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**Managing Editor**  
Dr. Russell Crawford

**Administrator**  
Samantha Mottram

**Telephone**  
+44 (0)1782 733007

**Email**  
jade@keele.ac.uk

**Web**  
<http://jadekeele.wordpress.com/>

**Address**  
59-60 The Covert, Keele University, Keele,  
ST5 5BG

**Article:**  
**Digital Native First Year Law Students and their  
Reading Skills in a Post Reading World**

Fabienne Emmerich\* and Ash Murphy

\*Corresponding author: Fabienne Emmerich, PhD, Lecturer in Law, Keele University  
01782 733139, [f.emmerich@keele.ac.uk](mailto:f.emmerich@keele.ac.uk) (co-author).

Ash Murphy LLM (Distinction) in International Law (University of Leicester), Graduate Teaching  
Assistant, Keele University, 01782 733514, [a.murphy@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.murphy@keele.ac.uk)

# Digital Native First Year Law Students and their Reading Skills in a Post Reading World

Fabienne Emmerich\* and Ash Murphy

\*Corresponding author: Fabienne Emmerich, PhD, Lecturer in Law, Keele University  
01782 733139, [f.emmerich@keele.ac.uk](mailto:f.emmerich@keele.ac.uk) (co-author).

Ash Murphy LLM (Distinction) in International Law (University of Leicester), Graduate Teaching Assistant, Keele University, 01782 733514, [a.murphy@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.murphy@keele.ac.uk)

## **Abstract:**

In this paper we draw on our reflective experiences of introducing and facilitating reading development exercises in a first year Administrative Law module. We argue that students of 2018 can be understood as digital natives who display an almost exclusive preference for digital reading. We build on the emerging literature that challenges the assumption that (law) students do not need support with their reading skills. Our main conclusion is that we should support our students' development of their reading skills as a craft that necessitates different tools for different spaces: screen or typographical (paper). We propose that this entails a three stage approach: first, to have conversations with students about reading in different spaces, the particular nature of screen space versus typographical space and the type of texts that lend themselves to the digital or the physical environment. Second, to help students develop their skills in working with and take ownership of academic texts in paper form. To achieve this we will further develop collective effort reading sessions combined with a paper reading pack of the key readings that each student will own. And finally, we aim to continue to engage students on their platform in digital social technology.

**Keywords:** digital natives, reading, collaborative learning.

Can be added as a bubble:

*Twitter is a great example of a modern technology platform readily accessible from any smart phone, which provides its users with text-based information in no more detail than 140 or 280 characters. Instagram similarly focuses on few words, placing pictographic information at the forefront of the apparatus. These two prominent technologies are just the tip of the digital iceberg and many more*

*exist to influence the way people in their everyday lives engage in reading. Where students are concerned this appears to affect their ability to deep read.*

## Introduction

We draw on our reflective experiences of introducing and facilitating reading development exercises in a first year administrative law module. A reading orientated module, we have begun to reflect on our experiences in the classroom with a focus on students' reading skills and their attitudes towards reading academic texts. Our initial reflection is that over the past three academic years many of our students have begun to retreat from reading. This is of course a terrifying given the nature of higher education, and particularly law, as reading centric.

In this paper we build and expand on research that challenges the assumption that (law) students do not need support with their reading skills (Taylor et al. 2001). The argument is twofold: first, the students of 2018 should be understood as digital natives who display an almost exclusive preference for digital reading (Prensky, 2001). Second, we must adapt and alter our teaching techniques in order to meet the digital native on ground that they feel comfortable as well as expose them to reading on paper. Our main conclusion is that we need to focus on our students' development of their reading skills as a craft that necessitates different tools for different spaces: screen or typographical (paper).

## The Problem

As lecturers we unwittingly adopt an assumption that everyone coming to study is in possession of a comprehensive set of reading skills (Hermida 2009). This assumption is rooted in two factors. First our own experience of reading shapes the way we expect others to read. As academics reading is staple. We spend hours at a time examining books and articles. Consequently we assume that anyone entering our world should have an equal propensity for reading. Second our assumption is based

on othering the students, “us and them”. “Us” being the generation that on the whole began their education reading and writing; “them” being the generation that began their education swiping and typing. An exponential acceleration of technology in the past decade has seen the smart phone become the primary source of ICT (Ofcom 2015). With 90% of sixteen to twenty-four year olds owning one, it has become unrealistic, and regrettably short sighted, to believe that those born into this digital world have not experienced alterations to the way they read (Ofcom 2015).

### *The Texts*

It is unfair to suggest a reading deficit among current students (Colgan et al 2017). They do continue to read. But the manner in which they read is no longer the same as past generations. A book, once the primary platform, is now taking a back seat to the different ways people, and particularly current students, read in their everyday lives (Jewitt 2005). While reading still takes place it is often a form of hyper or express reading. The volume of research on reading practices focuses on web-based texts or hypertexts rather than academic texts (Rose, 2011). Hypertexts are ubiquitous in our daily lives from web content to app content from mundane tasks to entertainment. Carusi explains 'that the reading practices of hypertext readers become increasingly fragmentary, that they are easily distracted by surface features: their response to the text is more general, less specific and emotionally engaged than that of linear readers' (2006 cit in Rose, 2011: 516).

The particular format or presentation of text seems to encourage an adapted form of processing information with a focus on immediacy and speed of information retrieval. The text is in flux, multi-layered and connected. Through its interactive nature readers make decisions on the depth and/or direction they take their reading. When revisiting a site it will invariably have changed, as sites are continuously updated. Rose (2011) mentions that the word reading may not properly capture this type of information processing. Rather they are swiping, scanning, and filtering; it involves split second decision-making and pathway selection.

But these reading skills designed for hypertexts are ineffective in the academic context where deep reading is crucial. To students deep reading may appear intimidating. A 1000 page textbook is surely a daunting prospect when one is used to thumbing through short, rapid information dispensing tweets. And if Roskos and Neuman (2014) are correct in their assertion that word knowledge is linked to reading ability then it stands to reason that hyper reading, designed to be accessible, is beginning to inhibit our students ability to read a slow burn text or article.

### *The Students*

Prensky (2001) devised the term 'digital native', based on the finding that by the time students graduate university they will have spent 20,000 hours watching television, 10,000 hours playing video games, and less than 5,000 hours reading (Prensky 2001). Importantly Prensky does not specify how much less than 5,000 hours reading takes place; it could be very much less. It is also important that Prensky's initial study predated the advent of the smart phone.<sup>1</sup> Assuming Prensky is correct and the situation has only proliferated with the rise of technology, then we are predominantly dealing with students that while not averse to reading are certainly less practiced in the habit of deep reading. Speed and interactivity are crucial factors in how digital natives like to receive information, anything too slow is laborious, and anything too static is uninteresting. Their ability to deep read is therefore a key skill that should be supported as part of studying for a (law) degree.

Deep reading requires an ability that is not a matter of disposition but of practice (Hermida 2009). Gregor et al. (2008) make the point that not all digital natives have the same skill sets and as such it is incorrect to assume a uniform level of digital engagement; this means a focus should remain on traditional learning techniques akin to the digital immigrant.<sup>2</sup> However if we as digital immigrants remain steadfastly arrogant in the virtues of how we did things, then it is very likely we will

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<sup>1</sup> Had this been included the results may have been even more one-sided.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that if you are born before 1980 the International Education Advisory Board suggests that you are a digital immigrant.

alienate the digital native and encourage a divisive culture. Any successful learning method will be built around the expectation of both those teaching and those learning (Spencer and Seymour 2013). It therefore appears clear that when we sit down to design our modules we must take into consideration the manner and form of reading that digital natives typically engage.

### Thinking about the Way Forward: Structured Reading in Administrative Law

Together with Angela Rhead, a learning developer at Keele University who specialises in supporting and structuring students' reading practices, we created three hours of dedicated structured reading as part of the 2017/18 administrative law module.<sup>3</sup> In week 4 we converted a double lecture slot into a structured reading workshop led by Angela Rhead. This was coupled with a structured reading tutorial in week 5. Both sessions were designed to encourage students to reflect on their reading practices, to think about possible barriers to reading and most importantly to read in a group.<sup>4</sup> The piece of reading we chose was a short public law judgment. We asked students to bring to the reading workshop a single-sided print out of the judgment prepared as a scroll. We brought along copies of a worksheet prepared by Angela Rhead that encouraged students to analyse the overall document structure of the judgment (date, type of court, name of the judge, area of public law, summary of facts and key rulings), the context in which it was written, and the structure, internal coherence and persuasiveness of the material judgment.

We applied a reflective teaching methodology to explore our collaborative experiences with our students during these 3 hours of dedicated structured reading (Rogers, 2001). We took an inductive approach in order to learn more about our students' reading practices. We noted down our general reflections after the sessions.<sup>5</sup> We then discussed our reflections and started to explore questions about the reading practices of digital natives within the wider context of the shift towards

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on Angela Rhead, [see https://www.keele.ac.uk/studentlearning/aboutus/angelarhead/](https://www.keele.ac.uk/studentlearning/aboutus/angelarhead/).

<sup>4</sup> This was part of a wider effort to focus on academic and legal skills development. The reading bloc was followed by a lecture/ tutorial combination on writing.

<sup>5</sup> No reference to individual students was made.

onscreen reading, the particular nature of screen space and the differential reading practices that it produces.

From our reflections we noticed two main puzzles: first, the majority of students did not bring along to the reading workshop or the tutorial a print out of the judgment. There had been specific instructions to do so. And second, after we gave them a paper copy of the case headnote (a one page summary of the key facts and rulings) the majority of students were reluctant to work with the paper copy.

First puzzle: in our teaching we noticed that an increasing number of students clearly demonstrate a preference for digital or screen reading. This may be for various reasons: from ease of access to digital texts through electronic reading lists to the cost of printing for students as well as for the environment. We have also observed a significant move from students reading on laptops to exclusively using smartphones as a one-stop shop device for researching, reading and note taking.

Long academic texts, judgments, articles or books are designed with paper in mind. Rose (2011) focuses on the experiences of screen reading texts designed for paper. E-books and .pdf documents' page structures are experienced as inhibitive and irritating. The page that is so functional and integral to the experience of typographical space, on screen breaks up the text and disrupts the flow.

Rose (2011) also finds that focus or getting in focus is straightforward when reading paper texts. But when reading digitally focus is a continual effort. There are a number of things that divert our attention. For instance digital reading requires us to swipe or scroll, so part of our brain function is diverted to co-ordination. Moreover the reader has to locate the change of the line after the scrolling of the page (Rose, 2011).<sup>6</sup> Other research has suggested that students tire more easily when reading on screen and complain of eye fatigue which may lead to gaps in comprehension (Jeong, 2010).

This waterfall effect of digital space works well for apps, but it makes it difficult for readers to produce "effective cognitive maps" of texts, particularly long academic texts (Li et al., 2012). Readers experience an increased sense of

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover the functionality of the screen presents a variety of distractions that need to be consciously ignored or disabled (for instance notifications).

dislocation, problems with identifying sequence in narratives and remembering details (Mangen and Kuiken, 2014). Students' focus on the screen first as a multiple platform and second for reading long academic texts, we argue, may be creating barriers to reading. To address this we need to encourage students to engage with paper and to support students to develop reading skills for typographical space. For typographic space is structured and framed by the static page (Rose, 2011). This creates the physicality of the text rich in contextual information, a physicality that stimulates the senses (feel of the paper, the smell of old books) and reinforces a connectedness to a scholarly community through the traces of other readers in the text (e.g. annotations in library books).

This connects to our second puzzle: the students' reluctance to take ownership of the paper text. During the reading workshop students had two separate pieces of paper, the case headnote and their worksheet. We found students would read the headnote and then write on the worksheet. We also noticed that many students had difficulty in understanding the facts of the case summarised in the headnote. Many of them did not annotate or mark the paper text of the headnote in any way to assist or enable their comprehension. They kept the two documents separate. Yet, taking ownership of the text is a key experience of reading on paper (Rose, 2011). We then used this insight to guide our approach during the subsequent tutorial to demonstrate the ways in which students could annotate and take ownership of the text. Angela Rhead had prepared annotated scrolls of the entire judgment that we brought along to the tutorial. We also sat with students in small groups to demonstrate how to map texts.

The reading exercises were also an attempt to introduce students to collective effort reading. The purpose of collective effort reading is to create an environment of collective support where all those participating do not feel isolated to the task (Murray, 2015). Each student is encouraged and motivated to read, because the burden appears to be shared. An added benefit is that students can also discuss the reading and work through difficult concepts as a group. On reflection collective effort reading was not as easy to sell to the students as we thought. Encouraging proactive attitudes within the student groups was challenging because the benefit of collective effort reading was not immediately obvious to students. Yet,



when groups did manage to participate in the exercise the feedback was generally one of surprised positivity. Reflecting on this it appears vital to further develop and integrate more collective effort reading into the module and to encourage students to meet outside of the classroom.

### *Conclusion: Finding a Common Ground*

We find that by maintaining the traditional model of teaching law we are asking students to betray the world they were born into. It seems that for many students the gap between the experiences of hypertext reading to academic reading on screen or on paper is too big to cross unsupported. Our reflections of our own reading practices have shown that we adapt to particular reading environments: we are fragmentary, easily distracted and superficial readers when swiping, scanning and filtering web-based texts; yet, we work with, annotate, mark, place spatial memory markers on paper texts. We take ownership of the paper copy.

Our main conclusion is that we should focus on our students' development of their reading skills as a craft that necessitates different tools for different spaces: screen or typographical. We propose that this entails a three stage approach: first, to have conversations with students about reading in different spaces, the particular nature of screen space versus typographical space and the type of texts that lend themselves to the digital or the physical environment. Second, to help students develop their skills in working with and take ownership of academic texts in paper form. To achieve this we will further develop collective effort reading sessions combined with a paper reading pack of the key readings that each student will own.<sup>7</sup> And finally, we aim to continue to engage students on their platform, the digital social technology platform. Experimenting with Twitterfall and discussing ways to introduce Instagram we are meeting the students half way. It is our hope that in collaboration we can support students to develop their reading skills and they can support us to develop our teaching techniques.

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<sup>7</sup> This may seem like going back in time. Based on our experience it is crucial to give students physical copies, because many are reluctant to print out the reading.

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