Designing online courses with students’ lives: a preliminary investigation

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Abstract This paper explores the configurations of online students' (Net Gener and not) lives in terms of home, work and study as specific domains of their everyday lives. It is interested in mapping out how these domains overlap or not based on how and which technologies they use within and between them. Understanding such connections will provide useful input on how an online course may be designed in a manner that ‘fits’ or takes into consideration the changed landscape of education not only from the point of view of universities but also from the point of view of students’ ‘wired’ lives.

Background and Focus of the Study

Young people born after 1982 are said to be the Net Generation. They were born into a society that has Internet and other digital technologies. Educators and researchers have been most interested in understanding how this generation differ from previous generations of college/university students (eg. EDUCAUSE, 2005; Tapscott, 1998). However, it is also important to note that universities have also changed with the Internet. For example, access to education has been defined and extended to be ‘lifelong’. So universities are not only institutions where Net Gen students have arrived, but also where mature (lifelong) learners (eg. Matures, Baby Boomers) have come back to start a degree or to pursue a higher and/or another one.

The landscape of higher education has changed not only because Net Gener have arrived to universities and colleges, but also, because of the growth of online education. To understand the Net Generation in higher education, we have to understand not only the fact that they have short attention span, with sophisticated multi-tasking abilities etc, but more importantly how they study (eg. prepare for exams, accomplish tasks) with the technologies that have been integrated into their everyday lives (on-campus, at home, etc). And here in the US, there is an emerging ‘swirl pattern’ among undergraduate students. This pattern refers to the increasing evidence (eg. NSEE1 2005 results) that students are taking classes from multiple institutions to obtain their degrees. We can say that this is one of the effects of the growing online education in this country.

The nature of student engagement has changed. It changes our definition of what it means to study and perhaps to belong in an academic community. This study will focus on how student organize their online study alongside their home and work commitments. Furthermore, though understanding the Net Gener has pre-occupied institutional research in American universities, this study will include students from earlier generations who have come back to education mainly through online course offerings.

1 NSEE stands for National Survey for Student Engagement. The NSEE ‘swirl pattern’ findings among undergraduate students was reported at http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/2590.html.
Aims of the Study

The initial aim of this study is to explore how students order or coordinate home, work and study in their everyday lives and to identify the technologies that they use within and outside their given online course/s across home, work and study as 'domains' of their social and technological practices. This information will be useful for the faculty and administrative staff and will provide relevant input in course design, evaluation and even in terms of the technological configurations that may be necessary to meet the needs of both the Net Gen students and those who are not.

Initial data will be obtained from student participants who are undergraduate students in their junior and senior year registered in an introductory course on instructional technology.

Research Design and Methodology

The general plan of the study is framed within a grounded and situated methodology. After having obtained the consent of student participants, the study proceeds with the following four phases:

1. Surveying the social and technological landscape of the university;
2. Gathering data on the time distribution or allocation between work and study and other occupations in their everyday lives;
3. Gathering data regarding the technologies and related activities they do when at home/work and when they are doing their online study;
4. Closely analysing the data gathered and reporting findings.

The methodology for this proposal is going to be broadly ethnographic. The process of analysis and interpretation between phases will be recursive and reflexive as it proceeds to understand the connections of home, work and study practices of students in an online delivery mode of a university course.

References
