Undergraduate Perceptions of Social Media Trends: Understanding Meaning Making Within the 'Digital University'
Category: Digital University

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Outline: Short Paper

Introduction

In writings published at the turn of the twenty-first century, futurists such as Prensky (2001), Tapscott (1998), Howe and Strauss (2000), and Oblinger & Oblinger (2005) describe the Net generation (also known as Millennial) students as digital natives inherently possessing technological knowledge and skills that older digital immigrant educators and parents lack. As outlined in a comparative analysis of recent literature in higher education (Smith, 2012), these authors largely began the digital native discussion by arguing that a unique generation of young learners (born after 1980) have new educational and technological needs and abilities because they have grown up immersed in a world with digital technologies and the Internet. Such digital native assertions have received a strong backlash from researchers critiquing these claims as being "unevidenced" (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008; Bullen, Morgan, & Qayyum, 2011; Guo, Dobson, & Petrina, 2008; Hargittai, 2010; Jones & Healing, 2010; Kennedy, Judd, Dalgarno, & Waycott, 2010; Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Vojt, 2011).

The importance of developing research-based understandings of Net generation student perspectives of technology comes to the fore as an issue that needs further exploration since, despite a growing body of evidence challenging notions of the digital native, such "unevidenced" ideas of digital natives continue to be embedded within the assumptions of contemporary research on student perceptions of technologies (see e.g., James, 2011; Kruger, 2010; Kumar, 2009). Such questions are ever more important given the increasing adoption of these tools in academic settings (Saeed, Yun, & Sinnappan, 2009), and because digital native arguments often provide a rationale for adopting social media to suit the needs of higher education audiences (Kennedy et al., 2007). What remains is a need for contemporary research that goes beyond usage statistics to investigate more deeply whether and how learners may view technologies to be a meaningful aspect of their academic study, and specifically how they make meaning of technologies such as social media in their own learning.

Purpose of the Study

To address calls to move beyond the digital native debate (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Kennedy, Judd, Dalgarno, & Waycott, 2010), those within today's "digital university" must understand the Net generation's perspectives on and uses of technology by asking students directly what they see as a meaningful part of their learning. This study aims to go beyond current research on technology usage and frequency that commonly assume digital native characteristics by asking not only *what* characteristics inform the tools students are using, but also *why* students view these tools as a meaningful part of their learning. Research questions guiding this study include: *(RQ1)* In what ways do undergraduate learners from different disciplines view social media to be a meaningful part of their learning? *(RQ2)* What characteristics of social media do undergraduate learners see as contributing to their meaning making during academic study?

Research Design

Methodology: This study employs a constructivist approach, which accepts two main

premises: (1) learners actively construct their own knowledge, and (2) social interactions are an important part of knowledge construction (Woolfolk, Winne, Perry, & Shapka, 2010, pp. 343-344). The research design is a qualitatively-driven mixed methods research methodology. Mixed methods (also known as mixed methods research, or MMR) can be understood as a methodological approach where a combination of methods is intentionally used to best address the research questions (Creswell, 2008). ***Sample:*** The sample for this pilot study will include fifteen students who are engaged in full-time first year studies at a large Canadian research-intensive university – five students from each of the three disciplinary areas of social sciences and humanities, health sciences, and natural sciences and engineering.

Data Collection and Analysis: The core component is a generic qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009) that incorporates grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2000; 2006), mainly throughout the collection and analysis of student interviews (Mayan, 2009). The supplementary component will collect data on student responses to questions regarding their social media technology usage via a mobile device (e.g., smartphone). To investigate learners' perceptions *(RQ1),* two semi-structured focus group interviews with learners from different disciplines will occur at the beginning and end of the academic term. Data analysis of the core focus group transcripts will involve qualitative thematic coding, also known as textual analysis or content analysis techniques (Julien, 2008; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Morse & Neihaus, 2009). The supplementary questionnaire will be collected via an open source and easy-to-use software application called *Frontline SMS*, which "enables users to send, receive and manage SMS over a mobile network" (see: http://www.frontlinesms.com/). Frontline SMS will also be used to collect demographic data, and technology logs and software tools (e.g., Google analytics, SPSS) will be used to analyze student responses.

Findings and Significance of the Study

Preliminary findings from this pilot study will explore how different learner viewpoints could more accurately reflect and acknowledge the emerging *perceptions* of social media technologies that are increasingly used in academic settings. Perhaps most importantly, in order to contribute to new theories that move beyond the current digital native discourse, pilot study results will also contribute to building research-informed understandings of the ways in which undergraduate learners' in different disciplinary settings may view social media technologies to be a meaningful part of their learning.

Conclusion

As evidence challenging digital native claims begins to unfold, we must work to move beyond the unevidenced assumptions underlying such discourse (Bennett & Maton, 2010). This study addresses a need for research that investigates the ways in which students make meaning of social media technologies, from their point of view.

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