Chapter 9

Are You Visiting or Do You Live Here?
How Novice Teachers Use Social Media to Form “Secret Communities” of Peer Mentorship and Professional Practice

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ABSTRACT

In order for the twenty-first century teacher to acquire the necessary professional skills to effectively instruct today’s digitally native students, institutional constraints must be lifted such that the institution does not impede the ability of the pedagogue to grow beyond what is expected to that which is instructionally transformational. After examining current trends in teacher preparation programs, there is a noticeable gap between the digital literacy of faculty and the digital literacy of students. Because of this deficiency, digitally literate novice teachers have looked to social media to form their own “secret” communities of peer mentorship and professional development external to their school and school district settings. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the literature related to how novice teachers form these secret communities, how residency in the community is established, and how visitor participation (i.e., veteran teachers and school administrators) is perceived within the community.

SECTION 1: DIGITAL NATIVES VS. DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS

Do They Exist? The Myths and Realities of Teaching “Digital Natives”

While calls for the transformation of 21st century teacher training programs to be more reflective of the modern student’s digital literacy skills, it is important to situate this need in the definitional terms of “digital natives” and “digital immigrants.” Before postulating that teacher candidates are in need of a set of culturally responsive digital literacy skills to effectively instruct the 21st Century student, a consensus

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must be reached as to whether this need actually exists. There are certain technological moments in our national history that we tend to associate as being “revolutionary” – for example, the automobile, the radio, television, and personal computing to name just a few. As such, one of the most noted changes that occurred as a result of the significant industrial changes at the turn of the 20th Century was not only a change in technological innovations but a dramatic change in the vocabulary that was used to identify and describe new ways of learning and communicating using such innovations. While there was no nomenclature specifically ascribed to the “new” set of learners growing up during these technological iterations, certain pedagogic vocabulary changed, nonetheless, to address the transformations in education reflective of an educational system that was becoming less agrarian based and more focused around advances in science and industry.

However, it was not until the turn of the 21st century that a specific label was applied to students born after 1980 at the precipice of the personal computing and mobile revolution. Here, it is important to emphasize that students born prior to 1980 were exposed to varying technologies as well, but a specific classification was not postulated until 2001 by Marc Prensky. Prensky (2001) labeled students born after 1980 as digital natives and went on to suggest that, unlike previous generations, this group of students is very sophisticated in their use of technology to the point that they have different cognitive capacities and differentiated learning needs. He further went on to dub learners born pre-1980 as digital immigrants and theorized that their lack of exposure to such devices as cellular phones, the Internet, and personal computing positions them at a disadvantage when interacting with the digital native population. While Prensky’s terminologies have been widely adopted in academia (Waycott, J., Bennett, S., Kennedy, G., Dalgarno, B., & Gray, K., 2010), the question must be posited if his definition oversimplifies the complexities of how today’s students apply their digital literacy skills (Margaryn, A., Littlejohn, A., & Vojt, G., 2011).

Adding to the definitional issues surrounding who should be identified as a digital native is the lack of empirical research-based evidence that such a generation of students actually exists. The studies that have been conducted are problematic from the stand point of considering what variables should be taken into consideration when selecting participants and gathering data. For example, what recent studies fail to take into account are the personal variables involved in a student’s technology use – these variables may include such things as access to technologies, educational background, and even socioeconomic status (Margaryn, A., Littlejohn, A., & Vojt, G., 2011). Further complicating the definitional arena is the suggestion in some studies that, while students use different technologies for different educational and social purposes, those uses may not translate to classroom practice. Waycott, et al. (2010) suggest that students tend not to intermingle the technologies they use for personal use versus technologies they associate with classroom instruction further complicating the conclusions of studies that have suggested that the digital native learns best only when immersed in an instructional setting that maximizes currently trending technologies.

Thus, why is it important to this writing to discuss the validity of Prensky’s (2001) original distinction between the digital native and digital immigrant? In order to arrive at a justification for a pedagogic paradigm shift driven by currently trending technologies, there must be some consensus in basic terminology moving forward. Taking into consideration the fact that the empirical evidence of the true existence of a digital divide among so-called natives and immigrants is still emerging, for the purposes of the writing here, the postulation will be that there is a distinction. As such, Prensky’s terminology will be referenced while keeping in mind that the definition is problematic and does not necessarily account
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