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LEARNING TO LEISURE? WHEN SOCIAL MEDIA BECOMES EDUCATIONAL MEDIA

Tara Brabazon

Abstract

Social media sites – like Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, FourSquare and Twitter – summon a tapestry of friendship, humour and community between digitally literate citizens around the world. But the role and value of these platforms and portals for education, teaching and learning is neither self-evident nor obvious. Therefore, this article returns to a key early text in the sociology of education: Paul Willis’s Learning to Labour. Willis addressed the injustices within and beyond school. He probed how teaching practices and the ‘resistive’ behaviours of young men ensured that they were prevented from – and indeed prevent themselves – from gaining social mobility. Everyday practices such as smoking, drinking, truancy and swearing undermined their capacity to improve economic and social status. It is appropriate to return to Willis’s argument and explore new strategies for avoidance, resistance and denial in the digital cultures of education. I track the movement from learning to labour to learning to leisure.

Keywords: Social media, Facebook, Paul Willis, leisure, literacy, resistance

Education has always inspired fear among those who want to keep the existing distributions of power and wealth as they are.

-Howard Zinn (2005, p. 87)

Many narratives have attended the rise of the read write web and social media. Finance capitalism, the credit crunch and crash demonstrated (again) the volatility of the market and the consequences on the public sphere of private (and corporate) behaviour. Creative industries strategies and policies attempted to inject entrepreneurialism and urban regeneration into post-manufacturing cities and nations. The economic focus on fashion and music, sport and tourism, creates a culture where one group’s work enables another group’s leisure. Through mobile telephony, work is displaced into leisure time. Indeed, the confluence of consumerism and non-working time means that leisure is now traded for the more ambivalently constituted label of ‘lifestyle.’

This article explores what happens when social media conflate with educational media. Social media sites – like Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, FourSquare and Twitter – summon a tapestry of friendship, humour and community between digitally literate citizens around the world. But the role and value of these platforms and portals for education, teaching and learning is neither self-evident nor obvious. This article attempts to create a moment of consciousness in platform selection. Simply because content can be digitally migrated between platforms does not mean that it should be. I wished to log the importance of Gunther Kress’s research in many of the argument made, particularly his conceptualisation of multimodality. Kress (2010, p. xiii) outlined the use of multimodality as, it “can tell us what modes are used: it cannot tell us about this different style; it has no means to tell us what the difference might mean.” The aim of this article is to start to configure how these different modes and styles can be used in

a way that enables learning and information literacy. Therefore, in this article I return to a key early text in the sociology of education: Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour*. Willis addressed the injustices within and beyond school. He probed how teaching practices and the 'resistive' behaviours of young men ensured that they were prevented from – and indeed prevent themselves – from gaining social mobility. Everyday practices such as smoking, drinking, truancy and swearing undermined their capacity to improve economic and social status. It is appropriate to return to Willis's argument and explore new strategies for avoidance, resistance and denial. I track the movement from learning to labour to learning to leisure.

Facebook matters to this article, as it matters to schools and universities. By 2011, it was reported that one in every eight minutes spent online is on Facebook. Students could be listening to an online lecture or reading a refereed article through Google Scholar. Instead, they are choosing to visit Facebook, which is replacing both Google and Yahoo in total time spent online (Kagan, 2011). Being on Facebook has become the default behaviour for millions of citizens around world and a default sign in option for myriad websites. Facebook is not the problem, but assuming that anything is intrinsically educational on the site is a concern. It is possible to use it in ways that are beneficial for education. However social media are not intrinsically or inevitably educational media. The consequences of that premise are my focus.

How working class kids still get working class jobs

The difficult thing to explain about how middle class kids get middle class jobs is why others let them. The difficult thing to explain about how working class kids get working class jobs is why they let themselves.

-Paul Willis (1997, p. 1)

Willis's argument is seductive. Deploying ethnographic research methods, he entered the culture of young men at school and demonstrated how their 'resistance' to teachers and education was effective in the short term, but blocked their chances for learning and social mobility. Specifically, Willis asked how leisure behaviours like smoking, truancy and swearing undermined learning possibilities. To digitally migrate his argument, students are now texting, updating and commenting on social networking sites. Instead of swearing and back-chatting the teacher, they are silent and chatting back to their friends on mobile phones in classrooms. Digital leisure, like analogue leisure, obstructs structured learning. In his original study, Willis (1997, p. 2) explored how 'resistance' to school ensures that young working class men are 'prepared' (through a lack of other options) to enter manual work.

In a post-industrial society, the Willis 2.0 question is how education is used to prepare students for underemployment and a capping of expectations. In other words, how do social media create spaces for resistance for students that – by wasting time commenting and updating on issues that do not assist their learning – block their chance and opportunity to learn? To give readers one example from my classroom, I rarely have problems with mobile phones in lectures and seminars. I often make a joke about the first ring or beep in the lecture or seminar, mentioning the owner's necessity to take the call to complete a drug deal. The laughter and touch of embarrassment is enough to stop the phones during formal teaching hours. However there is one student where I failed to curb this inopportune connectivity during formal learning. I just managed – by some serious nagging and pushing – to help Lily pass my module in the first semester of her first year. She failed her two other courses. This threat of expulsion may seem to provide sufficient motivation to concentrate in the second semester. Unfortunately not.

By the end of the second semester, Lily was even texting in my class. Her first assignment showed she had no real idea about the question or the course and had conducted no reading. She failed. While the distraction of the mobile phone was not the cause of her failure, it was clear she had lost the ability to differentiate between education and leisure, important and trivial, concentration and distraction. In this case, social networking during university teaching and learning sessions blocked Lily from completing her degree. Marc Prensky, when considering such failures, justified them as a product of intelligence and wisdom, rather than a lack of motivation and concentration.

More and more young people are now deeply and permanently technologically enhanced, connected to their peers and the world in ways no generation has ever been before. Streams of information come at them 24/7 ... Do such kids need school? More and more of them (almost a third nationally and half in the cities) think not, and drop out (Prensky 2010, p. 1).

Lily did not drop out. She was formally excluded for failure. Her connectivity and lack of concentration, study and reading denied her a degree. This is not 'technologically enhanced,' but intellectually deluded.

While social media and connectivity can provide distraction, there are more serious applications of the read write web in undermining the credibility granted to both education and teachers. Just as Willis's lads abused teachers behind their backs, Facebook enables this practice to continue, and with a much wider audience, with groups titled 'Worst Teacher Ever.'⁵ Often, these groups are given the Facebook category of 'Just for Fun.' The blogosphere is also used to collectivise and vent rage about the "Worst Professor" (for example: "Worst professor" 2010). A more organised, ordered and searchable version of this opinionated and misguided ranking system is "Rate my professors."⁶ In this case, anonymous students rank and judge their teachers. The criteria by which they judge academics raise questions, even from other students. Steiner (2010) probed the value of "Rate my professor."

In theory, it does serve a purpose; it helps uninformed students find the best professors and avoid the worst ... What does it say about the student population if we pick and choose professors by relying on anonymous reviews that often favor 'easy' courses? And how reliable can these reviews actually be? ... Furthermore, the reviews are limited to a few dozen words and categories including 'easiness,' whether attendance is required, and, for Rate My Professors, 'attractiveness,' all of which doesn't afford the opportunity for a very complete evaluation.

The systemic consequences of such a rating strategy were revealed by a Kaplan survey (Schaffer & Wong, 2010). The data revealed that such review systems penalise the harder and more challenging markers, with student reviews being the basis for course selection. Kaplan even argues that such socially networked course selection has created grade inflation, with large groups of students using Rate My Professor and choosing a course on the basis of easy marking. The confluence of 'popularity' of a staff member and 'easy' marking is damaging to accountability and rigour in higher education. When mediated and circulated through Facebook, popularity and easiness are then confused with quality learning.

Paul Willis's research asks deep questions about 'agency' and 'choice' in formal educational environments. But Willis's work is also a reminder that education is

difficult. To succeed requires reading, focus, care and respect. It is based on foundational recognition that teachers know more than students. Obviously clichés of student-centred learning and digital natives attempt to mask this truth. I am not suggesting that students do not arrive in a classroom with valuable experiences and expertise. However I am arguing that teachers know more than students. That is why they are teachers. If they do not, then they should be removed from the classroom. Students being ‘Born Digital’ is not the point (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). In making this statement, there is an attendant realisation that time is the most precious resource in not only learning, but life. The imperative is to use the time well as the moment of enrolment in a formal learning environment is short. Yet social media can transform crowd sourced information about quality teaching into crowd bullying of staff (and other students).

Willis provides the arguments to explain this ridiculing of staff. He demonstrated that such ‘resistance’ is trivial, flippant and carnivalesque.

This opposition is expressed mainly as a style. It is lived out in countless small ways which are special to the school institution, instantly recognized by the teachers, and an almost ritualistic part of the daily fabric of life for the kids (1997, p.12).

Willis showed that the “caged resentment” of the lads always stopped “just short of outright confrontation” (1997, pp. 12-13) The online environment provides an even safer and often anonymous environment to express rage, hatred and blame. Outright confrontation is blocked by the screen. Such sites raise key question about learning: who is responsible for success and failure? If a student does not attend a class or complete the reading and therefore fails the assessment, then should the measures of achievement be lowered and changed, or is personal accountability to be activated? Willis was clear: truancy was “a very imprecise – even meaningless – measure of rejection of school” (1997, p. 27). In the online university ratings, such as Rate My Professor, the desire to find an easy course where attendance is not mandatory and a high grade can still be attained, is rewarded with a high score.

By students not participating in lectures, tutorials and seminars, they may receive an adequate grade. But their learning – let alone the metalearning about intellectual discipline and rigour – is not achieved. Willis discovered that particular behaviours constructed a “space won from school” (1997, p. 29). Similarly, a space is ‘won’ from university through social media resistance. But working class children continue to gain working class jobs. Middle class web-enabled students continue to suffer degree inflation, underemployment and disappointment in attaining their aspirations. Formal learning is woven by a truth: the harder the student works, the more they learn. If they mobilise academic shortcuts, they harm themselves.

There is a human face to educational success and failure. The widening participation agenda in further and higher education is both socially just and economically important. However the legacy of undereducated earlier generations still has an effect. As Fran Abrams (2010, p. 45) realised, “time after time, studies had shown the pupils whose parents had the most education did best at school.” Injustice is perpetuated through the continuance of educational inequality. There has been insufficient intervention in literacy, reading, writing, aspiration and motivation to overcome earlier injustice. The maxim that propelled my research in *The University of Google* was that students who are the first generation in their family to enrol in higher education require *more* attention from teachers, not less (Brabazon 2008a). They require more assistance, scaffolded assessment and an overt discussion of the expectations of university. Geoff Pugh, Gwen Coates and Nick Adnett (2005, p. 33) argued that “students from under-

represented groups may require more extensive support or more radical changes in teaching and learning strategies if they are to approach completion rate norms ... a priority should be to find ways of ensuring more students succeed in completing their course and qualification rather than intensifying the marketing effort to expand recruitment.”⁷ Yet the widening participation agenda has been concurrent with the proliferation of online learning and – even more seriously – the managerialisation of our institutions. This means that the group that requires the most assistance has enrolled at the point that the least direct (face-to-face) teaching is actually available. Certainly Skype, academia.edu, Facebook, Twitter and FourSquare are useful when embedded into curriculum, but they are supplementary processes rather than learning outcomes in themselves. The new managerial tier in universities has used online learning as an excuse to reduce the number of academics, reduce teaching time, reduce support structures and reduce the corporeal, real time relationships formed between staff and students. There are fine uses of the social web in information literacy, media literacy and creating extra forms of support for students. But the medium is not the message. Social media are not intrinsically or inevitably learning media. Form is not content.

The more complex question to consider is the role of social media in either addressing or reinforcing this demarcation of aspiration and achievement. Applying Willis’s influential study to an education system framed by the read write web requires that teachers ask if social media are assisting students in their learning or merely offering distractions or transitory and ineffectual ‘resistance.’ The internet and web provides access to an extraordinary array of information that, when matched with information literacy, is searchable and provides profound benefits and opportunities. Social media increase the connectivity, community and communication potential of the web. When integrated with care into a teaching and learning portfolio, it enables an immediacy of feedback, individualised attention and mobility of information and support (see: Shim et al. 2007). To provide one example, Skype assists students in ‘meeting’ the authors, researchers and academics they are reading, providing a context around their learning beyond a single institution or classroom (Terry, 2009).

Willis asked how middle class kids continue to attain middle class jobs. One provocative answer is that ‘we’ let them, through a neglect of all the strategies and imperatives that are possible to activate through education to address social and economic inequality and oppression. To update his argument, some of these strategies to intervene in class-based discrimination and inequality involve monitoring and managing social media (Giampapa, 2010). Without intervention through curriculum and literacy programmes, assumptions about ‘young people’ (and ‘old people’) will ensure that those currently in power remain in power. With thought and care, media configured for leisure can be deployed in learning. But it will be used in a different way.

Willis’s arguments agitate with great resilience in our present. As Stanley Aronowitz (2004, p. ix) argued, Willis’s lads were “exercising ‘agency’ by choosing to ‘fail.’” The consequences of that failure are now much more serious, with “the factory jobs that were still available in the early 1970s ... now gone” (2004, p. x). Software and hardware have increased the productivity and efficiency of work, but reduced the size of the labour force. Education is implicated in such changes, offering the pretense of status and mobility.

The new working-class jobs – coded as forms of ‘professional’ labor – bring with them neither good wages and benefits, nor do they reproduce working-class culture. As the first generation to have earned a post-secondary credential, many working-class kids have been inducted into the value systems and expectations of the salaried middle class, but without acquiring the accoutrements (2004, p. xi).

For the ‘failing’ students recorded in Willis’s research, unskilled work was still available. Academic success was not the only path to economic stability. Such jobs and options have now reduced. The phrase ‘labour saving device’ describes labour reducing devices.

Returning to *Learning to Labour* twenty five years after its publication, Willis (2004, pp. 182-183) like Aronowitz confirmed the changes that had taken place.

The new high-tech jobs and the higher level training and educational programs designed to fill them are irrelevant to most of the displaced and to be displaced manual industrial workers ... We are seeing in the current ‘postindustrial revolution’ a shake out of especially male industrial labor on a scale similar to that of the shake out of agricultural labor in the first industrial revolution.

Many jobs now require not only the completion of high school, but a university degree. This ‘reality’ designates not only degree inflation, but labour surplus. With plenty of workers prepared to move to accept a job, work split and reduced shifts, take mobile telephone calls in their leisure time, answer emails and be prepared to be called into work at short notice, higher levels of education become one more strategy to manage – or manipulate – labour surplus. Technology has not caused such a change. But the industrial revolution ensured that a smaller workforce could become more efficient and productive through the aid of machines. The proliferation of the internet has enabled information, ideas and money to travel through national borders, increasing efficiency and reducing the need for local workforces. Off-shore outsourcing enables a range of tasks to be completed by the worker drawing the lowest wages anywhere in the world.

The ideological confusion between technological change, efficiency and progress has punctuated the history of many nations in the last two hundred years. The idea that technological change may reduce efficiency and productivity seems not only counterintuitive, but anti-historical. Yet this hypothesis is worth consideration. Does there reach a point where over-automating spelling checking and information searching creates a deskilled student as much as Henry Ford’s assembly line created the deskilled worker? (Lee, 2010).⁸ If software and hardware are proxies for developing skills in thinking, reading, writing, searching and learning, then does this loss of literacies really matter?

If students do not learn to spell because a spelling checker is housed in a word processor, do not learn grammatical rules because errors are corrected in a word processor and do not have to remember facts because they can look them up at speed via Google, then is this progress? Is there value in holding these analogue skills in reading, writing and remembering? Such questions are made more serious because of the ageism that accompanies technological change. Indeed, it is a form of reverse ageism, suggesting that a particular group of young people have intrinsic skills and abilities, thereby not requiring the benefits and commitment of formal education. The extreme end of Paul Willis’s argument - demonstrating how young people disenfranchise themselves from education - has relocated into the debates encircling the phrase ‘digital natives.’

Digital natives and analogue underemployment

There is a reason why Paul Willis is the analytical spine of this article. It is important to log that students in the analogue age complained, challenged teachers and enacted behaviour that was rarely in their best academic interests. But the imperative of Paul Willis’s research was that such ‘resistance’ and ‘rebellion’ was pointless. Working class

children continued to attain working class jobs, like their parents. Yet age and generation were not the key variables in his study. Class was much more significant. Therefore, it is inaccurate to over-emphasise a particular age or generation as ‘inventing’ resistance to teachers and institutions of learning. When aligning age and technology into a simple package, the reification of research variables creates generalisations and inaccuracies.

The journalistic narrative moves through a familiar pattern. A generation started to use social networking sites. After three years of accessing Facebook, the human brain transformed into a comatosed, bored, listless and illiterate mash of meat. Supposedly – as this zombie movie progresses - students are now incapable of grasping complex ideas because they are dragged through life by white earphones. Mark Bauerlein (2009) discovered “the dumbest generation,” formulated through a lack of analogue reading and literacy skills. Yet his argument is more subtle than such a book title suggests. He acknowledges the great potential of the online environment for learning.

Never have opportunities for education, learning, political action, and cultural activity been greater. All the ingredients for making an informed and intelligent citizen are in place (2009, p. 10).

Yet from this potential, Bauerlein locates problems in, with and through social media that particularly inhibits young people.

It isn’t enough to say that these young people are uninterested in world realities. They are actively cut off from them. Or a better way to put it is to say that they are encased in more immediate realities that shut out conditions beyond – friends, work, clothes, cars, pop music, sitcoms, Facebook (2009, p. 13).

This is a more subtle argument, about socialisation rather than brain transformation. Conversely, there is an alternative discourse where, instead of these brain changers being the worst students in the history of education, they are actually the best. Don Trescott and Marc Prensky lead the way in such an interpretation. Seemingly forgotten is that new media become old media (or the less ageist description, mature media) very quickly. Skills with software and hardware are easy to attain. Understanding how to use these skills in context and evaluate their results is a more complex process. However once more, as if tracing ageism from people and onto technology, new is better. Old is a problem.

Such talk about youth and media is not new. Assumptions are always made about youth, particularly when the people making the assumptions are not young (Cohen 1972). From the 1960s, the market economy required the invention of new target markets to enlarge and differentiate consumption. The ‘generation gap’ was invented to express a loss of faith in traditional authority structures. Clothes, rock music and long hair were connoted as not only different or radical (Jones 1990), but the building blocks of revolution (Hall & Jefferson 1976). Since the 1960s, this sweeping statement of difference on the basis of age has had many consequences. Firstly, and perhaps most significantly, the focus on age has meant that other social variables – particularly race, class (Savage 2000), gender (McRobbie & Nava 1984; McRobbie 1991), and religion – have been under-discussed. Secondly, alongside this simplification of identity is an absence of history. A single cultural formation – music, fashion, hair, the web - is rendered much larger and more significant than it actually is. Thirdly, the writers extolling youthful difference invariably read young people as a force of change, defiance, crisis and threat (Pearson 1983). This revolution through youth continues until the

moment they enter adulthood (Rimmer 1985). Then the next group of 13-19 year olds – Generation X (Redhead 1990; 1997), Generation Y, the Nintendo Generation and the Google Generation - is scanned for their threat, promise, challenge and transformation.

Ideologies of youth prevent and often block actual research into behaviour, history and context, enacting profound damage to schools, universities and libraries⁹ and flattening conceptualisations of literacy. This simplification through generation has existed since the 1960s with the mods and their amphetamines and scooters, the skinheads with their boots, violence and racism and the punks with safety pins, slashed clothes and mohawks (Savage 1991). Now that music and fashion are no longer battlegrounds between generations (Hebdige 1979), the talk of radical change and threat has moved to technology.

Instead of mods, skins, rockers, punks and goths, the new group of threat and opportunity has been labelled as Digital Natives. This phrase was first used in 2001 by Marc Prensky. A management consultant, he used the term to demonstrate that, “today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors” (Prensky 2001). Once more the young ones are restless and the older generation does not understand them. But true to the pattern, Prensky has:

1. diagnosed a moment of revolutionary change,
2. invented a social crisis and failure in education resulting from it and
3. transformed himself into the consultant to fix it.

Actually, generation is too blunt a sociological instrument to understand social, economic and political change. It always has been. It is far too vague a description to understand an age group and how ‘they’ deploy ‘technology.’ But in his affirmation of modernity, it is not surprising that Prensky deploys reified, positivist science: “it is very likely that our students’ brains have physically changed – and are different from ours – as a result of how they grew up” (Prensky 2001). Besides simplifying how ‘a generation’ engages with information, he has also hypothesised a physiological transformation of the human brain. It is significant to note that he has confused anatomy and socialization to make this case.

His argument becomes more damning when describing those ‘older people’ who doubt the scale of this change (and his hypothesis and rationale) as Digital Immigrants. Appropriately in a post-multicultural era, being an immigrant is a problem because they keep a “foot in the past” (Prensky 2001). This group is a technological inhibitor because they use the internet after other media when searching for information and supposedly print out emails. No ethnography or participant observation data is cited to verify these claims.

Forgotten by Prensky is that the platforms, data and information being processed at multi-tasking speed by the ‘natives’ were actually invented by ‘immigrants’ like Bill Gates, Serge Brin and Chad Hurley. A reality overlooked by Prensky is that ‘immigrants’ know more than ‘natives.’ In less xenophobic times, such a statement would be self evident, even at the level of analogy or metaphor. Immigrants have lived in different ways, in at least two places and must manage the trauma of movement, translation and change. Immigrants are flexible because they have to be. Digital immigrants hold experience of drafting on a screen and drafting on paper, noting both are valuable and often locate different types of errors. They know how to engage with information quickly or slowly, understanding when superficial reading and data mining will suffice and when a line by line, page by page, chapter by chapter deep involvement with an intricate text is required. But statements about continuity, stability and

considered reflection do not sell books, win grants or fuel consultancies. Prensky therefore must preach crisis and endless change:

If Digital Immigrant educators really want to reach Digital Natives – i.e. all their students – they will have to change. It's high time for them to stop their grouching and, as the Nike motto of the Digital Native generation says, 'Just do it!' (Prensky 2001).

Marc Prensky started much of this brain-changing discourse, constructing a generational crisis where none existed. Significantly too – and for those committed to widening participation and lifelong learning - an obvious corrective must be made. “All our students” are not unified by age or any other social variable. Students are a diverse group, socially, economically and culturally. While Prensky saw this generational revolution as an opportunity to develop his consultancy business, other commentators summoned fully fledged moral panics.

The *Daily Mail*, a Conservative British newspaper, pounces on particular topics to promulgate fear: young people, technological change or declining literacy. When these three panics combine, the resultant article is a horror movie that makes Michael Jackson's video for 'Thriller' look like an advertisement for L'Oreal anti-ageing products. The front page of the *Daily Mail* on February 24, 2009 warned that “Social Websites ‘harm a child's brain’” (Derbershire 2009). That quotation came from “neuroscientist Susan Greenfield” (Derbershire 2009). While she is acknowledged as “an eminent scientist” in this matter, she has not displayed her expertise in research methods. The basis for her arguments (buried on page six of the paper) lacked triangulation of data. The paper reported that Baroness Greenfield “told the House of Lords that a teacher of 30 years had told her she had noticed a sharp decline in the ability of her pupils to understand others. ‘It is hard to see how living this way on a daily basis will not result in brains, or rather minds, different from those of previous generations’” (Derbershire 2009). The combination of ‘Chinese-whisper’ referencing (informing parliamentarians what a teacher had told her) and a misinterpretation of the words from her informant resulted in an odd lurch between personal opinion, scientific observation and the inferences made from the views of others. Apparently the teacher reported a decline in ‘understanding’ others. In other words, there has been a shift in communication skills. How oral and aural literacies align or disconnect from digital literacies is an intricate and complicated topic. Multiliteracy theorists have taken such a disengagement or convergence as a primary research focus. None of this material is cited by the Baroness or the *Daily Mail*.

Such an absence is no surprise. Historically, the *Daily Mail* has shown a propensity to endorse science above the humanities and neuroscience over media studies. Therefore, to verify the statements cited from the Baroness, I returned to the Lords Hansard entry for the day, assuming she had been mis-quoted. I found that Greenfield's arguments became even more disturbing than those reported in the newspaper.

We do not know whether the current increase in autism is due more to increased awareness and diagnosis of autism, or whether it can—if there is a true increase—be in any way linked to an increased prevalence among people of spending time in screen relationships. Surely it is a point worth considering (HL Hansard 2009).

She also compares social networking and screen cultures to “the thrill of compulsive gambling or compulsive eating” and “being linked to similar chemical systems in the brain that may also play a part in drug addiction” (HL Hansard 2009).

This biologically determinist discourse is a mode of neo-Lombrosian thinking. Instead of measuring the size of the cranium and offering hypotheses about intelligence, these neo-Lombrosians jump straight to the brain itself without experimentation or scientific observation to make their case. At least Lombroso used a tape measure to provide some ‘evidence’ for his arguments. These current brain changers offer their opinions as ‘worth considering’ with multiple caveats. Yet the cost and consequences of their undertheorised clash of social and technological variables is unfortunate for educational policy. When the biological bases for actions are promoted, whether this mode of argument is used to locate crimogenetic tendencies, laziness, stupidity, brilliance, intelligence or anti-social behaviour, positivism predominates. The brain becomes the cause of behaviour. Such an argument blocks any responsibility (or necessity) for a teacher or librarian to intervene in learning strategies. It would not make the front page of the *Daily Mail* to argue that students are not any better or worse than they have ever been.

There is now a counter flow of evidence critiquing the Neo-Lombrosians. Research probing online participation is showing data in direct opposition to the brain changers. The [Generations Online in 2009 Report](#) from the Pew Internet and American Life Project found a declining variance between different groups’ web use. Sydney Jones and Susannah Fox (2009) found that “larger percentages of older generations are online now than in the past, and they are doing more activities online.” Their hypothesis from the gathered data is that “we can probably expect to see these bars [measuring age-based differences] become more level as time goes on” (Jones & Fox 2009). While the young have dominated digital environments, this online profile is shifting. The integration of mobile and digital platforms in daily life is building literacy in online platforms far beyond a ‘Google Generation’ or ‘Digital Natives.’

Similar results were logged in January 2008, in Jiscs ‘Information Behaviour of the researcher of the future’ (2008), better known as the Google Generation Report. It had a short-term run in the daily press that focused on the phrase Google Generation, rather than the findings of the Report. Behind the headlines and clichés, the outcomes of the Report were startling. There was a profound realisation that computer literacy was masking other educational problems. The conversational phrasing deployed in the Google Search engine did not facilitate the movement to other search engines and directories such as Google Scholar or the Directory of Open Access Journals. Significantly, they confirmed that information literacy concerns were rarely generational but were pervasive throughout all age cohorts.

- “There are very very few controlled studies that account for age and information seeking behaviour systematically: as a result there is much mis-information and much speculation about how young people supposedly behave in cyberspace” (Jisc 2008, p. 14)
- Not only is the “Google Generation” reading less, but academics more generally are reading less. The ‘Google Generation’ is not dumbing down, ‘society’ is dumbing down.
- The Report noted a wide tendency to skim read, particular the abstract, and to not progress further into the paper. This tendency was not only found in ‘young people’ – but all researchers.

- “Digital literacies and information literacies do not go hand in hand” (Jisc 2008, p. 20).

Assumptions about young people and technology have blocked considered discussion of literacy. Instead, a low skill base facilitated through conversational phrasing in Google has decentred debate and research into information seeking skills. The lack of research about online behaviours, particularly over the last decade, has had an impact. Policy and funding decisions about education have been made on the basis of misinformation.

This Report confirmed that assumptions about the online environment and students will damage the researcher of the future. Tabloid-fuelled biological determinism and ageism about computer use has injured educational policy decision making. Certainly, social conditions impact on behaviour and learning styles. How students occupy their leisure time influences their demeanour in the classroom and workplace. Student aspirations, environments and literacies should be monitored and studied. But if concentration is lacking, then it is not a sign of autism but reveals the need to develop tasks for building interpretative skills. A lack of reading is not caused by an addiction to pleasure, satiation, gambling and drug taking. Instead, teachers must mobilise a range of assessment options – workbooks, journals, reflective papers or creative-led exegeses – to encourage and enable the deployment of motivated research in student assignments. We as teachers can be staunch in our interventionist strategies. For my first year students, I state that they should not even think about submitting a paper with less than ten sources. My pass mark starts at that point. They grumblebum. They complain that I am a bha-ich. But they read: first to receive the grades and then because they – grudgingly – start to enjoy the challenges of scholarship, writing and thinking. Whenever the focus is on brains and not literacies, we miss opportunities for teaching, thinking and scholarship.

Talk of brain changers stops debate. If the argument that students’ brains have changed continues, then there is nothing that can be done and no possibility for intervention or transformation. Distraction and disconnection is not the characteristic of one generation or age group. Bauerlein did however offer a provocative hypothesis about screen culture and the development of multiliteracies.

Visual culture improves the abstract spatialization and problem solving, but it doesn’t complement other intelligence-building activities ... The relationship between screens and books isn’t benign (2009, p. 96).

Even more significantly, and aligned with Willis’s *Learning to Labour*, Bauerlein was concerned about the loss of time when deploying social media rather than educational media.

Every hour on MySpace, then, means an hour not practicing a musical instrument or learning a foreign language or watching C-SPAN. Every cell-phone call interrupts a chapter of Harry Potter or a look at the local paper. These are mind-maturing activities, and they don’t have to involve Great Books and Big Ideas. They have only to cultivate habits of analysis and reflection, and implant knowledge of the world beyond (2009, p. xi).

These ‘choices’ of behaviour are not generational or age-specific. But these are decisions that matter. When an email interrupts writing, when a text message disturbs reading a complex argument, then the development of deeper and more complex ideas

and interpretations is more difficult. Therefore, the relationship between information, media, learning and literacy must be considered with care and reflection. A balance is required between education and technology, rather than enabling the new to configure the important. For education, teaching and learning to function, there must be much more attention on making conscious and reflexive choices about time and behaviour that are beneficial to intellectual development, rather than encouraging sloppy thinking that a particular generation are ‘digital natives’ and therefore – seemingly ‘naturally’ – understand how to use web-enabled platforms in intellectually rigorous ways.

Leisured learning?

An increasingly complex relationship – and discussion – needs to be held about the relationship between access to digital media and the literacies required to use them with rigour and efficiency. The assumption that one particular age group holds specific gifts and abilities simply because of their birth date are not only inaccurate but inhibitory for skill development programmes (see: Mossberger et al. 2003, pp. 1-2). Instead, more intricate studies, theories and models are required that probe the relationship between basic literacy (the encoding and decoding of text or reading and writing) with higher order information literacy. Also, by focusing on ‘young people,’ the technology discussed is present in the home and carried on a mobile phone, rather than the workplace, school or university.

Leisure slops awkwardly into both labour and education. There are better and more complex ways to understand online injustice and inequality. For example, Mossberger et al. (2003) located four ‘digital divides’: access, skills, economic opportunity and democratic participation. Instead of activating these complex discussions, the managerialism of education is built on an incorrect premise: that teaching and learning is economically efficient. Online education rarely slots into a balanced budget. Similarly underdiscussed is ‘gaming behaviour’ from normally civilised students who flame their colleagues with racist, sexist or homophobic abuse (Turan et al. 2011). It is much easier to celebrate mobile(phone) learning (Thorton & Houser 2005), or Wikipedia’s ‘history’ page for critical thinking (Rosenzweig 2005), than to actually consider – beyond a tabloidised shriek – why widening participation agendas have failed (Thomas 2001), and why there is a high drop out from first year students (Chemers et al. 2001).

The justification for this techno-educational bundle is convincing. It is both convenient and cheap to undervalue the role of teachers and formal education in citizenship, the workplace and democracy, to suggest that very basic software and hardware are the foundation for the ‘new economy.’ Similarly, it is cheaper to affirm the value of student-centred learning and deny the expertise of teachers. But the knowledge held by teachers and students is not equivalent. Teachers know more. They write and read expansively. They write and interpret curriculum. They set assignments. They moderate and examine. They study, think and translate complex ideas into the stepping stones of lesson plans. Students can enact none of these tasks. Two distinct forces have decentred awareness of these distinctions between teachers and students. Progressivist and liberal politics have celebrated the value of the students’ voice in a form of mock-1960s libertarianism, building on the work of Ivan Illich (1971). Concurrently, neo-liberal forces have added the inflective of the market to the educational mix. As Mark Pegrum confirms,

Western education has become increasingly subject to the economics of the market and the creed of neoliberalism, where the state’s overwhelming object is to supply the standardized workforce – that is, human capital with transferable skills –

necessary to compete in the ever more globalized knowledge-based economy (2007, p. 16).

The user-generated content ‘movement’ – gathering together Flickr, wikimedia, blogs, podcasting, Facebook and YouTube – when aligned with student-centred learning and the market orientation that transformed students into consumers has provided a channel and venue for the emotive excesses of grievance, hostility and insolence against teachers and education.

More attention must be placed on “situated literacies.” Mary Hamilton describes this concept as a “time-bounded interaction between people and texts” (2000, p. 28). The blurring of leisure and learning has transformed the respect that is necessary to commence a scholarly journey. A survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and the Teachers’ Support Network reported that one in six teachers had been cyber-bullied (Meikle, 2007, p. 5). Harassment of instructors has emerged and digital mauling by groups of students is common (Pepitone 2006). What is stunning when reading the harassment and ridicule of teachers on Facebook is how few teachers have replied to the abuse. Perhaps it is a mark of their self-respect that they do not scan and upload the corrected papers of these students who attack them for their peer group to view and therefore disclose the real rationale for their abuse.

The small space that remains for the left and progressivist forces is an unpopular, underfunded and marginalised commitment to ‘the public,’ through the preservation of public health, public education, public libraries and an affirmation of independent decision making, disconnected from corporations, public relations and marketing consultants. It is from this context that the ‘digital natives’ discourse propelled a deep commitment to change for its own sake. Once more – as if commemorating May 1968, the young ones are restless and the older generation does not understand.

Teach the technology

David Buckingham (2007, p. viii) affirmed that, “we need to be teaching about technologies, not just with or through them.” He is right: form, media or platform do not speak. They are not the message. But content is mediated, framed and shaped by the platform selection to channel data. To take Buckingham’s argument seriously, technology should not be used as a neutral platform for leisure, shopping or learning. Instead, the technology must be taught and the communication system explored. The power of multimodality is that students and teachers must demonstrate an awareness of how digitised platforms are best used.

Without intervention, without being forced to improve and engage with complex materials, most of us will stay in environments where we are content and safe, with our friends and families. Like Paul Willis’s lads, we will mock those we do not understand, rather take the risk to learn from them. Social media makes such a problem worse as we are surrounded by ‘friends’ who comment, chat, reinforce, ‘like,’ and support. Learning comes from moving outside of our comfortable context. Only by learning to learn – rather than learning to leisure or learning to labour – can information and media literacy become the foundation for scholarship.

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