

## **“The silent Y’s”: an exploration of common learning factors among a group of ‘Generation Y’ students.(0298)**

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Universities have been very successful over recent years at developing teaching and learning mechanisms that support the increasingly diverse student body. Within this rapidly changing education landscape, perceptions of what constitutes the ‘average’ student have been increasingly challenged. Despite the success of the widening participation agenda however, higher education continues to be dominated by a generation of recent school leavers, currently known as ‘Generation Y’ (born 1980-1994).

As the lives of this demographic group have run parallel to the introduction and developments of digital technology within society, literature that investigates this group focuses primarily upon the impact of this technology upon the lives of these ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001). There has been very little interrogation of the impact of this technology upon ‘creativity’, or the ‘creative’ attributes of this generation of students however, despite a growing body of literature that identifies ‘creativity’ as an essential skill for the twenty first century (Robinson, 2001).

For the purposes of this study, the definition of ‘creativity’ follows the commonly accepted understanding of the term: as a process that produces an innovative or original outcome (Kleiman, 2008). Implicit within this definition is

therefore an expectation or an embracing of 'risk'; without this 'risk', this 'leap of faith', creative work is often destined to be predictable and repetitive.

Within the Art & Design community, creativity remains the dominant attribute necessary as a determinant of success. Hence, whilst students are being assessed on a range of skills, knowledge and understanding, they are inevitably being judged on their 'creativity' and their ability to 'innovate'.

Using the results of exam board decisions over the past three years (2007/08/09) a sample group of Design students were identified. This sample group contained individuals, who, in the duration of their studies, had consistently achieved a numerical average performance in their practical, or studio based work.

Before interviewing the students an analysis was made of their previous academic performance, which was then supported by an interview exploring each individual's domestic situation, their progress on their current programmes, and their perceptions of their creativity. These interviews revealed a number of common themes that challenge many of the assumptions held by faculty staff about the 'average' student.

During the interviews, all students within the sample group identified themselves as having very close supportive relationships with their family, frequently mentioning the 'security' and 'stability' of home, in addition to the 'comfort' of their surroundings. In the majority of cases, the parents were still

married, whilst just over half students lived in detached houses with a minimum of four bedrooms.

In addition to the economic information, students also discussed other factors that may impact on their decision-making, and influences on their creativity, and perception of the world. Of particular note was students' experience of overseas travel. In previous generations 'travel' was often used as a discussion point at interviews for Higher Education. Experience of other cultures was seen as an important part of an individual's education. All of the students within the sample group had some experience of travel outside of the United Kingdom, however this was mainly limited to the traditional holiday resorts of mainland Europe and always with the accompaniment of family and close friends.

Students were finally asked to identify any other experiences or extra-curricula activities in which they participated which may be unusual, or affect their academic performance. Most revealing about these answers was not the content or diversity, but the ordinariness of the results. No students were involved significantly in any sporting events, and rarely any activities outside of their studies and home-life. Two students described themselves simply as "quite normal".

When finally asked about how each student may improve their assessment grades, only one student cited the need to "step outside his comfort zone", yet also suggested "he was not prepared to take this risk". Evidence highlighted

during the interviews suggests that students within this group are not only relatively cautious individuals, but that they fail to recognise the implicit role of 'risk' within the creative process.

In his work "Distinction – A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste" (1984) the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu expanded his upon ideas of 'Cultural Capital' by exploring how the language and values of a social class are embedded within its cultural currency. Subsequently, despite the rhetoric of a fluid and mobile social structure, access to a dominant social group is actually restrained by the 'Cultural Capital' of among others, a complex language of inference and suggestion. For Bourdieu therefore, the aesthetic 'habits' and 'tastes' of individuals are developed by exposure to these same 'tastes' and 'values' during childhood. Hence, despite the accumulation of wealth in later life, for many people their 'tastes' are already defined.

Whilst one can challenge this idea, the results of this study suggest that the 'low risk' culture instilled by parents during childhood as a 'safety net' are now actually preventing students such as this sample group being able to respond or indeed even be aware of the implicit need for 'risk' within creative subjects such as Design. This research suggests that these students are not necessarily 'risk averse', but are so conditioned by conformity, that they are not actually 'risk aware'.

## Conclusions

Much of literature that explores the common attributes of this 'Generation Y' fails to contextualise their upbringing within a wider social, political, and economic context. Born between 1980 and 1994, this group of individuals has spent their formative years in one of the most politically stable and affluent periods within Western history. While this may not provide the anarchy or hedonism exhibited by previous generations, it has arguably produced a group of very confident, well-rounded individuals who will clearly become assets to society in the future. For some individuals however, if this cultural stability is compounded by domestic security, this research suggests it may result in having developed a group of people who are perhaps conditioned and indeed contained by their conformity, and unless some intervention is made, are subsequently destined to remain 'average'.

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