Digital natives debate

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Childhood in the Digital Age

The 'digital natives' debate: A critical review of the evidence (extracts)

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Abstract

The idea that a new generation of students is entering the education system has excited recent attention amongst educators and education commentators. Termed 'digital natives' or the 'Net generation', these young people are said to have been immersed in technology all their lives, imbuing them with sophisticated technical skills and learning preferences for which traditional education is unprepared. Grand claims are being made about the nature of this generational change and about the urgent necessity for educational reform in response. A sense of impending crisis pervades this debate. However the actual situation is far from clear. In this paper, the authors draw on the fields of education and sociology to analyse the digital natives debate. The paper presents and questions the main claims made about digital natives and analyses the nature of the debate itself. We argue that rather than being empirically and theoretically informed, the debate can be likened to an academic form of a 'moral panic'. We propose that a more measured and disinterested approach is now required to investigate 'digital natives' and their implications for education.

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On arguments for fundamental changes in education

The claim we will now examine is that current educational systems must change in response to a new generation of technically adept young people. Current students have been variously described as disappointed (Oblinger, 2003), dissatisfied (Levin & Arafeh, 2002), and disengaged (Prensky, 2005a). It is also argued that educational institutions at all levels are rapidly becoming outdated and irrelevant, and that there is urgent need to change what is taught and how (Prensky, 2001a; Tapscott, 1998). For example, Tapscott (1999) urges educators and authorities to '[g]ive students the tools, and they will be the single most important source of guidance on how to make their schools relevant and effective places to learn' (p. 11). Without such a transformation, commentators warn, we risk failing a generation of students and our institutions face imminent obsolescence.

However, there is little evidence of the serious disaffection and alienation among students claimed by commentators. Downes' (2002) study of primary school children (5–12 years old) found that home computer use was more varied than school use and enabled children greater freedom and opportunity to learn by doing. The participants did report feeling limited in the time they were allocated to use computers at school and in the way their use was constrained by teacher-directed learning activities. Similarly, Levin and Arafeh's study (2002) revealed students' frustrations at their school Internet use being restricted, but crucially also their recognition of the school's *in loco parentis* role in protecting them from inappropriate material. Selwyn's (2006) student participants were also frustrated that their freedom of use was curtailed at school and 'were well aware of a digital disconnect but displayed a pragmatic acceptance rather than the outright alienation from the school that some commentators would suggest' (p. 5).

This evidence points to differences in the ways young people use technology inside and out of school and suggests that school use of the Internet can be frustrating, but there is little basis to conclude that these differences are causing widespread and profound disengagement in learning. Rather, they tell us that technology plays a different role in students' home and school lives. This view is supported by research in post-compulsory education indicating that students are not clamouring for greater use of technology (Kvavik et al., 2004; Lohnes & Kinzer, 2007). These studies demonstrate the need to be much more careful about the views we ascribe to young people about technology.

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In summary, calls for a dramatic shift from text-based to multimedia educational resources, the increased use of computer games and simulations, and a move to constructivist approaches that emphasise student knowledge creation, problem solving, and authentic learning (Brown, 2000; Oblinger, 2004; Tapscott, 1999) based solely on the supposed demands and needs of a new generation of digital natives must be treated with caution. This is not to discount other arguments made for changes to education that are based on theory and supported by clear research evidence, but we suggest that the same standards must be met before radical change is made on the basis of the digital native idea.