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Challenging the Myth of the "Digital Native"

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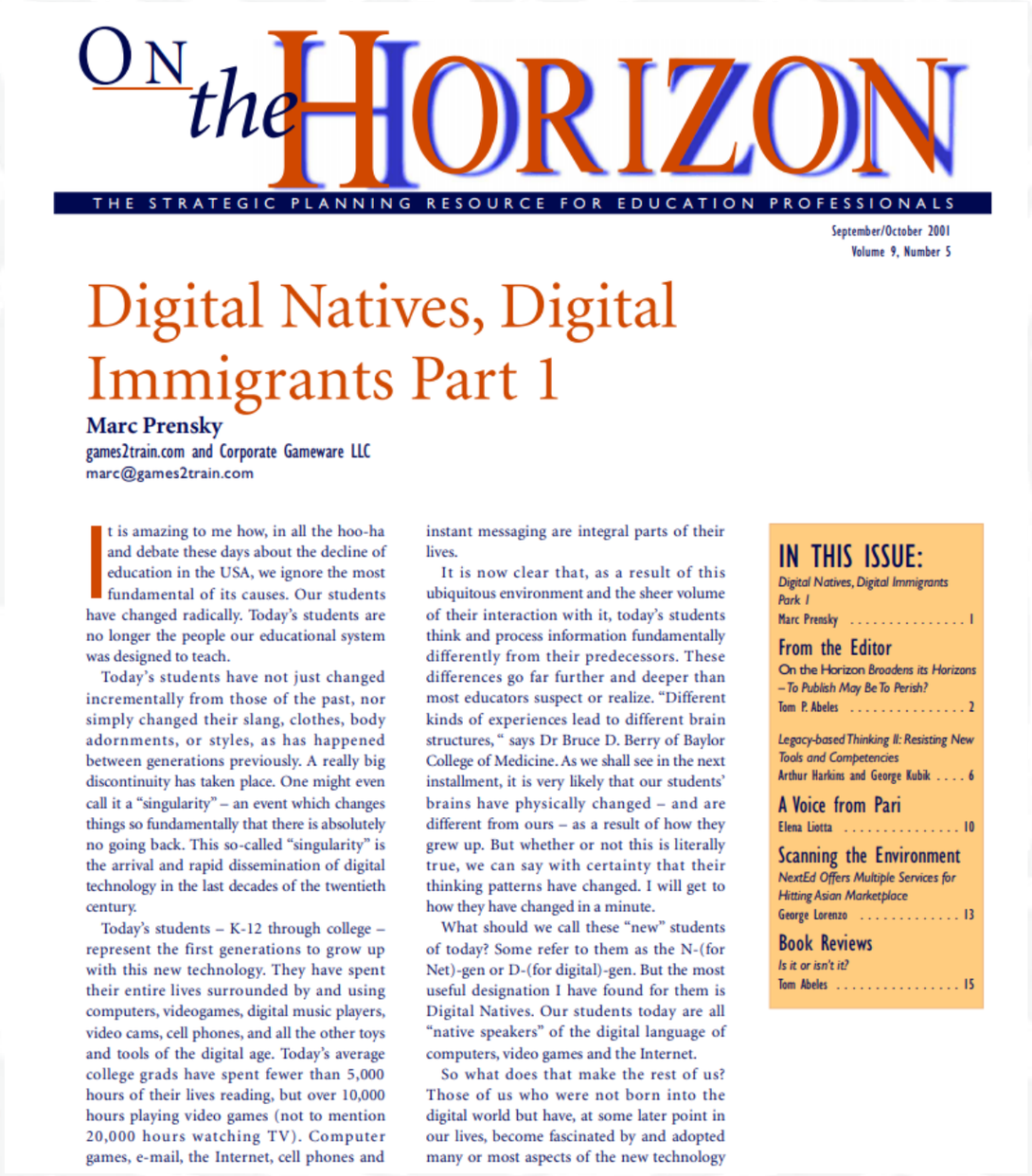
The Origins of the Myth

Mark Prensky identified two groups: digital natives (those born with technology as a “native language”) and digital immigrants (those who must learn technology as a “second language) in 2001.



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Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1

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It is amazing to me how, in all the hoo-ha and debate these days about the decline of education in the USA, we ignore the most fundamental of its causes. 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 twentieth century.

Today’s students – K-12 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 fewer 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, e-mail, 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 installment, 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. I will get to how they have changed in a minute.

What should we call these “new” students of today? Some refer to them as the N-(for Net)-gen or D-(for digital)-gen. But the most useful designation I have found for them is Digital Natives. Our students today are all “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet.

So what does that make the rest of us? Those of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology

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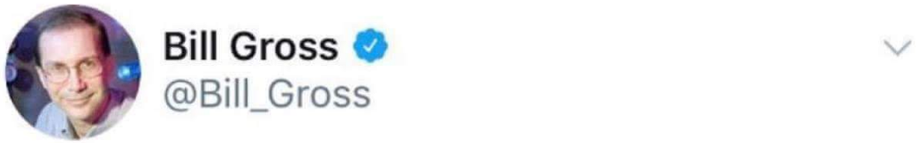

In the "I'm getting old" department.., a kid saw this and said, "oh, you 3D-printed the 'Save' Icon."

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THE DIGITAL ACCENT?

Digital Dialects & Idiolects

Dialect

di·a·lect

/ˈdīəˌlekt/

a particular form of a language which is peculiar to a specific region or social group.

"this novel is written in the dialect of Trinidad"

Idiolect

id·i·o·lect

/ˈidēəˌlekt/

the speech habits peculiar to a particular person.

"in his strange idiolect, he preferred to call angels “angelicals“"

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Recap

- “Digital native” is not a useful category for talking about our students, because it puts them and us into unhelpful boxes.
- Everyone’s technical proficiency/fluency/ability is different, and we need to take that into account when we’re asking our students to use technology.

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Outcomes Based Instructional Design

- Just like with readings, we must select the technologies we're employing in our classrooms with the overriding question: what does this technology do to help my students move towards the learning objectives I have for them in the course.
- When presented with new technologies, we have to be balance between being too slow to change and being too fast to change; resisting the 'pedagogical impulse.'
- How does this program/app/platform enable my students to succeed in the course? What are the affordances and limitations of using it? Who will it enable and who might it constrain?

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Credit to Dr. Amy Robillard who first brought my attention to the 'pedagogical impulse."

Activity Theory Based Instructional Design

- What specific activities can this technology be useful for? Which activities might be hindered by it?
- How many different platforms can students adequately and robustly engage with in a particular semester?
- Is the goal for technology use to be apparent or transparent?

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General Best Practices

- Minimize the number of tools you're using in a particular course; that minimizes the amount of class time you'll need to spend explaining technology.
- Don't assume that any particular student has familiarity with a tool you want to use.
- Offer individual help with technology in private; it's often something students don't want to ask about around their ppeers.
- Avoid activities that require technology use in class that can't be done on multiple platforms—some students don't have laptops but might have a smart phone.
- Make conversations about technology a part of the course—relate your experiences to theirs to avoid an us/them mentality.

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Discussion/Questions?

- What has been your experience using technology in the classroom in terms of students' "nativeness" with it?
- What are some of your take-aways from this presentation and what do you think you could do going forward?

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