



The Myth of the “Digital Native”

Why Generational Stereotyping Won’t Improve Student Learning



By Fred Mindlin

The phrase “digital native” (Prensky, 2001a & b) has been much publicized by Marc Prensky, a video game designer. Its use implies that the current population of students younger than some age, based on whenever one decides to date the “birth” of the digital age, have somehow acquired an inborn mastery of and facility with electronic tools. Prensky has been criticized from many angles, from the implicit denigration of immigrants as inherently inferior (Siemens, 2007) to his sloppy citations and the lack of a research basis for his assertions (McKenzie, 2007; Bennett, et al, 2008). Putting aside these and other questions about class, privilege and unequal access, which make the usefulness of such generational stereotyping problematic, there is a more basic flaw in the picture conjured up by the phrase “digital native.”

While clearly many young people are adept as digital consumers, their immersion in this world also heightens their susceptibility to the manipulations of advertisers, unless they’ve also acquired the critical and analytic skills needed to navigate our complex information landscape. And while today’s students certainly have a bigger menu of diversions before them than did their parents, entering the digital world as a creator and producer of content and mastering the tools to do so require a new and different skill set.

Mastery should mean having a depth of understanding and a historical perspective on the thing mastered, and facility with technology is merely facile without the motivation and opportunity to create in the digital landscape. While many youth are quite adept with these tools, as a generation, these digital

consumers need lots of helpful context framing and coaching from many perspectives.

An assertion made by proponents of the “digital native” myth is that these kids who grew up with the Internet already a part of their lives are somehow Internet experts by birth. On the contrary, my experience working with students K-12 is that most have a limited understanding of the Internet’s power and potential and lack the critical and analytic skills to harness it for their own uses. In terms of the Internet, I am the native, present since it was browsed with the original Netscape dragon.

I have watched it grow from a fascinating, but tiny, world of academic and community connections, where almost anyone could become a “friend” and quickly earn deep levels of trust, without ever a face-to-face meeting, into the vast and complex social web of deceit and chicanery and creativity, which it is still becoming. We all need each other, and all can contribute, and all need help of one kind and another from time to time.

The writer’s strike of November 2007 to February 2008 afforded a wonderful teachable moment, as the talk show hosts so admired for their wit and humor suddenly had nothing to say. It became much easier to identify them as performers dependent on “behind-the-scenes” creators for the cleverness once thought to be intrinsically theirs. One of our tasks as educators is to find ways to help these young people, immersed in the information sea, to stop and take time to look around and reflect on its implications and contours. Even more importantly, we must offer them opportunities to take control of the tools and use them to tell their own stories.

Here there is a point well taken in Prensky's argument: blocking social media in the classroom cuts our students off from some of the most powerful of these publication opportunities. As technology using educators and administrators, we must find ways to comply with our responsibilities to secure networks and meet legal filtering requirements that nevertheless do not cripple students' access to robust interactive and collaborative environments.

We must also acknowledge and confront the curmudgeons in our ranks, providing rich staff development opportunities and ongoing follow-up interventions to enable those colleagues who may be reluctant to embrace creative technologies. When teachers accept that their students may have superior skill levels to theirs in some areas of manipulating and navigating digital tools, it can help the students to acknowledge, in turn, that there are critical and analytic skills they need to learn from the teachers. I've had students angrily denounce me: "There's no advertising

in movies!" When I ask them to notice the way actors always seem to hold their soda cans with the labels towards the camera, and reflect if they take such pains to show their friends what brand they're drinking, their perceptions begin to shift. The most important "technological" skill is judgment.

Teaching students how to evaluate the veracity and reliability of the Internet and other digital resources is another key skill. From reading Alan November's classic analysis of a holocaust denial Web site (November, 1998) to acquiring a basic understanding of top-level domains, students need to know how the Web is built and what's behind the text and images on the screen.

Always asking ourselves about context and background helps us with another key information age skill, negotiation. Who controls this space I'm entering? What are its norms? What will happen to the information I share here? The importance of asking these questions and knowing how to find their

answers is not generation specific.

Finally, making good use of technology requires what I like to call "tapping the well." Ultimately, creative processes are all forms of narrative, and if students are unable to connect to and trust their own imaginations, there are no stories to tell. Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist and the director of the M.I.T. Initiative on Technology and Self, says schools also need to allow students to experience stillness, because the rest of their lives is not making it easy for them to find stillness (Turkle, 2009). Dialog in social media about the books we read can create rich interaction, but we still have to be able to sit still long enough to read the book in the first place.

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