

Digital Nomadism and Nomadic Students: Insights from Theories of Learning

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Digital nomadism has become a global cultural trend transcending typical workers who seek remote working to different walks of life including students who now can work and study digitally from anywhere. This has given rise to a growing population of nomadic students. Nomadic students bring about both opportunities and challenges to universities which deserve systematic and methodical investigations. In this short essay we look at this phenomenon from the learning perspective. We review several theories of learning and discuss how they apply to nomadic style of students. We draw relevant insights for educational institutions (universities and colleges).

Defining digital nomadism and digitally nomadic students

When Makimoto and Manners (1997) wrote their manifesto “Digital Nomad”, very few would have thought that their speculations about the potential of the internet to liberate workers from the shackles of their office would one day come true, but if Covid-19 thought us anything it was the human adaptability and the transformative role of digital technologies and internet as its driving engine. Accordingly, a digital nomad is someone who benefits from the freedom granted by digital technologies in the new economy. They are in search of freedom, community, and meaningful work by adopting a mobile lifestyle (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). As such, nomads are different from travellers, migrants, and tourists in that they do not move to a new location permanently nor do they seek pure leisure. Their lifestyle is a mix of leisure and work, the so-called serious leisure (Makimoto & Manners, 1997; Schlagwein, 2018). Adding studying online to the mix, we will arrive at the burgeoning phenomenon of nomadic

students. Students who adopt a digitally nomadic style to study while travelling in search for more freedom, new job opportunities and taking advantage of benefits offered by cost efficient destinations like Bali, Thailand, Barbados, and Bahamas. As digital nomadism rests in the nexus of remote working and travel mobility, student digital nomadism lies in the intersection of digital nomadism and online learning.

Learning theories and digitally nomadic students

The question is how educational institutions adapt or evolve to serve students who are digitally nomadic in a competitive manner. Not only do curriculums should change but also educators' approaches to teaching must be modified because as Eaton (2018) envisioned digital technologies and specifically social media functions as a medium for students to be "nomadic" (p. 60) throughout their lives, moving outside of the space in the classroom into a digital space where digital content are entertaining and educational. Students, therefore, use digital spaces to form a new identity and find community support while learning things in a new way (Ibarra & Kalich, 2022). As a result, the way digitally nomadic students interact with the world and learn from and about it are fundamentally different from traditional students' modes of learning. A review of learning theories offers important insights into this phenomenon.

Theories of adult learning

For the purpose of this discussion, we used Mukhalalati and Taylor (2019)'s list of main Adult Learning Theories (ALTs). According to Mukhalalati and Taylor, ALTs can be grouped into seven theoretical domains: (1) instrumental (2) humanistic (3) transformative, (4) social (5) motivational (6) reflective and (7) constructivist. Furthermore, instrumental theories can be behavioural, cognitive, or experiential.

Behavioural learning focuses on how, when, and why stimulus in the environment lead to an individual's change of behaviour. Cognitive theory, on the other hand emphasizes learner's internal environment and cognitive structures which include mental and psychological

elements such as learning style, thinking, and processing styles and preferences rather than the context or external environment. Experiential learning, however, suggests that learning is often facilitated through interaction with the authentic environment in the form of accumulated experience.

Humanistic view suggests that learning is student-centered and student-directed because adults can plan, manage, and assess their own learning to accomplish self-actualization, self-fulfilment, and self-motivation. Educators are essentially facilitators of personalised learning. Transformative learning, on the other hand, emphasizes transformation of meaning when the learner confronts a confusing issues or problem and engages in a critical evaluation of the situation based on self-reflection which often results in a transformation of existing knowledge into new meanings. Related to this, is social learning theory which highlights the centrality of social interactions where, the person, context, community, and the desired behaviour become the facilitators of learning. Social interactions in this regard can play transformative and modelling roles in one's learning journey.

Motivational theory of learning departs from social view by placing more emphasis on the role of intrinsic factors such as expectancy of success, self-determination, self-evaluation, and attitudes towards education in one's learning. Reflective theory is also an inward view which focuses on reflection-on-action of learning and reflection-in-action of learning. While reflection-on-action allows learners to evaluate the level of relevance or rigor of the processes after they happen, reflection-in-action allows learners to reflect while the activity is happening. This leads the learners to test their own knowledge, through investigation and development of richer more critical meanings about the world.

Lastly, the constructivist theory of learning suggests that individuals actively construct new knowledge through the interactions between their previous skills and knowledge, the skills and knowledge gained from social interactions with peers and teachers, and social activities.

A learning-based view of digitally nomadic students

As outlined above, learning occurs in different ways. Digitally nomadic lifestyle of students offers an interesting lens through which a number of learning theories can be viewed. First, from the perspective of humanistic theory, it can be argued that nomadic students are perhaps the main subject of student-centred and student-directed approaches to learning. The digitally nomadic lifestyle is the offspring of technology-enabled human centrism. Digitally nomadic students use technology to travel while learning and technology has given them a degree of flexibility and student-centrism that is unprecedented. New advances on online education and myriad of tools available to facilitate that point to the significance of the humanistic view of learning and its rising traction among different student cohorts such as nomadic ones.

Other theories of learning also seem relevant. For instance, motivational learning suggests that since digitally nomadic lifestyle is in essence a serious leisure and imposes less control over agents (students here), students who adopt this lifestyle need to be more self-disciplined, self-determined, and capable of constantly evaluating their learning and actively reflecting on and in their learning journey as their lifestyle is more dynamic. Educators can provide motivational guidelines to help students reflect on their experiences to achieve their learning goals. Analogously, from the viewpoint of social learning theory, digitally nomadic learning happens in the intersection of the student's intention to learn, the educational context of their temporary location and the community where they are based. Educators' facilitative role in helping students blend in and have an authentic experience is the key factor here. Moving on to the behavioural view, the learning style of students and their cognitive capabilities to acquire, process and apply knowledge in a nomadic style is an interesting yet less empirically explored domain. Previous research on VARK (Visual, Auditory, Reading/Writing, Kinesthetics) learning styles (Prithishkumar & Michael, 2014) offer a solid ground upon which further explanations on how digitally nomadic students learn compared to their counterparts can be established.

Last, the constructivist theory of learning offers two implications when applied to the learning style of digitally nomadic students. First, students actively construct new knowledge through their interactions with others which is different in nomadic students compared to other students due to the unique nature of nomadic lifestyle. Therefore, their constructed knowledge is profoundly different from their peers. Second, their peers including their virtual communities they are members of, and their online student cohorts play a central in their knowledge construction mechanisms. Educators' key role here is to ensure that student's knowledge construction path is aligned with their learning goals.

Concluding remarks for educational practitioners

In this short essay we shed some light on the growing phenomenon of digitally nomadic students. We offered a simple discussion about their learning journey from the perspective of main learning theories. This stream of research is in its nascency and more empirical as well as theoretical research is required to explore how, why, and under what conditions a nomadic lifestyle can yield desired learning outcomes. We encourage researchers interested in this stream to use our discussion as a starting point in a long yet very rewarding journey to a fertile land for research and practice.

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