

Chapter 12

The Net Generation and Changes in Knowledge Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses a methodological approach to investigate research and design knowledge acquisition in the context of social software applications, an area cluttered by an ever-growing number of applications and high expectations about the capabilities of a new generation of young users, the Net Generation. Its objectives are twofold: to provide a rational point of departure for developing a research and design framework and to exemplify it for the use of social software in higher education. The chapter scrutinizes popular assumptions about the Net Generation, basing the framework on the interdependency of user audience and technology. The results of a longitudinal exploratory study for the area of social software use in higher education are presented. The final part of the chapter discusses implications for the design of learning environments and a number of ideas for further research on knowledge acquisition within the social software context.

INTRODUCTION

Rarely has an innovative technology reached and engaged so many people in such a short time as social software. Since 1992, when the Internet, the World Wide Web, and the first browser came into being, young people in almost every country of the world have become increasingly connected

to the Internet. According to figures from the Pew Internet & American Life Project study, 93% of young people are permanently online, while 75% use cell phones (Jones & Fox, 2009). Equally high numbers or growing rates are reported for the use of a large variety of social software, the latest wave of applications disseminated via the Internet.

Even more importantly, studies indicate that, for young people, using social software is not just

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another activity during the day, alongside watching TV or talking on a cell phone. Web-based media seem to have become increasingly important in the lives of adolescents, constructing a new environment for social activities, communication, and cooperation (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005).

In general we are still a long way away from being able to fully assess the ramifications of social software. Investigation of knowledge acquisition in the age of a networked society is a wide open field of research. Visionary predictions, industrial promises, and a host of well-publicized non-scientific stories about the use and abuse of social media abound.

Education, being part of the daily life of young people, is an important area of research. How this new technology will exert its influence when the current technology-savvy generation arrives at universities and other institutions of higher education is a question yet to be answered. While basic numbers, such as the use of cell phones or memberships in social networking systems, are regularly compiled, it is unclear how the phenomenon of constant connectivity will affect the knowledge acquisition of young people, if necessitated by education in general.

Social software use seems to begin at a very young age. Stories of Facebook accounts being opened by parents for their four-year-old children surface every so often. A major unknown factor is how young people carry their attitudes toward information handling into formal education. The overarching goal of this chapter is to outline a framework for research that provides an empirically supported basis for discussing social software in the context of users and knowledge acquisition.

In order to reason about educational systems, we need to look at the target groups, the generations entering the institutions. Thus, to clear the ground for the investigation regarding technology use and changing knowledge acquisition, a critical review is needed. Did technology really produce a completely new and different generation of learners? Do these changes reach deep enough that

we can speak of generational breaks? Shouldn't we rather look at empirical facts and ask about usage, time patterns, and preferences of students who actually use social software?

This framework is outlined in three steps: A review of the label and visionary assumptions about the "Net Generation" initiates the discussion. The next step presents results of an exploratory study in the field of higher education. Empirical facts on social software use by students provide an up-to-date insight into systems use, preferences, and concerns on the ground of an exploratory study. The final step in the chapter discusses issues of generalization and expansion of the framework as well as further research ideas.

BACKGROUND: GENERATIONAL CHANGES AND SOCIAL SOFTWARE

To fully appreciate the impressive changes in the human use of technology it may be helpful to be aware of the larger timeframe in which developments used to happen. In his article about the computer becoming an almost invisible, "ubiquitous" element of day-to-day life, Marc Weiser envisioned such an all-permeating wave of technology (Weiser, 1991). The wider perspective suggests a development period of several decades. While the 1990s were a time of technological shift toward networking, the following decade laid the groundwork for universal access.

Within this framework of investigation the target group of social software users and the available technology are essential variables. While both are basic elements, they are not fixed over time, but rather "moving targets" to a high degree. So if we aim at investigating how people—in our case students in tertiary education—cope with the challenges of acquiring, building, and disseminating information by using innovative technology we need to look at each element and at their evolving relationship and interaction.

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