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Teaching the Sound Bite Generation

Abstract

Generation Y, those people born after 1981, also known as the sound-bite generation, have grown up in a visually rich environment complete with multi-channel televisions, computers, and video games. Generation Yers, as a result, have developed a visual learning style, which is different from previous generations that were predominantly auditory learners. (1) It is important that we, as educators, are aware of this change in learning-style and take it into account when we teach. This paper will discuss some of the adjustments the authors and their colleagues have made to incorporate this new style of learning into the classroom environment.

During a trip to Las Vegas for a conference in 2000 we took time to visit the museum at the near-by Hoover/Boulder Dam. Both of us were interested in finding out about the building of the dam. As we moved through the museum we found that it was setup with small ‘sound bite’ audio-visual stations. There were young school children everywhere pressing buttons for snippets of information. It was irritating and cacophonous. We were looking for something chronological and contiguous that gave us a complete yet concise history of the dam. Finally, on the top-floor of the museum, we found at small theatre, which was showing the history of the dam in a documentary film of about twenty minutes in duration. We sat down among a group of grade-school children to watch. By the end of the presentation, we were the only ones in the theatre. The children, it seemed, did not have the necessary attention span to watch all the way through. At the time, we simply assumed that this was because of their relative youth combined with their “school-trip” excitement level, but it seems that their behaviour and the staccato methods the museum had adopted to tell the story are

1 The Boulder Dam was renamed the Hoover Dam during Herbert Hoover’s presidency, but it had been named the Boulder Dam for the canyon it was originally to occupy. Ultimately, it was built in Black Canyon, but by the time that decision was made, the name “Boulder” had stuck.
both indicative of and responsive to a growing trend that is now apparent not only in children, but also in young adults.

Today’s university student typically belongs to Generation Y – that is, they were born after 1981. These people have grown up with, or experienced the development of the internet, cell phones (that now carry pictures as well as sound), video and computer games, and any number of television channels. (2) It is hardly surprising, therefore, that they tend to rely heavily on visual learning. As Jo Anne Vasquez pointed out in her keynote address to the North Carolina Science Leadership Association, learning styles have changed dramatically since the early 1950s. In the United States during the 1950s a person’s typical learning pattern included 30% visual, 43% auditory, and 27% kinesthetic sources whereas today it is 47% visual, 19% auditory, and 34% kinesthetic. (3) She also points out that in the 1950s the average 14 year-old had a vocabulary consisting of approximately 25,000 words, but by the year 2000 it had dropped to 10,000. (4)

The result stemming from this visually-saturated learning environment seems to be that people’s attention spans are decreasing. At a recent graduation dinner, we found ourselves sitting across from a production manager for CBC Television News. We had a conversation about how much time is allotted to news-stories. During our conversation, she said that every story should be told within thirty seconds, but that you can stretch it to a minute if it is a riveting story, after which time the viewer loses interest. She said that newscasters have to take into account the fact that we now live in a ‘sound bite’ world and that people’s attention span, even for a good story, is limited. Some professions are also beginning to address the changes in the demographic and applying new techniques to grab and hold people’s increasingly wavering attention. In law, for example, the realization has been made that 40% of the jury pool have been raised on computers, videos, the internet, and cell phones, and have shorter attention spans and have developed a visually based learning strategy. Lisa Brennan in writing for the National Law Journal suggests that: “They are more likely to zone out during a rambling presentation—no matter how eloquent—than they are during a succinct statement punctuated by electronic visuals meant to give them the feeling that they figured it out for themselves.” She points out that law schools are beginning to add courses, as part of their curriculum dealing
with the use of technology and novel advocacy skills, which will help lawyers to reach this new type of jury. (5)

**Generation Y in the University Classroom**

At the beginning of the semester John Pursley of Alabama University asks his creative writing class what it is they like to read? The response is typically; “I don’t know,” along with pregnant pauses and uncomfortable shuffling of the chairs. Over the last few years he has begun to realize:

“The fact is most of the students have read and do read on occasion, but the majority of their reading seems to be portions of what is assigned to them and what they cull from internet blogs and their friends’ facebooks, rather than out of any real love of literature. And though I can understand their fascination with the sort of voyeurism the internet provides, especially as an alternate to assigned reading, it troubles me when the first words out of a student’s mouth are I don’t like to read, which is almost inevitably followed by, I want to be a published writer…” (6)

The problem facing university instructors, such as John Pursley, is how do we engage this new breed of student and foster a love of our particular discipline? One answer may be to fight fire with fire and, to extend the metaphor, thereby blaze the path less trodden. One of the authors, in an English literature class, talks about the genres of literature and, to cement the requirements in the students’ minds, not only discusses the literature that is part of the course work but will ask the students to categorize the movies that are currently playing at the theatres and to support their arguments with reference to the plots.

**Visual Presentations**

Certainly, in a discipline such as English, visual presentations have long had their place. With modern media it is very simple, for example, to present film versions of plays that students may be studying. Playwrights have always written plays to be seen and heard, not read, but seeing and hearing first may be a useful and intriguing introduction to a closer textual analysis. In English and
other disciplines, documentaries may also be a useful introduction to information to give dynamic, visual representations of material that might not otherwise be readily available. A case in point, which brought this home recently to one of the authors, was a documentary on Roman Britain. This, from British school-child recollection, was inhabited by men in short leather skirts who, when they weren’t littering the countryside with piles of rubble and amorphous shards of pottery, built long, straight, boring roads while speaking a language which apparently killed them. In the documentary, and through the wonders of modern computer graphics, roads traced on modern maps led to cities of ancient ruins that rebuilt themselves before the viewer’s eyes, shards formed pots that took their places in the buildings and the dead came to life through their own words in recently discovered letters translated into idiomatic English. One letter was from a merchant who was due to make a delivery to a fort. He said he would be unable to do so, “because,” as the translator quoted, “the roads are too bloody awful.” Thus, thanks to the dynamism of modern technology, this distant history, eroded through time and slime, re-formed not only Roman Britain, but also the author’s opinion of Britain’s Roman period as something interesting and accessible. Of course, it is not always possible or necessarily desirable to include a full-length feature in a classroom setting, but modern software allows us to “cut and paste” not only words, but visual images into a PowerPoint presentation that may be used to augment course material.

**PowerPoint**

Since it appears that the current students are strong visual learners and technology has afforded us the use of ‘power point’, then we may easily chose to use it where advantageous. This is not to say that we should use this technology, as the name implies, to list point after point, but to bring visual texture into the classroom, using ‘power point’ as ‘power picture’ (7). In introducing a figure important to the course, for example, one might present his or her portrait to put a face to the name and use short film clips to bring the material to life. The old adage, “A picture’s worth a thousand words,” has always been true, but gone are the days of fumbling with upside-down, back-to-front overheads – today, visual images may be more easily, dynamically, and integrally presented.
Coming Online

Our students now have unlimited access to the internet, whether at home, or at university and it has become increasingly apparent that they rely on the information they find there as a basis for their research. Certainly the internet highway has made the research-journey faster, but since there is no license required to use it, it may be necessary to give students an internet highway code to enable them to travel in safety without becoming lost or misled. Of course, it is easy to advise them to consider the source of papers or documentary material, but the informal nature of some of their preferred sources, such as “wikis”, “blogs”, and “chat-rooms,” while potentially providing useful information makes monitoring more involved.

Wikis

As a case in point, last year one of the authors taught a new third year psychology class on Vision. As part of the course requirements, students were asked to make a fifteen-minute presentation on an aspect of the visual process to be vetted by the instructor. On the whole, these presentations were successful and informative. What struck the author were the citation indices at the end of the presentation and how heavily they relied on internet information - most specifically, wikis. A wiki is defined on Wikipedia as “a type of website that allows the visitors themselves to easily add, remove, and otherwise edit and change some available content… This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative authoring…” (8)

If students are familiar with this internet tool, surely we can use it to our advantage. Instructors could access wikis pertaining to the subject that is being discussed in class and compare and contrast the information in them to information from reliable primary sources. They could setup web sites in which students could contribute to the development of wikis concerning a particular subject as they become more familiar with the topic area, as opposed to simply using a wiki as a quick reference source.
**Blogs**

Another commonly used information source is the blog. The term “blog” is short for “weblog”. “A weblog is a journal (or newsletter) that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or the Web site.” (9)

Again, knowing that this web-tool is frequently used by students to gain access to information, then using it within the classroom may allow us to reach a larger number of students. Some classes, for example, could ask the student to design their own blogs on a particular topic. Blogs could even be used as a replacement for reflective journals. In this way the instructor could use the instruments of learning and communication that the students are familiar with help them to start to think about and express themselves on a particular topic, but for formal research it can only be a jumping-off point. A colleague of ours actually spends time in class directly comparing a blog from a reputable site to a primary source from a referred journal to show the inconsistencies in the information provided. He points out that blogs are not reviewed for accuracy and often contain an author’s opinion rather than straight fact and though they maybe a good starting point when researching a topic the student should always dig deeper and always seek out primary sources. In this way he is bridging the gap between what is known and what is there to discover.

**Online Chat Groups**

Chat rooms are very familiar to the current crop of students. We recently, downloaded MSN on to our computer so we can have real-time conversations with our sixteen-year-old nephew in Ottawa. He seems to be very comfortable with this form of communication and prefers it to email. A number of instructors at our institution have already set up chat rooms for their courses, thus giving the students yet another forum in which to discuss the topics covered in class. Some of the instructors have noticed that some of the quiet and shyer people in class take full advantage of the communication medium to express themselves.
Conclusion

The idea of integrating these new media tools in the classroom will be uncomfortable for many of us because it means that we have to engage in a new style of teaching to come to grips with this new style of learning. Nevertheless, as instructors, it is our responsibility to instill an interest in our subject. The authors believe that once we instill the interest in the subject matter the student will begin to dig deeper of their own accord. In this fast-paced, media-rich world, we want our students to develop an interest which lasts longer than the thirty or sixty seconds allotted to news stories while realizing, like Adam Sandler’s character in the recent science-fiction movie, Click, that the instantaneous gratification which new technology affords is no substitute for deeper consideration.

Citations


