What's in a name?

By Dr Ross J. Todd

What's in a name? Generation Y, Millennials, Generation Next, Net Generation, Echo Boomers, Digital Natives, Digital Citizens, The Digital Child, Google Gen, Mobile Generation, Digital Learners, Digital Immigrants, and there is probably more. These generational labels and the persistent use of them, not just by media commentators but by researchers and librarians as well, trouble me somewhat. They are catchy and glossy for sure, conveying a compelling sense of sophistication and competence. My concern is that these terms are often used without careful critical examination and thoughtful scrutiny, and presented and perpetrated as self-evident truths. It's the 'Digital Natives and 'Digital Immigrants' labels and discussion going on within many education and library communities that trouble me the most. The terms fall off the lips of many librarians, school librarians and school educators, from principals down! The terms appear in various public, policy and educational documents. The terms draw an analogy to a country's indigenous populations for whom the local beliefs and religions, languages, and social norms are assumed to be natural and innate, compared with immigrants to a country who often are expected to adapt and assimilate to their newly adopted home.

. . . these terms are often used without careful critical examination and thoughtful scrutiny, and presented and perpetrated as self-evident truths.

The 'Digital Natives and 'Digital Immigrants' terms emerged in the late 1990s, and were particularly promoted in two short papers by Marc Prensky, and from then on, this popular stereotyping has become very pervasive. In two papers (Prensky 2001a, 2001b), Prensky defined a digital native as a person for whom digital technologies already existed when they were born; they have grown up with digital technology such as computers, the Internet, mobile phones and MP3s: ''new' students of today . . . our students today are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet' (2001a, p. 1). He defined a digital immigrant as: "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" (2001a, p. 1). "We have adopted many aspects of the technology, but just like those who learn another language later in life, we retain an 'accent' because we still have one foot in the past. We will read a manual, for example, to understand a program before we think to let the program teach itself. Our accent from the predigital world often makes it difficult for us to effectively communicate with our students" (*Listen to the Natives*, 2005).

In these papers, Prensky makes some astonishing claims:

> *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.* (2001a, p. 1).
>
> *Digital Immigrants typically have very little appreciation for these new skills that the Natives have acquired and perfected through years of interaction and practice*. (2001a, p.2).
>
> *We can say with certainty that their thinking patterns have chang*ed. (2001a, p. 2).

I am concerned (read aghast) at how many people have grabbed on to this work – unquestioning, and uncritical! These statements are drawn from Prensky's paper Part 1. It is a six page article with no references. NO references. There is an unsourced reference to the claim "Different kinds of experiences lead to different brain structures" linked to Dr Bruce D. Perry of Baylor College of Medicine.

His second paper, Prensky Part 2, is a nine page article which seeks to "present evidence" from neurobiology, social psychology, and from studies done on children "using games for learning". Take a look at the references which are the sources of the evidence. Evidence includes many personal communications and private briefings, named but unsourced, for example, "G. Ried Lyon, a neuropsychologist"; books published pre-internet era on the human brain; incomplete references to four peer-reviewed journals such as *Nature; American Journal of Neuroradiology; and American Educational Research Journal. There are several references to popular magazines such a*s *Newsweek, Economist, and Time*; several references to newspaper articles, two surveys (with unspecified details) and four

references to “Inferential Focus Briefing” (a New York consulting firm gathering intelligence for corporate and investor decision-makers)!

So, this whole arena, basically from the get-go, has been built on what I would consider an unscholarly framework. It amazes me that many school librarians quote this work without being critical and careful in their selection of sources – the very competencies that they espouse and aspire for others to develop.

I want to suggest too that “born digital” and “digitally born” are nonsensical expressions. My grandmother had a wooden scrubbing board to wash clothes by hand; I was born in the time of washing machines. Am I ‘born washing machine’ or ‘washingmachinely born’? Nobody is born digital. As with any technology, invention or process that has emerged over the centuries, it is a matter of cultural circumstance, opportunity, access and education.

. . . “born digital” and “digitally born” are nonsensical expressions.

So what we see here is the foundation and perpetration of a discourse presented through a technological determinism lens, and without a substantive intellectual platform. There is no reference to any kind of conceptual, theoretical, or informed contextualization. The binary nature of digital native/digital immigrant terminology – polarisation and lack of careful differentiation – suggests a fluidity, capability, ease with information technology that not all children and young adults have, and a corresponding awkwardness with technology that not all older adults have. We acknowledge this, and then continue to use the terms, often encased in some kind of apology that these terms are appropriate.

. . . somewhat ignoring the important difference between familiarity, access, use, meaningful learning and purposeful application.

Such discourse tends to imbue those who grow up with technology with a special or indeed privileged status, while somewhat ignoring the important difference between familiarity, access, use, meaningful learning and purposeful application. It suggests that young people are somehow now outside the circle of adult influence in their lives, living and learning in a mysterious world where adults have little to contribute, and where the gap between them grows wider. It also devalues, perhaps dismisses, the complex set of relationships between old and new technologies and media that characterise today’s culture of convergence.

This discourse also ignores the fact that much of the digital environment was conceptualised, engineered and developed by the so-called digital immigrants. A high portion of people working in Silicon Valley today are immigrants -- information workers from around the world whose expertise and mastery over these new technologies are allowing American companies to succeed, and for young people and adults to have the rich affordances of this constantly evolving technology. As Saxenian notes in a 1999 report ‘Silicon Valley’s New Immigrant Entrepreneurs’, at this time, *immigrantsaccounted for one-third of the scientific and engineering workforce inSilicon Valley*

. . . much of the digital environment was conceptualised, engineered and developed by the so-called digital immigrants.

As noted scholar Henry Jenkins remarked in a blog posting, such terminology is:

> *a rhetorical device that short circuits thinking about meaningful collaboration across the generations. …As long as we divide the world into digital natives and immigrants, we won't be able to talk meaningfully about the kinds of sharing that occurs between adults and children and we won't be able to imagine other ways that adults can interact with youth outside of these cultural divides*(http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/12/reconsidering_digital_immigran.html).

The polarisation set up in the labels presents the assumption that, according to Rowlands and Nicholas (2008), the ‘Google Generation’ is somehow qualitatively `different’ from what went before: that is, they have different aptitudes, attitudes, expectations and even different communication and information ‘literacies’. Rowlands and Nicholas (2008) examined published literature on the information behaviour and preferences of young people over the past thirty years as well as whether, or to what extent, the same cohortsof older researchers adapt to the immense changes in information provision and information technology taking place around them as they progress through their careers. They found that young people engage in a range of behaviours such as horizontal information seeking – skim view small number of pages then ‘bounce’ out, often never to return; engage in power browsing – scanning rapidly; rapid and limited assessment and retrieval; clicking extensively; use of simple search strategies.

. . . it is a mistake to believe that it is only students' information seeking that has been fundamentally shaped by the digital environment . . .

They concluded, however, that it is a mistake to believe that it is only students' information seeking that has been fundamentally shaped by the digital environment, given that the same has happened to professors, lecturers and practitioners of a different generation. The 'Google Generation' and 'Silver Surfers' are becoming one (Rowlands & Nicholas, 2008, p. 18, p. 21). The exaggeration and stereotyping of generational differences is not supported in the growing body of research being undertaken by the Pew Research Center, and particularly the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Collectively, this research continues to tell us that information technology access and use are not based on generational differences, rather ethnic and socio-economic lines, and that this terminology exaggerates and stereotypes differences between young people and adults.

A couple of other perspectives. Having been involved in teaching qualitative research methods to doctoral students at Rutgers University, I have become considerably interested in the disciplinary arena of cultural studies, and its methodological approaches. Cultural studies emerged in the 1960s as a reaction to elitist notions of culture and meaning. Its aim was to pursue a critical examination of cultural practices and their relationship to power. Cultural studies theorists often examine three dimensions: production/political economy (time-space context of the text), textual analysis and audience reception. Given that Prensky is the founder and Creative Director of Spree Games(a K-12 curricular games company), it is not surprising that he states:

My own preference for teaching Digital Natives is to invent computer games to do the job, even for the most serious content. After all, it's an idiom with which most of them are totally familiar (Prensky, 2001a, p. 4).

From an historical perspective, the terms to me are simply offensive. Historically, the portrayal of natives (as first born in many countries) over time has become synonymous with primitive, violent people, particularly in the context of subjugation by colonial, imperialist nations. The historical and cultural polarisation of immigrants and natives, often immersed in the language of invasion, dispossession, resistance, and the long histories of reconciliation, continue to be quite radio-active topics, particularly in the midst of ongoing debates about immigration in many countries. It concerns me that the digital native/digital immigrant debate perhaps may reinforce these cultural and historical stereotypes.

Let's move on from this terminology.

Let's move on from this terminology. We may be all at different places and spaces, with varied experiences and opportunities. Let's focus on providing the best learning opportunities for these young people who are in our care as educators. We have a major responsibility to share in their engagement and transformation of information in all its forms, across a range of platforms. Through that sharing we can learn together, we can learn from each other, and we can grow together.

References

Bennett, S., Maton, K. & Kervin, L. (2008) 'The 'Digital Natives' Debate: A Critical Review of the Evidence' in *British Journal of Educational Technology* 39 (5), pp. 775-786.

Prensky, M.(2001a) 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants' in *On the Horizon*, 9 (5). Accessed at: http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf.

Prensky, M. (2001b) 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants', Part II: Do They Really Think Differently?' in *On the Horizon*, 9 (6). Accessed at: http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part2.pdf.

Prensky M. (2005) 'Listen to the Natives' in *Educational Leadership*, 63 (4), pp 8-13.

Prensky, M. H. 'Sapiens Digital: From Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom' in *Innovate,* 5 (3), Accessed at: http://www.innovateonline.info/index.php?view=article&id=705.5 (3).

Rowlands, I. & Nicholas, D. (2008) Information Behavior of the Researcher of the Future: A CIBER Briefing Paper, Centre for Information Behavior & the Evaluation of Research, University College of London, Accessed at: www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf.

Saxenian, A. (1999) 'Silicon Valley's New Immigrant Entrepreneurs' Public Policy Institute of California, Accessed at: http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_699ASR.pdf.

Dr Ross J Todd *is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and the Director of the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries (CISSL) at the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Dr Todd is also a member of the* Synergy *Board.*