



Wayne State University

Kinesiology, Health and Sport Studies

College of Education

7-27-2017

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Recommended Citation

Erin E. Centeio (2017) The Have and Have Nots: An Ever-present Digital Divide, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 88:6, 11-12, DOI: [10.1080/07303084.2017.1331643](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2017.1331643)
Available at: http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/coe_khs/68

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The Have and Have Nots: An Ever-Present Digital Divide
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Did you know that approximately 26% of the U.S population belongs to “Gen Z” (Forbes, 2016)? Gen Z’ers are youth that are born after 1998 and are recognized as the most ethnically diverse generation yet, with over 49% being non-white (Forbes, 2016). We all know that technology is a necessity in today’s society, and this is apparent within Generation Z’ers as they do not know life without technology.

We know as educators that using technology in the fields of physical and health education has long been encouraged. Numerous reasons indicating the importance of incorporating technology into teaching include: a) motivating students, b) enhancing instruction, and c) objectively assessing students (Lambert, 2016). Technology integration has even been included in the National K-12 physical education standards and guidelines from SHAPE America (S3.M4; S3.M8; S3.H2; S3.H10) suggesting that students should “engage in physical activity using technology” and “use technology to self-monitor health”. This is in line with common practices of Gen Z’ers as it has been stated that technology and the Internet play a key role in Gen Z’s health and wellness practices, with technology such as heart rate and activity monitors playing a vital role in their exercise participation and adherence (Forbes, 2016).

Although a necessity in today’s society, not all students have equal access to technology. Research indicates that the digital divide remains ever present, even though rapid advances in technology have been made. The digital divide refers to the perceived gap between those who have access to the most recent technologies and those who do not (Compaine, 2001). According to the Pew Research Center, only 67% of American households have broadband access with only 68% of American’s owning smartphones, and 13% of these household’s report being smart phone only

households (Horrigan & Duggan, 2015). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Commerce found that percentage of household usage of broadband and mobile devices were significantly smaller among African American (55%), Hispanic (56%), and rural (58%) households.

Although we encourage educators to utilize technology whenever possible in order to enhance instruction, it is important for us to remember as educators that the digital divide still exists among our K-12 students. We must ask ourselves the question “do we practice cultural sensitivity when discussing and assigning technology related assignments in our classrooms?”.

The Digital Divide in Physical Education

Heart rate and activity monitors are becoming ever so popular in the physical education setting. Teachers are encouraged to use them to objectively measure physical activity of students and help students understand exercise dose and intensity as well as learn how to set goals. Activity monitors are also becoming popular among students for everyday use. Many teachers, parents, and students are utilizing activity trackers to better understand their daily activity. This has created excitement among students as many see this as a way to compete against their friends. A parent of elementary-age children recently told me that physical activity monitors are changing the way that her children view physical activity: “my kids won’t go to bed until they have at least 10,000 steps,” she said. “Before they had Fitbits, they never would have been this aware of their physical activity throughout the day”. For many children, using physical activity monitors has turned being physically active into fun, competitive, and socially relevant activities. Although I am a huge proponent of activity monitors, having a better awareness of the existence of the digital divide leads me to ask myself “what about the students that don’t have the means to have an activity tracker?” “How does my encouraging students to use devices such as these outside of PE make those less fortunate feel about their activity participation and self-worth?”

The second example is based off of a recent article that I read in the Nov/Dec 2016 issue of JOPERD. The article discusses how to effectively incorporate technology into the physical education classroom (Lambert, 2016), and one of the suggestions that Lambert eludes to in the article is the idea of utilizing a “Flipped” classroom. A flipped classroom is when students engage in video lectures and gathering of knowledge outside of the classroom, and then have more time in the classroom to engage in the material and in the case of physical education, participate more in class. Although she does not specifically talk about a flipped classroom, Lambert discusses technology available to allow teachers to save trees and to help engage students in the learning process outside of the physical education classroom. This is a great idea and would allow for more time to master motor skills and engage in physical activity within the physical education classroom. However, the idea for a flipped classroom is difficult for those students who do not have readily available access to the Internet or have limited data on their smart devices. Although engaging, it puts students and parents in a peculiar position where they are forced to make an impossible choice of being left behind on homework assignments and learning, or take drastic measures to complete “flipped classroom” assignments.

A recent article in the New York Times discusses how school children are being left behind because of the digital divide (Kang, 2016). It discusses low-income families’ struggles of accessing the internet outside of the school setting. Although they have smart phones, data is limited, and the ability to maneuver homework on such devices is nearly impossible. The children spend time at night standing on the sidewalk outside of a local elementary trying to connect to the internet because they do not have any other choice. They cannot afford internet in their home and they need to complete assigned homework. Their school building closes right after the bell rings and there is no local library in their community. Although they have the best intentions to complete

the assignments, it seems as the digital divide is pushing them further and further from their peers academically (Kang, 2016). Although stories like this are “the norm” for American youth, it is still important to recognize that no matter where you teach, you have students that might be facing similar issues. Being aware and culturally sensitive, troubleshooting these issues when trying to integrate technology into your classroom is a must. Not making assumptions is key. Conduct a private survey at the beginning of the school year to gauge Internet access and access to other technologies that you might encourage students to use throughout the year. Do not forget that circumstances change in families (guardians get laid off), and have a private way for students to approach you if their situation changes and they cannot complete a homework assignment because of lack of access. Also, be aware that students are prideful, so acknowledging that their family does not have the money to have Internet access or cannot afford a cell phone might be hard for them to admit.

Utilizing technology in the health and physical education classrooms is important as it can provide a major benefit to both teachers and students. However, although we know technology is key with Gen Z users, it is important to remember that the digital divide is ever present in the school setting. Before giving your next assignment that might include handing in a paper through google docs, completing a Web Quest, creating YouTube videos, or asking your students to utilize their own personal Fitbits to track the amount of steps that they get outside of the physical education classroom, stop and ask yourself if ALL students are going to be able to be successful at completing the assignment. I am not suggesting that we stop challenging and encouraging our students to learn outside of our classroom using technology, but instead I am challenging you (and myself) to always stop and think if there is anything that you can do as a teacher to help close the digital gap among the students in your school/district.

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