

Things Won't Stop Speeding Up!

We must get used to a different pace and world

By Marc Prensky

[1038 words]

My kid's second grade teacher thinks my seven-year-old should slow down. Although he's very smart, he still sometimes misses things, like what a math problem is really asking for. So I've talked with him about this. His solution is not to slow down at all, but to stay fast and get it right.

We live in faster times. Most of us get this (although many don't enjoy it.)

But what most of us *don't* yet understand is acceleration. Things are not just going faster, they are *speeding up*. They are getting faster—and faster—and faster! And they are likely to continue to do so.

Infrastructure changes that used take centuries now happen in decades (Internet, fiber cable, mobile phones). Company growth that used to take decades now takes only years (Google, Facebook). Product development that took years (phones and tablets) now takes months. And we've gone from months to days (organizing large groups); from days to hours (Twitter meetups); from hours to minutes (medical tests); and from minutes to seconds and nanoseconds (computing).

Humans did not evolve to understand this kind of acceleration—it has to be lived through to be understood. As a young person remarks in Nicola Griffith's novel *Slow River*: "Older people ... [were] not born to the idea of rapid change—not like us." Today we are all living through a pace of change never before experienced. And there's no indication that it will slow down any time soon, if ever. So we'd better learn to live with it.

Are there limits? Possibly. But we are nowhere near them yet. Much of what we now do can, in fact, happen far faster. And many want it to. A journalist recommends against buying a phone because it takes 3 seconds to load an app (the competitor does it in only two (!)). Our fastest elevators often feel frustratingly slow.

Some may find this absurd. But those are the times we now live in.

Before leaping to the possible downsides—as far too many quickly do—let’s acknowledge that there are a great many benefits of this accelerated change for us and our kids. Mobile phones quickly spread around the world—over two thirds of the world’s people now have them. And their replacement by powerful computers (i.e. smart phones)—with huge health, education and other benefits—is happening much faster. The human genome was decoded far more quickly than almost anyone had thought possible. A great many barriers that now seem insurmountable will crumble in our kids’ lifetimes: new solutions to the world problems of food, disease and literacy are imminent. Far sooner than we think, the whole planet will be connected by always-on networks and powerful hand-held (or implanted) computers. And all our technology will be rapidly and continuously improving, everywhere.

In our accelerating world, many old systems—including education—are shifting quickly from a fixed hierarchy to more fluid networks. People whose views were formed earlier times often try to cope with the changes by thinking (or, more accurately, hoping) that there was somehow more benefit in the way *they* grew up. But that was just a reflection of their times. Today’s kids are frustrated that things are not moving faster.

Some question whether this accelerated pace is good for our kids—and for humans in general. Writers wonder whether the changes are producing only “shallower” and “dumber” people.

I believe their concerns are misplaced. What is actually going on is a mass adaptation by the current generation to the new, accelerating world.

It is a huge mistake to measure the people of today by the standards of yesterday. Assessed in the old ways, today’s kids may not be doing as well their predecessors—but those ways are increasingly irrelevant. We need new ways to take advantage of what kids can now do, as well as to help kids learn important skills useful for their future.

People who maintain that the basics of the past—reading, writing, arithmetic—are still the most important skills for life do not yet grasp the accelerating pace of change. Those things may still be crucial today, but they won’t be tomorrow. Our kids will live in a different world. They will communicate differently (they already do). They will calculate differently. Video will play a huge role (It already does.)

What *will* be important in their world, and what we should be teaching them, is effective thinking, effective action, effective relationships and effective accomplishment (eTARA) in today’s context of accelerating change and variability, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA).

Much from the past remains relevant, but we need to reevaluate how to preserve things from the past in the new context. If “depth” is important, we need to find a speedier path to it than long articles and novels—becoming more pithy and concise in all our communications is one solution. If logical, critical and creative thinking are important,

we must find better methods to propagate those skills. Teaching all our kids programming would work, and would also help them learn keep up with the increasing pace of change. How can we, in this era, require the algebra of 1000 years ago for a high school diploma and not require app building or robotics?

In these accelerating times, we must be continuously rethinking how and what we teach our kids. Although today's adults can be smart and experienced—and fully embrace technology—they were shaped by different times and a different pace of change. The *only* solution that will work is for adults to partner with those “born to change” to invent new ways.

Worried about our kids being part of an experiment? They have to be—there's no other way. As technology continues to speed up, and the world changes faster and faster, we face a continuous challenge of quickly finding new, better ways of doing what we need for the future and preserving what we want from the past. Anyone waiting for the acceleration to ebb, and for things to slow down — or even level out at a faster pace — will be disappointed. It's just not going to happen any time soon. Accelerating change is the context we, and our posterity, live in.

Let's get moving.

*Marc Prensky is the author of five books, including **BRAIN GAIN: Technology and the Quest for Digital Wisdom** (Palgrave-Macmillan 2012). He is currently writing a book on a new curriculum. Follow him at @marcprensky. Marc can be contacted at marcprensky@gmail.com*