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# Enabling media literacy for "digital natives" - a contradiction in terms?

## Book section

# ENABLING MEDIA LITERACY FOR 'DIGITAL NATIVES' – A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

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## Introduction

Being perhaps an old-fashioned academic, I'll begin with a Hegelian argument structure – thesis, antithesis, synthesis. As an aside, I note that to check this argument structure, I looked it up on Wikipedia, which told me that Hegel never said this: a case of a digital immigrant's argument corrected by a digital native's tool. Never mind, back to my argument.

## Thesis

Young people think differently from their parents because they were born into a digital world. This is clearly a much hyped claim on which we are today asked to reflect. As Marc Prensky put it:[i]

'Digital natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics *before* their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to "serious" work.'

And most important, those struggling and 'accented' digital immigrants:

'Today's teachers have to learn to communicate in the language and style of their students.'[ii]

## Antithesis

Young people do not think so very differently after all. It's all hype. Children are no more or less sociable, distractible, haphazard or creative in their learning than they ever have been. Certainly I have read no serious scientific research that shows children's brains are changing or being rewired by hours in front of the computer, as Prensky suggests. Let me quote from Professor Usha Goswami, a psychologist at Cambridge University:

'It is now recognized that children think and reason in the *same* ways as adults from early in childhood. Children are less efficient reasoners than adults because they are more easily mislead in their logic by interfering variables such as contextual variables, and because they are worse at inhibiting irrelevant information… The major developmental change during the primary years is the development of self-regulatory skills… Cognitive development is experience-dependent, and older children have had more experiences than younger children.'[iii]

## Synthesis

The arguments so far are too polarised, the dichotomies are too simple.[iv] So, some things are changing in young people's styles of learning and acting, but that doesn't mean they are fundamentally transformed. Rather, it seems that ways in which knowledge is represented and the ways in which pupils prefer to learn are being reshaped by the affordances of the technologies that they engage with and the pedagogic, commercial and peer cultures that contextualise their daily activities. Such changes, however, are occurring on a longer timescale, and far more variably and unevenly, than any claims of a wholesale transformation within the past decade might suggest.

In developing this synthesis, in my short time remaining, I'll make three observations, based on my recently project, UK Children Go Online.[v]

## First

There are lots of things that children and young people can do online, and also lots of things they struggle with. Anyone who has sat down with children in front of a computer knows the ambiguities involved in characterising their competences.

The voice of the digital native: 'We know the computer, we're the generation of computers.' (Focus group, 14-16 yr olds)

A sceptical voice: 'Every time I try to look for something, I can never find it. It keeps coming up with things that are completely irrelevant … and a load of old rubbish really.' (Heather, 17)

And an ambivalent voice: 'I think in comparison to my parents and loads of the older generation I know, I do know more. But I think there are a lot of

people that know a lot more than me… A lot of my friends know a lot… And I learn from them.' (Lorie, aged 17)

Watching children click links quickly or juggle multiple windows does not, necessarily, confirm that they are engaging with online resources wisely or, even, as they themselves may have hoped – we must not be beguiled by their confidence. Moreover, some of the variation in what young people do and don't know, or can and can't do, is partly a matter of socioeconomic inequalities: for poorer children, digital disadvantage may compound social disadvantage. Thus for some, the internet is a rich, engaging and stimulating resource; for others, it remains a sporadic and rather narrowly used one.

**Second**

One crucial reason that young people also struggle with some of the affordances of the digital world is that it is often opaque – hard to read, illegible. Just as in the world of print so too in the digital world, literate readers require legible texts.

I'll set aside the way computers talk to us – of illegal commands, fatal errors, and decisions to abort, while you lose all your recent work.

Instead, consider the ways in which online sites and services are designed either to enable or impede the user's ability to locate them, navigate them, ascertain their reliability, judge their authorship, contribute to them and, of course, learn from them.

An astonishing number of sites, it seems, enable a degree of navigating, downloading and even uploading without their young users gaining the faintest idea who produced the site or why, where the information came from and what happens to anything they may contribute to it.

Ofcom's latest report on children's media literacy, published last month,[vi] found that, for 12-15 year olds in the UK:

Two in three make some kind of reliability check when visiting a new website (do other people recommend it, is it up to date, has it a trust mark, can you confirm the information across sites). This is no more than checked reliability two years ago – and crucially, a large minority – for whom the internet has nonetheless become the first port of call for information and homework – make few if any checks.

Though most use search engines, they are not sure how the results are selected – some think it a matter of usefulness or relevance, others a matter of truthfulness, others a matter of paying to be highly ranked. Working class children appear more confused about this than middle class children.

I nearly put these two points earlier – up with my argument that children don't know quite as much as it may appear. But I think they better illustrate my concern about the legibility of websites. For there is little on the web that guides users – young or old – about how to determine reliability, or how to choose among searched results. They – and we – figure this out for themselves. The result, as I've shown, is both uneven and unequal.

**Finally**

This brings me to my last point. Why am I being so downbeat? Isn't there plenty of evidence for the many and wonderful things young people are doing online – learning, creating, participating, expressing themselves, and more? Yes of course.

Hence my title, 'Enabling media literacy for 'digital natives' – a contradiction in terms?' My purposes in flagging what young people don't know, and don't do online is to encourage the provision of more resources of all kinds – pedagogic, in relation to media and information literacy, and in relation to the better and more legible design of websites. The notion of digital natives, I suggest, is promoted by two constituencies – the first is educationalists, and they have much work to do to enable children to interpret online content critically and creatively; the second is those who provide content to children and, especially, those who market to youth, and they too, I have suggested, have a responsibility to improve the legibility of what they offer so that children can make fair and informed judgements about what exactly they are being offered.

In short, if we celebrate young people's digital literacy too much, providing more resources becomes a lower priority. On the other hand, if we recognise how their knowledge and resources may limit their opportunities, the task ahead becomes clearer.

**Endnotes**

i. Page 2: Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon, 9*(5), 1-2.

ii. *Ibid*, page 4.

iii. Page 1-2: Goswami, U. (2008). *Byron Review on the Impact of New Technologies on Children: A Research Literature: Child Development*

(Prepared for the Byron Review). Cambridge

iv. See Bennett, S., Maton, K., & Kervin, L. (2008). The 'digital natives' debate: A critical review of the evidence. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 39*(5), 775-786. Also, Toledo, C. A. (2007). Digital culture: Immigrants and tourists responding to the natives' drumbeat. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 19*(1), 84-92.

v. See Livingstone, S. (2009). *Children and the Internet: Great Expectations, Challenging Realities*. Cambridge: Polity. Also Livingstone, S., & Bober, M. (2005). *UK Children Go Online: Final Report of Key Project Findings*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.

vi. Ofcom (2009). *Children's Media Literacy Audit: Interim findings*. London: Office of Communications.