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Deployment of Multimodal Tools by Net Geners: The Avatars of the Multiliterate World

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Abstract

Present day realities which are becoming increasingly complex, multimodal and virtual require Net Geners to employ a combination of linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, and gestural communicative modes. The scholarly push towards research on the use of multimodality in higher learning institutions has revealed that multimodal tools set affective challenges, varying degrees of motivation and anxiety on the undergraduates. In addressing these challenges, this study investigates the deployment of multimodal tools among 50 mechanical engineering undergraduates in a technical university. The multimodal parameters that encompass this study include media (screen), mode (speech and writing) and semiotic resources (fonts). The instruments that were used for data collection in the study are survey questionnaire and focused-group interviews. Findings reveal that blogs, social networking sites, discussion boards, Google docs, Learning Management System and chat tools are the favorites among the majority of the respondents as opposed to Wikis, Podcast, and Skype. In addition, multimodal activities like creating animation, editing audio and video as well as Desktop Publishing Programs are not popular among the undergraduates. Interview results confirm that these activities are lowly utilized due to a combination of factors like the lack of facilities, time, skill and a classroom ecology that does not create a necessity for the utilization of those tools. Unquestionably, the results indicate that it is the onus of the educators to provide the Net Geners with the opportunities to utilize this new democratic learning space to its full potential. This kind of learning space indeed empowers them to be autonomous learners who play an active role in shaping their own learning rather than being passive recipients of knowledge.

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1. Introduction

The crashing pace of progress in today's technologically dominated world or the so-called cyber world together with the 'emerging global economy and pressing economic climate demands for graduates who are highly skilled' (Yusoff & Indra Devi, 2012). The graduates of the millennium are required to be well-equipped not only with basic literacy skills or print skills but also with multiple literacies which draw on a range of knowledge to make meaning of the linguistic, audio and visual representation created by new technologies (Barone & Morrow, 2003). Multiple literacies, or multiliteracies, is a term that was initially coined by The New London Group (1996) to address a need for literacy learning which is inextricably connected to technologies available at that time and to acknowledge the fact that new communication medium are reshaping the way we use language. They also advocate that learning environments need to engage students in a wide range of literacy practices that are creative, cognitively challenging and that bring together text-based and multimedia forms of meaning making.

Besides affirming that multiliteracy is linked to the concept of multimodality which refers to the combination of different semiotic modes, for example, language, image and music in a communicative artifact or event, Van Leeuwen (2005) adds that all new communication technologies are multimodal as they combine audio, print, image and interactivity, and multimodal texts incorporate textual, visual and aural elements in which meaning is usually communicated through the vehicle of computer technology. These include websites, blogs, podcasts, videos etc. In the Malaysian context, Dzulkifli (2012) asserts that multiliteracy involves the capacity to learn and to use all forms of visual and communication media and he suggests that one needs to assume multiple identities in order to cope with the waves of globalization and internationalization. In short, the graduates of today need to be multiliterate.

According to Anstey & Bull (2006), a multiliterate person is a problem solver and strategic thinker who can interpret, use and produce live and paper texts that employ linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural and spatial semiotic systems for social, cultural, political, civic and economic purposes in socially and culturally diverse contexts. Much has been said about the Net Geners of the millennium who are conceived as the avatars of today's multiliterate world. On the contrary, some scholars are against this notion. It has been highlighted that tension still exists amongst students when multiliteracies and multimodal-based teaching is integrated in classrooms (Powell, Alexander & Borton, 2013).

Thus, the focus of this study is to probe into the digital capital of the Net Geners in a technical university in Malaysia. These Net Geners comprised of fourth-year mechanical engineering undergraduates who come from urban and non-urban backgrounds with varying levels of interest and motivation in the use of multimodal tools.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to investigate the deployment of multimodal tools by final year Mechanical Engineering undergraduates taking the course, English for Professional Communication, at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia, Melaka (UTeM). The study also aims to identify the factors that affect the use of multimodal tools in the classroom.