

Introduction: Digital Wisdom

A Facebook conversation between a so-called “digital native” and a “digital immigrant”:

DIGITAL NATIVE: (: age was like I rllly like her!!!

DIGITAL IMMIGRANT: What does: “(: age was like I rllly like her!!!” mean? I am sorry I do not understand.

DIGITAL NATIVE: i have know clue what that means?

More disturbing than this garbled in-box dialogue is the notion that anyone born before 1980 is socially inept online. Writing in what strikes me as unintelligible code, my young Facebook friend has a multitude of “friends” born before 1980. A current Toyota commercial plays on this notion of a digital generation gap. A young daughter is concerned that her parents have only 19 social media friends while she has more than 400. The visual rhetoric is a humorous commentary; she is sitting at her computer looking at a social media site commenting on a picture of a puppy while her parents are cycling and interacting with people.

In 2001, Marc Prensky invented the term *digital native* to describe the generations born after 1980 and the “first generations to grow up” with digital technology. He referenced neurologist Dr. Bruce D. Perry of Baylor College of Medicine to support his theory that “today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors” (Prensky, 2001b). Prensky generalized digital immigrants by saying, “As Digital Immigrants learn—like all immigrants, some better than others—to adapt to their environment, they always retain, to some degree, their ‘accent,’ that is, their foot in the past” (Prensky, 2001a).

Prensky’s motivation, while academically altruistic, may also have reflected a vested interest (Prensky, n.d.). He built an industry around the message that educators need to learn the language of the “digital natives.” “This is not just a joke,” he (2001a, p.2) said. “It’s very serious, because the single biggest problem facing education today is that our digital immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language [that of a predigital age], are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language.” Prensky implored the digital immigrant to lose the accent.

Who are digital natives? What is a digital immigrant accent and why is it important to understand social media in the 21st century?

You Might be a Digital Native If . . .

“Mom, how do you hyperlink text?”

I have raised three “digital natives”. Yet, recently, my middle son, who is in technical college, asked me how to hyperlink a passage for a homework assignment. He knows how to search online and texts incessantly, but he could not finish an online project without asking me (the “digital immigrant”) how to hyperlink. But wait, Marc Prensky says my son by nature has a “hypertext mind” because he is able to leap from text to source in a single bound (Prensky, 2001b, p.4).

My 23-year-old graduate student was unable to fill out a job application using a PDF form while online. He called his digital immigrant mother to help him. He lives in cyberspace and only watches movies from Netflix. He can find anything on Google, except how to fill out a job application using a simple productivity tool.

My youngest, most digitally native son plays Playstation 3 with strangers online. He has an iPhone holstered to his right hand and thumbs texts at the speed of light. Recently, I caught him designing a logo with Paint. Paint! I use the most advanced graphic design software on my MacBook Pro; but he cannot understand why his image is fuzzy.

My sons are not unusual. “Digital natives” may have developed a more advanced thumb for quicker texting and may have hundreds of “friends” on various social media sites, but are their brains automatically more digitally advanced than those of we who were born before 1980?

According to Jeremy Mims (n.d.), *digital native* is a term “coined by Marc Prensky in 2001 (likely with the best intentions). But really, it’s just being used as a catch-all demographic for young people, and a way for people who don’t actually understand technology to sling _____ in sales meetings to those who know even less.”

Labels used for groups of people are never definitive. Why are natives those born after 1980? Why not 1984? 1990? Why not the year Facebook launched—2004? Labels limit, especially if they are misplaced. Even worse is being defined by your accent.

Digital Immigrant Accent

Marc Prensky (2001a, p.2) wrote that the “digital immigrant accent” could be heard when individuals turned to the Internet for information as a second rather than a first choice. Prensky identified immigrants as people who read the software manual instead of allowing the program to teach them. He defended these generalizations by stating that language learned later in life goes to a different part of the brain (2001a, p.2) and quoted Dr. Bruce D. Perry, who said, “Different kinds of experiences lead to different brain structures.” From this, Prensky concluded that “our students’ brains have physically changed—and are different from ours—as a result of how they grew up” (2001a, p.1). Whether this is literally true, to many teachers it does seem that students’ thinking patterns have changed. But is there really a digital generation gap? If so, what does this mean for social media interaction?

Labels help us organize: they help us store messy things in neat packages. Labels are great for files and boxes, but not so great for people. And so it is with the idea of a digital native. A person demonstrating the type of digital prowess Prensky talks about may be a 65-year-old professor who knows more about writing in the digital environment than her 18-year-old first-year student. The “younger generation” may be more comfortable with technology, but they may also lack the digital literacy of someone older and wiser.

Digital Wisdom

Prensky’s use of “digital native” and “digital immigrant” has stirred an academic debate. For instance, Russell Stannard (2010) says those who grew up in the digital age may indeed be “happier and less afraid about technology” than those who had to learn it later in life, but that this fact does not make the “digital native” better able to write a compelling blog or to post readable web content. In the same way, those who had to learn the technology and were not born into it can often communicate effectively online and learn new tools quickly.

To address the critics of his 2001 piece, Prensky wrote a follow-up piece in 2009, called “*H. sapiens Digital: From Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom.*” In this article, Prensky admits that the native and immigrant paradigm is becoming less relevant as we venture into the 21st century. He stops short in support of those he labels

immigrants, but I would like to stand up for all those born before the Internet, before the PC, even before the calculator. If those who matured in a digital era think differently as a result of what they have been exposed to, what about those of us who are older and who have had to learn how to adapt to an even greater number and complexity of communications technologies, all of which have certainly changed the way we think and act? While Prensky’s “digital natives” may be accustomed to the digital way of life, they do not remember how hard it was to type a paper before computers let alone correction fluid. They do not appreciate the simplicity of staying at home to research a paper instead of spending hours going through dusty volumes and scrolling microfiche machines. Earlier generations have not only adapted, but many of us are on the cutting edge of technology. And indeed Prensky now has replaced his original labels of native and immigrant with the notion of “digital wisdom”; that is, a digitally sophisticated person immersed in complex technologies might be called digitally wise—no matter his or her age (Prensky, 2009).

Wisdom is knowledge applied. The following chapters will offer you a chance to enhance your knowledge of social media in many settings. I invite you to apply that knowledge, and to become digitally wise.

—*Lisa M. Russell, July 2011*

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