Digital narratives of youth transition

Engaging university students through blended learning

The rewriting of a first-year university sociology course provided the opportunity to introduce the use of digital narratives into the classroom. This technological change in course delivery led the authors to consider the ramifications of the 'digital native' debate in teaching university-level youth studies. The focus of this article is students' responses to and uptake of the process of applying digital technologies in the production of a higher-order digital project.

by Sue Lovell
& Sarah Baker

This paper reports on the rewriting of a first-year sociology course at Griffith University where a Blended Learning Fellowship provided the opportunity to introduce the use of digital narratives into the classroom as an innovative and reflexive tool to assist students in developing a deeper understanding of the processes of youth transition. This technological change in course delivery led the authors to consider the ramifications of the "digital native" debate in teaching university-level youth studies, as discussed below. The intention of the changes to the course was to get students to produce a digital narrative that would deploy existing technology skills or extend the capacity for those skills. The focus of this article is the students' responses and uptake of the process of applying digital technologies they encountered in the production of a higher-order digital project – their experience of Palfrey and Gasser's (2008) "deep dive" step in information gathering about technology application in a classroom.

Digital narratives began in the Centre for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California (Meadows 2003). They are personal stories produced using any combination of video, images, animation, text and audio. They involve a form of "transliteracy", understood as "the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms and tools and media" (Thomas et al. 2007). Digital narratives between two and four minutes can be made using cheap digital cameras, more sophisticated video cameras, PowerPoint presentations or movie-making software that

utilises nonlinear editing. YouTube is full of digital narratives.

The course had the overarching theme of youth transitions, with a particular focus on the transition to university as an element in youth identity. In the first half of the semester, groups of students shared experiences of transition and worked out a way to represent them in a digital narrative. They had to upload the narrative to YouTube and embed it in a wiki. As part of the assignment, groups kept minutes of their meetings. Individual students also kept weekly field notes as an introduction to auto-ethnographic methods. As a part of their assessment, each student submitted a personal reflection on the process of creating a digital narrative, based on the minutes and field notes. Agency was prioritised by valuing student voices and experiences, the openness of the creative control students had over their representations and the deployment of skills that were understood to be at least reasonably widespread in the higher education student cohort (for example, Kennedy et al.'s (2008) figures suggested roughly 47% of students had actively uploaded movies to YouTube in 2005).

At the institutional level, the project received ethical clearance so that we could engage the students as participants in the research and make full use of their narratives and feedback. This meant field notes, minutes, the reflective component of the assessment and anecdotal comments recorded throughout the semester have all become rich sources of qualitative data. With the course emphasis being on young people's voices in the research process, we, the lecturers, wanted an ongoing feedback mechanism. In the second week, responses were sought through a "minute paper" that stated students' early impressions in two words. In Week 6, the lecture was devoted to student feedback. Students were given an opportunity to voice concerns: they asked and we answered questions in a forum setting. In addition, at the end of the course, a lecture-based feedback session required students to write anonymous comments on, "Something to change and how" and, "Something to keep and why". Suggestions were randomly selected from the larger pool and discussed on the spot. Finally, qualitative comments from official university-wide evaluations were collected.

Institutional pressures towards blended and collaborative learning

The higher education sector is responsive to a debate that has "students" at its centre as it increases its policy-based inclusion of information and computer technologies (ICTs) (Griffith Institute for Higher Education 2009). For Oliver (2006), the potential for "thriving" through creativity and independence has translated into institutional demands for pedagogical environments that contain "blended" learning – a combination of traditional and digital modes. Evidence of the centrality of digital literacy is apparent in the proliferation of collaborative wikis, online discussion forums, file exchange facilities and visual media that increasingly populate learning terrains. Educators are trying to draw on students' experiences and existing (or arguably emerging) skills to shape learning environments.

In addition to the push for blended learning in the higher education environment there has also been a move towards the promotion of collaborative learning using ICTs. As the recently published *Collaboration in teaching and learning* report (Education.au 2009, p.1) outlines, this approach to education draws on a range of learning theories, such as social constructivism and situated learning, which emphasise:

> … the provision of real world and authentic experiences and examples, working with others, and sustained interaction amongst members of a learning community, as necessary for effective learning.

In a sector where retention rates of first-year students continue to be of concern, a collaborative blende-learning approach could be perceived as a way for educators to capture student interest in the first formative weeks of a course. The implementation of collaborative blended-learning tools has the potential to do this in ways that will assist student acquisition and development of the key skills and dispositions that will serve them during the completion of their degree. However, a push towards blended and collaborative learning enmeshed with ICT use is problematic when, as the *Collaboration in teaching and learning* report (Education.au 2009,

p.5) points out, "research tells us that there is a significant variation in the competency and usage of ICT amongst young people, and that their information literacy skills are wanting". These findings challenge the popular notion that young people born after 1990 are "digital natives".

Introducing the digital native debate

Marc Prensky has suggested that because of lifelong immersion in digital technology the brains of young people "have physically changed … as a result of how they grew up" (2001, p.1). Rejecting designators like N-gen (for Tapscott's 1998 net generation), Prensky described young people at the turn of the century as "digital natives". "Our students today", he said, "are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky 2001, p.1).

Although it has not proved popular to pursue neuroplasticity as a key feature of youth identity, and even Prenksy himself has modified his position to suggest, instead, that "digital tools *are like extensions* of students' brains" (2005, p.8, our italics), Prensky's (2001) central conceptualisation of the generation gap remains: "they" are the "digital natives" and "our" represents the "digital immigrant". Likewise, his 2005 call for educators to listen to digital natives and package their education in ways that are relevant to them is worthy of consideration.

A considerable body of literature now scrutinises the experiences and perceptions of the generation/s of digital natives to determine their distinctive characteristics. They seem to be:

> … technologically knowledgeable, independent, self-reliant and entrepreneurial thinkers; thriving on challenging work and creative expression within clear direction, they seek managerial support yet detest micromanagement as they have a preference to achieve tasks in their own way, at their own pace. Further, they are more used to, and better at, operating in teams than previous generations although they can also work well on their own. (Oliver 2006, p.61)

Oliver's summary captures a view that, overall, makes much of the digital competences of students and the accompanying new patterns in their learning styles (Frand 2000; Gibbons

2007; Oblinger 2003; Oblinger & Oblinger 2005; Tapscott 1999).

Recently, however, the earlier literature has been rigorously critiqued. In the USA, Feeney has expanded Prensky's categories to include, among others, the digital explorer, the digital addict, the digital recluse and the digital refugee (in Toledo 2007, pp.87-88). To these, Toledo (2007) has added the digital tourist. Still in the USA, Palfrey and Gasser's (2008) book-length study, *Born digital*, provides a three-step model for information-seeking based on "grazing", "deep dive" and "feedback loop" styles of information-seeking. Those students who undertake deeper learning move from what used to be called skim reading (grazing) to look behind headlines and eye-catching graphics to engage in deeper learning, what Palfrey and Gasser (2008) term "deep diving". The "feedback loop" step, however, is to communicate this deeper "reading" to others and consider what they understand (Palfrey & Gasser 2008, pp.241-43). Only then is learning applied critically.

Prensky's (2001) binary of native/immigrant has therefore been challenged. In Australia, a 2006 study of 2,000 first-year students by Kennedy et al. (2008) demonstrated that many students are relatively passive in their use of sites like YouTube, being distributive recycling consumers of such technologies. In the year prior to the survey as many as 52.7% had never used a computer for creating and editing audio and video materials through programs such as iMovie. In addition, though Kennedy et al. (2008) discovered that 84% of students accessed Photoshop or Flash programs to manipulate images in the previous year, this was not common: for 48.7% it had been more than a month since they had created a static multimedia presentation through programs like PowerPoint or Director. The largest use of computers, at 57.7%, was for the daily playing of digital music without access to the internet through facilities such as iTunes (Kennedy et al. 2008, p.113). Students use mobile phones but predominantly for texting and calling people (79.5% and 76.2% respectively), with the daily use of higher-order phone functions being restricted to only 7.4% for emails and 8.1% accessing web services. Even though 32.2% take

Prensky described young people at the turn of the century as 'digital natives'. 'Our students today', he said, 'are all "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet'.

digital photos or movies on their phones, only 18% send them (Kennedy et al. 2008, p.113). Kennedy et al. challenge Prensky's suggestion that "[o]ur students today are *all 'native speakers'* of the digital language" (2001, p.1, our italics), and highlight the error of assuming that university students "have had a universal and uniform digital upbringing" (Kennedy et al. 2008, p.109), which is something the *Collaboration in learning and teaching* report confirms (Education.au 2009).

This paper taps into the implications of the digital native debate for higher education by following through on the specific issue of whether educators should continue to promote greater transferability of perhaps assumed digital skills into pedagogical environments. If so, which skills might these be and how do we find out more about who has them? If students, as Kennedy et al. (2008) suggest, are not using more complex, higher-order digital technologies as much as we imagine, are they still likely to thrive given a creative and technology-based challenge? Are they more "entrepreneurial" through exposure to others who use higher-order technologies, and their mastery of lower-order skills (such as texting or facebook, for example)? In Palfrey and Gasser's (2008) terms, will they "deep dive" to acquire the skills if they do not have them?

Findings

Week 2 – Minute paper data

At this early stage students had formed their groups and, based on their individual stories of transition to university, exchanged preliminary ideas of what the digital narrative might contain. The 138 responses were predominantly positive. Each student provided two words that best described their experience to that point, which resulted in a total of 62 words. Of these, 43 were positive (for example, "engaging", "interesting") and 19 negative (for example, "confusing", "stressful"). The comments suggested that students were intrigued and a little anxious – the course was different but not threatening.

Week 6 – Q&A in lecture

With the assignment almost due, students were tense. Those who were coping well were quiet

during the session (and a number approached us after the session indicating their satisfaction), but those who were challenged were very vocal. Group work was to blame, it wasn't sociology as they knew it, they wanted detail, order and strict limits and boundaries within which to function – they wanted support.

Week 12 – Forum

By the end of the course, the pendulum had swung back and some students realised that they had learnt something new technologically ("Digital narratives; highly enjoyable, learned more about current technology and gave us a voice!") and that group work played an important, if challenging, role in it all (for example, "Group work helped encourage me to meet new people, and work outside of my comfort zone").

Students' minutes, field notes and reflective commentaries

A more nuanced understanding of the issues comes from data collected through a small sample of 30 students' minutes, field notes and reflective commentaries that formed part of the digital narrative assignment (although they are subject to the usual vagaries of self-reporting).

Concerns about technology and unfamiliarity with digital narratives
Some perceived the assignment to be a "complex piece of assessment just with the technology that we would need to use" (Anna) and students certainly did not assume that others were digital natives. One group recorded in its minutes, "today's meeting being very basic and just talking about whether we were tech savvy" (Emma). Another student was very specific in her reflective component about the technological prospects of the group: "My main concern with this assignment was that it was so technology-based. We were lucky that we had one member who could solve our technology problems" (Edith).

None said that they were familiar with digital narratives. The link to a YouTube clip did not reassure them. Comments such as the following signalled the first stirrings of concern:
• "I am unsure as to what exactly a digital narrative is and examples in class didn't

demonstrate how a group digital narrative would look." (Hannah)

- "I was a little confused about the digital narrative […] I've never heard of it before." (Adele)
- "Early in the tute we realised we don't understand the digital narrative thing (thank goodness I wasn't the only one)." (Edith)

One student even became anxious before classes started and recorded this in her field notes:

I have spent the last few months since selecting this course wondering what on earth a digital narrative was, I admit, I was extremely nervous that it would be some technological thing-a-mi-jig I would have no hope of understanding. (Nina)

She then proceeds to put the term digital narrative into language that she understands, limiting its threatening nature and making it manageable: "but alas, a digital narrative is a different way of saying a PowerPoint presentation that tells a story – now that I understand!" "Alas" and the implied hooray of the exclamation mark sit in a certain tension here that uncovers some of the ambivalence students experience when challenged by technology.

Adjusting expectations of the medium
Where groups were more digitally inexperienced, or not lucky enough to have one member who was considered "savvy", initial goals were ambitious in ways that directly related to their technological inexperience and, therefore, complicated the process. One group suddenly recognised the need to adjust their expectations of the medium, noting in Week 4, "we were starting to get apprehensive about the amount of photos which would be required for the presentation (at 4 frames per second it would be at least 500)" (Niall). In Week 5, a change of strategy solves the problem: "we decided we should look for time lapse video footage" (Niall). Elsewhere, students realised that, "six pages were too long […] we decided to revise the current script, rearrange some of the elements and eliminate one of the storylines" (Nigel).

Technological problem-solving
Students sought strategies to get around the problems of creating a digital narrative in relation to both the product and the time it took to produce it:

We discussed whether we were just going to record ourselves talking or if we would just have photos or if we would have both. We discussed the pros and cons for each. I personally thought that it would be better to have just photos because if we did a video it would take a while to edit […] we decided to just have the photos. (Emma)

Getting the audio component to work was also a recurring problem for a number of the groups:

Mary and John both proposed putting pictures of their old homes and their new dorms in, in an effort to show where they were to where they are now. It was then decided that we would use text […] with images and music, rather than audio. Samantha advised it would be a lot easier than trying to record the audio. (Elizabeth)

When in Week 4 submitting the assignment online appeared daunting (Leroy), or putting it on YouTube was a challenge in Week 6 (Adele), an end-point strategy for a number of students was to get someone else to help them problem solve.

The Flexible Learning advisor assigned to the project reported conversion of PowerPoint to movie file prior to uploading to YouTube as something with which "students seemed to struggle". Where students had trouble uploading to the wiki it was sometimes, "due to the fact that a fellow student has [accidentally] deleted the instruction page". Instructions were replaced but this highlights a problem with the wiki at the level of the institutional technology itself rather than student inexperience. Some of the YouTube embedding problems occurred because students, as the advisor stated, "simply didn't read the instructions e.g. they forgot to click on the html link before embedding the code for their video link".

Since the digital narrative was not a component assessing technological skills, only a token mark was deducted for failure to upload

to YouTube or embed in the wiki. Consequently, despite the available support, an estimated one-third of the cohort did not persist with this task.

What constitutes work?

An unexpected observation was that students' conceptualisations of what constituted "work" in the whole process of creating a digital narrative were aligned with perceptions of task difficulty, digital or otherwise. Previous lack of exposure to any task meant that it was perceived to have a different workload and, therefore, a different status. Where students were digitally literate or seen to have certain useful skills, it was easy for them to contribute to the workload usefully. One student articulated this clearly:

Emily chose to do audio visual. Angie chose to be script manager and Tina chose to do communications and time keeper. I was to be the overall coordinator this was a bit disappointing as the role lacked much responsibility […] Angie and Emily seem to be more the leaders in this group probably due to the computer knowledge which in turn provides them with more ideas. (Yvonne)

In this all-female group, computing skills (audio visual, framing up the script and timing) appeared to be linked directly to concepts of leadership. In a mixed-gender group where the girls had put the animation together: "Jessica and I were able to show them the animation that we had done. We then needed them to do the narration as they are the more creative members of our group" (Anna). The girls in the group devalued their computing skills perceiving the skill they did not claim (narrating) as the more difficult one, done creatively by the boys. Where work is process work rather than product work, it is not recognised at all: "we all sat and brainstormed ideas as we decided that Matt was going to write the final copy and bring it in next week. We didn't accomplish a lot in this session" (Abby). Wherever the skills are familiar or intangible process-towards-outcome type of tasks, it seems they are devalued and considered to contribute less to the workload.

Conclusions and discussion of findings

This project continues at Griffith, although the Blended Learning Fellowship that produced it is over. Digital narratives are now a regular course feature because it is clear that they enable students to either expand and/or share digital literacy skills they already have or to develop them for the first time. Digital narratives also do this in ways that engage students with their own experiences of youth transitions and give them, quite literally via YouTube, a global voice, a tool for self-expression outside the university.

We are confident that Prensky's claim that, "Our students today are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (2001, p.1) is an exaggeration. We are equally confident that the statistical data from the Kennedy et al. study (2008), which places roughly half of our current cohort as digitally confident with higher-level skills, has been accurately reflected in our classroom experiences with digital narratives. Students were much more likely to be digitally literate at the level of photo manipulation and selection and sequencing in relation to musical clips, for example, than they were in relation to audio/video synthesis or embedding the finished product. It appears accurate to claim that even a relatively privileged, Western, predominantly middle-class and Generation Y student cohort is far from homogenous in its level of digital literacy.

Toledo's (2007) challenge to the binary of digital native and digital immigrant can be opened up further and rendered more complex by recognising that Prensky's (2001) thesis leaves very little room for students from the so-called "digital native generation" who do not take up that identity or, indeed, who feel as anxious about technology as some digital immigrants or academic staff. More work needs to be done in this area of youth studies. Similarly, more can be done around the question of what students understand by workload and status of engagement in relation to the acquisition of the identity of digital native and, as always, the role that gender might play in the field of technology and interpersonal sharing of such skills.

An unexpected observation was that students' conceptualisations of what constituted 'work' in the whole process of creating a digital narrative were aligned with perceptions of task difficulty, digital or otherwise.

Returning to Oliver's description of the digital native as "technologically knowledgable, independent, self-reliant and entrepreneurial thinkers" (2006, p.61), we can now draw together some relevant and contextualised observations about how accurate such comments might be, rather than fall prey to generalisations. In the first instance, "digital natives" are not all as technologically knowledgeable, as popular commentary might have us imagine. In fact, the findings presented here support, at a qualitative level, recent quantitative research data such as that of Kennedy et al. (2008).

The statistical results are certainly confirmed by the behavioural characteristics observed in the process of setting a digital narrative as a significant and assessable component in a first-year sociology course. The majority of students defaulted to the use of photographs and text balloons where audio voiceovers and moving images proved too challenging or too time consuming. Even though students were provided with links to free-access conversion software, a number had difficulty in using these, some were reported, by both tutors and the Flexible Learning advisor, as failing to read or follow digitally relevant information. This again demonstrates the misplaced assumption about Generation Y being "digital natives".

Similarly, levels of self-reliance and independence seem exaggerated. Email traffic between students and their tutor, lecturer and Flexible Learning advisor in the weeks prior to submission of the narrative was high. Even though ample support was available online, even though a comprehensive help page was set up on the intranet, students quickly bypassed the "deep dive" stage of the information-gathering cycle identified by Palfrey and Gasser (2008) and went straight to other group members for advice or to digital immigrants for assistance. Where the communication skills were lacking to do this (or the motivation of assessment did not galvanise them into action), some simply reneged on the development of unfamiliar skills.

Once support was received, students returned to the task, met the challenges it offered and retrospectively found the group work and the demands of creating a digital narrative rewarding and satisfying:

I am very impressed with it. I showed the group our virtually finished digital narrative. They were all very impressed with the finished product, which made me very happy to hear. Tina and Tamae even got teary. I think it was because of the intensity of the images with the music; plus maybe their excitement. Neverthelesss, I was rather impressed and proud of the work I contributed to the group. I would have to say I feel I performed well during this experience […] Although it started pretty slowly, it has been fun […] I think it has been a good experience doing this assignment. We were able to bond and form good friendships. It has been unforgettable. (Michelle)

There is pleasure in having met the challenge. Indeed, if one of the aims of a blended-learning approach is increased student engagement (with its retention spin-offs) then the above quote suggests it is the group work aspect of the digital narrative assignment that encourages a sense of community among the class even though there was initial resistance, sometimes appropriate and legitimate, at the front end of the challenge. Other quotes also reflected this sense of community, for example another student said the project, "helps us become familiar with one another and our transitions" (Week 12 Forum).

A project such as this has greater potential for creating student connectedness thereby challenging an investment in independence, a "preference to achieve tasks in their own way, at their own pace", which is attributed to Generation Y (Oliver 2006, p.61) and taken on board wholesale by researchers such as Prensky (2001) for the sake of producing today's students as digital natives. The "technologically advanced" digital native component of Generation Y is, in other words, a learned identity that some young people do not claim as their own and have not yet acquired despite this popular attribution.

Finally, there is plenty of scope to return to something that has been almost completely neglected in this article. We have examined Palfrey and Gasser's (2008) "deep dive" stage of information gathering and ascertained that students were encouraged to learn about digital literacy at the same time as they were learning

about transitions as a concept, that is, effectively living what they learnt across experiential and conceptual dimensions. Palfrey and Gasser's (2008) model, however, has a third stage of information gathering that enables the critical application of what is learnt at the "deep dive" stage: the stage of the "feedback loop" – discovering what others think and becoming a community of thinkers. The second half of the semester used the digital narratives that were produced in the first half to do precisely this and, in a future publication, it is to the "feedback loop" that our attention will turn.

The expectation that digital natives will be creative and "thrive" depends to some extent on educators being brave enough to encourage young people out of their comfort zones; this is a tall order in any first-year undergraduate classroom. Digital narratives are one way to do this, with a number of students acknowledging that they left the course with new technological knowledge (for example, "Learnt more about putting a PowerPoint presentation together" – Week 12 Forum). In addition, being able to upload to YouTube is a real form of giving voice to young people who previously haven't been able to connect at a global level.

References

Education.au 2009, *Collaboration in teaching and learning*, a report of the Strategic ICT Advisory Service, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Australian Government, viewed 27 September 2009, <http://www.education-au.edu.au/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/SICTAS/2009_SICTAS_CTL.pdf >.

Frand J.L. 2000, 'The information-age mindset: Changes in students and implications for higher education', *EDUCAUSE Review,* v.35, n.5, pp.15-24.

Gibbons, S. 2007, 'Redefining the role of information professionals in higher education to engage the Net generation', keynote paper presented at Educause Australia 2007, viewed 23 April 2009, <http:www.caudit.edu.au/educauseaustralasia07/authors_papers/Gibbons2.pdf>.

Griffith Institute for Higher Education 2009, *Blended learning good practice guide*, viewed 23 April 2009, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/gihe/pdf/gihe_tipsheet_web_bl.pdf>.

Kennedy, G.E., Judd, T.S., Churchward, A., Krause, K. & Gray, A. 2008, 'First year students' experiences with technology: Are they really digital natives?', *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, v.24, n.1, pp.108-22.

Meadows, D. 2003, 'Digital storytelling: Research-based practice in new media', *Visual Communication*, v.2, n.2, pp.189-93.

Oblinger, D. 2003, 'Boomers, Gen-Xers & Millennials: Understanding the new students', *EDUCAUSE Review,* v.38, n. 4, pp.37-47.

Oblinger, D. & Oblinger, J. 2005, 'Is it age or is IT: First steps towards understanding the net generation', in *Educating the net generation,* eds D. Oblinger, & J. Oblinger, Educause, Boulder.

Oliver, D. 2006, 'An expectation of continued success: The work attitudes of Generation Y', *Labour & Industry*, v.17, n.1, pp.61-84.

Palfrey, J. & Gasser, U. 2008, *Born digital: Understanding the first generation of digital natives*, Basic Books, New York.

Prensky, M. 2001, 'Digital natives, digital immigrants', *On the Horizon*, v.9, n.5, pp.1-2.

—— 2005, 'Listen to the natives (schools should improve teaching)', *Educational Leadership,* v.63, n.4, pp.8-13.

Tapscott, D. 1998, *Growing up digital: The rise of the net generation*, McGraw Hill, New York.

—— 1999, 'Educating the net generation', *Educational Leadership*, v.56, n.5, pp.6-11.

Thomas, S., Joseph, C., Laccetti, J., Mason, B., Mills, S., Perril, S. & Pullinger K. 2007, 'Transliteracy: Crossing divides', *First Monday*, v.12, n.12, viewed 28 April 2009, <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2060/1908>.

Toledo, C. 2007, 'Digital culture: Immigrants and tourists responding to the natives' drumbeat', *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, v.19, n.1, pp.84-92.

AUTHORS

Sue Lovell is a lecturer in literature, ethics, gender and sociology at Griffith University. She has published on Australian writer Janette Turner Hospital and Australian artist Vida Lahey, whose biography she is currently researching. Her primary research focus is narrative based.

Sarah Baker is a lecturer in cultural sociology at Griffith University. She has previously held research fellowships at the Open University and University of Leeds, UK, and University of South Australia. Her most recent publications on young people's music making and the working conditions of young people in the television industry appear in Youth and society (2008) and Theory, culture and society (2008).