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Going beyond the obvious: Engaging fashion design and fashion communication students in reflection and self motivated investigation

Claire Allen and Claire Evans

Abstract

This paper presents an exploration of the interactive possibilities for engaging students in their fashion studies encouraging them to go beyond the Google culture of information skimming.

The future digital savvy learner (digital native) is expected to have a heightened visual spatial intelligence and respond to rapid changing signals. These students are likely to be easily distracted a phenomenon described by Linda Stone ¹ as 'continuous partial attention' which is the desire of an individual to be attentive to the continuous stream of information, however they act as a 'live node' in networks, connecting, engaging with and transmitting information. This behavioural and cultural shift requires a radical rethink of how we present information and stimulate engagement.

We have considered the future learning environment where it is expected students will have their own digital device (eg:iPhone/iPads/Slate and 3D devices) with them at all times and this will be linking them to information that complements their studies.

The study looks at comparisons between tutor expectations and student learning experience within the fashion study field. It will investigate ways to engage the fashion student to move beyond the 'attentional' gate of surface learning considering such methods as embed spaces for thinking and reflecting, contributing information, socialising and learning. The study tracks the research process of fashion students and investigates teaching methods to guide them in their navigation through infinite unedited fashion related information.

Key words: Emergent learning, 'Google' generation, pedagogy, fashion studies

In a beautiful and remote location in North Yorkshire at 15.45 on 23rd May 2011 a year one undergraduate student exclaims...

'I just want signal, I haven't had signal since 10am this morning!'

Without access to the digital environment the world for this student is small and restricted, they are in effect socially disabled. This is the behavioural trait of the

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‘Google generation’, according to Nicholas those born after 1993 belong to the ‘Google generation’ (otherwise known as generation Z)².

Introduction: Defining the problem.

This paper considers some of the problems that are being faced in higher education teaching and learning in the digital age. The ‘Google generation’ are about to enter Higher Education they have been born into the digital revolution and have grown up immersed in it. This generation is often criticised for bouncing and skittering their way through continuous streams of information, constantly multitasking and never focusing in on any one thing for long. Their learning is therefore very much as a result of this behaviour and surface orientated. It has even been suggested their brains are hard wired differently as a consequence. Carr argues that whilst research has demonstrated engagement with online media enhances our visually stimulated behaviour, the counter to this gain is the loss of the ability to pay attention to one thing for any length of time. Paying attention is important as it is part of the process of transferring information from the short term to long term memory, critical to learning and the acquisition of knowledge. We need to find methods to encourage engagement and opportunity and motivation to retreat from the endless skimming and scanning behaviour the web promotes³.

Generation disconnect.

Tutors will have studied and developed their own knowledge in a very different way to the ‘Google generation’. Tutors often work intuitively but are very much influenced by their own learning experiences⁴(4). It is likely that the tutors learning experiences have been dominated by a ‘top down’ model of teaching that focuses on the tutor knowing and delivering content. Williams et al consider this to be a mode of learning that is based on prescriptive learning systems and argues the need to be more adaptable and flexible in order to meet the challenges that Web2.0 technology is presenting⁵. The Google generation demands that we rethink the traditional top down teaching model; and adapt teaching to meet this different learning behaviour.

The internet has given us infinite access to information democratising knowledge. The tutor is no longer the key to the knowledge the student can reach and access this information and more.

Socialising behaviour impact on learning

The student is a conductive in a continuous stream of information they are a ‘live node’. This does not mean they necessarily consume the information they merely pass it on. The ‘Google Generation II’ study conducted by CIBER and the BBC found that of all the web users who took part in their study it was ‘the “Google” generation that rated social media most highly.’⁶ Nicholas et al note that the ‘Google generation’ have...

the propensity to rush, rely on point-and click, first-up-Google answers, along with growing unwillingness to wrestle with nuances or certainties or ability to evaluate information, keeps the young especially stuck on the surface of the ‘information’ age, too often sacrificing depth for breadth.⁷

In addition to this, open access search engines are becoming smarter, in December 2009 Google began customizing its search results based on an individuals’ past search history⁸. This may well have real commercial benefits for search engines but for the inexperienced researcher this creates a situation of ever decreasing circles and inhibits self organised enquiry. Based on the research findings from a global survey by OCLC (2006) ‘89% of college students use search engines to begin an information search (while only 2% started from a library website)’,⁹ This raises the importance for intervention from the educator to guide the investigation process of students and scaffold the learning. Only when there is a degree of feedback on the information does it have opportunity to contribute to the individual’s knowledge; only when they stop and digest the information do they have an opportunity to learn from it. Again this is where intervention is needed as the embedded social behaviour of the ‘Google generation’ is to bounce and skitter and not spend time meaningfully engaging with the information found.

Nicholas argues we are only at the beginning of the global digital transition¹⁰. The argument is growing for a paradigm shift in the learning model to meet the needs of the ‘Google generation.’ Nicholas stresses the rate of technological development and the affect this advancement has on behaviour means we cannot ignore the impact this has on their learning style. Collins and Halverson call for an urgent rethink in the face of rapid digital innovation, stating, ‘that our technology leaders need to work together with educators not as missionaries bearing magical gifts, but as collaborators in creating opportunities to learn.’¹¹

Williams et al argues that there needs to be a relationship between prescriptive and emergent learning noting that

Emergent and prescriptive learning have both always been with us. What has changed is a radical transformation of the modes of production of interaction, communication, and dissemination, collectively referred to as Web 2.0 which makes emergent behaviour possible at an unprecedented scale, pace, and breadth of participation.¹²

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Emergent learning – Art and design pedagogy

Emergent learning is far from a new concept, There has been limited discussion about the pedagogy in Art and Design and yet it is based on emergent theory centring round the collective enterprise of learning where dialogue and interaction between student, tutor and support staff allows for the emergence of concepts, ideas and design solutions^{13 14}.

In order to create creative individuals willing to take risk and experiment, art and design practice has to allow for an exploratory and flexible approach to learning. Assessment strategies have been devised that do not focus on outcome alone but give greater credit to the emergent learning journey that has taken place. This acknowledges that the learning takes place through the process of self discovery, knowledge is the outcome. Shreeve et al research in art and design found that tutors saw themselves as co-learners with students and identify that learning is a social activity; students are actively encouraged to develop social networks and engage with the world beyond the university. These networks facilitate interaction and further discussion. The nature of the disciplinary knowledge is that it is inherently unstable and uncertain, constantly changing, a continuum of changing views^{15 16}. Dialogue and interaction is the process by which feedback on investigation and exploration is gained. The students have to learn to negotiate ambiguity of their learning environment.

Emergent theory is used to help explain the new dynamic that is happening to the learning behaviour of students since the birth of the internet and the resulting outcome; democratised knowledge. Goldstein states ‘Emergence....refers to the arising of novel coherent structures, patterns, and properties during the process of self organisation in complex systems.’¹⁷

Williams et al uses emergent theory to establish a learning framework that draws together two modes of learning: prescriptive learning systems and emergent learning networks¹⁸. By pulling these modes together a scaffolding approach can be applied to give the emergence learning constraints in the form of touch points for collective dialogue and opportunities for tutor interventions and resulting in a new learning ecology. There are parallels with the creative art and design student and the ‘Google generation’ student as a whole.

It is too simplistic to consider the pedagogical approach of art and design as they too are wrestling with the impact of the dramatic change in the teaching and learning environment and the ‘Google generation’ behaviours. Tutors in art and design have also noted difficulty in engaging their students as they are so easily distracted and have made observations of the students bouncing and skittering behaviour and constant need to be engaged in digital communications.

The Student Primary Research Project (SPR project)

These summarised findings representing the first stage of a research project, tracking ‘Google generation’ undergraduate students entering higher education within fashion studies.

The intention was to investigate the question: If access to digital search engines is removed what effect does this have on the student research process.

Aim

The aim of the controlled experiment was to gather qualitative cause and effect evidence of their research investigation process. It is considered that the behaviour is likely to be indicative of the new generation of learners. The study also aims to identify clues to sustaining self motivation and engagement of a generation that is so easily distracted.

Participants

Eighty undergraduate students from four courses within the fashion department at the University of Huddersfield took part in the SPR project. 76% were born in 1991/1992 just before the acknowledged start of the ‘Google generation’.

Methodology

Following an initial period of exploratory investigative research observing formal teaching and learning sessions a methodology was established. We worked with Ryedale Folk Museum in North Yorkshire to develop the SPR project. The Museum’s remote location in North Yorkshire was critical to the experiment as it provided a controlled environment without access to wireless internet and mobile signal. We designed an investigation brief for SPR project aimed at getting student groups to research a set of historical objects which included one garment, one artefact and one textile detail.

Ten days after the field experiment a focus group was conducted. The focus group was followed immediately by a controlled research experiment with the same participants. The students were briefed verbally to research the fashion garments present. They were asked to record their findings. They were left with a laptop, drawing and note taking equipment and no tutor.

Evidence was gathered through informal observations, film and questionnaires (50% response rate). The nature of research is exploratory and qualitative and not intended to be conclusive.

Findings

Key observations on SPR project at Ryedale Folk Museum

- All students came prepared with their own equipment.
- Students chatting and socialising in their groups, there was no formal discussions about their approach to the study. Limited discussion about study objects. Social chatter increased over study period. Only a small number spoke to the collection expert.
- Appeared to tackle the study as individuals.
- Quick to start and eager to put on the handling gloves, there was a sense of urgency, once familiarised with their study set, the research activity

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slowed. Comfortable with wearing the handling gloves but reluctant to touch and return to items, especially the garments.

- Focused in on the smaller items in the study set, rather than the garment.
- First activity observed taking photos this continued.
- Written notes and descriptions of study set item. Read and took notes from information sheets provided.

Feedback questionnaire and Focus group SPR project

Students commented on really enjoying getting to know other course groups. 44% noted that they received little information about the brief prior to the day. One commenting that they had no time to read the brief so went straight to taking photos. 44% considered the day to be good to excellent. 54% concluded the pre-selected study set part of the day was good to excellent. 6% noted they did not have enough time to study pre-selected study set. The focus group said time was an issue for drawing and more detailed sketches and it was difficult to draw the items although drawing was good for details but they got a lot out of the drawings.

The focus group were asked to rate the value they placed on the research they did at and after the museum visit.

	Notional Percentage value students placed on research activities		
Visual research on the day of the museum visit (primary research)	40%	30%	50%
Text based research after the museum visit (secondary research)	60%	70%	50%

The 30/70% group rated the 'on the day research' lower because the museum information sheet had been taken by the earlier group. All the items were still there they still could ask the museum staff about the items and the expert visited their study room. The 50/50% group said they had got a lot from talking to the expert. The majority of students also acknowledge on the feedback questionnaire that they learnt something new.

Key observations from the Focus group experiment.

Based on a five minute interval analysis of the film footage

- Quick to get started by putting on the handling gloves, two of the students focus on logging on to the computer (all put on gloves except those on the computer).

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- The focus of their investigation of the garments is to find text based clues (word references). They first look at the label and the receipt found in the retail bag included.
 - Drawing starts between ten and fifteen minutes into the task.
 - Collective boredom is visible after ten minutes.
 - Expectantly focusing on the computer rather than looking at the garments in detail.
 - Students state that without word references internet researching is hard
 - After thirty minutes a discussion about specific design and construction detail is instigated by a student sat the opposite end of the room to the computer.

Discussion points

Time is a valuable and in short supply. Even when there is plenty of time the students we have observed perceive it to be in short supply and feel the need to rush at all they are doing. What maybe happening is that there is self imposed pressure creating the driving motivation to 'get in and get the job done' so that 'I' can do what 'I' want to do. This behaviour is having a direct impact on their understanding; understanding what needs to be done, understanding how it can be done, understanding what they are looking at, understanding ways to move forward. Nicholas et al research identified in the 'Google generation' this need to 'rush' at their research and a lack of confidence.

Although the students in our research enjoyed the socialising aspect of the SPR project and noted this as a valuable outcome to the project, it was observed they were not collaborating together. They grouped together for the research project but there was no evidence of them developing a research methodological strategy. Web 2.0 brings socialising and researching closer together the problem lies in the blurring of these boundaries and the natural motivation to socialise can make it difficult to know if you are socialising or researching. The learning experience can be a very social experience, but it is now more important to clearly define where learning is the focus and the social aspect is supporting the research and learning.

The focus group experiment highlighted the 'computer first' behaviour. When students have access to a computer or other internet connection they will instinctively go first to a search engine as the start point. They then focus their research questions around finding word clues to 'feed' the computer search engine. The focus of the primary research is no more than word association investigation and if they cannot find 'words' they are quick to give up. In addition they photographed the objects and continued to as they studied. There was no observed strategy to how or what they photographed; they seemed 'snap happy'. This means they are quickly converting the object into a flattened digital record. They have not necessarily engaged with the object, studied or researched it, they have merely recorded being there and seen it.

Conclusion

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Engagement is critical to the learning process this study gives us a snap shot of the research approach and processes utilised by students in the field of fashion studies. With the Google generation about to enter higher education it is important that we understand how integral the internet and digital devices are to their learning behaviour. By having this knowledge and understanding we can seek to find better ways to engage the students and embrace the digital environment. We have been through a period of phenomenal digital advancement that has brought us some wonderful digital teaching aides but as Nicholas¹⁹ points out we are only at the beginning of the digital transition. We now need to make the shift from merely bolting on digital aides to our existing teaching practice to make it more integral to our pedagogical approaches. It is the significant changing learning behaviour observed of the Google generation that has alerted us to the need for change.

The changing currency of time is having a radical impact on our students the need to 'rush' because they perceive time is short. Web2.0 has blurred the boundaries between socialising and researching. Research behaviour centres round feeding the computer search engines and not engaging with primary research. Understanding these key areas that are significantly impacting on our students can now help us to rethink when and where our tutor interventions should be. This will enable us to scaffold the learning, engaging the student and helping them to develop strategies for greater depth of research in their fashion studies.

Notes

¹ Linda Stone, Continuous Partial Attention, *Linda Stone*, Viewed on: 1st September 2009. <<http://lindastone.net/>>

² **D Nicolas, I Rowland, D Clark & P Williams**, Google Generation II: web behaviour experiments with the BBC, *Aslib Proceeding: New Information Perspective*, 2010, Vol. 63, pp.28-45.

³ Nicolas G Carr, Big Think Interview With Nicolas Carr, *Nicolas G Carr* Viewed on: 19th Jan 2011. <<http://www.nicholasgarr.com/>>

⁴ **N Entwistle, D Skinner, D Entwistle & S Orr**, Conceptions and beliefs about 'good teaching': An integration of contrasting research areas. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 2000, Vol. 19, pp. 1-16.

⁵ **R Williams, R Karousou & J Mackness**, Emergent Learning and Learning Ecologies in Web 2.0. *The International Review of Research in Open and distance Learning*, 2011, Vol. 12.

⁶ **Nicholas, D., Rowlands, I., Clark, D., Williams, P.**, *Google Generation II: web behaviour experiments with the BBC*. 2010, Vol. 63, p. 44.

⁷ *ibid* p. 44.

⁸ **Pariser, Eli.** *The Big Filter Bubble*. London : Penguin Viking, 2011.

⁹ Rowland, I., Nicholas, D., Williams, P., Huntington, P., Fieldhouse, M., Gunter, B., Withey, R., Jamali, H., Dobrowski, T., Tenopir, C., *The Google generation: the information behaviour of the researcher of the future*. Aslib Proceedings, 2008, Vol. 60, p.292.

¹⁰ Nicholas, D. *Implications of the digital transition for libraries*. [Film of proceedings of Keynote speaker] [prod.] Biblioteksdagarna 2011. Visby, Sweden : Svensk Biblioteksforening on Vimeo, 11-13 May 2011. Pod case. <http://ciber-research.eu/CIBER_news.html>

¹¹ . Collis, A., & Halverson, R. *The second educational revolution: Rethinking education in the age of technology*. 2010, Vol. 26, p.26.

¹² Williams, R., Karousou, R., Mackness, J. *Emergent Learning and Learning Ecologies in Web 2.0*. The International Review of Research in Open and distance Learning, 2011, Vol. 12.

¹³ Danvers, J., *Towards a Radical Paedagogy: Provisional Notes on Learning and Teaching in Art & Design*. JADE, 2003, Vol. 22, pp. 47-57.

¹⁴ Shereeve, A., Sims, E. & Trowler, P. 'A kind of exchange@: learning from art and design teaching'. Higher Education Research & Development, 2010, Vol. 29, pp. 125-138.

¹⁵ Danvers, J., *Towards a Radical Paedagogy: Provisional Notes on Learning and Teaching in Art & Design*. JADE, 2003, Vol. 22, pp. 47-57.

¹⁶ Shereeve, A., Sims, E. & Trowler, P. 'A kind of exchange@: learning from art and design teaching'. Higher Education Research & Development, 2010, Vol. 29, pp. 125-138.

¹⁷ Goldstein, J., *Emergence as a construct: History and issues*. Emergence, 1999, Vol. 1, p.49

¹⁸ Williams, R., Karousou, R., Mackness, J. *Emergent Learning and Learning Ecologies in Web 2.0*. The International Review of Research in Open and distance Learning, 2011, Vol. 12.

¹⁹ Nicholas, D. *Implications of the digital transition for libraries*. [Film of proceedings of Keynote speaker] [prod.] Biblioteksdagarna 2011. Visby, Sweden

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