

# Britain needs a more proactive academic culture in which we reach out to the next generation of scholars.

by Blog Admin

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*In the run-up to the 2012 London Olympics, it seems timely to consider the ways in which we can also exercise the minds of our young people by passing on the academic baton of knowledge. [Anthony Ridge-Newman](#) discusses how creativity and collaboration make for fulfilling efforts in engaging the next generation of scholars.*



In a time when human systems seem saturated with information, and new modes of communication increase the already fragmented channels through which such information is disseminated, it is important for thinkers to innovate in order to reach new audiences and inspire the minds of the next generation.

In my [last post for this blog](#), I proselytised that the internet is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. While social media and blogs are useful applications to build an audience and network, they require a degree of active engagement on both sides. The academic who uses *only* the internet for public engagement should not assume that those with a potential interest in their work will actively seek them out.

## Reaching out to the 'mobile internet generation'

Culturally, access to knowledge is becoming increasingly limited, even though it is often merely a click away. It is especially the case for today's young people, who could be characterised as being the 'mobile internet generation'. In this postmodern society, some forms of internet media, like those stemming from popular culture, may have greater online magnetism than others. Young people in general are naturally attracted to entertainment and keeping-up with internet based trends. However, that does not mean they would not be interested in topics which are academic in nature.

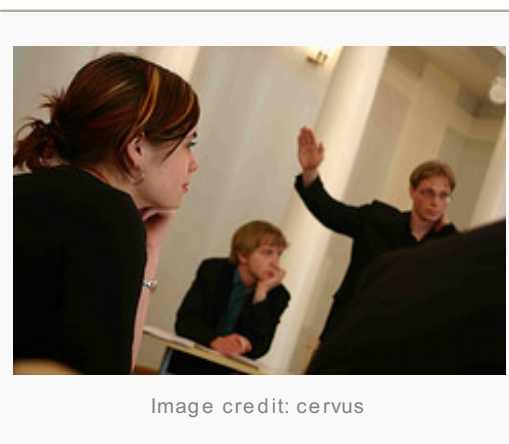


Image credit: cervus

It is a case of reaching out and not expecting them, necessarily, to find their own way to academic information online, which is likely to be hidden amid a vast cyber jungle. In a world of information and entertainment overload, those who believe in the development of knowledge need to be actively competing for their place in the minds of the next generation. It is therefore incumbent on this generation of academics to seek out and inspire the next.

## Collaborative projects can inspire and engage

The idea of a more proactive academic culture in Britain might be an unattractive prospect for some. But I can testify firsthand how fulfilling using creative methods of dissemination can be, especially when engaging with a younger audience.

Elements of my research are influenced by the field of internet democracy. In the run-up to the 2010 General Election, as a historian and ethnographer, I became interested in observing the manner in which, especially young, people were beginning to use social media as a tool for political engagement. Subsequently, I felt the call to actively share my work with the next generation of potential academics, journalists and politicians.

In autumn 2009, I devised and led a collaborative project, which took the form of a school tour, suitable for audiences of up to 250 pupils. The hour long session consisted of a 20 minute presentation called 'Young People, Democracy and the Internet', during which I talked about my research and how the audience could practically engage in internet democracy – even though most of them were too young to vote.

The second section featured the testimony of representatives from Conservative Future and Young Labour, who gave a short introduction to their own experiences as politically active young people. The session was concluded with an interactive *BBC Question Time* style debate, for which I gave my best impersonation of David Dimbleby. I chaired a panel of six speakers which consisted of politicians, journalists and university students.

The format was designed to be unceremonious and to encourage audience interaction. The young people set the agenda through putting questions to the panel on topics of their choosing. These included issues like, the European Parliament, the drinking age, employment for young people, the cost of the 2012 Olympics and the legalisation of cannabis. It made for an interesting and enlightening debate on all sides.

### **Passing the baton can be done well in all fields**

Each academic field has its own unique features, therefore every opportunity for inter-generational face-to-face engagement will require some thought and creativity to maximise interaction and learning.

Every scholar holds intellectual capital which can be invested in the minds of tomorrow. Taking active steps to pass on the baton is of collective benefit as it will only improve Britain's stride in the now globalised and competitive academic arena.

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