

New generation learners - does the learning environment match student expectations?

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Abstract Who exactly are our students and what characteristics do they have in terms of their interest in using technology for learning? The study presented in brief below developed from a desire to know how far the new generation of learners entering Higher Education had experienced technology and what their expectations might be for using technology in their tertiary learning.

Various nicknames have been given to the current generation of students entering higher education at the moment. They have been called, for instance, 'the iPod generation' from the high number of sales to this age group of one of the technology icons of the early 21st century. Another nickname given to them has been 'The Net generation' from the apparent ease with which they use the internet to support their leisure, study and lifestyles and apparently move seamlessly from one piece of technology to another. Marc Prensky (2001) in a recent paper coined the phrase, 'digital native' to describe a generation who have access to all things digital and use technology without a second thought, whether it be a stand alone mobile phone, digital camera or computer or a convergence of these technologies in a Blackberry™ or a 3G mobile. While we might debate the frequency of use and availability of technology it is not in dispute that the current generation of new students has a greater potential to access and use digital technology for learning and leisure than in any previous age. These students represent the first generation to grow up with technology becoming a ubiquitous part of their lives whether at home or in class. As this generation of students moves into adulthood and university study, this paper seeks to ask what are their expectations of using technology in their higher education studies and how far could these expectations be accommodated within the varied learning environments of higher education? Prensky has suggested that while the students in the eighteen and upwards age range are at home in their digital landscape and as such it is their native environment, their teachers belong to a different age and generation. They are described in terms of 'digital immigrants' because of their perceived unfamiliarity with digital technology. They do not speak the same language as the younger generation and do not necessarily have the same facility with using varied and multiple technologies.

The study reported in this short paper set out to investigate whether students starting at university are in fact so much at ease with technology and can access the internet without difficulty or whether there are perceived problems with accessing computers and the web and an underlying reluctance to use technology to support learning and leisure. Does Prensky's stereotype of the new generation accurately describe the experiences and expectations of a generation of students just starting out in Higher Education?

Alongside this was the question for which this university among others wanted an answer; namely whether our current e-learning environments support the students' aspirations for learning? In essence the authors wanted to establish a baseline knowledge of students' confidence with technology, their prior uses of technology for studying and leisure, students' expectations of using technology in their studies and ease of access to technology off-campus.

The methodology for this study began with a set of questions being developed by the evaluation team, and then placed onto the web-based 'Survey Monkey'. These were then made accessible to students. Students registering for the first time in September 2005 were invited to take part in the on-line survey and the survey was kept open for a month during October 2005. The data was then analysed using SPSS. The results showed that participation in the survey was spread across most departments and included both those students with expected technical ability and those where technical ability was not anticipated by the type of programme they were enrolled for. The gender split across survey participants was similar to the general admissions data for the university and there was an overall participation rate of 7% of new students.

Some of the key points in the results included the fact that 69% of the respondents (almost equally male and female) were aged between 18 and 21. Over 75% of the respondents were using email daily prior to entering university, while 82% were using text messaging from their mobile phone daily. Confidence levels amongst the students overall were high with 74% being 'very' or 'extremely confident' using technology, while just 3% claimed to be not at all confident using technology.

Students were asked about their access to computers and the internet and where they preferred to work. Many of them preferred to work from home which was either their hall of residence (with internet access) or their own home. Access to computers and the internet was not identified as a problem for this group of students with just 2% claiming they could not easily access a computer and 4.1% not having easy access to the internet.

Further questions enquired about whether students preferred learning face to face or with computers and how they preferred to communicate with others such as friends, family, lecturers and other students, plus their perception of

the advantages and disadvantages of using technology in learning. Being able to access their study materials off campus via the university's managed learning environment was valued as one of the advantages that technology brought to learning and the ease of electronic communications was valued by nearly 80% of students as a means of supporting their learning. However when offered a choice students still stated a preference for choosing a traditional face to face approach for their learning, rather than let their entire learning take place online in spite of their apparent ease with technology.

The evaluation team which carried out this survey has also been involved in recording student opinions at a series of focus groups. These are being analysed and will provide further evidence to identify students' own expectations and preferences for e-learning in Higher Education. The authors expect to continue investigating this area of work alongside further dissemination and following the discussion which ensued at the Blended Learning Conference. With more and more students needing to work part-time, the notion of a managed learning environment where students could access course materials and discussion forum and submit assignments on a 24/7 basis is increasingly attractive to them, but can they trust the technology to deliver their expectations? The notion of trust and the matching of students' expectations with high quality learning environments will continue to be of interest to the authors and their university colleagues and the impact of learning technologies on the future student learning experience will, in our opinion, continue to present a major challenge for academics as they adjust to a new generation of learners and learning

The authors would be happy to engage in discussing this area further with participants and can be contacted via the Blended Learning Unit at the University of Hertfordshire (www.herts.ac.uk/blu) or directly.

References

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Biographies

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