

## Chapter XLII

# Research Methodological Issues with Researching the Learner Voice

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter provides a summary of current research exploring students' use of technologies. It focuses in particular on a case study carried out in the UK, which explored the use of technologies by students in four different disciplines. The case study included an online survey, audio logs and interviews. The findings suggest that students are now immersed in a technology-enhanced learning environment and use technologies extensively to support their learning activities. It points to changing digital literacy skills and has profound implications for educational institutions in terms of how courses are designed and delivered and in how students are supported in their learning.*

### INTRODUCTION

There is currently a lot of interest in exploring students' use of technologies and how they are appropriating new technologies for learning. The chapter provides a review of some of the current work being conducted in this area, concentrating in particular on work from the UK (including projects funded through the JISC Learner Experience programme and the HE Academy e-learning pathfinder programme) but also draws on research from the States and Australia. Al-

though the research drawn upon is primarily in a tertiary level context, the findings and implications are still of considerable relevance to the K-12 sector. In particular the chapter will critique the different methodological approaches that are being adopted and discuss how this influences the research findings. The chapter will draw in particular on research data, which the author has collected through the JISC-funded LXP project. The chapter will conclude by summarising some of the themes, which are emerging from this research and consider the implication of these findings for

educational institutions and the changing skills set of both academics and students.

## **A SHIFT TO THE LEARNER VOICE**

It's interesting to reflect on the parallels in the evolution of technologies and their use. Early use of the web was dominated by a focus on content, on information presentation, whereas the emergence of web 2.0 tools has shifted focus to user-generated content, communication and collaboration. Many are arguing that we are seeing a profound shift in the ways in which technologies are being used in education, and that we need to evolve new pedagogical paradigms to best meet these needs (Alexander, 2006; Downes, 2006).

Research activities follow interesting and difficult questions – no more so than in e-learning research. Although one could argue that it is technologically deterministic to take such a stance, in reality the profound and fast changing nature of technologies cry out for dedicated research to understand these changes and their implications. E-learning research covers a broad church of interests: pedagogical, organisational and technical research interleave (Conole and Oliver, 2007, Conole, 2008). Within pedagogical research the focus ranges from questions about how to design appropriate educational interventions which best utilise new technologies, through to understanding the changing literacy skills needed by teachers and students to use these. The perception that new technologies are having and will continue to have a profound impact on students and the way in which they are learning has led to the growth of interest in research which focuses on the student voice. How are students using technologies to support their learning? Is there an indication of the ways in which learning is changing as a result? What is the impact of this: on teachers – in terms of how they design and support educational activities? What is the impact on the educational organisation? In terms of providing

a flexible and evolving learning environment for students, how can institutions make good use of new and emerging technologies? What might be appropriate enabling, future-orientated strategic and policy frameworks?

## **A TIMELINE OF SOME KEY LEARNER EXPERIENCE RESEARCH**

This section highlights some of the key research looking at students and their use of technologies over the past five years. In the space permitted I cannot hope to do justice to the wealth of literature on this topic; instead I have cherry picked a few examples, which typify the general trends being observed across most of the studies. Oblinger and Oblinger's book (2005) provides a useful starting point in terms of recent research in exploring students' use of technologies. It acted as somewhat of a watershed in terms of tuning into the increasing research interest in studying how students are interacting with technologies and how this might be changing the ways in which they were learning. Terms such as "Netgeneration", "Nintendo kids", "Millenials" (amongst others) typify this movement (see for example Tapscott, 1998; Prensky, 2001; Kennedy et al., 2006, Baird and Mercedes, 2006; Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005, Morice, 2000). In the introduction to the book 'The NetGeneration' Oblinger notes "We hope this book will help educators make sense of the many patterns and behaviors that we see in the Net Generation but don't quite understand" (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005:7). The general arguments the book puts forward are that:

- Technologies are 'interwoven' through all aspects of the lives of the netgeneration
- Today's netgeneration have grown up with technology
- Use and ownership of technologies is becoming near ubiquitous

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