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Do you YouTube? Wanna come to MySpace? Musings on narcissism in the 21st century student

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Abstract: The explosion of subscriptions to social networking sites such as YouTube, MySpace and Facebook leads us as educators to some fundamental questions about the purpose and nature of university education, issues which have been ignored in the last decade as Western governments, along with vice-chancellors, have trumpeted the economic, utilitarian and vocational benefits of a university education. Such sites may be designated 'social' in nature, and in one sense they are. But they also direct attention to the individual, as the centre of a virtual 'exclusive' group. What does it mean to an education system notionally geared to the 'class' as a group, to inclusivity as a goal of education, and to the notion of tolerance of difference as a result of exposure to the class? Should we be encouraging the display of self that social networks allow as a healthy way of forging identity in a world characterised by increasingly undifferentiated and global 'selves'?

I'd like you to meet Menton. Listen particularly to the lyrics, and if you're a first time visitor, look for the box on the right hand side for Menton's 'friend count'.

And her's 'I am the Greatest'! He doesn't seem to have mastered audio upload yet, but check out **his** friends. Tania's is a revealing site, and she seems to have cloned a lot of her friends: the ultimate narcissism?

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I'd like to emphasise that I didn't use any subterfuge to access these sites; I didn't have to pretend to be a friend, each 'self' as reflected in their sites is open to the world.

SLIDE Kath & Kim: Look at Moiye

The explosion of subscribers to social networking sites is truly astonishing. YouTube, invented only in 2005, reports 70 million viewings per day. It was *Time's* 'Invention of the Year' in 2006, according to *Time* writer, Lev Grossman, because it promotes 'authenticity'. He also claims: 'The way blogs made regular folks into journalists, YouTube makes them into celebrities'. Australia MySpace claimed on 27 June this year that over 48,000 videos had been uploaded in the past three days. It is the most popular social networking site in the country, according to HitWise, an internet research company based in the UK. 27 % of all internet users regularly use MySpace, and it claims over 160 million subscribers. On that same day Flickr claimed nearly 3000 photos had been uploaded in the last minute – at 9.20 am. The site says its first goal is 'to help people make their photos available to the people who matter to them. Maybe they want to keep a blog of moments captured on their cameraphone, or maybe they want to show off their best pictures to the whole world in a bid for web celebrity'. Web celebrity? HitWise reported that Bebo 'surpassed MySpace in weekly market share of UK internet visits to become the most visited social networking site in the UK for the week ending 5th August 2006', and is the 11th most popular site on the internet with 22 million users. SecondLife, opened in 2003, claims 7.4 million accounts have been opened, although many are never really 'peopled'. But it seems to have over 1 million active users, most of whom appear to the sceptical eye, to be living a fantasy life. How many dumpy bodies have you spotted on the site? The fellows are all hunks, the girls leggy blondes. And the focus is 'look at moi'. The Australian-based Prospect Research (reported in *Campus Review* 3/4/07 pp.12-13) claims that in 2006, 34% of Gen Ys had their own blog, and 13% their own website.

SLIDE: Time cover

Last year, *Time* nominated 'You' as Person of the Year, via a computer screen recast as a mirror: the internet now reflects you. What's happening here? Has Gen Y turned into a tribe of narcissists intent only on becoming celebrities in their own circles, as Grossman implies? Legends in their laptops? W.H. Auden once said that it was every poet's desire 'to be/ like some valley cheese/local, but prized everywhere' (*Shorts II*). Now it seems, that's also Gen Y's desire. 'If you aren't posting, you don't exist'? It might appear so to those of us brought up

in more 'modest' times — is "modest" a word in common currency any more? My generation of boomers was used to secret diaries and photo albums shared only with friends. For many of us, the exposure of self encouraged by these sites reflects a self-centredness that is potentially destructive of community in a broad sense.

Now this of course conflicts with the common notion that social networks *engender* community. But it can equally be argued that although some sites such as YouTube are open, sites like FaceBook and MySpace **can** be 'closed', to limit 'community' to selected friends, effectively *narrowing* one's social circle. Some Gen Ys seem desperate to attract as many friends as possible to their friendship group; I pointed out the little box in the right hand side with the friend count number! Some SecondLife subscribers pay real not just Linden money to have others sit on their sites, in the hope of attracting even more 'swarming' visitors. I note from the weekend papers that even politicians have got into this one, with Malcolm Turnbull having a FaceBook site that boasts 300 'friends'. Odd definition of 'friends', but there you are.

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This presentation will:

1. briefly examine the technological and social phenomena of social networking by:
 - canvassing some of the print media reactions to sites like MySpace
 - exploring the more considered commentary on use of the new technologies and what they mean for society
 - giving my own conjectures about why young adults are flocking to the sites
2. to outline the common responses of the higher education community
3. to suggest some deeper pedagogical and curriculum responses we might consider.

1. Social and technical phenomena: the reactions

Media reactions

Of course we can dismiss the many alarmist headlines and commentary on social technologies as typical of the sensationalist leanings of the media. Newspapers are dying as a medium, so they have to become increasingly hysterical in their 'reporting'.

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This from a *Canberra Times* piece on March 24 2007 (p.20) from the UK: 'Playground bullies are deploying iPods and ... sites such as MySpace and MSN Messenger to wage increasingly high-tech campaigns against their victims, according to new research. (...) Victims reported feeling more lonely in school, having fewer friends, and being less liked than their peers.' The activities ranged from posting disparaging remarks on websites, to posting photos of others as they changed after exercise classes. Body shape comments and homophobic remarks were the most common forms of offence, and 20% of girls in a 15,000 person study, were cyber-bullied compared with 10% of boys. Exclusion from group sites was another common form of harassment. Sounds just like a Grade 9 class at school really.

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A longer piece in the *Weekend Australian Magazine* March 2007 reflects the amazement of the 'newby' to the world of social sites. Nussbaum, the writer, reprises the intimate details of one of her featured MySpace users, Kitty, including her sexual experiences and her reaction to the death of her parents at 22, and then confesses to being 'bizarrely protective of her...she seems so exposed. And that feeling makes me feel very, very old'. Nussbaum goes on to characterise the reaction of the older generation to social exposure in these terms: 'They have no sense of shame. They have no sense of privacy. They are show-offs, fame whores, pornographic little loons who post their diaries, their phone numbers, their stupid poetry — for God's sake their dirty photos! — online. They have virtual friends instead of real ones. They talk in illiterate instant messages. They are interested only in attention — yet they have zero attention span...' (Nussbaum 2007 p. 24).

Meanwhile, we baby-boomers lament the inability of Gen Y to plan ahead, to project long-term futures, to 'invest' the time and energy into 'preparation for a career', notwithstanding **our** pronouncements about the instability of the careers we're preparing them **for**. We criticise them for their lack of 'commitment', for refusing to plan more than a day ahead, for their spur of the moment choices, their waiting for 'a better offer', at the same time as we exhort them to remember that they **can't** predict what they'll be working at in 10 years' time. Is there any wonder that they have zero attention span when they're listening to us?

Serious commentary

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There is of course a plethora of more serious commentary around Gen Y and its diversions, as well as the implications of new technologies for university education.

In examining Gen Y, Tapscott, quoted in the Demos report 'Digital Curriculum: Their Space' (2006 p.75), argues they are characteristically 'self-reliant...and high in self-esteem'. Further, the Demos study asserts that the young are 'strengthening their *existing* friendship networks rather than *widening* them' (Demos 2007 p.10, my emphasis). My mature adult friends who blog and MySpace however, argue that *their* use of social media is to locate people with the same interests as them, 'strangers', whom they might or might not meet physically in pursuit of a shared interest. It seems to me, from general observation only, that new friends are allowed into the 'group' of Gen Y only when they have been vetted thoroughly by one and preferably more group members, and that the Demos argument is accurate in relation to this generation. Not though for politicians, who sign up all-comers.

The most extensive study on the narcissistic tendencies of today's young was conducted by Jean Twenge and her associates at San Diego University. She is reported (Hoover 2007) as arguing that 'gadgets and online social networking sites have stoked the self-loving tendencies of modern students'. The survey canvassed 16,000 college students, who filled in an instrument called the Narcissistic Personality Inventory over the period 1982 to 2006. The

Survey, in case you missed it, asks students to react to statements such as 'I like to be the centre of attention', and 'I think I am a special person'. Apparently 30% more respondents showed 'elevated narcissism' in 2006 than in 1982, and their level of narcissism was equal to that of movie stars, *American Idol* hopefuls, and web-celebs like Paris Hilton. The researchers blame this narcissism on sites like MySpace which 'permit self-promotion far beyond that allowed by the traditional media' (*Campus Review* 6/3/07 p.6). I quote from the Hoover report: '(The researchers) define narcissism as excessive vanity and sense of entitlement. ...people who exhibit such qualities tend to lack empathy for others, behave aggressively when insulted, and ignore the needs of those around them. Everyone is attractive or getting surgery to become so; competition and individual pursuits trump group or collective action; relationships are superficial and transient; kids are treated permissively at home and fed with self-inflating messages at school". The authors apparently blame the 'self-esteem movement' of contemporary Western societies, saying 'we have to stop telling kids they're special all the time'.'

Many of course disagree with the conclusions and findings, pointing to the level of volunteering in US high school students. Others point out that *other* people have to watch *you* and *you* have to watch *others*: it is mutual admiration rather than narcissism.

Yet anecdotal reports from some UC staff seem to support the NPI findings. These staff are incorporating shared sites in creative writing classes for open critique. The learning strategy is pedagogically sound: it mirrors the reality of a professional writer's life, since peer review will determine success or otherwise. Yet these teaching staff report despair in their attempts to get students to give and take critique constructively: the students are 'defensive and resistant to constructive critique once they come up with an idea'. They are not utilising the lecture material which contextualises contemporary culture: their writing almost invariably uses 'linear narratives about their workplace using hip hop rhythmic patterns that do not reflect on the cultural and historical materials from the lectures'.

Simply put, they are captured by their own experience, and unreceptive to context and history. This view echoes the lament of Birkerts (1994 p. 27). He argues that the movement away from the linearity of print text has changed the very nature of cognition. He acknowledges that there are benefits of hypermedia and linked textuality: 'an increased awareness of 'the big picture', a global perspective', and 'an expanded neural capacity, an ability to accommodate a broad range of stimuli simultaneously'. The 'losses' he catalogues however, are not insignificant: 'a reduced attention span and a general impatience with sustained inquiry', as well as 'a shattered faith in institutions and in the explanatory narratives that formerly gave shape to subjective experience'.

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My own conjectures

What then is the attraction of social networking, instant communication with a circumscribed group of friends to Gen Y?

There is a confluence of factors at work, I believe.

The Dusseldorp Skills Forum survey 'What young people are thinking' reports that 95% of young people are satisfied with their life overall; in fact Eric Sidoti of DSF notes they 'face the future with almost a sense of invincibility'; 'their aspirations are defined broadly by...family, friends, work'. But 'we get the impression that their world view is quite circumscribed. We don't know whether their ambitions and aspirations are in some degree inspired by a sense they can't influence much beyond that. They aspire to those areas they have the power to affect change and can control — their personal lives. But when you talk about the bigger issues, you don't get the same sense of empowerment' (Hare, 2007). Interestingly, Sidoti urges more attention to 'transition issues', to work or further study, but he is less concerned than we are at this conference about programs and ways of assisting first year students to 'adjust' to university, and more concerned with providing **all** school leavers with careers advisors, 'transition brokers' he calls them, who would provide personal individual advice about their options, and support to achieve them.

Thus we could surmise that this sense of powerlessness to change the 'big issues' induces a focus on self, or narcissism. I would also argue that we of this Baby Boomer generation cannot comprehend that sense of powerlessness because we grew up in the 60s when one felt 'empowered' to change the world. The Dylan piece 'The Times they are a-changing' was an **assertion** of power, not a plea for it.

We are also seemingly unable to enter their world because we are 'immigrants'. Our use of new technologies is relatively primitive compared to that of our new generation students. One study reported by the Demos group found that 'one-third of the children surveyed, including one in five 11 year olds, regularly use the internet for blogging, yet two-thirds of parents do not know what a blog is, and only 1% thought that their child used them' (Demos, 2006; p. 73). We can't enter 'their space' because we don't know it exists. I have found the same ignorance of the very existence of these virtual worlds true of many academics at my university, and at others where I have spoken about social technologies.

I used to use Patricia Cross's psychological stages of life in my teaching in the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education to demonstrate that youth of 17-24 were still in the identity formation stage of development. I now use it to argue that with generational changes, we must accept that identity formation has been delayed to the late 20s, as mass education is required by a greater number of the age cohort than ever before, and as Gen Y tends to stay 'grouped' before making the commitment to a 'significant other' through marriage and children. One of the reasons for this of course, is the decreasing size of families, and the loss of a sense of 'group identity' that is engendered in larger families. Gen Ys exist in smaller and smaller family units, and more frequently in single parent families. China's recent One Child policy makes it no accident that it is one of the fastest growth countries for social sites.

We could also argue that the ethos of the age has played its part. The advent of security cameras in almost every public venue has surely created a world in which Gen Y **knows** there's no privacy anymore. It's a world in which they will be 'captured' on CCTV every time

they enter a club, mess around in the mall, and perhaps 'reviewed' by strangers. Why not open your daily life to those you invite to enter?

But we should also consider the role of social networking sites in allowing Gen Y to develop a sense of identity, to 'construct' self. I referred earlier to the ways in which earlier generations used the media available (diaries, photos) to explore and develop identity or self. In my youth, photos were expensive, so were 'special'; you placed them in an album, after developing perhaps 3 lots of film a year. You showed the album to a few select friends who might be interested in your activities. You kept a diary, and hid it from family and friends, in which you reflected on your 'self', recorded your daily activities in what later seemed to you tedious detail. One Gen Y, interviewed for the *Weekend Australian* piece I referred to earlier, explained her LiveJournal blog in just those terms: it is 'just a lot of day-to-day bullshit'. When the interviewer asked her how she'd feel about having it a Google search away from the world when she was 35, her response was simple: 'I'll be proud! It's a documentation of my youth...Even if it's just me, going back and Googling **myself**...It's **my** self — what I used to be, what I used to do' (Nussbaum, 2007). Mitrano (2006) is another arguing strongly for the role of social media in developing identity in adolescence and young adulthood. danah boyd, due to keynote at a forthcoming August conference on the MySpace generation in Brisbane, is one of many investigating the deliberate identity construction in social networks, although I am less enamoured of her experimentation with kinaesthetic additions to cyberspace in the form of Vibrobod, an application that adds vibrations and cool/hot sensations to visual and auditory simulations. Useful for dentistry perhaps.

And it is just as likely that Gen Y don't *want* their parents to know about their sites for the same reason as we kept our diaries hidden, because they don't want parents messing with their identity, their self-construction, any more than they do already in the 'real' world. Berg (2007) also reports some students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison warning off administrators considering muscling in on their spaces: "Don't bother with IM or Facebook — that's **our** way to network. Leave us alone. This is my way to procrastinate. I don't want to feel guilty about it.'

However, I believe a fundamental change in our educational and social philosophies has contributed to the explosion of emphasis on a social identity distinct from the identity that adhered in the past to the descriptor 'university student'. Our students are obliged to work if only to support their mobile phone costs, so they have a 'work identity' in addition to the student identity possible when uni was 'all' you did. They already see themselves as part of an 'economy', not a 'society'. Our emphasis in the past decade has been on 'the economic good' of a university education, rather than 'the public good'. This has also I believe, contributed to an increased self-centredness on the part of Gen Y. Our curricula are far narrower, more instrumentalist, more vocationally-oriented than ever before. Government and university managers, our programs themselves, proclaim that graduates are economic units in a competitive global economy. Why wouldn't you put more energy into developing your social networks, when the ethos of the age is to delimit your identity to a work role? When Gen Y are told that all knowledge can be accessed with a few clicks via Google or Wikipedia, why would you waste time on 'book learning'?

2. How are we as educators reacting to the use of the new technologies in higher education?

I'd suggest in one of four ways.

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a. With the same alarmist prohibitions as is evident in many of the print reactions. Consider these edicts, in the syllabi of a journalism school at an American university:

'Anyone who engages in rude, thoughtless, selfish behaviour, such as the use of a cellphone for instant messages, games etc., will have his or her cellphone confiscated until the next class session and will be excused from the class. The cell phone will be returned after the student apologises at the next class session.' And: 'If your cellular phone is heard by the class you are responsible for completing one of two options: 1. Before the end of the class period you will sing a verse and chorus of any song of your choice or 2. You will lead the next class period through a 10-minute discussion on a topic to be determined by the end of the

class.' Other staff are banning laptops in class, citing students' tendency to email, and cruise MySpace (Bugeja, 2007).

Some US colleges have been known to scour MySpace sites for possible infringements of college rules, and legal officers have turned themselves in knots wondering about the legalities of monitoring sites for inappropriate behaviour. Horror stories abound: at the Millersville University of Pennsylvania, one teacher education graduate was denied her education degree and teaching certificate when the university discovered a photo of her on her MySpace page titled 'Drunken Pirate' (she was in a pirate's hat, and drinking) and deemed her professionally unsuited to a teaching career. (She has of course, this being America, sued, both for the rightful degree and damages of US\$75,000; *The Chronicle online April 27 2007*.) The dean of library services at California State University at Fresno fulminates against the pernicious effects of Web 2.0, because it destroys intellectual life as we know it through 'an accumulation of random facts and paragraphs' (quoted in McLemee 2007). 'There is a present danger that we are 'educating' a generation of intellectual sluggards incapable of moving beyond the Internet and of interacting with, and learning from, the myriad of texts created by human minds over the millennia...'

b. Some of us react with denial: we say to ourselves: 'let them live in their parallel universe. I don't know what they're doing there, they probably don't want me to know, so I won't go there. Anyway, I'll be retired in five years'. In relation to this, bear in mind the academic demographic: we are the second oldest workforce in Australia after farmers, and according to Geoff Scott, 50 % of us **will** be gone in 5 years. Postman and Weingartner say that this denial is a form of the 70s notion of 'future shock', 'when the world you were educated to believe in doesn't exist' (1971, p. 26). The digital divide, in the developed world at least, is increasingly **generational**, rather than merely socio-economic.

c. We use new technologies as an optional extra, a bolt-on to our existing 'delivery'. We use our Learning Management Systems as Content Management systems, directing students to e-reserve articles, other databases, our PowerPoint slides for a given 'lecture', and as a

distributed message system. And of course, the architecture of our LMS reinforces their use as a content dump, just as our 'book-framed' education encourage us to continue to think in terms of Dewey or Library of Congress classification systems instead of hyperlinks. Another example of the 'bolt-on' reaction is a recent exchange I had with a staff member, who had been very recently introduced to MySpace. He was worried about declining attendances, and genuinely wanted to help his students by adopting a more flexible way of teaching. Would I support his bid for a grant to podcast his lectures? Now I happen to find podcasting a great way of getting current news items, but I think it's limited in its 'pull power' to a lecture. It's possible that lack of classroom charisma and the capacity to 'engage' students **may** be the reason for attendance figures of 15-25% mid-semester, which many of our staff report; podcasting simply draws public attention to one's 'performance' abilities, or lack thereof.

d. Our fourth reaction is more productive. We can embed social networks as an integral part of course design, although we're just at the beginning of this.

The Carrick Institute has funded three inter-related projects which will give us evidence of the efficacy or not of these new approaches to teaching. The first relates directly to our FYHE theme, and is headed by Dr Gregor Kennedy at the Uni of Melbourne as lead institution, partnering with Wollongong and Charles Sturt. It will examine how first years and their teachers are using social media for online publishing, file-sharing and communication, in order to develop guidelines and a toolkit for teachers: urgently needed, I'd suggest, for practical ways in which us remaining digital immigrants can adapt our teaching approaches. It is due for completion next year.

A second project is led by Associate Professor Janice Herrington of Wollongong and focuses specifically on mobile technologies such as phones, iPods and PDAs, and examines how appropriate they are to authentic and meaningful learning. It will also complete late next year. The third is our Digital Learning Communities project, lead from the University of Canberra by Dr Rob Fitzgerald, with RMIT and QUT as partner institutions. We're also undertaking a survey of students' use of various media applications, BUT across all years and at

postgraduate level, and then we'll be piloting the integration of several promising social media applications in various subjects across the three institutions. The result should be a set of exemplars of effective design with the technologies as an integral component of the learning or curriculum design. It is due to complete early next year.

Another valuable tool for us all will come in the developing Carrick Exchange, funded by the Carrick Institute, and designed to utilise Web2.0 technologies, provide a range of collaborative and personalisation tools, and access to high quality resources.

Such projects I would argue represent an important acknowledgement that our need is first for information or evidence about our students' usage of social media, divorced from the more generic data we receive from marketing consultants and media companies more interested in the entire population of Gen Y than for the 30% of the cohort at university. There may be significant differences between these groups, and the work of the CSHE at the University of Melbourne has already given us some evidence in that direction. For example, Krause reports regarding the 2005 First Year cohort that domestic students spent 3.7 hours per week on the internet for recreational purposes, compared with the 7.5 hours of international students, possibly reflecting the latter's need for communication 'home', or their loneliness. Domestic students spent slightly more time using the web for study than for recreation: 4 hours, while international students spent 6 hours. Observation at my institution would indicate this is mostly 'search time'. Krause also reports that 46% of students considered online discussions to be useful, and 28% found them of little use. This suggests I think that we're not using this application well, not a lack of efficacy in the application itself. The findings of the projects described earlier will identify whether social media have specific 'affordances' that we can embed in our programs.

The second element of such projects that is crucial is that at least some are intended to develop curriculum **with** the media, and research the efficacy of such curriculum and the media embedded in them. The focus is on the learning afforded, and how it occurs, rather than on the technologies per se.

In addition to these investigations, I would argue that we should now be advocating for more research on the cognitive neuroscience of media-based learning. Thus far, research in neuroscience has tended to focus on abnormal brain conditions such as post-stroke learning, and of course this is critical. But there has been remarkably little attention paid to investigating whether multiple media inputs actually **do** wire the brain differently, as Prensky claims, and how we could use any changes to benefit higher order learning.

These projects acknowledge that a generational shift to 'grouping' has already occurred, and that we should be capitalising on that social trend in more technologically mediated ways than we are currently doing. Our approach over the past decade or so has been to add a measure of 'group work' to our assessment tasks. But rarely have we deliberately taught the skills of productive groupwork to our students: we have simply assumed that groups will 'form, storm and norm' intuitively. However, consider the way MySpace friendship groups develop: the 'intent' is to **create the group**, not to produce an outcome in the form of an assessment task.

We have assumed that students can use their mobile technologies to undertake groupwork, even if they don't always come to campus to work as a group. But we haven't built into our programs even the simplest of ways to engender a learning group ethos. We have rarely explained to our students that they'll need to know each others' names, mobile phone numbers, email addresses and set up access to a wiki for group activity. I remain constantly astounded at the need to teach tutorial staff to use introductory exercises in their first tute of the semester, so students actually get to know each other. Little wonder that Krause's (2006) report on the First Year experience includes the startling revelation that 1/3 of domestic students were not even confident that at least **one** teacher knew their name, while the figure was 47% no-confidence for international students! It's almost as if we are conspirators in undermining the class identity at university. Yet as a blogger to Swarming Media (www.swarmingmedia.com, June 12 2007) points out, social media technologies afford a **multiplicity** of identities. Surely we can capitalise on this and encourage a learning community as one of those identities?

Studies (Thacker 2006) continue to suggest that Gen Y are adept at using media for their social lives. (Who hasn't been amazed by the speed with which your children can text you back when it's taken you a painstaking 10 minutes to use your less-than-nimble older fingers to punch out a couple of sentences on a mobile phone?) Yet they are less skilled at using technologies for their learning, particularly in information literacy.

My point here is, no technology is automatically used for its educative capacities. Worthies in the US determined legislatively that radio be used for educational purposes when it was first introduced. Look at radio now. Ditto, television, for all its educational potential, has degenerated on most channels into Big Brother and other 'reality' shows. It took little time for the internet to produce its three dominant 'categories': porn, gaming and cheat sites. Kvavik and Caruso (2005) argued that in their US survey, students were overwhelmingly positive about the attraction of IT in education: it was about 'convenience', easy off-campus access. I am sure that's true, but we haven't made the effort to demonstrate and embed applications that use Web 2.0 technologies for their educational purposes, for developing a learning group.

We can't expect our students to make their own connections between formal education and their social media. **Mass** use of such media will always be for diversion, leisure, for 'grazing' and informal interest-driven learning. That doesn't mean we shouldn't make the effort to find and use the potential of social media for our purposes. For those who have yet to consider that potential, I strongly recommend the JISC report from the UK, 'What is Web2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for education', by Paul Anderson, an excellent introduction to various applications and their possibilities and implications. It is particularly useful in that it situates the applications within the literature on social, cultural and pedagogical change.

Additional approaches

I would like to suggest several other approaches that I believe would better serve Gen Y in their education.

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1. A thorough overhaul of curriculum design and development

We have, I believe, failed to understand the simplest message of the Digital Revolution, that the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan argued in 1967.

We continue to rely on the old lecture/tutorial format developed in an era when 'experts' could conceivably know all there was to know about a subject, when books were relatively expensive, and when oral dissemination of a topic through a lecture was considered an efficient 'delivery mode'. And of course, our current funding crisis encourages managers to cling to that mode. Yet we bemoan the fact that student attendance at lectures is declining. Why are we surprised by this, when we put 20-40 PowerPoint slides online as a demonstration of our 'flexibility' and accommodation of students' busy working lives? If 'content' can be accessed so easily through Google searches, or even more 'reliable database searches', why would students think the lecture is the only source of the information they need?

We continue to use templates of curriculum that emphasise 'content' and 'lectures' in their very structure: in unit outlines, we use tables listing 'Week 2: The principles of marketing. Lecture room 2B 11-12'. Unlike the approach used in school curricula, we rarely include any reference to the **ways** and the **media** in which we will teach and our students learn: we merely describe the broad approach: 'standard face-to-face', 'online only', 'distance education'. We assume in these course and unit descriptions that they will simply listen, and read. Yet a glance at the websites with which I started this address, pages from MySpace, reveals new connective ways of reading and structuring information. 'Reading' a webpage no longer relies on a print reading technique of left to right across, and then down the page. Think of those photos spinning in from left, right, up, down. The very medium Gen Y uses as part of their lives favours a non-linear, non-print apprehension of data, a 'remix' of image, sound, text. For assessment, we still focus on assessing the 'content', instead of **also** requiring them to demonstrate how they went about the **process** of constructing knowledge, obliging them to adopt meta-cognitive strategies.

An appropriate approach to curriculum design would abandon our persistent focus on 'content' and lecture/tutorial, and describe the blending of content **and** processes **and** the media used to explore these.

2. Innovative use of social technologies for support services at the very least

Melbourne University uses a blog for its First Year/Transition program to allow students to develop a sense of community, swap stories and experiences, and give tips for social life. It proved so popular after its introduction in 2006 that the first years who have proceeded to second year have requested that they keep the blog going. Berg (2007) has described how the University of Wisconsin-Madison has incorporated social networks into their enrolment processes, and advising, with the bonus benefit of forging more collaborative and student-centred work between various service units of the University, and improving peer-to-peer learning.

3. A re-examination of the role of a university education

Our focus in educational research in these past few years in Australia has been on the effects of competition, on our funding situation, on our ability to attract international students, even on the First Year Experience. It's about the pragmatics of the sector, its bread and butter issues. This work has been important, but it all revolves around finances and funding: our First Year Experience programs, let's face it, relate directly to student retention and the LTPF.

I believe that in our **scholarship** of teaching we need to pay more attention to the **purposes** of a university education in a vastly changed world. In this endeavour, I would argue that we should return to some of the gurus of education commentary in the early years of the technological revolution: Marshall McLuhan, whom I have already mentioned, and Neil Postman. Postman's extensive investigation of the effects of mass media has provided a baseline for me in my learning on media. It remains relevant, although the media have changed: Postman and Weingartner writing in the late 60s and 70s (1971, p.19) quote John

Culkin, of Fordham University as saying 'a lot of things have happened in this century, and most of them plug into walls'. Well of course these days most of them are unplugged, wireless. The major fear for Postman and Weingartner was that the concentration of media ownership would lead to one-way communication and the demise of democracy. This fear is in fact contra-indicated by social technologies. Nevertheless, social networking is a prime case for many of their recommendations. In *Teaching as a subversive activity*, they argue for the introduction of an 'anthropological perspective', which 'allows one to be part of his own culture, and, at the same time, to be out of it':

One views the activities of his own group as would an anthropologist, observing its tribal rituals, its fears, its conceits, its ethnocentrism. In this way, one is able to recognise when reality begins to drift too far away from the grip of the tribe' (1971, p.17).

This suggests a need to build into all our curricula an examination of **how** knowledge is produced and communicated today, how that affects **learning itself**, how the **media** shape the message. We need to build into our programs opportunities for exploring not merely how students are 'experiencing' university, as if it were a closed system like it was in medieval times, but also what the institution itself is 'for'. And what it ultimately is 'for' is **disinterested inquiry**, which requires at its core the sort of self-examination Postman and Weingartner argue is 'anthropological'. Making students aware of the **meaning** of the worlds they are 'constructing' in MySpace is ultimately more important than warning them of the possible effects of their self-exposes on their future career.

A further lesson for us today from Postman and Weingartner is the notion of 'subversion' of popular culture. If we use social media to examine how it is 'constructing' us and knowledge itself, we can, perhaps, oblige our students to use it for less vacuous activities than many currently indulge.

I should point out that Postman wrote a later piece, *Teaching as a conserving activity*, which I believe to be equally important in a re-examination of our purpose as educators. That

involves of course the identification of historical capacities which we deem as worthwhile to conserve and carry into this brave new world. One of the most important of these is the capacity for **sustained** concentration, sustained reading of texts.

This will be our greatest challenge, I think, in the fragmented, fragmentary, image and sound-soaked world of cyberspaces. As suggested in the Birkerts's quote earlier, tolerance for concentrated periods of intense reflection and reading is low, students multitask. If we can persuade them that learning is sometimes a matter of thinking until your head is hot with chemical energy, to the exclusion of other inputs, we'll be doing them a great service in **conserving** an ability to develop sustained focus on the problems we urgently need **them** to solve, problems incidentally that we have bequeathed. One way we could do this is to re-introduce a complete text for study in each unit; so much of our course reading today is articles, a concession to an assumed shortened reading attention, and to brief periods of study. After all, if we as immigrants can adopt some of the skills needed for entry into their world, they should be able to reciprocate.

It has been argued that the most significant innovation occurs today at the intersection of disciplines, by those seeing connections in previously 'disconnected' fields. If this is so, the capacity to link apparently disparate fields becomes more critical as a cognitive approach, and of course the very architecture of cyber networks encourages such cross- and inter-disciplinary borderlessness. The LEAP publication, *College learning for the new global century*, provides some helpful argument and practical guidance on ways to engender connection at all levels, disciplinary and social. The report argues that we ourselves fail to demonstrate the connections between one subject and another in our programs.

4. Simplified applications and technical compatibility

I have one more hope, a mere technical one, so it shouldn't be too difficult to achieve. That is for the many small applications out there to be easier to 'capture' for use and incorporation in my curricula. It has been argued that many small applications are more productive and likely than one large one, and that is certainly the direction of the 'mashedlc' project at UC. But I am

a digital immigrant. I find the new language a challenge, much less the technical aspects. I have told this story elsewhere, but I realised how much of an immigrant I am, when one of the collaborators in the UC project emailed to the group: 'the rss feed out of google groups can now be leeched in drupal'. I was OK with this up until the word 'leeched' L-e-e-c-h-e-d. Was this a misspelling of 'leached'? l-e-a-c-h-e-d? In which case it made semantic sense. I puzzled, until a couple of days later, this message came out: 'Leech is a module for downloading articles from feeds to a Drupal site. It is the reincarnation of Aggregator2 module. New in Leech is that articles aggregated from a feed can be turned into any node type'.

Aaaah! All clear! But one of the benefits of working in a learning group is that there are technogeeks there who **do** know these things. I just have to be patient in learning at least some of the language, if not the technical fixes. And I have to hope that the rest of the team will recognise that I don't have their technical expertise, but that I can read a whole book!

I do hope that it doesn't take the 50 years that some such as Abel (2007) predict, to embed these various 'small applications' into a form where I can simply decide what facility I want and select it. I have some hope for this: I wonder how many of us remember that it was only 10 years ago that filesharing across Mac and PCs was impossible, that you had to know html code to upload files, that you actually had to understand TCP/IP networking protocols in order to experiment? A decade may yet do it.

In the meantime, we should be prepared to learn about Leech, and other applications; as our conference theme reminds us, 'regenerate, engage, experiment'.

Or take the early retirement option.

Thank you.

SLIDE

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SLIDES

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