# Digital Pedagogy and the Student Voice

## Digital Pedagogy

“*Today’s students have not changed incrementally from those of the past. A really big discontinuity has taken place. One might even call it a singularity – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is no going back. This singularity is the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century*.” (Prensky, 2001)

Prensky’s paper was one of the first to identify a shift in the information seeking behaviour of students at all levels of education, away from the ‘analogue’ paradigm, and towards a new ‘digital’ mode of information behaviour. Throughout the last two decades this perceived change has influenced the strategic and operational management of Libraries, especially in Higher Education. The emergence of so-called “Digital Natives” (Prensky, 2001) has also led to changes in the way that educational professionals construct and deliver courses in Higher Education.

New ‘Digital Pedagogies’ have emerged which are specifically tailored to the perceived behaviours of ‘digital natives’. These pedagogies have shifted the focus of teaching away from face-to-face physical (analogue) interaction, and towards an online, interactive, constructionist pedagogy, which can be led by the student, as much as the teacher. These digital approaches find their ultimate expression in the ‘Massive Online Open Course’ or MOOC. Courses designed on a MOOC model allow for students to access the course when and where they wish, study at their own pace, and (generally) free of charge. The largest providers of MOOC courses are Coursera ([www.coursera.org](http://www.coursera.org)) [726 courses], and (in the UK) Futurelearn ([www.futurelearn.com](http://www.futurelearn.com)) [40 courses]. Two broad categories of MOOCs are defined in the UUK report ‘*Massive open online courses: higher education’s digital moment*’ “*cMOOC. These are courses based more closely on the original ‘constructivist’ distributed peer learning model, Courses are typically developed and led by academics through open source web platforms…[&] xMOOC These courses are typically structured around more conventional lecture formats and are increasingly delivered through proprietary learning management platforms with contractual relationships with academics and institutions.*” (UUK, 20013a)The nature of MOOCs being online, free of charge, and (generally) non-accredited, the completion rate for this type of course is very low – “*Of the initial enrolments, the total number of students who tend to complete a course can reach 20% but the majority of courses have a completion rate of less than 10%”* (*ibid*). The above quote suggests that, whilst there may be an appetite for an entirely on-line service, there is still a place for ‘analogue’ learning and teaching, especially at HE level. This need is evidenced through the ‘Student Voice’ and especially through the National Student Survey.

## The Student Voice

*“[The UK] has had a long history of student voice, from Robert Owen's school in New Lanark (allowing the children to direct their learning through questioning, 1816) to Neillie Dick's anarchist school in Whitechapel (set-up by her in 1908 aged 13); A.S.Neill's Summerhill School and Alexander Bloom's St Georges-in-the-East (1945–55).”*  (Wikipedia, 2013)

Within Higher Education in the UK the ‘Student Voice’ has become an increasingly important factor in the way that education is delivered and managed over the past 10 years. The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) suggests that *“…broader discussions are initiated across the sector about the nature of HE learning communities, to include a more explicit focus on notions of learning partnerships and perceived barriers to, and effective practices in, creating cohesive learning communities.”* (HEFCE, 2009) The impact of the Student Voice can most clearly be seen through the annual ‘National Student Survey’, or NSS. This comprises a survey of the ‘learning experience’ of graduates, with the information gathered after the end of the final year of University. It is the results of the NSS over the last two years that have led to this paper.

## The Funding Regime

The introduction of the new funding regime in 2011, whilst having a negligible effect on the number of students entering HE (Coughlan, 2013), has had far greater impact on the perception of HE and teaching for these students *“…students in England are paying much more for their education and this is having an impact on their perceptions. They are paying a lot more, receiving a little more and increasing their expectations in terms of value for money.*” (HEPI, 2013). With the vast majority of students now paying £9,000 per annum tuition fees, students have far more expectation of ‘value-for-money’ than under the previous state-funded scheme. The manifestation of this expectation is resulting in a digital dis-connect between the perceived direction of University and Library infrastructures, and the needs of students. Plans by the government to further reduce the amount of central funding made available to institutions, along with a possible increase in the student tuition fee contribution will only increase these expectations.

## The Digital Dis-connect

Ever since the publication of the report “*Information behaviour of the researcher of the future*” (JISC, 1998) Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) generally, and libraries in particular, have followed the recommendation to “[*A]djust to a new reality: the need to compete for attention among user groups, especially the young, who demand involving, dynamic and personalised content experiences that can compete with the likes of Facebook*. “, and this has been further refined by the recent JISC Guide ‘*Engage students with mobile learning*’ “*As 80% of people will be accessing the internet using mobile devices by 2015, organisations need to embrace mobile learning quickly. By adopting mobile learning, organisations can increase student satisfaction and retention, widen participation and potentially reduce costs*.” (JISC, 2013) This has resulted, over the past 10 years, in many ‘fixed’ computer resources being de-commissioned, with a concentration on ‘mobile’ access through laptops, tablets, and now mobile phones becoming the default.

NSS comments (below) over the past two years (since the introduction of increased student fees) point to a very different perception of how libraries should be supporting students in their information searching behaviour.

*Never enough copies of key texts in the library…*

*[N]ot enough books, not enjoyable reading from a screen. Then working with one, surely it is better to look at the printed book than the electronic screen…*

*Feel the library's resources need to be expanded. During 3rd year I needed to use a computer in the library, it was always too busy. Or the books I wanted were always already out…*

*Although the new learning resources centre is wonderful, there are still not enough computers by far…*

*The ratio of computers to students is terrible. We need more computers.* (NSS, 2013)

As can be seen by the comments above, students see ‘value-for-money’ under the new funding regime as being demonstrated by more ‘desk-top’ machines being provided for them (both in the Library, and in the Classroom), and in the purchasing of additional copies of physical books (‘*not enjoyable reading from a screen*’) for libraries and academic departments. In the NSS 2013 return there were no calls from students for more access to Library services through mobile devices or across social networks. With the focus having been on a reduction of ‘analogue’ resources in the form of fixed equipment and physical titles on the shelves, this dis-connect is now particularly visible following the change in funding regime.

## The Way Forward?

It may be that the current dis-connect between student expectations (essentially ‘analogue’) and University policy and practice (almost exclusively digital) may decrease over time in a similar fashion to the ‘blip’ in University entrance numbers in the year following the introduction of higher student fees (Coughlan, 2013). The current tendency of students to see their time at University as ‘consumers’ may revert to a more experiential viewpoint over time. However, I believe that wider socio-economic factors, such as the continuing decrease in government funding for Higher Education;



(Universities UK, 2013b)

will lead to student calls for greater investment in ‘analogue’ resources in future, thus taking us back to an institutional information technology infrastructure model last seen in the last century. The way forward lies in both listening to, and educating, future students in their interaction with University Library resources.

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