GEN Y AND THEIR ‘BACKPACKS OF HIDDEN TREASURES’

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on part of a teacher/researcher’s PhD action research study conducted in an Australian public high school, investigating the use of online social networking as a classroom learning environment where students were encouraged to find and use their hidden treasures. It examines student reactions and online activity whilst they are interacting with a range of Web 2.0 and social media tools. The study may inform the rising generation of higher education learners and their course developers and explores the move from passive to active learning through Gen Y’s engagement with online social media. It looks at a range of innovative practices that were made possible through using a Ning online social network as a classroom environment whilst encouraging Gen Y to take more responsibility for learning. It also looks at the pedagogical implications that come with the use of social media as they challenge traditional models of ‘instructional order’. This study primarily adopts a social constructivist approach to teaching with the focus being on learning, rather than teaching. The study found that having such a flexible curriculum environment encouraged Gen Y to share their ‘hidden treasures’ and, hence, informal classroom learning became more visible and more readily documented. Gen Y students appreciated the opportunities to publish and to gain feedback from more than their teacher alone. Students, in some cases, could be seen to be engaged in their own cycle of learning where they valued the opinion of their peers which, in turn, helped them to improve their work.

KEYWORDS
Gen Y, Web 2.0, Social Media, Online Learning, Active Learning, Designing for learning
CREATING, CONNECTING AND FORMING PARTNERSHIPS

Gen Y students, in the developed world, come with a backpack of ‘stuff’ that enables them to create, connect and form a partnership in the learning process. Sifting through Gen Y’s belongings, to find which of these are ‘treasures’ and which are not, can be difficult. By combining Web 2.0, social media and face-to-face teaching, this study uncovered many of these treasures. Students were encouraged to move beyond the comfort of teacher-directed work which is usually limited to using Word, PowerPoint and basic Internet searching. Gen Y students were faced with a wide range of tools which encouraged them to think, create and share. Multimodal methods of learning were at their fingertips and new literacies became part of the day-to-day learning cycle. Some examples of student work from this study can be seen at http://webtowhere.ning.com/group/getcreative and include the use of a many Web 2.0 tools such as:

- Survey generators - http://polldaddy.com/
- Movie making with copyright free music - http://animoto.com/
- Picture globe generator - http://taggalaxy.de/
- Picture editors - http://www.picnik.com/
- Timeline creator - http://www.timetoast.com/
- QR code generator - http://www.mobile-barcodes.comQRSTQR-code-generator/
- Data visualization - http://ghs2011.ning.com/group/datavisualisation

RESEARCH DESIGN

The data collected were from Semester 2, 2010 and Semester 1, 2011. Data from Semester 2, 2011 is, at the time of writing this paper, still being collected. Respectively there were seven classes and three classes involved in using one Ning social network in the first two semesters. Students were aged between 13 and 16 years old and each class had approximately 25 students. The research supports Harwood and Asal’s (2007) ideas on the need for new technologies to be fully absorbed and seamlessly interwoven into the fabric of Gen Y lives. It uses Graham Nuthall’s (2007) notion of a ‘lens on learning’, while exploring the social processes and culture of this online classroom. It deploys his extensive body of research and analysis of classroom learning processes to conceptualise and analyse the data throughout the action research cycle. It takes an approach which supports Brophy’s (2002) calls for more research on social constructivist teaching that includes attention to a variety of learning outcomes. This study adds depth to Prensky’s (2010) ideas of assimilating teaching, learning and technology into an encouraging approach for Gen Y. It does this by developing a cycle of
continuous improvement through online peer feedback, student reflection, student improvement and, finally, peer and self-assessment. Most importantly, by the open publishing nature of online social networking, it provides struggling students with models and examples (both good and bad) of their peers’ work at their times of need.

**SHARED TREASURES**

“The kind of learning that will define the twenty-first century is not taking place in a classroom – at least not in today’s classroom. Rather, it is happening all around us, everywhere, and it is powerful”. (Thomas & Brown 2011, p. 17)

These words helped the researcher to think about learning differently and to explore ways to reproduce some of Thomas and Brown’s ideas of twenty-first century powerful learning using the Ning social network. Throughout this study, this teacher/researcher found that she had to, at times, “unlearn” many of her traditional teaching practices and to become part of a community of learners.

Students needed support and scaffolding, not only to assist their peers in the learning process, but also to understand and embed the wide range of Web 2.0 tools. The teacher was also new to many of these practices and needed to work with the students as partners in the learning process.

- Students came with knowledge and skills and were encouraged to use and further develop these as well as to share them.
- Social networking was used to enable Gen Y to become the resources for their peers.
- Peer-to-peer feedback was set up so that each student had 3 peers to provide feedback for improvement and assessment.
- Work was presented via a range of media and published for all to share and to see in ways which could be used as models for other students.
- Students produced help tutorials to support the learning of others and connected learning occurred; hence, the class frame of thought moved past the concept of ‘cheating’ and into a shared framework of learning.

The author believes that the key to success with this shared framework was opening the possibilities for students to construct and share their skill and knowledge. This included using their phones to scan, take pictures and upload content. During semester 2, 2010, there were more than 150 students sharing the one Ning and these students made more than forty online student directed groups where, within the normal school rules of behaviour, they were able to freely express themselves.

By designing learning that valued the uniqueness of social media, combined with Web 2.0 and face-to-face teaching, this research saw students become important resources in the learning process, both formally and informally. The use of social media enabled GenY to bring out their treasures and to share in ways that supported the learning of others. The social methods of learning in this research (Ning) can also be used in other educational settings and integrated into their learning environments such as Intranets, Blackboard systems and alternative online environments.
REFERENCES


Thomas, D & Brown, J, S 2011, A new Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change, amazon.com, Charleston, USA.