

Educating the Net Generation: Implications for Learning and Teaching in Australian Universities

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Project summary

Recent commentaries propose that universities are ill-equipped to educate a new generation of learners whose sophisticated use of emerging technologies is incompatible with current teaching practice. This project will investigate this proposed gap between learners' and teachers' use of technologies and identify the implications for higher education.

The primary goal of this project is to identify how the technology-based tools of a new generation of students can be successfully used by higher education practitioners in local educational contexts to facilitate and enhance students' learning. This goal will be achieved by:

- investigating how commencing first year students and their teachers use traditional and emerging technology-based tools in their everyday lives and to support student learning;
- drawing on the expertise of teachers and using the results of the investigation to develop and implement pedagogically sound, technology-based tools to enhance student learning in local learning environments.

The primary outcome of this project will be the improvement and enhancement of students' learning experiences through the innovative use of technology-based tools.

Focus of this project

This project will focus on technology-based tools that are used for three related purposes:

1. Communicating Traditional digital communications technologies (mobile phones and email) have recently been supplemented by other Web- and phone-based communications tools, including instant messaging software (e.g. Messenger), social networking software (e.g. Friendster), and discussion forums. SMS or Text messaging has become an integral communication activity for young people; a recent report found that 83 per cent of teenagers own a mobile phone with most using it on a *daily* basis to 'text' others.
2. Publishing Using the Web as a tool for personal digital publishing has increased in popularity over the last five years, predominantly in the form of web logs (blogs) or wikis (shared Web-based publishing tools). A recent US report suggested that 19 per cent of 12-17 year olds have published their own online journal or blog (PEW report, 2005). Individuals are also using the Web to share material such as photographs or images (e.g. linklist). Web syndication and RSS feeds have facilitated the distribution of material published on the Web. Individuals who subscribe to RSS-enabled Web sites are automatically alerted to newly published information relevant to their interests.
3. File sharing Web-based RSS feeds and syndication have also facilitated the distribution of audio or video files (podcasting) that allows people to download and play audio and video clips on their own computers, mobile phones or MP3 players. Moreover, new generation mobile phones allow individuals to transfer and share digital files easily and seamlessly.

Thus, in addition to more traditional technologies (e.g. email), this project will particularly focus on how students use these emerging technology-based tools: web-based communications tools such as instant messaging and social networking; text-based mobile phone communication; online publishing using blogs and wikis; digital file sharing using the web and mobile phones; the use of the web to access published material particularly via RSS feeds or syndication and the use of MP3 players for audio streaming and podcasting.

Methodology

This project will be conducted in three stages: Investigation, Implementation and Dissemination.

Investigation stage This stage will document how first year university students are routinely using emerging technologies and technology-based tools in their day-to-day activities and to support their learning experiences.

Implementation stage The findings and outcomes from the investigation stage will be critical to the activities of the subsequent Implementation stage. The case studies identified in the guidelines will be used as a basis for a series of Pilot Implementation Projects.

Dissemination stage The third stage of the project, the Dissemination of the project's outcomes, will be grounded in the lessons learned by those who have participated in the pilot projects and by the findings from the Investigation stage. At the conclusion of each pilot project, a round table discussion will be held with project team members, students, teaching staff, administration staff and IT support staff in order to further draw together what has been learnt from the implementation.

Outcome

The lessons learned from each pilot implementation and the resources generated will be collectively used to revise and update the guidelines created at the end of the Investigation stage. These guidelines will be rewritten as *A Teachers Handbook: How to use Emerging Technology-based tools in the Classroom*.