

DIGITAL NATIVES: Fact or Fiction?

Instructions: *This discussion will occur in two stages. In the first segment, (~15 min), the student groups will read the following excerpts and discuss the questions below. For the final segment, (~15 min), we will reconvene as a class and together share our ideas and thoughts on the topic.*

Excerpt #1

Prensky, Marc. “**Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants**” On the Horizon. NCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001. Accessed at: <http://www.hfmboces.org/HFMDistrictServices/TechYES/PrenskyDigitalNatives.pdf>

Our students have changed radically. Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.

Today’s students have not just changed *incrementally* from those of the past, nor simply changed their slang, clothes, body adornments, or styles, as has happened between generations previously. A really big *discontinuity* has taken place. One might even call it a “singularity” – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back. This so-called “singularity” is the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century.

Today’s students – K through college – represent the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age. Today’s average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV). Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives.

It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today’s students *think and process information fundamentally differently* from their predecessors. These differences go far further and deeper than most educators suspect or realize. “Different kinds of experiences lead to different brain structures,” says Dr. Bruce D. Berry of Baylor College of Medicine. As we shall see in the next instalment, it is very likely that *our students’ brains have physically changed* – and are different from ours – as a result of how they grew up. But whether or not this is *literally* true, we can say with certainty that their *thinking patterns* have changed.

We need to invent Digital Native methodologies for *all* subjects, at *all* levels, using our students to guide us. The process has already begun – I know college professors inventing games for teaching subjects ranging from math to engineering to the Spanish Inquisition. We need to find ways of publicizing and spreading their successes.

Excerpt #2

Bennett, Maton, and Kervin. "The 'digital natives' debate: A critical review of the evidence" British Journal of Educational Technology. Vol. 39, No 5, 2008. P. 775–786. Accessed at: <http://api.ning.com/files/AkclmKAQ9nT0vPJucYL9261SknCvwP1UJ-RaVQ7kZumzWZVPq5iNlfGrqf0Jpc3wUnK8A07FuVmRXQ1WRqnre5q2z53PRnT0/TheDigitalNativesDebateCriticalReview.pdf> ([click here for link to full article](#))

The generation born roughly between 1980 and 1994 has been characterised as the 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001a) or the 'Net generation' (Tapscott, 1998) because of their familiarity with and reliance on ICT. They are described as living lives immersed in technology, 'surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age' (Prensky, 2001a, p. 1). Social researchers Howe and Strauss (2000, 2003), labelled this generation the 'millennials', ascribing to them distinct characteristics that set them apart from previous generations. They offer a positive view of this new generation as optimistic, team-oriented achievers who are talented with technology, and claim they will be America's next 'great generation'.

Immersion in this technology-rich culture is said to influence the skills and interests of digital natives in ways significant for education. It is asserted, for example, that digital natives learn differently compared with past generations of students. They are held to be active experiential learners, proficient in multitasking, and dependent on communications technologies for accessing information and for interacting with others (Frand, 2000; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, b; Tapscott, 1999). Commentators claim these characteristics raise fundamental questions about whether education is currently equipped to meet the needs of this new cohort of students.

The claim that there is a distinctive new generation of students in possession of sophisticated technology skills and with learning preferences for which education is not equipped to support has excited much recent attention. Proponents arguing that education must change dramatically to cater for the needs of these digital natives have sparked an academic form of a 'moral panic' using extreme arguments that have lacked empirical evidence.

The picture beginning to emerge from research on young people's relationships with technology is much more complex than the digital native characterisation suggests. While technology is embedded in their lives, young people's use and skills are not uniform. There is no evidence of widespread and universal disaffection, or of a distinctly different learning style the like of which has never been seen before. We may live in a highly technologised world, but it is conceivable that it has become so through evolution, rather than revolution. Young people may do things differently, but there are no grounds to consider them alien to us.

Questions:

1. What evidence have you seen of "The Digital Native"?
2. What evidence have you seen that contradicts the idea of "The Digital Native"?
3. What types of technology do your students use, and for what purposes?
4. What do you see as the biggest barriers to student achievement- lesson delivery style or student work ethic? What role does/can technology play in that equation?
5. Based on your answers and reaction to the above articles, what are the implications for education/your classroom?