

The net-generation, the knowledge economy and on-line learning: who is 'learning' on-line and how? (0073)

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Abstract

Measures to increase the number of people using on-line learning technologies in universities have been a recurrent theme in UK government policy over the last twelve years. Over this period much has been written by learning technologists and librarians about what these changes have meant for students in particular institutions and courses, but relatively little has been written by sociologists of education. In this paper space is given to these student experiences and using material gathered from a telephone survey of 513 students and in-depth interviews with a further 20 at one large new university. The paper draws attention to the ways in which students are socialized at school and university into wanting and using computers and the internet. It also explores how variations in income and household circumstances influence access to these technologies and the ways in which they are used.

Keywords: e-learning, higher education, digital natives.

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Introduction

Over the last twelve years a number of people from the computing industry have suggested that today's university students, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 25, have a different approach to learning in comparison with earlier generations

(c.f. Tapscott, 1999; Prensky, 2001; Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005). It has been argued that one of the differences that set this generation apart from their predecessors is their use of computers and the internet. Today's higher education students, it is suggested, have grown up with computers and have taught themselves to use these technologies to read and prepare assignments and other work for university (Irvine, 2005). When they are not studying it is noted that they get their entertainment from chatting with friends on social networking sites, downloading music and videos or playing computer games (MSNBC, 2005; Robson, 2009). This way of living, it has been argued by a range of think tanks and opinion formers is so profoundly different from that of previous generations that it requires university staff to change their approaches to teaching and learning (Green and Hannon, 2007; Leadbetter, 2008; Bradwell, 2009; Greenfield, 2009; Melville, 2009).

In response to observations about the growing use of computers and the internet by higher education students, so-called online learning, there have been a plethora of policy proposals from secretaries of state for education in the UK (Clegg et al, 2003). Among the measures proposed in the last ten years have been the following initiatives:

- a) The ill-fated e-University (a partnership between many UK universities with Sun microcomputers) (Blunkett, 2000);
- b) A unified strategy for e-learning (DfES, 2003; 2005);
- c) The e-learning benchmarking and pathfinding initiatives (HEA, 2008);
- d) A policy statement on the appropriate use of technology to enhance learning and teaching (HEFCE, 2009);

- e) A HEFCE taskforce to look at changing demands for online learning from students and employers (THES, 2009).

To date, while computer industry business people, government ministers and journalists have been prepared to make comments about changes in how higher education students are using these technologies to study, work and socialise, there have been few research studies examining the patterns of this activity by sociologists of education (Selwyn, 2007). In the absence of such studies, journalists and other commentators have coined a wide range of new phrases, often incorporating reference to a major software company, to describe what they suggest is a very different generation of higher education students. These new phrases include: Millennials, Digital Natives, Digital Generation, Google Generation, Generation Y, MySpace Generation, Nintendo Generation, Net Generation and You Tube Generation (c.f. Green et al, 1998; Tapscott, 1999; Howe and Strauss, 2000; Prensky, 2001; Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005; Williams and Rowlands, 2007). Meanwhile, the evidence offered to support these claims of different behavior by this younger generation of university students has tended to be drawn from the observations authors have made of their own, often male, children and their children's friends. Many of these young adults themselves being, or about to become, students at elite universities in the USA or UK (Tapscott, 1999; Prensky, 2001; Robson, 2009).

Faced with anecdotal evidence from computer business industry people about what is alleged to be a new generation of computer and internet users, and concern expressed by journalists as well as the interest of policy makers in this area, this paper examines how higher education students use online technologies to support their studies and other activities on and off campus. The paper draws on a telephone survey of 513

higher education students and in-depth interviews with a further 20 in one large new university. Evidence gained from these sources demonstrates that almost all undergraduate and postgraduate students use computers regularly as part of their studies. Students, it would appear are steadily socialised into the use of these machines at school and university through formal tuition from teachers and support from family members. These students are generally not self taught, but come to want and use a range of branded computers (e.g. Apple and Toshiba) and standard software packages (e.g. Blackboard, Excel, Pebblepad, WebCT and Word) through their experiences at school, university and home.

While computer ownership was nearly universal among higher education students at the time of the study, access to the internet was not as extensive, due to the costs of this technology and the contractual terms associated with broadband access. As a consequence of these financial and legal constraints, there were marked variations in access to these technologies reflecting the income and household circumstances of students. Contrary to the claims of the advocates of the Digital Natives and Net Generation thesis, older students were more likely to study and socialise online as they tended to be wealthier and to have access at work or from their home address which they were more likely to share with a partner, children and other relatives.

Finally, and also contrary to the claims of many computer industry business people, a majority of the students studied, were not sophisticated, methodical or focused in their information gathering, analysis, evaluation or the compilation of assignments. Instead, for many students these tasks tended to rely heavily on the use of the Google search engine to collect information which they then cut, pasted, collated using Microsoft

Word before submitting it for assessment. Many of the students appear to have been digitally socialised rather than to have been recruited as digital natives. Most had bought expensive computers, many used the internet, but their use of these technologies was generally rudimentary. Whether this was an economic investment for the students and whether the knowledge they have gained in the use of these technologies will produce an economic return remains as yet unexplored.

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Biography

Huw was appointed as Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic) at the University of Salford in July 2010. Previously he worked as Dean of the Business School at Manchester Metropolitan University (2005-2010) and Associate Dean at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England (2000-2004). In all of these roles he has been heavily involved in the development of e-learning applications and staff development programmes designed to make the most of these technologies.

