The 'digital native' and 'digital immigrant': a dangerous opposition

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Introduction

The distinction between the digital 'native' and the digital 'immigrant' has become a commonly-accepted trope within higher education and its broader cultural contexts, as a way of mapping and understanding the rapid technological changes which are re-forming our learning spaces, and ourselves as subjects in the digital age. Young people have grown up with computers and the internet, the argument goes, and are naturally proficient with new digital technologies and spaces, while older people will always be a step behind/apart in their dealings with the digital. What is more, young learners' immersion in digital technologies creates in them a radically different approach to learning, one which is concerned above all with speed of access, instant gratification, impatience with linear thinking and the ability to multi-task. Teachers, we are told, have a duty to adapt their methods to this new way of learning – are required, in fact, to re-constitute themselves according to the terms of the 'native' in order to remain relevant and, presumably, employable (for example Prensky 2001, Oblinger 2003, Long 2005, Barnes et al 2007, Thompson 2007).

It is no doubt the case that when we work in internet environments, we work with technological spaces which are highly volatile, and which offer us new and potentially radical ways of communicating, representing and constituting knowledge and selfhood. Within such potentially disorienting spaces, the rhetoric of the digital 'native' allows us to structure and contain our understanding of their implications, positioning young learners as subjects 'at one' with the digital environment in a way which older users – teachers, 'immigrants' – can never be.

The 'digital native' discourse (sometimes nuanced by alternative terminologies - 'Net Generation' (Oblinger 2003), 'Digital Generation', 'Technological Generation' (Monereo 2004), 'Millenials' (Howe and Strauss 2000) and so on) pervades our discussions of the challenges of teaching current generations of students, despite its over-simplistic reduction of our understanding to a raw binary opposition. Serious critique of this discourse is long overdue. Much is written against Prensky's formulation in the blogosphere (for example, Sandford 2006, McKenzie 2007) but there is comparatively little published literature examining its assumptions in a sustained way.

Exceptions are those studies which highlight the way in which our categorisation of the 'digital native' works to homogenise diverse and varied groups of individuals, using generational categorisation to over-determine student characteristics and relations to technology (for example Littleton et al 2005). Our understanding, according to one commentator, should be 'situated in diversity rather than dichotomy' (Owen 2004). Krause (2007), for example, reports on a study of first year students in Australian universities, finding that their experiences and understandings of technology vary significantly according to socio-economic background, age and gender – the 'assumption of homogeneity is misleading and dangerous', she concludes (p138).

Other studies countering the 'native' rhetoric focus on the way in which it over-states the rift between generations in terms of their levels of immersion in technology. Owen (2004) for example, quoting NTIA (1999), notes that the highest levels of usage of the internet at home in the US is among 35-44 year olds. A more recent study (JISC, 2007) notes that, while use of internet technology, particularly for social networking, is almost ubiquitous among 16-18 year olds, this does not translate into a desire among this group for more technologically-focused approaches to teaching and learning at university. On the contrary, 'fundamentally, this age group suspects that if all learning is mediated through technology, this will diminish the value of the learning' (p.30).

So, while empirical data is emerging which questions some of the blanket claims made in the growing body of literature which takes the native/immigrant binary as its starting point, it is still hard to come by writing which challenges the fundamental assumptions implicit in this discourse from a theoretical perspective. Our view is that this is a discourse which – despite its clear limitations – is becoming

internalised by many in higher education, and is being too readily permitted to structure our discussions of the effects of technology on teachers, learners and universities. This paper, then, offers a series of theoretical perspectives which aim to problematise the discourse, highlighting its basis in the view of higher education as a commodity, its consistency with managerialist agendas, its tendency to marginalise the role of the teacher, the violence of its hierarchical oppositions, its essentialising dynamic, and the underlying discrimination implicit in its metaphors.

Hierarchical violence and the place of the teacher

> In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful co-existence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically, etc), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy. (Derrida 1981, p41)

A useful place to start re-thinking, if not deconstructing, the native-immigrant opposition is to consider the series of binary oppositions which depend upon, and cluster around it. Drawing on the terminologies evident in the large popular literature, and the much smaller academic literature on this theme, we might extract the following:

native	immigrant
student	teacher
fast	slow
young	old
future	past, or 'legacy'
multi-tasking	logical, serial thinking
image	text
playful	serious
looking forward	looking backward
digital	analogue
action	knowledge
constant connection	isolation

We would argue that the term 'occupying the commanding position' (ibid.) in this opposition is that of the 'native' (the 'future'), with the 'immigrant' (the 'past') taking the subordinate position. What we then see here is a structurally embedded de-privileging of the role of the teacher, aligned with the 'immigrant' position – the old, the past, the slow, the backward-looking, the association with modes of knowledge construction becoming 'obsolete', and dependent on analogue (print) technologies.

The literature does, in fact, regularly posit a one-way determining relationship between the technology and the role of the teacher or institution – technological change is 'forcing educational institutions to deal with a new population of learners' (Barnes et al 2007, p1), and 'if Digital Immigrant educators really want to reach Digital Natives – ie all their students – they will have to change' (Prensky 2001, p6). Those who do not are 'just dumb (and lazy)' (ibid).

The teacher here, therefore, is placed in a position which is both subordinate and impossible, within a discourse which situates her as both unable to change, and as being forced to change in order to remain a competent, employable professional. On the one hand, she is informed that she is determined, by her age, to have a particular, sub-adequate relationship with technology based in her status as 'immigrant'. On the other, she is told that she must adapt her teaching methods and alter her position as subject within the digital in order to continue to function as a professional – to 'reach' and teach upcoming hordes of students who are determined differently, as 'natives'. An impossible barrier is constructed between teacher and students, which both cannot be, and must be, breached by the teacher through her responsibility to change.

So this discourse has a paradox at its heart – a deeply essentialising vision of selfhood as determined by generational positioning (the 'immigrant' can never *become* 'native' – 'You and I are "digital immigrants" and we will never be as good at "digital" as they are' (Long 2005)) is promoted alongside an imperative to change, to engage with a technology-driven professional development agenda which 'demands nothing less than an entirely new worker identity' (McWilliam 2002, p292). As McWilliam has argued, such professional development agendas, based in a 'deficit' model of the developee's own state of knowledge, constructs new and unequal power relations between developers and

academics, and risks eliminating the space for 'radical doubt' needed in order question the assumptions upon which such agendas are built (ibid, p298). In the native/immigrant opposition, teachers are equally without agency and in a position where they are forced to perform as active agents in order to maintain their viability as employable, relevant, 'quality' (ibid.) academics.

The discourse of the market
McWilliam also draws our attention to the basis of 'professional development' agendas in an enterprise culture within higher education, of which skills development in the use of technology is a cornerstone. Clegg et al too (2003) have highlighted the way in which e-learning has been constructed as determined by the unquestionable 'needs' of globalisation and the marketisation of higher education, while Fairclough (1993) has demonstrated how higher education has been colonised by a 'marketized' public discourse which emerges across its promotional literature and its various constructions of academic and student roles.

We can track within the 'digital native' literature and discourse an alignment with this vision of higher education as market driven and determined by a culture of enterprise. The need for institutions and individual academics to change (to become more 'digital') is regularly justified by referral to student 'needs' which come to stand as proxy for market 'needs':

> What do the differing learning preferences and views of technology of the 'new students' mean for colleges and universities? There might be few implications if students were passive consumers and did not use their 'purchasing power'… Colleges and universities may find that understanding – and meeting the expectations of – the 'new students' is important to their competitiveness. (Oblinger 2003, p42)

There is little evidence, in fact, that students *do* desire more technologically-driven approaches to teaching and learning (McWilliam 2002), and research demonstrates that they often resist and themselves de-privilege the modes of identity construction and teaching associated with e-learning (JISC 2007, Bayne 2005). Across the literature, we see the 'needs' of the 'native' – for instant access, for customer-service orientated provision, for flexible, modularised approaches – used as justification for the perpetuation of a particular, commodified view of how higher education should be. Unsurprisingly, the 'native' discourse – which constructs the teacher as redeemable only through their active engagement with a development agenda – is itself one which originates with, and is primarily perpetuated by, developers themselves. Academics within this model have a duty to constitute themselves as entrepreneurial, flexible, responsive and 'switched on'. Oblinger, for example, gives us an illuminating instance of 'good practice' in meeting the needs of the 'native':

> In many cases, customer service is more than a preference – it is a prerequisite to retention and effective learning…. Rio Salado College has adapted its approach to ensure that learners have the service they need. A 'beep-a-tutor' program, available seven days a week, guarantees students that tutors will respond to their question within one hour. With beepers, the tutors receive questions no matter where they are. (Oblinger 2003, p42)

It is an indicative vision of the effect of 'native' (market) 'needs' on the role of the teacher – mobile, electronically 'tagged', infinitely responsive, quantitatively performance-measured, perpetually 'on call'. We need, it seems, to think more critically about the implications of too thoughtlessly 'buying-in' to the native/immigrant discourse, to consider more mindfully what its implications are for the ways in which teacher, student and higher education are constituted and understood.

A racialised discourse and problematic metaphor
In the current political climate, talk of immigrants and natives inevitably evokes complexities and anxieties around migration, integration, and racial and cultural difference in Western society. For example, Prensky's knowing asides ('like all immigrants', p2, 'everything we know about cultural migration', p3) and his unfailingly negative descriptions of immigrants ('heavily accented, unintelligible foreigners', p2) – though attributed to the 'natives' on whose behalf he claims to speak – depend for their comprehensibility and effectiveness on a culturally specific, and racist, understanding of the character of immigrants:

> the discourse of postwar ideological legitimation of racist practices is a complex rhetorical exercise that seeks to establish the superiority of one's own culture on the basis of 'principal

otherness' in which 'presumed biological-genetic differences in the post-war period are replaced by differences between cultures, nations or religions represented as homogeneous entities' (Van der Vilke, 2003: 313). (Charteris-Black 2006, p566)

To extend the metaphor, Prensky's immigrants are constructed as asylum seekers – unable to remain where they were, barely tolerated or openly ridiculed where they must go, ill-suited and unprepared for life in the new country, sentimental and idealistic about the old: "Not-so-smart (or not-so-flexible) immigrants spend most of their time grousing about how good things were in the "old country" (2001, p3).

The terms 'digital immigrant' and 'digital native' are now in such common usage that it is easy to forget that they are metaphors which, while evocative, can fix us into certain habits of thought. These metaphors carry with them some hidden assumptions. If we ask "native of where?", we begin to see that the metaphor demands a territory, a nation-state or a landmass. Indeed, Prensky describes the digital as a "ubiquitous environment" (2001, p1) where there are, at most, either more or less fluent ways of being within the digital.

When the digital becomes equated with geography in this way, then we should ask: "what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself?" (Butler 1993, p28). With no meaningful 'outside' to the digital, and therefore a minimal amount of agency or choice about whether or how to create or affect digital spaces, the digital native and immigrant alike are stranded in a world not of their own making. It simply *is*, determining and beyond the influence or control of individual learners and teachers.

A sense of inevitability and powerlessness around this particular construction of the digital perhaps goes some way to explaining the relatively uncritical adoption of e-learning by some educators, and its violent but equally uncritical rejection by others. What point is there in thinking things through if we have no choice but to follow wherever the 'natives' lead? In addition to the marketised nature of the discourse already discussed, these land-based metaphors may have a role to play in our understanding of the web as commodified:

> If metaphors selectively structure experience, what consequence does the 'cyberspace as place' metaphor have for our experience of the internet? Some legal scholars have argued that treating cyberspace as a place had led to the propertisation of the internet, with ominous results. (Olson 2005, p12)

Other metaphors: the VLE as 'walled garden', for example, and the notion of the public web as the 'wild west', also invite particular kinds of understandings of safety and risk, ownership and belonging which are rooted in an offline experience we may wish to avoid replicating in our educational projects.

Sandford (2006) claims a more active role for an older generation, suggesting first that rather than 'immigrant', 'digital colonist' would be a better way to describe a generation who were and are the creators of many of the infrastructures the younger generation appropriates. He goes on to reject the land metaphor entirely, arguing in favour of a less determining position toward technology: 'there is no brave new world, no new land to conquer: whatever we have, we built ourselves and we can continue to shape ourselves' (online). De Saille makes a similar claim, saying that:

> such discourses… code every expansion of the Web into a perpetual act of conquest over a terrain which simply does not exist, either as an imaginary universe or as a material network, until it is created. (De Saille 2006, p5)

To reframe this for the discussion at hand: the technologies that mediate online learning and teaching do not spring up from nowhere, and to abandon the possibility (responsibility?), as learners and teachers, of shaping the technologies we use (which will inevitably shape us in turn) is to leave ourselves at the mercy of those whose interests may be quite different from ours:

> Once a new territory has been colonized, it is handed over to business interests to loot; and the worst elements of the West are posted there to administer and civilize the natives. (Sardar 2000, p733)

In conclusion

Our argument is not that changing media environments have no effect on the way in which we are constituted as subjects, and as learners and teachers. Similarly, each new generation of students asks us continually to re-think our understanding of the project and purpose of education, both online and off. Rather, we argue against the reduction of our understanding of these issues to a simplistic binary which contains within itself the structural de-privileging of the teacher, a marketised vision of higher education, a racialised and divisive understanding of student/teacher relationships and an associated series of metaphors which 'write out' the possibility of learner and teacher agency in the face of technological change. As teachers, developers and researchers in higher education, we need to become more critical of a discourse which otherwise promises to over-determine our future understanding of the complex relationships between teacher, learner, technology and higher education.

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