7.5: Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants

As a mixed-blood Cherokee, I’ve always been troubled when people use Indigenous phrases or images inaccurately to try to present an argument: from mascots to the overworked use of the phase pow-wow. I understand the precarious nature of using words like native. That was why I rolled my eyes the first time I heard the phrase digital native.

Conceptually, the idea of the digital native almost makes sense. The theory is that there is a profound difference between those born during the most recent age of the personal computer and the Internet and those born prior to the ubiquitous onslaught of digital technologies. Those born during this technological boom would be native to digital and computer technology, and those who were older would be the digital immigrants, coming to digital technologies later in their lives. The implication is that the digital native is familiar with and proficient with technologies that the digital immigrant is not, and because of this split in digital skill, it will be difficult for the two to communicate. For context, imagine the stereotype of the parent or grandparent who needs a child to set the clock on the microwave or to program the VCR.

In some small ways, this concept is rooted in reality. The cliché is out there. A quick search reveals over 1,000 articles with the phrase “digital native” in the titles, many claiming they will help the non-native to understand how the digital native thinks and works, treating those labeled as native as if they are alien to the norm, or more frightening still, that the digital native has become the norm and those who are not natives are now an outmoded minority. An even less nuanced version of this argument is often invoked as well: “These kids know everything about technology!”

Such a statement reveals the ultimate folly of the digital native as a construct: It too easily leads to a sense of conflict or resignation. What we have to realize is that while it is indeed useful to think about the differences in the ways that people born in an age of digital computing and those born prior to these digital technologies use these tools, to assert that the mere presence of digital technologies so dramatically changes a skill like writing is simply misplaced.

More troubling is the other side of the binary. In 2017, when there is talk of building a wall on the southern border of the
United States and discussion of mass deportations, “immigrant” is word that carries the baggage of subjugation, fear, and the questioning of legal rights. Words matter. To use the dichotomy of native/immmigrant is dangerous. Such loaded words aren’t fodder for avoiding the more nuanced and important conversations about how to write with the best available means of communication in an era when the available means are multiple. When the digital native is conceived to exist in rarified air above the digital immigrant, problems arise. CNN features declare the world the property of the digital native, while the digital immigrant becomes a “relic.” Huffington Post declares flatly that the digital native brings an idyllic “equal level” to all people. The underpinnings of “native” are that a thing or a place is home for a certain group. This leads to subtle implications that those who are not digital natives are attempting to colonize, invade, or co-opt. It also falsely asserts that just because a person is a certain age that person automatically knows and possesses certain skills.

The presence of digital technology has changed the way we think about writing. There are new tools at our disposal, and those digital tools are at times quite intimidating to those who learned to write before computers were an available or viable technology. There is a significant need to understand the way these technologies have changed our composing practices, but at the same time, the computer (or tablet or smartphone) is just another step in the evolution of a writing process that has always depended on technologies (paper, pencils, ink, etc.).

The most common methods of communication are changing, and that does matter, but it’s not due to anything other than people using the best available means to convey their messages to each other. They can use pictures and video, but that’s because the means to use Instagram and YouTube and SnapChat exist now. It doesn’t mean that other people cannot, or that technology is the domain of a specific generation. Indeed, multiple research studies (such as those from the Pew Research Center) confirm that the uptake of digital technologies isn’t strictly tied to generational groups—it’s tied to socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, and access to broadband and smartphones. Digital technology is now accessible in ways it wasn’t previously, and those with access and without pre-existing habits of using a specific format choose what they judge to be the best mode of writing, while those who do have pre-existing habits can either be curious about new modes of writing, or not. We have always written, and we will always write. To assert that whole generations either own or are alienated from the technologies used for writing is a needless limiter that attributes false mastery and fosters a sense of futility. It doesn’t represent any reality on the ground. It’s a myth.

It’s easy enough to see how writing with technology works by looking at specific cases instead of attempting to generalize a native skillset. Texting, for example, is changing the ways that people understand communication, as they can now work in a method of communication that teeters between real-time and archived, not a phone call but also not an email (or a letter or note). It offers affordances that older methods of personal communication did not. It’s a good thing. But there’s the down side, too. Most people are now confident—falsely—that they can find any information they need with a Google search, making the gathering of support for arguments sloppy. At the same time, a small percentage of people in many age ranges don’t understand the word Google as a verb and do not possess the skills to critically analyze websites to know what is reliable and what is simply material someone else published online without concern for its validity.

And more importantly, we can see that age—being “born into” the digital world—doesn’t bring greater proficiency if we simply look at how young people understand digital security. A person with an innate knowledge of the digital would understand secured networks, Facebook permissions, complex passwords to avoid hacking, and so on. But those same Pew studies noted above show that 50% of young people don’t use privacy settings and that nearly 40% don’t understand the differences between secured and non-secured communication. If anything, studies show that young
people think their parents understand security issues better and handle that for them, a sure fire indicator that their native status in the digital realm doesn’t pass the first threshold of understanding the gravity of digital environments.

The first thing we can do to correct the misuse of digital native/ immigrant language is to recognize that the terminology itself is troublesome. We can just stop calling younger generations digital natives and that will resolve part of the problem. We can refer to them in some other way that recognizes their status as those who have always lived with technology when that is important to a discussion, but we can also try to move beyond considering this a major issue. We could also relegate the divide to history, as those of us who were among the first who were designated digital natives are now in our 40s and are, in some senses, now the “old” that was the original digital immigrant in this equation. It might be time to stop thinking so hard about differences in experience based on age, particularly when there’s a larger difference based on economics. And one based on gender. And one based on race. There are differences that are much more important.

The harder work is in confronting the misconception itself. This is best done by simply not treating users differently based on a generational divide. One of my colleagues, Bob DeSchutter, works with a group of seniors who regularly play the game Minecraft. They don’t behave differently, in terms of user-experience and knowledge acquisition, than the young players from the local schools who come to our open Minecraft play sessions. Regardless of age—something we forget due to the fallacy of the digital native—is that anyone who hasn’t played a video game will need to be oriented to game play, whether that person is 70 or 7. We have to untangle the belief in inherent literacy from the anecdotal experience of encountering more literate people of a specific age range. Much like the issue of race, it can be difficult to separate people from their reliance on stereotypes and cultural expectations, but that is the only solution to an issue of misconception. Observing instead of expecting is the answer to combatting the myth of the digital native.

We have to understand that as technology changes, culture also changes, and as writers we have to think about how audiences change and how composing practices change across time. This is a difficult and nuanced, an always changing and complex practice. We must always think about the words we use to speak about important concepts. We have to work against the fatalistic generalization that the young understand technology and the old do not. Digital is not a place. You are not native to it, nor do you need to apply for residence on its shores. You’re not too old, nor are you so young that you’ll have magical powers that cause you to innately understand everything digital. But digital technology does shape how you write and will continue to shape how you write. You need to watch, and take note, and learn, and follow the writing wherever it takes you.

Further Readings

For more information on the bad idea of the digital native, see Marc Prensky’s work, which is available on his website at marc-prensky.com. For more on the acquisition of digital literacies, see Stuart Selber’s Multiliteracies for a Digital Age, and N. Katherine Hayles’s My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts. See also the Pew Research Center’s reports on “Digital Readiness Gaps,” “Social Media Fact Sheet,” and “Generations and their Gadgets.”

For more information on race in digital contexts, see Lisa Nakamura’s Cybertypes, Adam Banks’s Digital Griots, and Angela Haas’s “Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice.” Using the Boolean strings “Native American” and “digital technology” will provide current, and quite interesting, readings on how tribes are using digital technology to preserve tribal histories and languages.
Keywords

digital literacy, digital native, technoliteracy, tech savvy, prosumer

Author Bio

Phill Alexander is an assistant professor in the Games and Simulations program for the Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where he is also the co-director of the Varsity Redhawks Esports Team. Phill is also a mixed-blood Cherokee rhetoric scholar affiliated with the professional writing and American studies programs. His research deals with race, communication, collaboration and identity formation in digital spaces, particularly video games. More about Phill can be found at phillalexander.com.