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No More "Digital Natives" and "Digital Immigrants"

One of the prevailing metaphors for different experiences of the world as it has become digital is that there are "digital natives" and "digital immigrants." The young people who have grown up in the immersive digital environment are the natives. Those who came of age before digital immersion are the immigrants.

This metaphor describing different experiences initially came from an academic article published in 2001 by Marc Prensky called "Digital natives, digital immigrants." The experience that he drew on was that of language. Immigrants to a place with a language that is new to them can develop fluency in the new language, but they frequently maintain an accent that distinguishes them from the native speaker of the language.

The essence of this concept is that the young are the natives and the older, pre-computer age folks are the immigrants. This is often discussed in the context of schools. The teachers mostly are out of tune with the technology because they are older, the assumption goes. However, we assume that the new people coming into the teaching profession will be into the technology because they have grown up in the age of the personal computer and now the smartphone. And, of course, the kids are all

immersed in a digital soup, so they have picked up the language by osmosis.

I've long had some niggles about this assumption that age is the key determinant of how a person relates to technology. One of my first jobs when I was at university in the mid-60s was inputting data for a computer. I was entering information from a mid-1800 census for a history professor who was tracking mobility of people in the 19th century. The keyboard I used for entering information was on a machine about 50 times larger than the laptop on which I am writing this article. The information was entered by punching holes in a card — the cards were then run through a computer to do calculations.

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The meme for humane experience being alienated by technology was the punch-card that said on it "Do not fold, spindle or mutilate." I still have a button in my collection with that as the slogan — but, of course, meaning not to mutilate unique human experience with technological conformity.

Then in 1981 I was part of a project to produce an electronic communications system for my union. We created a network that reached into our locals in all regions of British Columbia. It was essentially an email system using portable terminals with 300 baud modems and connected with phone lines through a bed on the terminal on which you placed a telephone handset. The terminal printed using heat sensitive paper, like fax machines of the day. Eric Lee from Labourstart in his book about the development of the use of technology by unions identified the BC Teachers' Federation network as the first extensive union electronic network.

So I was always uncomfortable with identifying the differences solely on age. I felt like I had aged in positive ways along with the technology.

Then I recently read an article on *First Monday*, an online technology and sociology journal, offering a new way of looking at the differences in how people participate in digital technology that seems appropriate to me. The article is called "Visitors and

Residents: A new typology for online engagement," by David White and Alison Le Cornu from the U.K.

White and Le Cornu point out that much has changed in this first decade of the new century — specifically the development of social media. They say that "the Native/Immigrant dichotomy is now redundant." In fact, they suggest that making it an age issue never really reflected the reality that "there is as much variation within the digital native generation as between the generations."

They say that the old metaphor "provoked a sense of panic among 'immigrant educators' who now perceive[d] themselves wrong-footed and unable to step up to the plate." Indeed!!

White and Le Cornu provide us with a new frame for understanding the difference in the way people participate in the digital soup — Visitors and Residents.

Visitors are people who use the technology to attain a goal, but "they are unlikely to have any form of persistent profile online which projects their identity into the digital space. They are anonymous, their activity invisible to all but the databases running the websites they use." Visitors may have a number of reasons for not wanting a digital identity. Fear of identity theft and issues of privacy are common.

Visitors may use email or Skype but are wary of creating a Facebook profile and place little value in belonging online.

"Residents, on the other hand," according to White and Le Cornu, "see the Web as a place...in which there are clusters of friends and colleagues who they can approach and with whom they can share information about their life and work. They have a profile in social networking platforms. When Residents log off, an aspect of their persona remains. Residents see the Web primarily as a network of individuals or clusters of individuals who in turn generate content."

The authors also caution that these two categories should not be simplified as a dichotomy — the reality is that most of us are somewhere on a continuum, perhaps moving in one direction or another at any one time.

They also point out one of the dangers, particularly for teachers. We may be both Resident and Visitor — "an individual might take a Resident approach in their private life but a Visitor approach in their role as a professional." The ubiquity of the Web,

however, means that there is a blurring of boundaries — a "context collapse."

Teachers who try to live the duality of Visitor and Resident may find that their Resident personality is found by their students and creates an unintended crossing of professional boundaries.

Readers who want to get more details of the argument will find an the article at firstmonday.org. It's likely that only Visitors will pursue this. Residents will be too busy living their life online.

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ENDNOTES

White, D. and Le Cornu, A. "Visitors and Residents: A new typology for online engagement." Downloaded on September 6, 2011 from firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3171/3049.

Please fill in the circle with the answer that best completes the sentence: Standardized tests...

A) assume that children come standardized.

B) cause a great deal of anxiety in children.

C) are not good assessments of student learning.

D) are used to judge students, teachers, schools and communities. Since the tests don't measure student learning, we may be losing teachers who are good for our kids.

E) All of the above

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