

Climate Change Through Reels



Students as Co-Creators Learning and Teaching Research Collaboration Evaluation Report

Section 1. Executive Summary

As Giroux highlights “...there is no democracy without informed and knowledgeable citizens and in doing so affirm education’s critical function and the crucial role it plays in promoting civic awareness, civic courage, and civic engagement.” This is the starting premise of our project; we wanted to extend this notion of civic awareness and responsibility to our digital lives. The aim of the project was to understand students’ perspectives of issues surrounding climate change and climate colonialism by working with students, from climate deniers to climate activists. The aim was to engage in open and frank conversations with our architecture and life science students about knowledge acquisition, to understand where knowledge and information is garnered and what influences our students’ positions/ideologies. Through these conversations we co-developed activities including ‘critical scrolling’ that promote media literacy skills to combat misinformation in the classroom and online. These activities are designed to encourage participants to critically investigate their digital lives. Through this we hope to arm individuals with the skills to become “critical agents”, to compassionately and critically converse with others. The activities are designed to integrate into the classroom to facilitate these conversations and prevent brain rot, specifically in the age of AI.

Section 2. Background and Aims

According to Ofcom, UK adults spend approximately 4 hours and 30 minutes a day online on non-work-related activities, which increases to 6 hours and 20 minutes a day for those ages 18-24. A significant portion of that time is spent scrolling on social media, which is a main source of news and information. Sites such as Instagram and TikTok use microvideos to communicate content to its vast audience. Anyone can create and upload content. As a result, information and knowledge on such platforms may be miscommunicated, either mistakenly or deliberately (Essien, 2025; Fremstad and Paul, 2022; Loupessis and Intahchomphoo, 2025).

Giroux (2023) refers to the rise of neoliberalism as ‘pedagogical terrorism’, which we as educators have a duty to combat. With the rise of neoliberal ideologies, we have a sense of duty to address, acknowledge that they exist, to centre compassion and critical pedagogy in these conversations. Through our initial investigations it became clear that we were motivated towards understanding how to combat brain rot, or cognitive offloading, by creating tools to arm ourselves and our students to become ‘informed and knowledgeable citizens’ (Giroux, 2023).

The aim of our project was to co-develop media literacy skills with our Life Sciences and Architecture students to combat mis, dis and mal-information across all forms of social media. To achieve this, we co-created a ‘zine’ on how to avoid cognitive offloading through the repeated scrolling of social media. We co-designed innovative tips and activities to ensure that the act of scrolling is more active and critical than passive, which we co-created over a course of in-person workshops. We engaged in conversations investigating what our algorithms are selling us and strategies towards combating brain rot. We aim to share and disseminate our zine with colleagues and students, whilst incorporating the activities within

our teaching.

Section 3. Methods

Taking a collective, dialogic approach, we shared experiences and knowledge. We applied a critical pedagogical approach to develop our critical awareness of the social and political inequities and the role of social media, specifically our individual algorithms align with and inform our values. We explored this through three co-creatively run workshops with and for the co-creator research team:

1. Collecting Instagram reels, podcasts, and other forms of media that students engage with regularly.

At this stage, student partners took the lead and produced a watch list for us to collectively engage in the second stage. All Instagram reels were collected on a Padlet or shared with the group in real-time. Each member of the group explained their choice and related this to their lived experiences.

Note: TikTok was no longer used, due to the change in ownership from the original proposal.

2. Critical scrolling

We developed 'critical scrolling', an activity that requires individuals to critically engage with the content they would ordinarily passively receive. The activity is timed, we chose 6 mins, but it can be longer or shorter. During that time each member of the team would actively scroll, taking notes of each of the Reels they were presented with. We then regroup and collectively engage with each other's content and attempt to deconstruct the argument present to us in this short space of time.

3. Media literacy skill toolkit- how to combat brain rot zine

Co-create a zine- a handmade DIY publication (magazine) using materials such as glue paper, newspaper clippings, coloured pens- to support the development of students' media literacy skills, whilst informing future research approaches and practices.

Each workshop, students were providing lunch and refreshments.

Section 4. Results

We collectively co-created a zine with activities and information combating brain rot through the following activities:

- Critical scrolling and
- Combating cognitive offloading

4.1 Critical scrolling

During the exercise each person was scrolling for 6 mins. The number of advertisements and reels that each team member watched was different for each person, with Shukri being exposed to the highest number of advertisements.

4.2 Combating cognitive offloading- Zine

Below are the images of a zine that was collectively created by the team (Figure 1, 2, 3 and 4), introducing members of the project and the rationale behind it (figure 2), the activity intentional scrolling and includes tips to prevent cognitive offloading (figure 3) and the final page of the zine (figure 4).

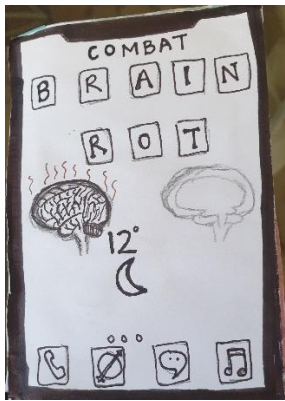


Figure 1. The title page of our zine

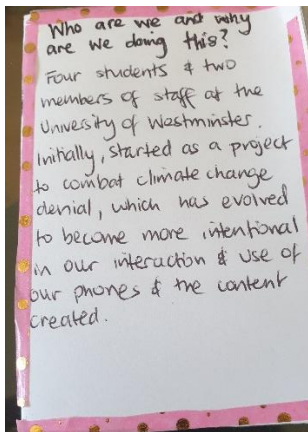


Figure 2. Insert pages of the zine, introducing the members of the project.



Figure 3. Page 3 and 4 of the zine. Page 3 introduces the co-developed activity 'Intentional Scrolling'. Page 4 includes co-created tips to prevent cognitive offloading.



Figure 4. Back page of the project, with a brain.

Section 5. Discussion

The project took a slightly different direction than we intended. Rather than engaging in conversations reading climate denial, as we were unable to recruit climate deniers, we focused on the act of scrolling. We recognised the link between consumerism, climate change and social media which introduced other avenues of research for us such as, what is the carbon footprint of our digital lives, what are the cognitive impacts of scrolling and what is the algorithm trying to sell or convince us.

The activity we developed 'critical scrolling' revealed to us how polarising the content on social media can be. This activity was integrated into the Media, Art & Design seminar for foundation students. The discussion that emerged from it reveals how our algorithms are shaped by gender, race and class and how it in turn shapes our perception of the world around us. Students from the EU often mention how they are targeted by racist AI-generated videos depicting London as crime-ridden and overrun with immigrants (Spring, 2026). It is not only important for us to recognise and acknowledge this bias that exists in our social media feeds, but to make this apparent with the wider public.

Reflecting on our digital lives has allowed us to be more critical of our use of social media, trying to slow down, actively take back our time. The culminating activity 'zine making to combat brainrot' highlighted that the process of creating is more important than the end product. The zine asks us to develop tools to combat brainrot, such as '5 a days' for your brain, instilling healthy brain habits to encourage critical thinking such as reading poetry, handwriting or journaling, speaking to a human instead of a bot, developing an analogue skill, going for a walk etc.

Section 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

With the integration of AI into everyday life including social media, we are witnessing the rise of cognitive offloading and the tools we developed in this project are useful to combat this (Gerlich, 2025). The use of AI more so that social media has damaging impact on our environment, democratic, civic life as well as our critical thinking skills.

These activities and tools can be used in different disciplines and integrated within different classrooms contexts. Our hope is that these activities lead to a narrative shift as Hayes and Kaba describe: "When a fact or set of facts prompts people to change course, it's usually because someone or something has interrupted the narrative they knew and told a story that feels more true- one worth making changes over." (Hayes and Kaba, 2023, pp 21).

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