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Closing the generation gap between youth, business school and business through Learning- by-Sharing

Combining Academic Rigor and Practical Relevance

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ABSTRACT

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The main problem addressed in this study is the gap between youth and older generations in business and business schools. By overlooking youth digital literacy it is claimed that both business schools and businesses are ill prepared for educating and training future youth. The gap between business and business schools is described based on current research (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). The gap between youth and older generations in business is described and explained through a case description (Thijssen, 2006) from business practice. The purpose of the research is to make business schools aware of the gaps between youth culture and business in terms of digital literacy, youth culture and learning styles. Recommendations are formulated (Veen, 2004) to gather knowledge about youth digital literacy and steps to close the gaps identified. The methodology of the study is a hybrid research approach between literature study and action research in the field of learning (Thijssen, 2006). Finally a new eclectic learning model Learning-by-Sharing (Thijssen, Maes & Vernooij, 2002; Maes, 2003; Huizing, Maes & Thijssen, 2007; Thijssen, Vernooij & Stein, 2007) is presented as a constructivist and collaborative learning approach between students, teachers, researchers and practitioners. The Learning-by-Sharing model can be seen as an operationalisation of new learning requirements. Thereby breaking the boundaries between generations and between business schools and business. Implications and recommendations for shaping future education and training for youth are formulated.

Key words: Academic Rigor, Practical Relevance, Digital Literacy, Youth, Generation Gap and Gap between Business and Business School, Innovation, Learning-by-Sharing

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Introduction

The main problem addressed in this study is the gap between youth and older generations in business and business schools. By overlooking youth digital literacy it is claimed that both business schools and businesses are ill prepared for educating and training future youth. The gap between business and business schools is described based on current research (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). The gap between youth and older generations in business is described and explained through a case description (Thijssen, 2006) from business practice. The purpose of the research is to make business schools aware of the gaps between youth and business in terms of digital literacy, youth culture and learning styles. Recommendations are formulated (Veen, 2004) to gather knowledge about youth digital literacy and steps to close the gaps identified. Requirements for demand driven education are explicated. The methodology of the study is a hybrid research approach between literature study and longitudinal action research in the field of learning (Thijssen, 2006). Finally a new eclectic learning model Learning-by-Sharing (Thijssen, Maes & Vernooij, 2002; Maes, 2003; Huizing, Maes & Thijssen, 2007; Thijssen, Vernooij & Stein, 2007) is presented as a constructivist and collaborative learning approach between students, teachers, researchers and practitioners. The Learning-by-Sharing model fits the new learning requirements. Thereby breaking the boundaries between generations and between business schools and business. Implications and recommendations for shaping future education and training for youth are formulated.

The main proposition in this study is that most business schools and businesses are overlooking digital literacy of youth and therefore are ill prepared for educating future youth.

In section 2 we illustrate the gap between generations in business to be able to describe the gaps between youth, business and business schools in section 3. In section 4, insight is provided in the possible directions for future actions towards closing the gaps. In section 5 Learning-by-Sharing is introduced as a promising new learning approach for business schools and in section 6 the implications for business schools are formulated as well as recommendations for applying the Learning-by-Sharing approach to prepare for and innovate future education and training.

Generation gap in business

To illustrate the generation gap in business between youth and senior management, I present the following case from international business practice. Lost Boys is an international creative company progressing business innovation through the innovative design and implementation of interactive and web based platforms and campaigns for major clients of leading companies (Milder, 2006). Their young creative staff of designers, all aged in the early 20s, follows the latest trends on the Internet such as Web 2.0, social commerce and Peer2Peer communication (Bauwens, 2006). Examples of which are Wikipedia, Second Life and Habbo Hotel and even the way Linux as open source operating software comes about. When these young designers speak with brand managers and marketing managers of client organisations (often aged between 28–35) these managers have a limited notion of what the new opportunities in interactive communication are or what the emerging on line youth culture entails. Even if the 28–35 year old

manager understand youth digital literacy, it is very difficult to convince their superiors in the age group 35 and over to allocate more resources to new media as games and Internet platforms to communicate with youth and fewer resources to traditional media as radio, television and print.

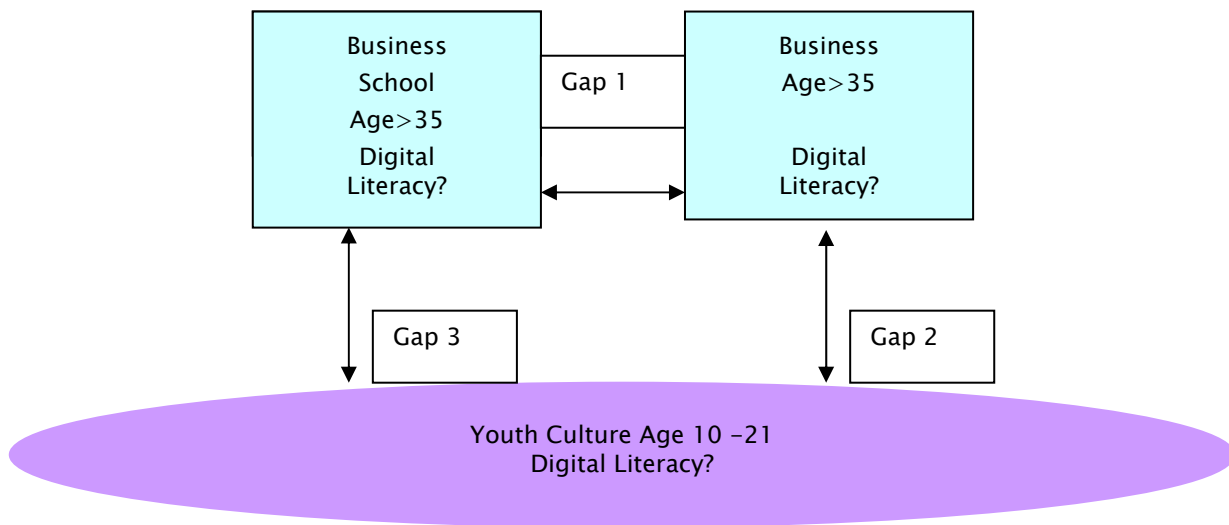
So in fact Lost Boys has to educate their clients who are only 10–15 years older and are missing most of the recent changes in social interaction and on line value creation in Cyberspace. The education at Lost Boys is aimed at closing the generation gap between youth 10–21, managers 28–35 and directors aged 35 and over. Older generations miss the new business models that make for instance Google, eBay, Amazon and YouTube so successful. These new business models are often based on social commerce where peer production for benefit, peer governance and creative commons are emerging in Web 2.0. Many managers stick to traditional media as TV and print even though less and less young people watch television or read newspapers. A lot of money is wasted without reaching the heads and hearts of youngsters (Thijssen et al, 2006). If the managers are 35 years of age and over (those that formulate the strategy and control the resources) the cultural gap between youth 10–21 and 35–55 year adults is even more significant. The question is what are we overlooking in business and in business schools, considering the above case from business?

The digital literacy GAP between youth, business and business school

In this section the issue of digital literacy is addressed and the gaps between youth, business and business schools are explained according to recent publications. Business schools more and more focus on closing the gap between theory (rigor) and practice (relevance) as pointed out by Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) and Bennis and O'Toole (2005) stressing the fact that business schools have lost their way in producing academic theories, not relevant for business practice. Business managers (mainly over 35) and educators (mainly over 35) interact and determine the competencies required for young professionals obviously based on their mental models about the world as they see it today. They collaboratively decide on the learning content for future students. This is the point! Managers and educators often miss out on knowing youth culture of future students and more in particular the way they process information, share information, build social relationships, networking skills and use innovative media to shape their lives. We know very little about their learning styles and learning skills. What do we currently know about digital literacy? According to recent research, the answer is, little to none (Veen, 2004).

The below figure 1 identifies gap 1 between business and business schools. This gap currently enjoys great attention from business schools by involving business in education more and more. Gap 2 and gap 3 up till now enjoy little attention. If businesses understand little of the digital literacy of youth that has evolved in the last ten years, how are we as educators to know about it? The input of youth themselves, formal research, a new lens and the method of Learning-by-Sharing may help to close these overlooked gaps and overcome the problems as indicated.

Figure 1: The Generation and Digital Literacy Gap



Youth and digital literacy can drive new learning

In a study conducted by Veen (2004) from the Technical University in Delft, Netherlands entitled “Learning from Youth” a number of recommendations to close the gap between youth and education are made:

- ❑ Take the social skills and learning skills of the net generation as a starting point: these competencies will need to be specified through research and design principles will have to be generated that link to the broader reform of education towards demand driven and competence development to include fresh knowledge on the net generation.
- ❑ Learn from the principles of game design in the commercial world for the design of education and create a social ecology to enhance the quality of modern education. (Like Microsoft and Harvard Business School work together, my addition)
- ❑ Reward students that are willing and able to make a contribution towards the design and improvement of education.
- ❑ Apply the knowledge and skills of students to train teachers, researchers and staff using open source tools. (And also train practitioners, my addition).
- ❑ Change requires much energy to overcome resistance. Life-long learning students are a natural target group to experiment and develop new educational programmes with. The roll out to other target groups can follow in time.
- ❑ Teachers have a crucial role and influence on future education. Redesign the teacher’s education together with youth and with business.
- ❑ Regard ICT as a motor and not just as a tool.
- ❑ Stimulate research to explore, describe and explain cultures in Cyberspace and learn from fast developments in China, South Korea and Singapore (And throughout Europe and the USA, my addition)
- ❑ Connect and engage libraries to these innovative developments.

The above list of recommendations is just one example where educators actively seek new learning models and pedagogies to make the transformation from teacher centred education to student centred education to overcome the gaps as indicated. To put the student at the centre of educational programs, we found a number of additional criteria that new learning models should adhere to (Thijssen & Vernooij, 2004) to bridge the gap between academic degrees and life-long learning. From case research at the University of Amsterdam, including the Johan Cruyff Academy, the Centre of Post Initial Education and the Network University some interesting requirements are generated for designing and developing demand driven education:

- It requires a 180° paradigm shift for educational institutions to come to the alternative approach of demand driven life-long learning.
- It requires new design competencies.
- It requires customer intimacy with learner and company.
- It requires operational excellence from personnel and systems 24 hours a day seven days a week.
- It requires access and immediate response as well as distinctive support to add value to both learner and company.
- It requires dedication to transforming oneself and the learner.
- It requires money to pay for time and facilities.
- It requires up to date ICT facilities to support communication and collaboration.
- It requires breaking through existing boundaries.
- It requires an animator and moderator to oversee the total change process.

In the following section we change our lens to put the student at the starting point of the learning process and introduce the new learning model of Learning-by-Sharing as an operationalisation of the above pedagogic requirements.

Changing our lens to Learning-by-Sharing

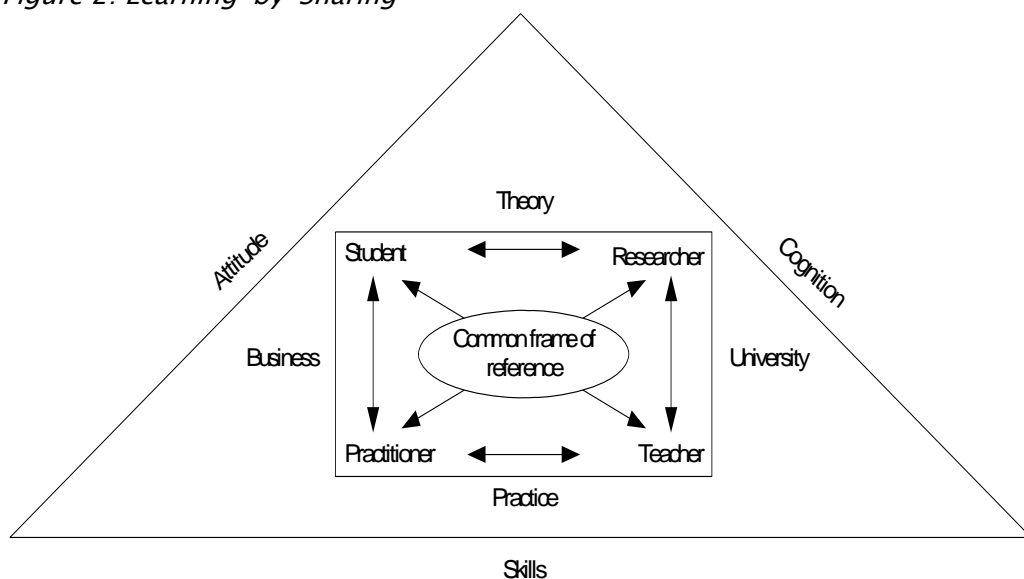
The above human (youth) centred view is shared by Boswijk et al (2005) who put the individual (in this case the student) in the centre of attention in his or her physical and virtual living spaces, taking into account the personal, social, cultural, economic and ecological contexts. Youth is willing and able to develop themselves in these contexts. Learning takes place at home, at school, at work, whilst dealing with businesses for purchasing products and services, organisations to join for sports, and culture and governments to provide support, as well as learning in public space from nature and other public resources. The home front (friends and family) play an important role in the learning process. This view requires unlearning traditional mental models of supply centred education and urges experimenting with demand centred education. In this way we may accelerate the learning of future youth.

Learning-by-Sharing (Thijssen, Maes, Vernooij, 2002; Thijssen, Vernooij, 2004; Thijssen, 2006; Huizing, Maes & Thijssen, 2007; Thijssen, Vernooij & Stein, 2007) as developed at the University of Amsterdam is a new model for collaborative learning and is proposed to solve the gaps between youth, business school and business. Here I suffice with a short description. In this model the development of theory (rigor) through experiments and investigation (formal research) is combined with the development of innovative practices (relevance) through learning in practice. Teachers, researchers, students and practitioners join forces to establish learning communities. Its main improvements on existing learning models are the systematic introduction of the external

world into the learning process and the reciprocal nature of the interactions involved. All learn from the shared learning experience. Students are not passive receivers of knowledge but instead, active knowledge producers bringing their digital skills and creativity to the team.

In practice the Learning-by-Sharing model overcomes much of the problems as identified and fits the requirements as listed in section 4. It allows for building a common purpose, a common language, a dialogue, innovating and learning. It builds communities of practice and through the involvement of researchers and teachers it offers opportunities to reflect on current direction and practices. This view on combining products and processes of thought is supported by Mahoney and Sanchez (2004). In this sharing process students are actively engaged as knowledge producers and share their talents in the form of digital and creative skills, to generate mutual value and close the gap between generations.

Figure 2: Learning-by-Sharing



Learning-by-Sharing is developed over the past 20 years at the University of Amsterdam at the department of information management, in consultancy practices and in a social complex situation of combating poverty and social exclusion in the Netherlands (Thijssen, 2006). The longitudinal study shows that if students, teachers, researchers and practitioners engage in a process of collaborative and constructive learning, gaps between generations and gaps between business and business school can be overcome through dialogue, developing common understanding, a common language and innovation through shared learning.

Designing and Implementing Learning-by-Sharing

Guiding principles for the design and implementation of Learning-by-Sharing can be described as follows:

TABLE 1: LEARNING-BY-SHARING DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Design Category	Design Principles
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shape learning as a social process to explore and exploit the potential value of diversity• Transformation from an 'undesired state' to a 'desired' state• To study real-world fundamental issues• ROLE OF INITIATOR
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include students, teachers, researchers, and practitioners in every educational setting and promote role-switching• Bridge the generation GAP to promote digital literacy• Connecting all units of observation: individual, team, organisation, network, society• ROLE OF MODERATOR
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use a common theoretical frame of reference• Combine business and university in action learning programs to study real-world fundamental issues• Apply fundamental theories to diverse and complex practices• Pattern of human action of building trust, enabling and enacting• ICT as motor for future learning and value creation• Through social entrepreneurship defined as: engaging, Learning-by-Sharing, innovating and accounting for aimed at social value creation• ROLE OF MODERATOR
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on cognition, skills, and attitudes to stimulate generative learning and learning-to-learn capabilities• Individuals connect and use 'means' to an 'end'• And accounting for aimed at social value creation• ROLE OF INITIATOR

The above design principles derived from longitudinal research (Thijssen, 2006) indicate that with a (1) common purpose between (2) people as students, teachers, researchers and practitioners and (3) processes of innovating, learning and mutual value creation, can (4) generate and account for improved performance, thereby closing the gaps between generations and gaps between business and business schools.

From the longitudinal study on Learning-by-Sharing at the University of Amsterdam and in social complex situations outside the University we have learned that in each specific context the roles of initiator and moderator in Learning-by-Sharing projects are vital to assist in embarking on Learning-by-Sharing processes. Formulating the common purpose, engaging people as students, teachers, researchers and teachers in the learning process, understanding the complexity of the problem at hand and taking into account the timing and the sense of urgency in solving the problem. Learning-by-Sharing generates value when academics propose and develop

theory and methodology (rigor) and students and practitioners guard the practice development (relevance), when advancing a common goal.

Implications for business schools

The gaps as presented in this study between generations and between business schools and business indeed make business and business schools ill prepared for educating and training future youth. The implications for business schools are that apart from closing the gap between business and business schools, the gap between youth, business school and business must also be seriously considered in order to be prepared to educate and train future youth well. The following recommendations in combining academic rigor and practical relevance through Learning-by-Sharing can be seen as a roadmap for business schools for the future:

- ❑ As most business schools have partners in business, identify those partners that agree on the gap with youth and digital literacy and also see it as a serious problem for future success.
- ❑ Follow the Learning-by-Sharing process and define a common purpose to close the gap with youth.
- ❑ Engage students, teachers, researchers and practitioners in learning through practice, learning through experimenting and learning through investigating, studying real-life fundamental issues to generate new insights, formulate an overview of the problem and develop foresight for future direction.
- ❑ Describe and explain the gap between youth in terms of culture, digital literacy, learning styles and formulate alternative actions to close the gap.
- ❑ Test these alternative actions on a small scale, supported and analyzed with formal research.
- ❑ Reward students in making a contribution towards closing the gap and explicate lessons learned to share with business and other business schools and implement the best practices on a larger scale.

It is anticipated that business schools, following the above recommendations to combine academic rigor and practical relevance, will benefit from digital literacy from youth. Following the roadmap allows for preparing students better for their future career and may at the same time boost the value creation processes in business as well, through a better understanding of how youth learn, live, work and generate value.

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