

Session 2

LOST IN THE NOISE: THE RISING TIDE OF DIGITAL INFORMATION AND HOW TO MANAGE IT

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Information is the new fabric of the universe. It surrounds us and is available anywhere and everywhere. The complete knowledge of humanity is only as far away as the smart-phone in our pockets. The higher education universe is no different to any other environment; academics, executives, professional staff and students alike are being swamped with an increasing tide of information. Important messages are being lost in the noise, deleted from inboxes or glossed over in a *Facebook* news feed. Communicating with each other is becoming increasingly difficult for all of us and, as mobile devices and e-learning proliferate, this situation is only likely to become more complicated.

Elegant solutions for dealing with the increasing volume of information are not easy to come by. Universities are spending millions of dollars on new student information systems, learning management systems, web designers and integrated email systems. Despite this, the surging tide continues to rise. Ways of dealing with this problem are not to be found in a single piece of software but through a synthesis of aesthetics, marketing, cognitive psychology and efficiencies in digital interaction and user interface design. For example, previous research has found that first year students have strong tendencies toward various communication channels and will generally ignore messages from the university in social media, particularly if they are longer than around 80 characters (Lodge, 2010). This research suggests that the message and the medium need to be carefully considered in terms of the psychological processes we employ online and when reading from a screen.

Successful advertising on the Internet has been carefully designed to cater to this processing but also to elicit an emotional response. The information is clean, uncluttered and text is used sparingly (see also Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004). When it is used, it is in a very easy to read, fluent font. Research consistently shows that rather than a left-to-right, top-to-bottom linear process, we approach websites like a search task (Rowlands et al., 2008). Our eyes scan the scene for the information we need, ignoring anything that does not immediately attract our attention or feel good to interact with. Carr (2010) calls this new way of processing “the shallows” and suggests that our brains are being fundamentally rewired because we do not tend to read as we would a passage of text on a page.

This paper will discuss the ways in which web aesthetics and the lessons from cognitive processing of information can be harnessed by universities to clean up the communication channels between all the stakeholders. Web designs and resources that cater to searching rather than reading, providing better user interfaces and screen space for staff, looking at alternative channels like rapid simple syndication and sending clean and simple emails all help to cut down the noise. The knowledge and power of web aesthetics is at our disposal, what is needed is a vision and a commitment to work together to manage information so that messages stop being lost in the noise.

Presenters Biography:

Jason Lodge is a lecturer in higher education at the Griffith Institute for Higher Education and the Student Experience Coordinator at Griffith University. Jason works to refine and improve the whole of institution student experience strategy at Griffith. He is responsible for working with academic staff overseeing the student experience in all four of Griffith’s academic groups and provides strategic and practical support to academic leaders from Deans Learning and Teaching through to

First Year Advisors and Course Coordinators. Jason has just submitted a PhD in psychology and has been researching learning and teaching for the past five years. Jason has worked in professional and academic roles in various institutions and has a holistic understanding of all facets of higher education in Australia.