Transcending generations in education

A radical re-organisation of schools and classrooms and the teaching-learning process has become essential to meet the needs of the current generation of students.

Dileep Ranjankar

It was the year 2000. As a part of my efforts to understand schools and children of all ages, I happened to visit a Bangalore school that had a pre-school section. I followed the standard strategy of being a ‘fly on the wall’ observing, absorbing, and when the situation was conducive, asking questions to students, teachers and administrators there.

The four-year-old in the junior kindergarten class was smart and highly communicative. She was very forthcoming with her responses. I asked her what she liked and what she did not like in general. Who loved her school, her teacher, her mother, and her grandmother. She did not like it when her elder brother fought with her. She also did not like it when her grandmother told her bedtime stories.

This was rather strange, since I had believed that most children liked stories told by the elders in the family. So I was wondering why she did not like her grandmother telling her bedtime stories. Maybe the grandmother saw too many “Ransome Brothers” movies and told her some horror stories – I thought. After some patient interaction, the little girl told me “When she tells me the stories I go to sleep. But she wakes me up and asks me – the moral of the story.” I was stunned by her unexpected explanation. What struck me personally was the girl’s ability to explain her discomfort. I also began to think about several misconceptions that elders have about issues related to the next generations. Such as that which we believe the stories are told in order that they would understand the moral of the story. Or that children go to school to learn. Or that employers go to office to work. It is correct to assume that children go to school only to learn? They could be going there because that is what is expected of them by their parents. Or because they like to be with their friends in school. Or for the teacher who tells them nice stories. Or they like the playground and the sports facilities. The children are not even at a stage to understand the “moral” of the story. They may understand it cumulatively through several stories – which would be sunk in several layers of their understanding, only to emerge later. Or their moral of the story would be different than what we understand it to be. What about the pure enjoyment of the story by itself? What about the other uses of the story – such as understanding the language, relating to the characters, imagining the etchings, the feelings, and so on?

Third-generation learners

As in many spheres of life, one of the biggest challenges in the educational system is that we have a first generation of leaders and educators that decide the education policy, the second generation of teachers that are responsible for facilitating education for the children who belong to a third generation. Understanding third-generation children is a complex process and needs special efforts on the part of all concerned, including parents.

The third-generation children are fearless, articulate, independent, rational (capable of a high degree of analysis on “what is right and wrong” for them), impatient, non-hierarchical, and have wider methods of acquiring knowledge. Therefore, what is likely to work with them is not position, age, seniority, power and experience, but strategies that promote equality, democracy, placing before them hard data for them to analyze and infer, and where required, allowing them to take charge of their own learning.

The steps needed

This requires a radically different organization of schools and classrooms, including in terms of the seating arrangements, the teaching-learning process, methods and material, and the quality of interaction with the children. Parents and teachers must jointly understand that comparing situations with their own childhood and therefore expecting certain types of responses from the children, will not work.

The first step towards making this happen is to completely overhaul the teacher education agenda. Today’s teacher education must educate them with multiple current and future scenarios, providing ample opportunity for teachers to interact with the current generation, understand them in a more systematic way and evolve effective processes to interact with them based on this understanding.

The second big requirement is to develop excellent “Teacher Educators” who have such an understanding – since the teacher educators are even more far removed from the current generation of children and hence sold to the list of challenges.

The third important step is to find a method to educate parents to accept the fact that their children are bound to respond differently to situations than what the parents did when they were children.

The fourth requirement is to sensitise the educational functionalities outside the schools to appreciate the need to transcend generations, while determining and understanding the needs of the schools, the school administration and the education system. Children and their future must be at the heart of any decisions about curriculum, classroom practices, examination system and school management system.

(Dileep Ranjankar is chief executive officer of the Azim Premji Foundation.)
The man who made IT
India's software owes much to Narayana Murthy

TCS and Patni Computer Systems were the first to discover the offshoring model in the mid-70s, and Wipro followed suit a few years later. Yet, if there's one person that defines India's IT prowess, it is Infosys co-founder NR Narayana Murthy who retires today after 30 years, having steered the company he co-founded with ₹10,000 borrowed from his wife to a $6 billion enterprise. A $6 billion firm in a $60 billion Indian software industry doesn't do justice to Murthy's legacy, and there's little doubt the company appears to have lost its edge of late—the $3 billion of cash it is sitting on is seen as evidence of its conservatism, something that Murthy's successor and ace-banker KV Kamath will have to change.

Though others were there before him, Murthy changed the paradigm with the global services delivery model that he perfected. Others are doing the same now, but it was Murthy who delivered quality services to clients through Infosyians located in different parts of the world—multiple-locations but completely integrated services. And for those who thought Murthy ran just a wage arbitrage-driven shop of coding jocks, keep in mind that the banking industry's most successful 'product' is Finacle, developed under Murthy's guidance. None of this would have been possible without a talented and motivated team, and once again it was Murthy that took ESOPs to an entirely different level—from the time Infosys was founded, the company has given out ₹50,000 crore worth of stock options to employees.

Though Murthy disappointed admirers for not standing up to the government when he was chairman of IIM Ahmedabad and the government wanted to push its reservation agenda, many see him as the first practitioner of 'do no evil', long before Google adopted this as its motto. He had no difficulty in parting ways with a colleague, widely seen as Infosys' rainmaker, on moral grounds; and when a top client (accounting for a fourth of Infosys' turnover) set unacceptable terms, he chose to walk out instead of cutting corners to deliver the product. Convincing clients of his corporate governance, however, required a lot more, so Infosys was the first Indian software firm to list on Nasdaq.

As Murthy hangs up his boots to create even more entrepreneurs with his Catamaran fund—it has investments in socially useful firms like SKS Microfinance and Manipal Learning—we wish him luck. His investors will cherish his advice more than his money—when the government-run education system didn't deliver, Infosys set up its own training facilities that rival many universities. Now that's thinking.
THE FINAL BOW

It’s flashback time as Infosys founder Narayana Murthy demits office. Darlington Jose Hector encapsulates the man, the achievement and victories, which are also milestones in the Indian IT industry’s history.
OBC leverage not beyond 10 pc: SC

PBD BUREAU/PTI

NEW DELHI, AUG 18

THE Supreme Court today held that eligibility percentage for admission of the OBC candidates under 27 per cent quota in Central universities would be at most 10 per cent less than that of general category students.

A Bench headed by Justice RV Raveendran said that the eligibility criteria for OBC category students would not be decided on the basis of last cut-off for general category students.

The verdict put at rest the confusion prevailing over the implementation of the April 10, 2008 judgement on the issue as different central educational institutions were adopting varying yardsticks for giving admission to the OBC candidates.

The Bench, however, clarified that there would be no disturbances in the admissions which have already been done by the universities for this academic session but extended the admission date till August 31 for filling vacant seats according to the rules laid down by it.

"Where minimum eligibility marks in the qualifying examinations are prescribed for admission, say as 50 per cent for general category candidates, the minimum eligibility marks for OBCs should not be less than 45 per cent (that is 50 less 10 per cent of 50).

"The minimum eligibility marks for OBCs can be fixed at any number between 45 and 50, at the discretion of the institution. Or, where the candidates are required to take an entrance examination and if the qualifying marks in the entrance examination is fixed as 40 per cent for general category candidates, the qualifying marks for OBC candidates should not be less than 36 per cent," the Bench said.

The court's clarification came a petition filed by PV Indersan, a former professor of IIT Madras, seeking its direction in the light of discrepancies in implementation of OBC quota in different educational institutions.
Cut-off relaxed 10% for OBC admissions

ABRAHAM THOMAS  ■  NEW DELHI

In times of spiralling cut-offs for admission in Central universities, students from other backward classes (OBC) can heave a sigh of relief. On Thursday, the Supreme Court gave a landmark decision laying down that cut-off marks for OBCs cannot be linked with cut-off for general category candidates.

Interpreting "cut-off marks" in context of 27 per cent quota under the Central Education Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act, 2006, to mean "minimum qualifying marks", the Bench of Justices RV Raveendran and AK Pattanaik directed all Central institutions and universities to henceforth admit OBC students based on the minimum qualifying marks scored by them in the last examination.

To balance the academic excellence of the institution and the socio-educational background of OBC candidates, the Bench noted that the minimum qualifying marks for OBCs will not be more than 10 per cent lower than the minimum eligibility marks for general category.

Thus, for admission to graduate or postgraduate courses, minimum qualifying marks would be based on the Class XII qualifying exam score or the common entrance examination for admission to a particular course. However, the Bench clarified that previous admissions made by any universities under contrary cut-off principles will not be disturbed.

Continued on Page 4

Cut-offs relaxed 10% for OBC...

From Page 1

At the same time, it directed vacant OBC seats to be filled up, latest by August 31. Only in the event that eligible OBC candidates do not come forward for admission, the reserved seats would be diverted to general category, the judges added.

The order came on a petition moved by former IIT Director PV Indiresan who brought to the Court's notice the dichotomy existing in deciding cut-offs for OBC admissions pursuant to the April 10, 2008 decision of the Apex Court approving 27 per cent quota for OBCs in central educational institutions.

The application had sought a clarification on the order subsequently delivered by the same five-judge Bench on October 14, 2008 where it laid down that the difference between OBC cut-off marks and general cut-off marks should not be more than 10 per cent.

Indiresan demanded that the cut-off for OBC must be linked with the marks obtained by the last student admitted under general category.

But the Bench was not convinced as by doing so, several OBC seats remained unfilled and got diverted to general category.

Referring to its October 14, 2008 order, of which Justice Raveendran was a part, the Bench said, "The use of the words cut-off marks in none of the three places of the order dated October 14, 2008 refers to the marks secured by the last candidate to be admitted in general category."
Capitulation fees

Govt allows supply to be restricted, high fees result

There are no two opinions on the fact that there is a widening demand-supply gap in higher education. Two months ago, it had yielded a jaw-dropping cutoff of 100% for the BCom Honours course at Shri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi University. Now there is the news of a sensational ₹1.7 crore worth of capitation fee being collected for a postgraduate radiology seat by a private medical college in Mumbai—imagine the unnecessary tests which will be ordered to recoup this cost! Note that the Supreme Court had banned capitation fees in 2003 but obviously that ban hasn't eliminated such fees, only pushed them underground. Perhaps the Prohibition of Unfair Practices in Technical Educational Institutions, Medical Educational Institutions and University Bill, 2010 would provide a more effective counterweight, given that it actually prescribes penalties up to ₹50 lakh for charging capitation fees, publishing misleading advertisements and similar malpractices. So might the National Accreditation Regulatory Authority Bill, 2010, which seeks to effect quality control by ensuring that every institute goes through a mandatory, independent and rigorous accreditation process. Both these Bills were introduced in the Lok Sabha last year. Both of them have fallen by the wayside, like so much other pending legislation, as Parliament sinks into an internecine quagmire.

The health sector has been one of the most ignored areas of India's economy. The ratio of hospital beds, doctors and nurses for every 1,000 people here is less than half of that in Pakistan, while Bangladesh beats us at the rates of immunisation for DTP3 and measles. Meanwhile, the Medical Council of India has proved itself not just an ineffectual but also a controversy-ridden regulator, with the corruption rot engulfing even its top officials. Yes, there have also been some sunnier developments, like the announcement of a common medical entrance test and the lifting of the bar on the direct entry of companies into the field of medical education. But the addition of seats just isn't keeping pace with the rise in aspirants, and it's the supply side that's critical. Unless matters are fixed at this end, it's the consumers who will really end up paying for price distortions at the training end. A few years ago, Assocham had reported that coaching for admission to engineering colleges was netting such huge amounts as could fund 30-40 new IITs. No doubt a similar calculation for medicine and capitation fees wouldn't be any less dramatic.
Scientists move closer to HIV vaccine, isolate antibodies
Can Fight A Broad Spectrum Of Virus Variants, Raises Hopes

Kounteya Sinha | TNN

New Delhi: Scientists have isolated the most powerful broadly neutralizing antibodies (bNAbS) against HIV so far—a major step towards finding an effective vaccine against the deadly virus.

Capable of fighting a broad spectrum of variants of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, some of the 17 antibodies discovered jointly by The International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) and The Scripps Research Institute blocked HIV infection of cells as much as 10 to 100 times as potently as the previously discovered bNAbS.

An antibody is an infection-fighting protein produced by our immune system when it detects harmful substances like viruses and bacteria. These HIV neutralizing antibodies are produced naturally by a minority infected with HIV, but who show no symptoms.

Since HIV was first identified in 1981, 40 million have been infected. Annually, an estimated four million new infections occur, of which 90% are in developing countries. In the past 25 years, AIDS has claimed over 25 million lives.

The new antibodies that target the CD4 binding site on HIV—the site where the virus engages the T cells to initiate its infection—were isolated from blood serum samples across the world.

Dr Rajat Goyal, IAVI’s India head said, “This cocktail of bNAbS will help us design the most effective immunogens, the active ingredients of vaccines, which will then help us find the elusive HIV vaccine. Only a minority, who are HIV-positive, begin to produce bNAbS after several years of infection. Animal studies suggest that such antibodies could block HIV infection if they were elicited by a preventive vaccine.”

The 17 new bNAbS were isolated from four HIV-positive individuals that are mostly of African descent. Earlier in 2009, this same research team had found two potent bNAbS, PG9 and PG16.

Dennis Burton, director of the IAVI Neutralizing Antibody Center, said, “Most antiviral vaccines depend on stimulating the antibody response to work effectively. Because of HIV’s remarkable variability, an effective HIV vaccine will probably have to elicit broadly neutralizing antibodies. This is why we expect these new antibodies will prove to be valuable assets in the field of AIDS vaccine research.”

Experts say a vaccine against HIV is a must with 7,000 new HIV infections occurring daily and 9 million HIV-infected individuals unable to access life-saving antiretroviral medication.

The new bNAbS are encouraging. Many of them bind to unknown molecular structures on the surface of HIV. This means that they could significantly broaden the target options researchers have in designing vaccines to elicit similar antibodies.

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IBM pursues chips that behave like brains

San Francisco, Aug. 18

Computers, like humans, can learn. But when Google is taught to search box based only on a few keystrokes, or your iPhone predicts words as you type a test message, it’s only a narrow mimicry of what the human brain is capable.

The challenge in building a computer to behave like a human brain is technological and physiological, testing the limits of hardware and science. But researchers from IBM Corp. say they’ve made a key step toward combining the two.

The company announced on Thursday that it has built two prototype chips that it says process data more like how humans digest information than the chips that now power PCs and supercomputers.

The chips represent a significant milestone in a seven-year long project that has involved 100 IBM researchers and some $41 million in funding from the government’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA. IBM has also committed an undisclosed amount of money.

The prototypes offer further evidence of the growing importance of “parallel processing,” or computers doing multiple tasks simultaneously. That is important for rendering graphics and crunching large amounts of data.

The uses of the IBM chips so far are prosaic, such as steering a simulated car through a maze, or playing Pong. It may be a decade or longer before the chips make their way out of the lab and into actual products, and it’s not what the chips are doing, but how they’re doing it, that is key.

“IBM is in the business of making computers that can do the same thing as legal and economic considerations of the interstellar migration, philosophical and religious concerns, where to go and why, are the most important. How to inspire the public to support this very expensive vision,” he said.

The Darpa plan has generated buzz as well as the need for funding in the labs, pubs, diners, and websites that orbit NASA centers, both physically and virtually, where the dream of space travel has never died and where a few stubborn bands of scientists and engineers, fuelled by science fiction dreams and prophecies, are designing spacecraft that could cross interstellar space, including a small ship for preserving life for the trip.

If you have a hobby, why can’t you be designing an interstellar space ship? asked Andreas Troilos, who works for the University of Aldébaran and directs Project Icarus, a worldwide collaboration of scientists that design a spacecraft that could carry a scientific probe to a nearby star system, Alpha Centauri, 4.4 light-years from here — in a trip that would take less than 100 years.

“This is what we do,” said Louis Friedman, former executive director of the Planetary Society, in Pasadena, Calif., which bills itself as the world’s largest public space organization.

Many scientists wonder if life, especially intelligent life, exists beyond Earth. Some day, the interstellar dreamers vow, the life out there will be us.

People like Dr. Troilos say the technology already exists, or will soon exist to send instruments and perhaps even people to nearby stars, although a human flight could cost hundreds of billions of dollars. The half-million dollars Darpa will award is not enough to build a spaceship or even to buy a modest office in which to imagine one — but enough to start serious planning and, perhaps, to invite ridicule from critics of government spending.

An actual human launching is at least a couple of centuries away and, barring the invention of Star Trek-like warp drives, could take astronomical centuries to complete. Whoever goes on such a journey will not be coming back.

But there are plenty of reasons that humans will eventually swarm the cosmos, to make the trip, scientists say, if not for human restlessness that has sent us out of the caves and across the oceans, then to escape being wiped out when the human population multiplies on the planet Earth, which will do in a couple of billions of years.

Another lure could be the discovery of a habitable planet elsewhere, something that could happen in the next few years through the efforts of NASA’s Kepler satellite and related astronomical efforts, according to Bill Tarter, an astronomer at the SETI Institute in Mountain View, Calif., who has taken a key role in the search for extraterrestrial. “This will get real soon,” Tarter has said.

It has an eerie parallel, he said, with a recent analogy as a destination.”

— NYT
How computers will soon get under our skin

A simple stick-on circuit can monitor heart rate and muscle movements as well as conventional medical monitors, but with the benefit of being weightless and almost completely undetectable.

**STEVE CONNOR**

It may soon be possible to wear your computer or mobile phone under your sleeve, with the invention of an ultra-thin and flexible electronic circuit that can be stuck to the skin like a temporary tattoo. The devices, which are almost invincible, can perform just as well as more conventional electronic machines but without the need for wires or bulky power supplies, scientists said.

The development could mark a new era in consumer electronics. The technology could be used for applications ranging from medical diagnosis to covert military operations.

The “epidermal electronic system” relies on a highly flexible electrical circuit composed of snake-like conducting channels that can bend and stretch without affecting performance. The circuit is about the size of a postage stamp, is thinner than a human hair and sticks to the skin by natural electrostatic forces rather than glue.

“We think this could be an important conceptual advance in wearable electronics, to achieve something that is almost unnoticeable to the wearer. The technology can connect you to the physical world and the cyberworld in a very natural way that feels comfortable,” said Professor Todd Coleman of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who led the research team.

A simple stick-on circuit can monitor a person’s heart rate and muscle movements as well as conventional medical monitors, but with the benefit of being weightless and almost completely undetectable. Scientists said it may also be possible to build a circuit for detecting throat movements around the larynx in order to transmit the information wirelessly as a way of recording a person’s speech, even if they are not making any discernible sounds.

Tests have already shown that such a system can be used to control a voice-activated computer game, and one suggestion is that a stick-on voicebox circuit could be used in covert police operations where it might be too dangerous to speak into a radio transmitter.

“The blurring of electronics and biology is really the key point here,” said Yonggang Huang, Professor of Engineering at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. “All established forms of electronics are hard, rigid. Biology is soft, elastic. It’s two different worlds. This is a way to truly integrate them.”

Engineers have built test circuits mounted on a thin, rubbery substrate that adheres to the skin. The circuits have included sensors, light-emitting diodes, transistors, radio frequency capacitors, wireless antennas, conductive coils and solar cells.

“We threw everything in our bag of tricks on to that platform, and then added a few new ideas on top of those, to show that we could make it work,” said John Rogers, Professor of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a lead author of the study, published in the *Journal Science*.

— *The Independent*

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A computer with a brain of its own?

A Prototype Chip Developed That Can Process Data the Way Humans Do

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The prototypes offer further evidence of the growing importance of “parallel processing”, or computers doing multiple tasks simultaneously, that is important for rendering graphics and crunching large amounts of data. The use of the IBM chips so far are prosaic, such as steering a simulated car through a maze, or playing Pong. It may be a decade or longer before the chips make their way out of the lab and into actual products.

But what’s important is what the chips are doing, and how they’re doing it, says Giulio Tononi, a professor of psychiatry who worked with IBM on the project. The chips’ ability to adapt to types of information that it wasn’t specifically programmed to expect is a key feature. "
Researchers set five-year deadline for heart parts

TAN EE LYN

STEM cell researchers in Hong Kong and the United States are trying to grow spare parts for the human heart that may be ready for tests on people within five years, they said on Thursday.

Scientists have already made basic heart muscle from stem cells, but the Hong Kong-led team wants to refine it so it can replace any part damaged in heart attacks, and to recreate the natural pacemaker, where the heartbeat originates.

"When you get a heart attack, there is a small time window for a cure when the damage is still small. You can cure with a patch, a small tissue, so you won't progress to late stage heart failure," said team leader Ronald Li, director of the University of Hong Kong's Stem Cell & Regenerative Medicine Consortium.

"We have the muscle strip now, but we want it to mimic what we see in the native heart better, (and) that requires engineering," Li told Reuters in an interview.

An organ or section of tissue grown from a person's stem cells can, in general, be surgically implanted only in that same person.

"There are many different types of heart cells. If cells that are responsible for electricity aren't going right, you get arrhythmias or heart rhythm disturbances. There are heart muscle cells that do mechanical heart pumping that work all the time."

The team will use approved human embryonic stem cell lines to build these human heart muscle strips, as well as the native pacemaker for people with arrhythmia, or irregular heart beat.

The team plans first to transplant these muscle strips and pacemakers into pigs, and, if successful, to move to human clinical trials where they will transplant parts of the heart that are grown using the patients' own stem cells in about five years.

"The question is whether we can put it in the heart to integrate with the recipient organ. Even if it becomes integrated, will it last?" Li said.

He added that the team chose to use pigs because porcine hearts were anatomically and functionally more similar to human hearts.

"I am hoping that at the end of the five years, we will have a number of blueprints for designing different prototypes that can be tested," he said.

Stem cells are the body's source of all cells and tissues. They can generate all the cell types of the organ from which they originate. Because of their ability to generate different types of cells, to multiply and self-renew, scientists hope to harness stem cells to treat a variety of diseases and disorders, including cancer, diabetes and injuries.

As well as the Hong Kong experts, the team will include scientists from the Harvard Stem Cell Institute, National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in the United States. —Reuters
New VC for Banaras Hindu University

Our Bureau

Hyderabad, Aug. 18

Dr Lalji Singh, former Director, Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad, has been named the new Vice-Chancellor of the Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi.

According to a communication from the Union Ministry of Human Resources Development, he has been appointed as Vice-Chancellor for a period of three years.

Coincidentally, Dr Lalji Singh, a noted molecular biologist, who made DNA fingerprinting a strong medical and diagnostic tool in the country obtained his doctorate (PhD), as well as his graduation and post-graduation from BHU.

"It is a very good feeling, but the task is very challenging," said Dr Lalji Singh.
Is Google+ starting to get on Facebook's nerves

Aug 18: There's no question that Google+ has quickly become the most successful social offering that Google (GOOG) has ever released, picking up more than 20 million users in a matter of weeks.

That may still be eight years behind Facebook's user base of more than 700 million, but the search company's social platform seems to be getting Facebook's attention, particularly with the recent launch of Google+ social games, such as Angry Birds. While a Facebook executive recently dismissed the Google Network as inconsequential, it seems clear the competition is keeping Facebook awake at night—which may be a good thing.

It was fairly easy for Facebook to dismiss Google's earlier social efforts such as Buzz and Wave, in much the same way it was easy for users to dismiss them. Neither one managed to gain much traction outside a small group of Google fans and early adopters, in part because Buzz suffered from some serious privacy concerns early on (after it automatically added people from a user's email address book without making it clear this would happen) and Wave was just too complicated and the purpose of the service was unclear. Although Buzz continues to exist—for now—Wave has been shut down.

Google+, by contrast, has been hailed by many users as the social platform Google's previous social efforts weren't: attractively designed, easy to use, and with some appealing features such as the use of Circles to separate a user's social graph into different groups. The company's approach to the use of pseudonyms has gotten criticism from users—including me—but apart from that, it has been well-received. And according to ComScore (SCOR), Google+ got to 25 million users more than 10 times faster than any other service in the history of social networking (although there are some who are complaining it is a ghost town).

Last week, Google tipped its ante by adding social games including the popular Angry Birds and Bejeweled to the platform. And that entry into social games definitely got Facebook's attention, since games are one of the bigger sources of revenue and engagement on the larger social network, thanks to a partnership with social-gaming leader Zynga.

Not only did Facebook quickly tweak its game-related features to make them more appealing to developers such as Zynga, but a Facebook executive also seemed downright snippy when asked about this new competitor at a recent game industry event, according to a report in Fortune magazine. In talking about Google's offer to developers—the search company is offering to take only 5% of the proceeds from games, in contrast to Facebook's 30%—Director of Game Partnerships Sean Ryan said: "Google is at 5% because they don't have any users for games.

Like McDonald's and Starbucks, Ryan went on to describe Google's effort as being similar to McDonald's (MCD) getting into coffee in an attempt to compete with Starbucks (SBUX) (although that might not be the best comparison from Facebook's point of view, since a number of analysts believe McDonald's entry into the coffee business puts substantial competitive pressure on Starbucks). And the Facebook executive described Google's launch as a copycat move, saying the company had managed to "emulate aspects of our system, which...they have the right to do."

Games aren't the only element of Google+ that seems to be getting on Facebook's nerves. There have also been reports—which have been circulating on Google's network by the company's head of social, Vic Gundotra—that invitation links to Google+ posted on users' Facebook pages are not showing up. Given the history of tension between the two companies over issues such as the sharing of contact information, there has been speculation that Facebook might be blocking these links, but the social network says it isn't aware of any such blocking.

Can Google+ become a full-fledged competitor for Facebook? The Web giant has said the launch of social games is "just the tip of the iceberg" when it comes to what the company plans to add to its social platform, and some see mobile photo sharing as a big element of Google's plans for the future—in part because of the recent launch of a mobile photo application called Photovine. This would take Google+ straight into another core product area for Facebook, which has become the world's largest photo-sharing service.

This isn't just about competing with Facebook.

As described in a recent Gigamon Pro report (subscription required), Google is making this push into social networking not just because it wants to compete with Facebook but also because it needs to tap into the "social signals" and activity that users are engaging in on such networks as part of its core search and advertising business. And Google's new CEO and co-founder Larry Page has made it clear these efforts are a central part of what the company wants to do.

In an interview with Technology Review, Google's vice president of engineering and business development, Vic Gundotra, said the company's incentive system to compensate employees who contribute to its social plans. Facebook may have had the social-networking business more or less to itself for the past few years, thanks in part to the rapid decline of Myspace, but Google has made it obvious that it wants to become a major player. And while it is still early the launch of Google+ shows the search giant may just have what it takes to put some competitive pressure on the larger network. In the long run, that is likely to be good for Facebook users and for developers of third-party applications as well.