Leveraging Social Media to Facilitate Intergenerational Learning: Bridging Digital Immigrants with Digital Natives

Yuxiang (Chris) Zhao¹, Yutian Shi², Qinghua Zhu²
¹ School of Economics and Management, Nanjing University of Science & Technology, China
² School of Information Management, Nanjing University, China

Abstract
Intergeneration learning (IGL), which is viewed as one form of lifelong learning involving the transfer of knowledge and skills across generations, can be conducive for us to deal with ageing population. Our objective is to examine how social media can promote IGL process, reinforcing the relationship bonds and cooperation between digital immigrants and digital natives, and to enhance the digital skills and media literacy of older generation. Compared with the traditional IGL concepts, we argue that the new paradigm of IGL should focus on ICT-enabled communication and collaboration. According to the characteristics of IGL and our objectives, we plan to employ the action research to find out what kind of knowledge and skills will be exchanged, and what dynamics will have effects on the participation, communication, and collaboration between generations. The workshops, online platforms and immersive situational learning are the three practical activities in our further research design.

Keywords: Social Media; Intergenerational Learning (IGL); Digital Immigrants Digital Natives; Action Research


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Contact: njusyt@iql.com

1 Introduction
Because of the ageing population phenomenon in China and in many other countries of the world, significant transformations and challenges have been witnessed in all aspects of our lives. Education plays a pivotal role in dealing with the transformations and challenges brought by the sweeping progress of the society. Recognizing the need to call great attention to the lifelong learning, many countries start to promote the initiatives and campaigns to face these contemporary social issues. Intergeneration learning (IGL) can be viewed as one form of lifelong learning involving the transfer of tacit knowledge, skills, values and norms across generations, and can help build our intellectual as well as our cultural capital preparing us to face changes in the future (Ho, 2010; Hoff, 2007). Prior study has indicated that acting together is the basis for all learning (Rogoff, 2003), and IGL can provide the opportunity for the young generation (digital natives) and their elder predecessors (digital immigrants) to be together, and to learn from each other in the contexts of both formal and informal education (Cortellesi & Kernan, 2016).

Recent years have seen the development of new concepts and practices of IGL in various contexts (Ropes, 2013). IGL projects constitute social vehicles that help digital immigrants and digital natives interact, support, and provide care for one another (Kaplan, 2002), which may further facilitate intergenerational engagement (Wall et al., 2015), foster reciprocal cohesion (Osoian, 2014), enhance the digital inclusion (Guzzo et al., 2014), and promote the intergenerational solidarity (Patrício & Osório, 2012). Although IGL is a promising and growing field of practice across the western countries, especially in Europe (European Union, 2012), we have to admit that in China, both IGL products and IGL programs are still in its infancy. From the macroscopic view, government and policymakers should raise awareness of those
challenges brought by the ageing society and take action with the aim of creating better opportunities for active ageing and strengthening solidarity between generations (Patrício & Osório, 2012). From the micro-level perspective, more IGL products should be designed to facilitate the functional affordances and socializing affordances of lifelong learning. This decade, with the advent and growing popularity of social media, a series of changes have been emerged in education and learning domain. On the one hand, social media has penetrated into the lives of digital natives. On the other hand, more and more digital immigrants are beginning to adopt the social media and gradually adapting to the Internet environment because the influence of younger. Thus, social media may open new possibilities of bridging generational gaps and allowing reconnect with others. We believe that the adoption and enhanced use of social media will help improve the effectiveness and efficiency of IGL. This study aims to conduct and present an action research involving different generations in activities facilitated by social media. We will recruit older people and volunteer college students as our participants. The objective of this study is to examine how social media can promote IGL process, reinforcing the relationship bonds and cooperation between digital immigrants and digital natives, and to enhance the digital skills and media literacy of older generation.

2 Related Work

Although some researchers have indicated that the term intergenerational is loosely defined and there is lack of precise conceptualization on the meanings, methods, and goals of intergenerationality (Granville, 2002; Hollingshead, 2014), there are still some overlapping concerns when we take a closer look at those definitions. For example, Cherri (2010) defines IGL as “one form of lifelong learning involving the transfer of tacit knowledge across generations”. Tempest (2003) indicates IGL as “a reciprocal learning process based on diverse knowledge”. The innovation of IGL comes from novel ideas and the depth of memory. Osoian (2014, p.500) defines IGL as “a mode that people of all ages can learn together and from each other.” Klamma et al. (2005) emulate that IGL is based on processing experiences from one generation to another. The European Network for Intergenerational Learning (ENIL) suggests that intergenerational practice should cover three important issues: 1) involving more than one generation; 2) activity planned prior to its implementation in a progressive nature; and 3) mutually beneficial learning for the different generations (Report on Intergenerational Learning and Volunteering, 2013, p. 4) (Botteri, 2016). In this respect, ENIL suggests that IGL is “learning partnership based on reciprocity involving people of different ages where the generations work together to gain skills, values, and knowledge.” Botteri (2016) highlights the overarching aspects of IGL, namely who would take part and what the foci of such activity might be. We consent that when developing the IGL product or planning the IGL program, it is of great importance to understand your participants and design the appropriate and attractive tasks.

Research concerning IGL has been conducted in various contexts. Some studies have set up a focus on knowledge transmission and interpersonal interaction within families (Gadsden & Hall, 1996). Some researchers argue that IGL as an-encompassing concept may be defined more broadly beyond family relationships (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008), and thus extend to some other contexts such as school classrooms (Ayers & Narduzzi, 2009; Loewen, 1995), workplaces (Novackova, 2016; Ropes, 2013), and communities or societies (Neikrug, 2004). Some scholars propose a typology of conceptual approaches to describe the IGL process between different generations, namely learning from each other, learning with each other, and learning about each other (Franz & Scheumpflug, 2016). In this regard, different generations may attain their skills and values, facilitate their engagement, enhance their mutual understanding, and thus reinforce the intergenerational solidarity with the evolving roadmap. From the practical perspective, there are two primary ways to carry out the IGL. The first is to create some learning communities to bring together people with different generations who work together on some specific tasks or jobs (Marshall, 1997). The second is to develop some educational programs or courses that involving different generations together to create a richer learning experience (Ayers & Narduzzi, 2009; Hatton-Yeo, 2006). The former
approach places great emphasis on policy-making and the latter attaches importance to the mechanism design.

Regarding the limitations of existing IGL, some researchers indicate that traditional IGL heavily relied on face to face communication neglecting the capabilities of computer supported learning communities (Klammer et al., 2005). We agree with this point that with the progress of ubiquitous learning, IGL should not be limited to time and space. Compared with the traditional IGL concepts, we argue that the new paradigm of IGL should focus on ICT-enabled communication and collaboration. Some researchers also propose that intergenerational play can create a context for social interaction and learning for different generations, and playing game together provides an effective way to link the digital immigrants with digital natives (Davis et al., 2002). Thygesen et al. (2014) attempt to address how elderly people can be instructed in the use of ICT to be digital inclusion, and further explore how ICT training can be used as IGL experience. The findings highlighted the fundamental role of those digital natives as experienced ICT users and teachers but also as a decisive factor for course participation for many digital immigrants. However, so far, few studies have endeavored to examine the mediating or moderating role of social media in facilitating the IGL process, especially for the lifelong learning cases in China.

3 Research Design

3.1 Research Method

Since the objective of our study is to leverage social media as tools or channels to facilitate the IGL process, and thus improve the performance and efficiency of IGL outcomes, we need to conduct a series of participatory studies that can involve the different generations to the most extent. We are intended to find out what kind of knowledge and skills will be exchanged, and what dynamics will have effects on the participation, communication, and collaboration between them. Action research gains our attention due to our needs of understanding generations’ diverse motivations, attitudes, and behaviors. Reason et al. (2001) define action research as a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. Avison et al. (1999) defines action research as a particular qualitative research that associates research and practice synergistically. Lingard et al. (2008) regard action research as an iterative process in which researchers and practitioners act together and the collaboration is the key feature of it. Kolb (2014) elucidates that the action research can also be regarded as a learning cycle which has the potential to get more information than practitioners learn consciously from their own experience. Engagement is also a crucial factor for IGL and action research is usually participative for people (Baum et al., 2006). Therefore, we plan to use the approach of action research to collect data from the various learning contexts (both informal and formal) between the young and the old. Some specific research methods, such as in-depth face to face interview, focus group, survey, and field experiment will be combined to investigate our topics.

3.2 Research Plan

Improving digital skill and media literacy of the older generation (digital immigrants) is surely one of our primary objectives. Meanwhile, the young generation (digital natives) may also get some valuable tacit knowledge and life experience from their elders during the IGL process, and further cultivate positive values and sense of commitment and responsibility. Thus, consolidating the connections between them should also be highly valued. Generational inherent differences are identified as being potential barriers between people (Baily, 2009). Consequently, IGL is not only for transferring knowledge, but also reinforcing harmonious relationship and alleviating the intergenerational conflicts. In this regard, we will lay more emphasis on the ensemble view that designing a portfolio plan to implement the IGL process, including both off-line and online activities.
First, workshops that related to the ICT and social media are considered to be a suitable vehicle to convene the digital immigrants and digital natives. The workshop can be carried out in experiencing store and service-oriented learning center, such as Shanghai Library “Innovation Space” and Apple experience stores. During the learning process, they are divided into groups to discuss the pre-set topics, exchanging knowledge and sharing experience. The old will get handbooks for using digital products and the young will be trained as intergenerational coaches and mentors. Each group consists of leaders who control the learning process and learners who want to get in touch with the new digital devices and products. Workshops run regularly in order to guarantee the ability people achieved. Observation and in-depth interview will be conducted to get some feedbacks.

Second, we will set up several online platforms that allow interaction between the digital immigrants and digital natives. The old can freely choose different courses, books and even games from a catalogue, and then invite the young to participate in the activity. Besides, the platform should make a balance between the online interactions and offline communications (Fuchsberger et al., 2012). Various types of social media will be incorporated into the platforms, such as instant messaging, SNS, gamified applications, and MOOCs, to facilitate the functional and socializing affordances of online platforms. Behavioral data will be recorded and some small group surveys will be launched after their participation.

Third, immersive situational learning can be viewed as an effective and attractive way to implement IGL. We plan to design some field experiment to maximize the interaction between generations. After exploring the common interests of different generations, some appealing tasks will be set up in advance. Playing game is an excellent way for users to get in touch with the new technology closely. Hence, we intend to design the game elements into the IGL process, such as points, leaderboards, badges, storytelling, appropriate challenges, timely feedbacks, and etc. We will also conduct serious games and somatic games to get our participants involved in the pre-set activities, thus help them to learn to use social media, learn by social media, and co-create or collaborate via social media among different generations. Observations will be made through the whole IGL process, and multi-stage surveys will be employed to examine the cognitive absorption, self-efficacy, and flow state of participants before and after the immersive situational learning, which will to some extent, evaluate the performance and satisfaction of IGL.

It is important to note that, each learning activity will be video-recorded or tape-recorded with the explicit consent of the participants (Kenner et al., 2007). After getting audio and video data, we can observe and analyze both generations’ words, attitudes, face expressions and motions to discover what elements will stimulate them and attract their attention. Interviews with participants before and after the activity will be used to explore their changing attitudes towards IGL and the exchange of knowledge. Surveys can be conducted to find out the achievement of those participates. We can design questionnaires to get their satisfaction of the learning process and modify the projects by the results in an iterative way.

4 References


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