Chapter 90
Students, Internet, eLearning and Web 2.0

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ABSTRACT

An investigation into the students' use of internet services, media types and e-learning preferences tried to find out if students today are interested in the use of Web 2.0 methods for learning. More than 2.000 students participated in the survey conducted by the international architecture company DEGW and the author. The data of the survey are compared to the results of a parallel study by HIS GmbH that was answered by 4.400 students. The results of both studies throw a critical light on the popular discussion about the net generation or the so-called digital natives and may lend themselves to a more cautious or careful introduction of Web 2.0 methods in teaching and learning accompanied by instructional and tutorial assistance.

INTRODUCTION

The numbers are impressive: during the past 5 years since its commencement, 95% of all American students have become members of facebook, more than 150 million people use it worldwide and have uploaded over 10 billion photos. Since its initiation 3 years ago, 12 million German users have registered with StudiVz. YouTube's video Database has been in existence for a mere 3 years and already counts more than 100 million videos. Flickr contains more than 2 billion photos of its users. These numbers are truly impressive. Furthermore, primarily the younger members of our society have primarily been responsible for generating them. But can they be labelled the "net generation" based solely on these statistics?

Wolfgang Schweiger has found an explanation for the often-cited magnitude of internet use: "academics who intensively deal with online media and reiterate its massive prevalence increase its relevance and thus the legitimacy of their own research" (p. 97; italics in the original).

Considering that Schweiger studied "The Myths of Internet Use" (2004), if his assertion is correct, my own research and this very article would lose their legitimacy. My analysis will not deal with enormous numbers, but rather with tiny statistics.

The Internet is full of fantasies about young people who have access to computers and internet since early childhood. Many proponents of Web 2.0 and eLearning 2.0 are presently fuelling such speculation (see Schulmeister, 2008). This theme has been indiscriminately adopted and disseminated by the OECD in its own Website for the "New Millennium Learner" (NML).[1] Francesc Pedró (2006) of OEDC-CERI asserted: "that NML seem to be a generation-wide phenomenon, growing steadily and already having a universal character in some OECD countries." He chooses the fact that more younger users than older users favour instant messaging as a criterion for his finding that: "instant messaging is considered to be a quite good indicator of the development of NML." The European Commission has also recently begun to study the topic by calling on the Director of its Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, Yves Punie, to edit and oversee a number of eLearning papers on the topic "New Learning Generation."[2] Despite various critical voices (Schulmeister, 2008; Evans, 2007; CIBER, 2007; Bennet, Maton & Kervin, 2008), the myth of a new net generation has increasingly found advocates in the cultural region of Europe.

The arguments are always identical: the universal access to new media and its extensive use by children and youth must be shaping this new Net Generation. I do not question the existence of many teenagers who are active in the internet as cited by Tapscott (1997), Opaschowski (1999), Howe & Strauss (2000), Prensky (2001a), Palloff & Pratt (2003), Oblinger & Oblinger 2005, and many others. It is not the appropriate place here to describe the claims of these authors here in detail. For an extensive criticism of these publications see Schulmeister (2008). The youth they describe communicate in virtual communities and volunteer for chats and interviews. However, generally speaking and from a scholarly viewpoint, those who write about such young people make certain unforgivable methodological mistakes (detailed data and argumentations are reported in Schulmeister, 2008):

- Media activities of youth are reviewed one-sidedly without regard for other aspects of their lives; empirical surveys show that youth are active in clubs, mostly sports clubs, that they spent much of their time in meeting friends outside; media use is just one of their ways to spend their leisure time;

- Seldom have both the actual content of youths' media use and an exact profile of their motives been studied; research into the actual use of media shows that youth still watch traditional television and hear music to an enormous extent and also read print media; with regard to the Internet the majority uses the communication methods and the social software;

- The publications make incorrect generalizations about to the whole generation based on the results of accidental samplings, while overlooking the biggest differences between youths, their activities, interests and preferences; all studies of large samples in the internet using differential statistical methods (factor and cluster analysis) demonstrate that young people as well as the older population break apart in different user groups with different interests, motivations, lifestyles, social orientations etc. (see for example Treumann, Meister & Sander, 2007);

- Most net generation authors assume the behaviour of youths is determined by the existence of digital media and assumed to influence the learning habits and preferences of an entire generation in high school and college, whereas thorough surveys in-

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