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The Backyard Blitz Syndrome: the emerging student culture in Australian Higher Education

By Judith Langridge

Introduction

This paper is both a reflection on and a reaction to the issues addressed by Craig McInnis in his Inaugural Professorial Lecture at the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education which discussed problems associated with what he calls patterns of disengagement apparent among university students at the start of the 21st century. In considering the perceived disengagement of these students this paper will discuss whether this phenomenon could or should be attributed to a contemporary cultural environment that sees students as the ultimate consumers who need to be 'entertained' every 10 minutes.

In discussing the approach to study and literacy levels perceived in many contemporary students this paper will argue the possibility that this results from acculturation to an electronic visual culture rather than a culture of reading and writing, as well as an increasing tendency for many individuals to adhere to a culture of mobile privatisation. In considering the changing attitudes to learning, this paper examines how it may be possible to employ the technology responsible for transforming that learning process to make over the teaching process.

Since 1995 there has been a great deal of research undertaken and a huge volume of academic work published about the impact of digital technology on education and learning outcomes. However, the focus of this paper is not so much on this aspect of technological developments but on how digital technology has created the Backyard Blitz Syndrome (1) – a cultural construct resulting from widespread immersion in a social environment within which a war is not seen as an evolutionary conflict likely to last for six years (WW II – 1939-1945) but more as a six-week 'blitz' with a blow-by-blow coverage viewed on television screens in homes around the globe.

The arguments in this paper stem from observations made at an Australian regional university campus while working as a tutor in communication theory courses and undertaking studies towards obtaining a multimedia degree before embarking on postgraduate studies.

The process of disengagement:

In his lecture (2) McInnis identified a variety of causes for this phenomenon that he argued is manifested in (among other things):

- Declining numbers in classrooms
- Requests for special arrangements to meet the demands of paid work
- The ability to work at locations away from the university
- The diversity of institutions, courses and subjects now available

McInnis asserted that, from the student perspective, this process of disengagement and apparent lack of commitment could be regarded as part of a process of negotiating their level of engagement with the university within the context of the multitude of choices now available to them. He further argues that the changes in patterns of engagement are by no means directly student-driven but partly reflect the responses of universities to market pressures. His paper also looks at what he describes as a 'fundamental shift' in the way young people now regard the university experience and he cites the work of Don Edgar (3) who described the students' relationship with the university as a 'thin relationship between footloose workers in the global market place'.

What McInnis says about this aspect of student disengagement is graphically illustrated by my personal interaction with a social worker friend who graduated from the University of Queensland in the early 1970s. She was comparing her university experience with that of her son who graduated from the same institution in 2001 (4). During her highly structured studies toward her social work degree, she 'practically lived' at the university and immersed herself in and interacted with the university community. On the other hand, her son – an IT graduate – considered it was only necessary to be on campus for lectures and tutorials in what was a very flexible course. Most of his study and assignment research was undertaken on-line at home. He worked part-time, had the ability to work away from the university and could be seen to be one of the 'disengaged' cohort: highly mobile and employable anywhere in the global market place.

Mobile privatisation:

This is a term coined by Raymond Williams (5) who describes it as:

...an ugly phrase for an unprecedented condition in which people are increasingly living as private small-family units or, disrupting even that, as private and deliberately self-enclosed individuals, while at the same time there is a quite unprecedented mobility of such restricted privacies.

Using the metaphor of city traffic flow to describe this phenomenon, Williams argues that each family group or individual moves along the life path within a shell of privacy, obeying the traffic rules but making contact with other shelled individuals only as and when necessary. He further argues that from the outside this may be seen as dehumanising the individual – however, within the shell the individual is with people they want to be with, going where they want to go.

This aptly describes McInnis' disengaged cohort – the contemporary university student. As argued by Williams, it is a case of these individuals adjusting to radically altered conditions. In our society, the communication culture has changed – as have the rules governing it. It is hardly surprising, then, that the manner in which many students interact (communicate) with a tertiary institution has changed. Today, students are just individual shells negotiating their life highway, obeying the traffic rules society has set before them, rather than fully engaged, integrated participants in the institution.

Journey from conventional to contemporary:

My own journey as an individual shell – encompassing as it does working as a university tutor and embarking on academic studies – has led to a dichotomy of experience in both conventional and contemporary university learning environments. This duality – this standing with a foot in both camps – has provided valuable insights into the changes that have occurred in the past 10 years in the attitude of many students towards the acquisition of theoretical knowledge that has to be considered such an integral part of undertaking any degree studies.

It seems relevant at this point to include some personal information about how my own

evolutionary learning process has led to the insights being discussed in this paper. In 1993, while employed as program manager at the Mackay studio of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, I began tutoring journalism students at Central Queensland University's Mackay campus. At that time I had no academic qualifications but a broad experience in print and electronic journalism and radio programming gained over 28 years which was considered adequate to qualify me for the task of teaching. The experience of teaching these students sparked an interest in achieving my own academic qualifications and that, in turn, led to my leaving the ABC in 1997 to devote more time to those studies, while still teaching journalism courses. In 1998, having completed my communication and media studies degree, I planned to undertake further studies to focus on my special interest in the impact of new and emerging technologies on the communication culture of a regional community such as Mackay. It was then I realised that I knew virtually nothing about how the new technology that has made such a fundamental difference in how we communicate actually works. It was this realisation that led me to enrolling in a multimedia studies degree program. In 2003 I am still working as a sessional tutor at CQU's Mackay campus but in communication theory courses rather than in journalism.

A ten-year odyssey:

Personal observations in the ten-year journey from conventional to contemporary university environment have identified fundamental changes in tertiary studies and student attitudes towards those studies. In 1993 more than half the students attending journalism classes were relatively computer illiterate, which meant a significant amount of computer laboratory time ten years ago had to be devoted to teaching those students how to access and use the applications they needed to complete their assignments. Today there is a very different demographic with only very few mature-age students lacking the computer skills their younger peers take for granted.

In 1993 very few students had personal computers and the 'norm' was for them to visit the campus to work in the library to undertake research for their assignments from printed texts appropriate to their study, as well as to attend lectures and tutorials: the student accepted that a theoretical understanding was central to their studies. In a 2003 multimedia world most students have a personal computer and it is more common for them to access material for their assignments on-line. Theoretical understanding is considered irrelevant in a skills-based course and attending lectures/workshops is problematical for a variety of reasons. Indeed, today many of the courses studied are only offered on-line and it seems to be taken for granted within the university that all students are equipped with the computer literacy necessary for them to participate in the contemporary learning environment.

Because this material is available to anyone in any location with the appropriate technology, attending campus is considered unnecessary. Why travel to campus when the material needed is accessible on-line at home? This is particularly important to those students in paid work (part or full time) who see the time spent travelling to and from campus as being better invested in other activities. In the circumstances, it seems reasonable to argue that it is the application of communication technology that has not only impacted on how a university interacts with its students but on how many contemporary university students approach the learning process.

This is supported by Instructional Technologist Sharon Gray (6) who argues that information technology is revolutionising the way we live: '...including the way we communicate, the way we define our community, the way we do business and the way we acquire knowledge' (7) .

Learning: an evolutionary process or 'instant fix'?

It has to be said that, for many contemporary university students, learning is not considered an evolutionary process where one gradually acquires the knowledge one needs to achieve a positive

outcome. For some students information is considered something to be acquired in byte-sized chunks as and when required. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that many students – particularly those undertaking multimedia courses involving a high degree of technical skill – regard acquiring theoretical knowledge as boring and irrelevant within a context that is seen as being largely task-oriented.

This is an issue of concern to the Canadian Teachers Federation (8) which argues that the new technology is not just an assemblage of machines and their accompanying software – that computers embody a way of thinking that orients a person to approach the world in a particular way: ‘The more the new technology transforms the classroom into its own image the more a technical logic will replace critical, political and ethical understanding’

Personal experience indicates that, although this cohort of media-savvy students are acquiring academic qualifications to work in a cultural industry, they do not see any imperative to acquire an understanding of how communication works within that culture. They appear not to understand that they need to know how the culture within which their texts will be created (with what is arguably the ultimate communication tool) will impact on how their texts will be read by their audience: nor do they see the relevance of understanding how communication works will allow them to create texts that will carry a more effective message.

There is also a perceived tendency for many students to delay completing assignments until the last possible minute and then put in a concerted effort in a bid to complete the task. Perhaps this is because of poor time management; perhaps it is pressure of paid work; perhaps it is an attitude that regards the practical skills – the ability to build web pages or design a film poster – as the most significant aspect of their university experience. Whatever the reason, it could be argued there is yet another aspect of McInnis’ idea of student disengagement to be considered here.

The electronic visual media plays a dominant role in the lives of a significant number of tertiary students at the start of the 21st century. They live in a world saturated by the instant fix. They are immersed in and have become acculturated by a plethora of popular culture texts steeped in this phenomenon: television programs feature detectives who solve the most baffling crimes within the hour-long time-span of a given program; garden experts who, in two apparently hectic days, turn a garbage tip into a delightful garden – the ‘Backyard Blitz’ syndrome. A reality check would reveal that many crimes take years to solve and that a garden is not created in two days and is not static. It takes time, planning and nurturing for a garden to evolve; it needs feeding to thrive and grow. The same approach applies to learning, which can be seen as the ultimate evolutionary process affecting any individual’s life journey.

It seems safe to argue that it was inevitable that this ‘instant fix’ attitude would, for some students at least, find its way into the academic arena: a concentrated effort for a limited time span will see the task achieved – no matter how well or how badly the task is cobbled together, it is done. This then is what I call The Backyard Blitz syndrome. It could just as easily have been labelled with the title of one of a number of contemporary ‘lifestyle’ programs that seek to entertain the audience by making a radical change to a given environment within a limited time span. However, Backyard Blitz seemed most appropriate as a metaphor for the attitude prevalent among so many students in the contemporary university classroom environment. The team/the brain cells focus on an area of interest (barren backyard/academic assignment) and, for a defined period of time the task is ‘blitzed’: a concentrated effort is made to transform the current status into the desired outcome (beautiful backyard /acceptable assignment). The emphasis is on completing the task in the time allotted – it has nothing to do with the quality or longevity of the outcome: nor has it anything to do with adding another layer of knowledge to what has gone before or preparing the ground for what is likely to come after.

That this is an appropriate metaphor for the acculturation of a multimedia student cohort (and, it must be said, of almost two million Australians) is illustrated in a print media story published in

the Sydney Morning Herald in February 2003. In this article, David Dale included figures showing audience share on the first night of the current audience ratings for commercial television (9). Topping the list was Backyard Blitz that, according to the survey for that night, attracted an audience of 1.82 million. Dale argued that this was evidence that 'Australians maintain their obsession with domestic improvement'

If one applies the Backyard Blitz concept to the US-led war in Iraq, the same kind of thinking becomes apparent. The target area is blitzed for a defined period of time ('this has to be a quick war') and a concentrated effort is made to transform the current status into the desired outcome (dictatorship/democracy) – and the complete scenario is played out live on television screens and websites around the globe: reallife/ death infotainment or a macabre psuedo video game.

Generation Y and the attention span:

McInnis' disengaged cohort as a phenomenon has been recognised by various people and has been given various labels. In a newspaper article (10) Kerry-Anne Walsh talks about Generation Y (those born after 1982) – the successors to the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1961) and Generation X (1962-1981) who, she says, are 'confident, often arrogant and have the attention span of gnats'. This, she argues, is the generation whom educators and marketing companies are desperately trying to get to know. In her article, Walsh cites work done by Queensland University of Technology's Head of Careers and Employment, Col McCowan, revealed when he was a keynote speaker at a private conference of the National Elite Sports Council at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. In that paper, McCowan argued that Generation Y views life through a prism of self-interest. 'They are not interested in theories, only relevance... they don't want your opinion, they want theirs confirmed'. He asserted that because their lives are attuned to quick assessment and judgment Generation Ys absorb everything in short chunks.

That this should be so is understandable in an electronic visual culture where television programs (commercial) have built-in advertising breaks every ten minutes: that's when the viewer makes a coffee, gets something to eat, makes a phone call or attends to personal needs. The resulting acculturation is being catered to by at least one of McCowan's associates who has amended lecturing methods to enable five minute breaks every 10 minutes of lectures to allow his Generation Y students to 'talk, or use their mobiles, their computers or handheld games at regular intervals'.

In a newspaper column responding to the Walsh article mentioned previously, Terry Sweetman (11), described the Generation Y cohort as spoilt brats, overindulged and spoilt by parents with whom they negotiated what they wanted to do – rather than doing what they were told to do. What Sweetman says echoes McInnis' argument about student disengagement and apparent lack of commitment being a part of a process of negotiating the student's level of engagement with the university: student negotiation of their relationship with the university is just another facet of how they are required to negotiate their way through the society in which they live at the start of the 21st century.

Disengagement or boredom:

It seems difficult to believe that young people, who can spend hours at a time sitting in front of a computer – absorbed in their electronic world – creating web pages, communicating on-line or playing the latest computer game, do, in reality, have only a 10-minute attention span. Indeed, it could be argued that their attention span is determined by interest – a depth of interest that can keep them physically immobile for prolonged periods, sometimes to the point of putting their health at risk.

An article in the Sydney Morning Herald (12) warned that those who sit in front of a computer without moving for hours at a time are at risk of developing a condition labelled 'e-thrombosis': the same fatal blood clotting – deep vein thrombosis (DVT) – that can result from sitting in a cramped seat on a long flight.

This prolonged immobility argues an attraction that can keep an individual's attention focussed for prolonged periods. As students negotiate their way through their life journey within their shell - being with people they want to be with and doing what they want to do - they do not want to be bored. This attractive, interactive electronic world does not bore them – rather it fascinates and absorbs them.

According to Tapscott (13), factors contributing to this attractiveness are the strong sense of independence and inclusivity experienced by these young people when they go on-line. Their understanding of the technology (how to work it) gives them an unprecedented ability to search for information relevant to their perceived needs. However, having the ability to surf the net and acquire that information does not always mean they focus on one topic for any length of time. Physical inactivity does not necessarily indicate a prolonged mental attention span: more realistically it indicates a fascination with an environment within which a huge variety of information designed to inform and/or entertain can, for them, be easily and quickly found.

Therefore, if we agree with McInnis' that disengagement occurs because of lack of interest ('this is boring and irrelevant'), it seems reasonable to argue that what needs to happen is not so much for academics teaching theoretical courses to reshape their lectures by offering a five-minute break every 10 minutes to cater for game-playing (and, so, reinforcing the problem), but rather to consider evolving a new way of teaching designed to stimulate the interest of this disengaged cohort.

Articulate but illiterate

Another area of concern pertinent to this discussion, but not touched on by McInnis, is the diminished literacy skills apparent in many students who perform poorly in their written assignments. These are highly intelligent, articulate young people who find it difficult to transfer their skill with spoken words into their written work that, in too many cases, displays poor spelling and grammatical structure. It seems likely that this is because their acculturation is in an electronic visual culture rather than in a culture of reading and writing (14):

It could reasonably be argued that by reading books we tend to acquire literary skills without even being aware that we are doing so: perhaps we use the books we read as the role models for how we will write. This viewpoint is supported by Sharon Cromwell (15) who argued that:

All teachers and most parents understand that kids who are motivated to read and write are more likely to have stronger reading and writing skills. They understand that a distinct connection exists between recreational reading and writing and improved reading and writing skills.

In her paper she cited a 1997 report, Reading and Writing Habits of Students published by the National Center for Education Statistics, that, she argued, demonstrated the validity of correlating independent reading and writing with higher proficiency in those areas.

It is further supported by Deborah Knott (16) who argues that critical writing depends on critical reading and that 'most of the papers you write will involve reflection on written texts – the thinking and research that has already been done on your subject.'

Schirato & Yell (17) offered some insight into this topic when they asserted that in contemporary western youth cultures visual mediums and genres were becoming increasingly popular at the expense of other mediums and they predicted that the continuing move to more interactive visual mediums could be expected to increase this trend. They argued that different mediums (watching

a film or listening to music compared with reading a book) provide different economies of pleasure: the relationship between the time and energy consumers/readers expend in reading texts measured against the pleasure they gain from this. They also argue that there is a huge time difference (or commitment) that differentiates the two activities:

Reading a book can take several hours, days or months, while watching a film takes a couple of hours. That is, books and films are characterised by different economies of pleasure. This is not to say that one activity is better than the other; what it does mean is that people may take this factor into account when they choose between the two.

Having regard to that, it seems safe to say that a student acculturated to a multimedia world of visual texts would find much more pleasure (and find the time invested much more rewarding) in watching a video text or browsing the internet in search of study material, rather than reading a print text nominated as required reading in a particular course of study. It must be argued that, whether the pleasure gained from this particular activity warrants (in the mind of the student) the time invested in it, would depend on what the student hoped to achieve from undertaking the task. After all, planning, researching, drafting and then writing and referencing an assignment in the traditional way is an integral part of the learning process that entails a great commitment of time and effort. More often than not in a multimedia world time is a very precious commodity for the majority of tertiary students. It is arguably quicker and easier for many to search the internet for information, download the material found and then insert it into a document that is then submitted as an assignment. This is an approach that anecdotal evidence strongly suggests underlies the problems tertiary institutions are now experiencing with plagiarism. It could also be argued that using such an approach could be expected to diminish any learning outcomes achieved.

There is some merit in a stance that argues that there are some students, in the university environment, who would be better suited to a different style of skills training than the highly theoretical mode expected before one attains a university degree. These are the students focussed on the acquisition of practical skills who see putting those skills within a theoretical framework as boring and irrelevant.

The university response to the disengaged cohort:

McInnis argued that student patterns of engagement were not being entirely student-driven but reflected in part the responses of universities to market pressures as well as the diversity of institutions, courses and subjects now available to the student. His argument has a deal of merit – however, perhaps it is not as much about the diversity of institutions and courses available but the economic imperatives in contemporary tertiary education. It is self-evident that under the impact of technological advances there have been radical changes in the past 10 years, not only in the way study materials are delivered by universities and accessed by their students but also in the types of courses being offered by these institutions.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the traditional courses once considered mandatory for a university education no longer attract sufficient students to make them economically viable and they are being dropped from university curricula. It seems that, when there is a societal imperative of ‘user pays’, tradition gives way to innovation, specifically in terms of the courses offered by a university and how those courses are delivered to the student. If students are not attracted to the course being offered, then a university’s funding will be diminished. The provision of courses is then all a matter of (in the commercial vernacular) ‘putting bums on seats’.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that perhaps ‘user pays’ in a tertiary education environment does not in fact produce innovation because academics struggle to be relevant to a disengaged audience. ‘Perhaps it actually stifles innovation because universities are working

according to an economic bottom line rather than really enlivening the mind of the student' (18) . Certainly, given the current political climate, the economic imperative is considered unlikely to disappear from the university balance sheet and so it becomes necessary to work within the limitation this imposes. It would appear that, if academics involved in teaching theoretical courses want to continue to enliven the mind of McInnis' disengaged generation, it is incumbent on them to change the teaching environment in order to re-engage that interest: teach students to recognise that learning is an evolutionary process that carries its own rewards rather than have them adopt a Backyard Blitz attitude towards their studies by acquiring only sufficient information to allow them to complete a specific task within a specified time frame. It is believed this can be achieved not so much by changing what is taught but how it is taught.

Conclusion:

This paper has examined what Professor Craig McInnis has described as patterns of disengagement apparent in many university students in the 21st century. In exploring the technological changes that have made it possible for students to become disengaged from the traditional involvement in the university community, this paper has identified several cultural shifts that could be deemed to contribute to the phenomenon discussed by him. These include:

- Acculturation to an electronic visual medium;
- Mobile privatisation and the tendency of individuals to negotiate their way through society;
- The emergence of The Backyard Blitz Syndrome;
- The increasing prevalence of personal computers; and
- Changes in the dissemination of study materials for university courses.

In identifying these elements of change, this paper has argued that, if technological developments have been responsible for transforming the process of learning, then those responsible for teaching this 'disengaged generation' and those who will undoubtedly follow them need to use that technology to transform the way in which they teach and so meet the challenge involved: to use the technology that has helped create this infotainment culture to counteract the disengagement of this easily bored Generation Y.

This would mean a fundamental shift in the way many academics now present lectures, workshops and tutorials. Indeed, this is already happening in many university courses as academics employ computer software applications such as PowerPoint to illustrate their lecture materials. It is possible to take this further and involve this multimedia savvy cohort in the learning process in an interactive way by creating illustrative material designed to engage – and hold – their attention. This could mean workshops in which video clips and group learning tasks are introduced to illustrate theoretical concepts. A restructure could involve a break in routine every 10 – 15 minutes. This does not mean a five-minute break to play video games or send text messages on mobile phones. A rather more productive solution would be to challenge this perceived boredom by setting students a cooperative learning task: screening a video and then having small groups analyse what they have seen before joining a class discussion could achieve this outcome. All this requires time for planning and implementation but could, in its turn, be seen as part of the evolutionary process of teaching as well as learning.

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Queensland University's Mackay campus. In 1998 she graduated with a degree in Communication and Media Studies and is currently in her final year of a Multimedia Studies Degree before embarking on postgraduate studies. Her special area of interest lies in the impact of new and emerging technology on the communication culture of regional communities.

Endnotes

1 This is an allusion to the CTC Production television program Backyard Blitz telecast at 6.30pm Sunday nights on Channel 9. This program features a team of four people with landscaping design and gardening skills who join forces and undertake within a limited time span to make over a 'problematic' backyard. Information about the program is available at:

<http://www.burkesbackyard.com.au/blitz/home> [\[back\]](#)

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[\[back\]](#)

3 McInnis, Craig, 2001, Signs of Disengagement? The Changing Undergraduate Experience in Australian Universities, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne (p.7)

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4 I am grateful to Roslyn Hirst, social worker of Mackay, for sharing this comparison. [\[back\]](#)

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16 Knott, Deborah, 2001, Critical Reading Towards Critical Writing, New College Writing Centre, Toronto, Canada accessed at: <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/critrdg.inc> [\[back\]](#)

17 Schirato, T & Yell, S. 2000, Chapter 10 'Visual Mediums' in Communication & Cultural Literacy: an introduction (2nd ed), St. Leonards, NSW, Allen & Unwin. [\[back\]](#)

18 Comment made in a private e-mail discussion on 28.01.2003 by Dr Geoff Danaher, Lecturer in Cultural Studies, Central Queensland University. [\[back\]](#)

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