

Chapter 6

The Digital Generation and Web 2.0: E-Learning Concern or Media Myth?

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the Digital or Millennium Generation and Web 2.0 is investigated focusing on how post-secondary students just entering American colleges and universities use the interactive or read-write web popularly known as “Web 2.0” and what implications their use of those web sites has for E-learning. Central to the investigation is addressing the question of whether the Digital Generation and Web 2.0 concepts describe actual realities or exist merely as popular media constructions. The basic thrust of the chapter will be the position that the Digital Generation does not function as a monolithic group, but that the use of Web 2.0 technologies is related to developmental stages and life situation.

INTRODUCTION

Among the many dimensions of the burgeoning web-based distance education movement in American education is the concept of a digital generation comprised of students who have grown-up exposed to and using digital computing technologies (Carlson, 2006; Hird, 2000; Johnson, 1997; Livingstone & Bovill, 1999; Rushkoff, 1998). By virtue of this experiential background, members of this generation are said to have developed a level of comfort

with and expertise in using those technologies that prior generations do not have (Gibbons, 2007; Gros, 2003; Oblinger, 2003; 2006; Snyder, 1998; Tapscott, 1998; Turkle, 1995). Dubbed “digital natives” by Prensky, these students are contrasted with their teachers and with prior generations whom are often designated “digital immigrants” (2001b, 2001c).

A number of common characteristics are ascribed to these digital natives who comprise the digital generation (Frاند, 2000; Gros, 2003; Tapscott; 1998; Prensky, 2001a; 2006). Among these are:

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- **Tech savvy:** Digital natives grow-up with a computer mouse in their hand and learn to use and gain expertise with digital computing technologies with ease.
- **New literacy:** They are more comfortable with screen-based learning than traditional 19th/20th century, text-based educational methodologies.
- **Multi-taskers:** They thrive in situations having many simultaneous multimedia inputs.
- **Learner control:** Digital natives want to be “in charge” of their own learning rather than follow a universal, “one-size fits all” curriculum.
- **Information rich:** They are accustomed to having a multitude of information at their fingertips.
- **Digital consumers:** Digital natives are pervasive consumers of digital media and portable electronic devices are essential to their lives.
- **Connected:** Digital natives are constantly in contact with and draw support from others, and are more comfortable working in groups than alone.

Though much has been said about these digital natives in popular literature and the press, the concept has also received attention from serious scholars as well (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Negroponte, 1995; Papert, 1996; Valentine & Holloway, 2002). The American Library Association (2007), in an editorial in an official publication, has gone as far as saying “people born after 1980 are very different from those of us who were born earlier. . . . There is some evidence that they actually think and process information differently as a result (p. 28).”

Other writers question the claims made about digital natives and analyze the nature of the debate itself. For instance, Bennett, Maton, and Kervin, (2007) argue that “rather than being empirically and theoretically informed, the debate can be likened to an academic form of a ‘moral panic’ .

. . . a more measured and disinterested approach is now required to investigate ‘digital natives’ and their implications for education (p. 1).”

In addition to the threat of a having to cope with a generation of students for whom established educational practice may be inadequate, educators also have to cope with the advent of a new trend in technology—Web 2.0. For many in higher education, learning to cope with the old Internet is still posing a challenge and the specter of a new Internet looming over them is disconcerting. What is even more disturbing is the idea that the two are linked, forming a post-modern double-whammy that threatens to knock higher education out for the count. Before mass panic sets in, however, it would be prudent to examine each of these claims to see whether there is, indeed, cause for concern and, if concern is called for, to begin the process of adjusting instructional practice to address those concerns. Accordingly, this chapter examines the twin concepts of the digital generation and Web 2.0 and the relationship each has with the other to form some preliminary hypotheses concerning those concepts. Specifically, this chapter seeks to do three things:

- Critically examine the idea of a digital generation to derive a better understanding of its ontological base and identify those characteristics that may inform E-learning practices;
- Identify the Internet technologies and functional characteristics that comprise Web 2.0; and
- Compare the notions of the digital generation and Web 2.0 using multiple data sources to determine whether there are any usage patterns that indicate a relationship between the two that can inform E-learning educational strategies.

Integral to this examination is a report on the results of preliminary research by the author directly addressing the use of Web 2.0 technologies

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