Chapter 1

Millennials, Digital Natives, and the Emergence of New Educational Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter serves as an exploration into the landscape of technology use in educational research as it relates to millennials in the United States. The chapter offers a discussion of digital technology and recent studies in educational research as they relate to millennial technology use for educational purposes followed by implications for these environments. Educational scholars and anecdotes from U.S. national digital learning initiatives such as the MacArthur Foundation have promulgated a persona of today’s youth in the United States as “digital natives” and “millennial learners” (Strauss & Howe, 2000). This chapter seeks to examine the literature regarding digital narratives and the emergence of new educational and creative spaces as result of digital technology. Findings of this work suggest that students within this case agreed that technology should be used in the classroom based of their learning styles and ability to understand and retain information.

INTRODUCTION

Millennials (Learning Styles, How They Process Data, Use of Technology)

Educational scholars (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Lenhart, Madden, McGill, & Smith, 2007; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) and anecdotes from U.S. national digital learning initiatives such as the MacArthur Foundation (Ito, Horst, Bittanti, boyd, Herr-Stephenson, Lange, Pascoe, Robinson, Baumer, Cody, Mahendran, Martinez, Perkel, Sims, & Tripp, 2008) have promulgated a persona of today’s youth in the United States as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) and “millennial learners” (Strauss & Howe, 2000). This chapter seeks to examine the literature regarding digital narratives and the emergence of new educational and creative spaces as a result of digital technology. Findings of this work suggest that students within this case agreed that technology should be used in the classroom based on their learning styles and ability to understand and retain information.
& Howe, 2000). These young people, as described by the recent studies and digital initiatives authored by the scholars noted above, are purported to be online constantly, Internet savvy, and prefer technology enhanced communication channels such as texting, instant messaging, and online posts (Ito, et al., 2008; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickurth, 2010) to conventional face-to-face interactions. These sources also suggest youth spend approximately 10 hours a day using some form of technology, including social media. Ito (2009) and Mesch and Talmud (2010) for example, suggest digital technology and social media play a large role in the daily lives of youth and that these technologies are deeply intertwined within their daily routines, including social, leisure, and extracurricular activities. While the percentage of those who use social media and other related technologies may be high, it is important to acknowledge there are important differences among these users along gender, racial, and socioeconomic lines in technology adoption and use (Hargittai, 2008b; Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010). Junco, Merson, and Salter (2010) suggest these inequities can be conceptualized along two dimensions: (a) a digital divide in access to or use of technology, and (b) digital inequalities in how technologies are used and the influence of the digital divide on social media use. As such, educators should be aware that inequalities in technology and social media use still exist between subgroups of students, reflective of a broader sociocultural stratum (Hargittai, 2008b; Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010). While the position of these and other scholars suggests a positive relationship between youth and technology, prevailing media accounts portray youth media and technological practices as deficient or harmful to academic learning without acknowledging the layered complexities of technology or the experiences of students (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009b; Thurlow, 2006). This dichotomous view between youth experiences and adult perspectives has caused the use of technology by youth, as seen by adults, to be separate from academic processes and practices. Mesch and Talmud (2010) add to the theoretical discussion of youth and their engagement within a social world through the Internet, social media, and mobile technology, suggesting that the Internet and its affordance of social media has displaced other forms of social ties. This displacement has caused a shift in how youth engage with others in their homes, family lives, schools, and workplace.

In modern society there are different types of students and learning styles. Current learning styles that are present in classrooms for millennials have an effect on how well they perform academically. It seems that in current society technology has taken over aspect of learning especially for millennials. Some institutions are transitioning into using more technology in the classroom because of the growing investment and need for institutional advancements. In the journal, Supporting Millennials to Learn Effectively with Technology Tools it states that, “Today’s youth are exposed to digital technology in many aspects of their day-to-day existence-this has a profound impact on their personalities, including their attitudes and approach to learning” (Keengwe, 2007, p.52). For millennials, learning styles can include hands on learning and technology based approaches. Using technology in the classroom can help meet students where they are at. Another thing to keep in mind is how Millennials are learning and processing the information they are retaining. Henson purports “Millennials are more comfortable creating and constructing their own knowledge rather than being instructed. The student-centered approach is based on the understanding that students learn more when they take responsibility for their own learning (p.52)”. By using technology in the classroom, Millennials have a sense of power and control of what they are learning. Allowing students to use what they do most outside of the classroom, which is texting, instant messaging and social media, inside the classroom in moderation helps create a sense of flexibility when it comes to learning and them retaining what they are learning. Millennials are constantly surrounded by technology and the vast changes that are always taking place. Researchers argue that using technology in education can help benefit students (Keengwe, 2007). Keengwe (2007) suggests that this benefits to
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