In addition to benefiting teachers, such communication allows students to take on the role of *more knowledgeable others* (Vygotsky 1978) who possess valuable *funds of knowledge*, or expertise and insider perspectives on a variety of topics developed outside of the classroom setting (Moll et al. 1992). Providing students a platform in which to express their voice as *more knowledgeable others* promotes a degree of student empowerment that is otherwise rarely experienced in the classroom (Cook-Sather 2002).

Observe

Observation, in The STORRI Method, is a heightened awareness of one's surroundings. Through the use of physical senses (e.g., sight, hearing) the teacher recognizes elements of youth culture within the classroom, hallways, and nonacademic environments (e.g., grocery store, park, shopping mall). Personal observation allows the teacher to identify youth culture as a lived phenomenon that is ever present in society (Bennett 2011). Thus, *observation* is a form of informal research in that one does not intentionally pursue knowledge about youth culture but, rather, gains greater awareness of it in his or her immediate surroundings (e.g., recognition of an unfamiliar brand logo on a student's T-shirt, a billboard advertising an upcoming movie, or the newest teen heart throb on a magazine cover).

Research

In this step of The STORRI Method, the teacher intentionally seeks out knowledge about emerging and popular elements of youth culture through personal investigation of both student and nonstudent data sources. Unlike observation, which is a heightened level of periphery awareness, *research* is goal oriented and focuses on acquisition of knowledge within specific categories of youth culture (e.g., music genres, clothing styles, slang, technologies). For example, if a teacher learns that she

has multiple students who are passionate about video games, she may want to learn more about a video game that is currently popular among her students' age group. One way in which the teacher could begin her research on this topic is to visit a local retailer and ask a sales associate for assistance. After receiving a title from the salesperson, the teacher may perform an Internet search to find blogs and wikis about the game to obtain plot and character summaries, watch gameplay walkthroughs on YouTube, visit message boards that discuss the game, explore trending posts on social media about the game, or even acquire the game to gain personal experience playing it.

Reflect

Reflection is among the most important practices a teacher can perform. Reflection is an ongoing process during which teachers thoughtfully analyze their practice, philosophy of education, and curricular decisions in order to improve student learning (Valli 1997). Within the context of The STORRI Method, reflection considers what youth culture is, what insights it offers about students, and how it can be strategically utilized in the classroom. While introspection is critical to reflection, it is also important for teachers to have a medium for expressing and organizing their thoughts externally. Some ways in which teachers can do so are by keeping written journals, blogging their experiences, debriefing with colleagues, or utilizing open source software such as CmapTools to create mind maps. No matter the chosen medium, capturing reflections is a best practice for teachers because forgotten insights and revelations are ineffective for personal or professional development.

Integrate

After teachers have explored elements of youth culture, acquired new knowledge, and reflected on what was learned, they are able to integrate youth culture into the classroom. Examples of integration may be as simple as using elements of youth culture as talking points for building rapport with students, offering metaphors for course content, serving as lines of inquiry for class projects, or incorporating youth culture into the physical learning environment by playing music that students enjoy during class or displaying inspirational quotes from popular figures or media. The only limitation to integration is a teacher's own imagination and creativity!

The STORRI Method can also be a helpful tool for promoting large-scale collaboration among teachers. For example, teachers can partner with colleagues to develop interdisciplinary projects on broad topics such as social justice in the twenty-first century in which students examine the ways race, gender, class, and sexuality are represented in youth culture. Through such projects, students are encouraged to critically analyze the ways in

which their culture may be oppressing and marginalizing certain populations. Thus, youth culture is a tool for not only promoting engagement but also expanding students' critical consciousness (Freire 2000).

Having presented each of the six steps of this strategy, a fictional narrative of a teacher using The STORRI Method is provided in the following section. In this account, the teacher, Mrs. Harvey, explores and integrates youth culture in a high school-level U.S. government class. To display The STORRI Method's iterative nature, the *observe* step is purposefully omitted and reflection is exhibited at multiple points throughout the narrative.

Domestic States, International States, and *Family Guy*

When students came into Mrs. Harvey's classroom, the bell ringer activity for the day asked for a list of their three favorite television shows and a short discussion on why they enjoyed each (*survey*). On reviewing the students' responses, Mrs. Harvey, a high school U.S. government teacher, realized that a large number of her students wrote about the animated series *Family Guy*. Before class was over, Mrs. Harvey asked Wes, a student who emphasized that *Family Guy* was his "all-time favorite show," to meet her for a brief conference. During their discussion, the teacher asked Wes to share more about the show and why he enjoyed it so much. Wes was more than happy to talk about his favorite characters and even shared a few anecdotes from the show that he found especially humorous. Wes also mentioned that *Family Guy* had a lot of jokes about politics and history that could be useful in class (*talk*). Having never watched the show before, Mrs. Harvey set aside a few hours that night to watch several of the highest-rated episodes of *Family Guy* on Netflix. Taking notes in her journal, Mrs. Harvey looked for ways she could use the show in an upcoming lesson (*research/reflection*). One episode the teacher found particularly interesting was titled "E. Peterbus Unum" (MacFarlane 2000), and it followed the Griffin family, the central characters on the show, as they attempted to create their own country. While watching the episode, Mrs. Harvey recalled an upcoming lesson in which students would be required to compare domestic states (e.g., Tennessee) and international states (e.g., France). Per the state standards, students would need to know that all international states have four characteristics: population, defined territory, established government, and sovereignty. Although she did not personally enjoy the show, Mrs. Harvey was pleased to see that the fictional nation, Petoria, possessed all four characteristics of an international state, allowing her to connect the television show with course content. Unwilling to show the whole episode in class due to several segments that were inappropriate for classroom viewing, Mrs. Harvey jotted down a few ideas about how she could incorporate this episode into her upcoming lesson (*reflection*).

After a short period of reflection, she decided that because so many of her students were already familiar with the show, she would forego playing a video clip in class and simply utilize images of Petoria's flag and the Griffin family in a PowerPoint presentation to promote dialogue with students about the episode. During the lesson, the students perked up when they saw the famous cartoon characters projected on the screen. It was apparent they were excited to talk about Petoria and why it would be considered an international state while Iowa would not (*integrate*).

Reflecting on Mrs. Harvey's Use of The STORRI Method

The STORRI Method is situated within a student-centered framework and thus may require teachers to step out of the comfort of their own generational culture to explore students' worlds. It is important to note that one does not need to enjoy youth culture in order to extend one's understanding of it, in the same way that becoming more knowledgeable about others' faiths or political ideologies does not necessitate personal conversion. As shown in the previous narrative, although Mrs. Harvey did not personally enjoy *Family Guy* and probably would not watch it for her own pleasure, she was still able to recognize its value as a generationally relevant instructional tool.

Exploration also does not equate to blind celebration. As with all levels of culture, there are innumerable examples of oppression and marginalization within youth culture. Thus, teachers are encouraged to maintain a critical lens as they explore youth culture and discover teachable moments that may increase students' consciousness of social injustices embedded in their generation. For example, *Family Guy* was used in the narrative to spark students' interest in an otherwise irrelevant concept; however, the show is also ripe with numerous examples of overt stereotypes regarding various populations (e.g., gender, race, religion, ethnicity; Hughey and Muradi 2009) that can be beneficial for instruction. Teachers must be mindful that they do not become hypercritical of youth culture, however, because this can further widen the perceived generation gap in the classroom. Rather, the teacher should acknowledge concerning items with students and allow them to openly discuss these matters as a means of socially constructing understanding about marginalization and oppression within youth culture.

Considerations for Future Practice

The STORRI Method was designed based on the author's experiences serving as a reverse mentor (younger mentor) to veteran and late career secondary-level teachers. Working with these teachers in formal and informal reverse mentoring capacities has provided numerous insights about exploring and integrating youth

culture into secondary-level classrooms. First, no person who is willing to learn about youth culture is too old to do so. Thanks to evolving views of aging (e.g., 40 is the new 20), greater social heterogeneity (e.g., some adolescents and adults share similar interests), and global connectivity via the Internet, youth culture is more accessible to older generations than ever before (Bennett 2004, 2011; Chaney 2004; Sweetman 2004). Thus, if there is a will there is a way! Second, although youth culture may seem easier to implement in social studies or literature classrooms than math or science classrooms, it can be applied in any discipline. The trick is for teachers to adapt their mind-set about what and how they teach. Speaking on this, Prensky (2010) urges teachers to think of curriculum and instruction decisions as a collection of nouns (e.g., content, instructional tools) and verbs (e.g., intended skills, desired learning outcomes). He argues that although the nouns used in classrooms should continuously evolve to reflect students' worlds (e.g., technologies, interests, pop culture references), the verbs on which teaching and learning activities are built (e.g., analyze, debate, calculate) remain constant over time. As a result, using strategies such as The STORRI Method can help teachers in all disciplines expand their repertoire of generationally relevant nouns. Finally, although it may be a difficult, slow, and uncomfortable process, it is the duty of a teacher duty to adapt his or her content and teaching methods to address the ever-changing worlds in which students live. Despite the tremendous social and technological changes that have occurred during the past century, the ways in which classrooms operate have changed very little (e.g., direct teacher-led lecture, students sit quietly in straight rows, assessment via rote memorization; Prensky 2010). In order for schools to be perceived as relevant learning spaces that help students prepare for the *real world* and achieve their goals, teachers must be willing to adapt their instructional practices (Prensky 2010; Tapscott 2009). As Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2005) argue:

A successful teacher will impart knowledge and expertise in a manner that best enables the student to absorb it. The easy way out for a teacher is to teach in the manner in which they were taught. Then the effort of learning a new approach isn't required. But good teachers acquire the skills that best help their students learn. They [*sic*] ignore, at their peril, the fact that today's generation learns differently from those that preceded it. This means that teachers should track generational changes more keenly than many other professions do. (105)

Thus, whether teachers choose to utilize The STORRI Method, take continuing education courses, attend workshops, enter into reverse mentoring relationships, or pursue any other form of professional development, it is of the upmost importance that they are aware of generation gaps in the classroom, acknowledge the im-

pact of generation gaps on students and teachers alike, and make conscious efforts to adapt accordingly.

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