Beyond the myths of the digital native

Tiffany Wycoff
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As schools look to blended learning as a solution to personalize and positively impact student achievement, the need to train and support teachers has become blatantly clear. Thus, districts and schools have allocated scarce resources to the process of onboarding and supporting teachers as new tools and platforms are introduced. However, school leaders and teachers often fail to recognize the need to similarly onboard and support students into new digital environments, instead trusting the inherent technological competencies of the "digital native" student.

In his 2001 essay “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”, Marc Prensky coined the term digital native to describe the generation of students from kindergarten to college who had grown up with technology. Prensky argued that immersion in “computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging” radically changed the way students think and process information, thus, requiring different methodology and content from their digital immigrant teachers⁴. In the decade and a half since the divide between digital native and immigrant was defined, the assumption that students inherently understand the digital world better than their immigrant teachers has endured. Though there is some validity to this assumption, it is overly generalized in both scope and population. As educators, we must recognize and debunk the critical myths about digital natives and immigrants so that the students can succeed in a blended learning environment.

Myth #1: All students are digital natives

Even in a culture of digital abundance, it is erroneous to assume all students have grown up with technology. Though technology pervades the culture of developed countries, so does the digital divide between children who have access to technology and those who do not. An estimated one-third (31.4 percent) of U.S. households, or 5 million families with school-aged children, do not have a high-speed internet connection². District leaders confronting the digital divide head on, are focusing first on channeling resources to open access. For example, in Columbus, Mississippi, Superintendent Dr. Philip Hickman returned $800,000 worth of textbooks purchased by his predecessor to purchase student technology. Of the digital access issue, Dr. Hickman says, “Our children of poverty have less of an opportunity to have access to information, to technology, to experiences that can shape a student’s mind frame and career ambitions. Technology can be a great equalizer.”
Dr. Hickman and others also recognize the lack of digital access means, students do not enter the digital academic environment with the same skills as some of their peers. Thus, it is important for school leaders and teachers to assess what students need. As Dr. Hickman points out, “help students understand how to use technology—to explore, research and gain information to broaden their horizons, and not just play games.”

There are also partnerships outside of schools attempting to bridge the digital divide and broaden digital inclusion for populations of lower access. One such partnership is in place between NY Foundling, Knowledge House, and Sprint whose 2016 Digital Inclusion Summit provided community education, Chromebooks, and 5-year WiFi access for youth and their foster parents within the New York City foster system. While there is a great effort to open digital access to students, it is important we implement blended learning models with this issue in mind until the gap has been closed.

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2 http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/the-numbers-behind-the-broadband-homework-gap/

Myth #2: Students can apply their social and entertainment tech knowledge to academic settings

As mobile devices and one-to-one laptop programs have been integrated into more classrooms, teachers have assumed a certain level of competency even from students with full access to similar digital tools outside of school. However, the platforms children use recreationally are very different from those of an academic setting. This is the generation of instant message, not email. Social media tools most often used by students are not just instant, but ephemeral. On these platforms, users communicate via images, videos, gifs, emoticons, and acronyms more often than sentences or even words.
The mode of use also differs in and out of school. Outside class, children tend to view technology as a form of entertainment or socialization. While their generational comfort level with technology may allow them to tinker with new apps and learn interfaces quickly, the skills they develop tend to be oriented around the areas of most use - fun and friends. There are certainly crossover skills, but students need assistance in transferring social skills (i.e. group messaging) to similar academic skills (participation on a discussion board). Whether online or offline, the same distinction exists between socialization and collaboration. Students play with friends outside school, yet teachers know it is still critical to teach and model how to collaborate in the classroom effectively.

Beyond the crossover communication skills, there are some competencies students typically do not acquire from recreational use of technology. Out of school, students rarely have reason to conduct academic research, collect and analyze data, create presentations or infographics, organize online files, complete and submit work to a dropbox, add a calendar reminder, or even format a document. When we incorrectly assume competency in using one of these digital tools, students can feel disoriented and less likely to succeed in demonstrating their academic knowledge within it.

Schools can help students feel comfortable and confident by introducing one new tool at a time and providing training and practice opportunities. It is also helpful to spend time setting clear expectations for interacting within the platform and generating a class contract for responsible peer communication.

2 http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/the-numbers-behind-the-broadband-homework-gap/

Myth #3: Students naturally like technology, so will like learning through technology

Middle and high school students transitioning from a traditional model of learning to a blended environment must make the same mindset shift as their teachers and be engaged as stakeholders in the change process. At a young age, the majority of students are conditioned to believe being a good student involves listening to one’s teacher and doing as one is told to in the classroom. The definition of good teaching that emerges from this modeling is teacher-centered rather than student-driven. In a blended classroom, the teacher role transitions from the sage-on-the-stage model to guide-on-the-side. Take a flipped classroom, for example, where a student’s experience moves from listening to the teacher in class to watching videos at home and working in class while the teacher circulates the room to help students get unstuck in their application of the concepts learned via video.
In the mind of a student adjusting to the change, that can easily translate to “My teacher used to teach me, and now he doesn’t.”

Teachers benefit from taking into consideration other factors which may impact student perception of blended learning. In their 2008 report “A Study of Student Perceptions in a Blended Learning Environment Based on Different Learning Styles,” researchers Akkoyunlu and Soylu found that student perception of blended learning varied according to learning style. In the study of undergraduate learners who took the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, those in the diverger group presented a higher need for emotional and social exchange, and subsequently a less favorable perception of blended learning⁴. Moreover, it may also be the case that some students simply do not like technology as much as teachers assume they do.

Taking the time to build understanding and buy-in from students can mitigate unexpected resistance from this group of stakeholders. One way teachers can accomplish this goal is through class discussions which bring student assumptions about learning to the surface in order to challenge them, or in some cases, to build their expectations into the implementation plan. Inviting students to participate in the planning process or engaging them as feedback partners in the selection of learning platforms can be similarly empowering in the effort to generate positive blended learning perception and culture among students. Finally, teachers can help make the transition smoother by selecting a blended learning model most proximal to the current mode of learning. This will provide a more iterative path for both teachers and students in transforming the learning environment and provide for early victory moments as students experience success rather than frustration.

Myth #4: The limitations of the digital immigrants

Just as the assumptions we make about Digital Natives can lead to unnecessary roadblocks along the blended learning journey, so can those we make of ourselves as digital immigrants. The scores of teachers who have paved the way as digital literacy and blended learning trailblazers have defied the myth of the immigrant and found innovative ways to transform learning through technology. They have done so despite the digital divide or lack of classroom resources, developing a “hacking mindset” to empower learning by using technology to its most transformational end.

As a digital immigrant group, we are more technologically fluent than we may have felt when digital devices first made their way into the classrooms. The discomfort felt by adults in 2001, when Prensky framed the generational divide between digital natives and immigrants, has significantly dissipated as mobile technology and social media have become thoroughly embedded in our culture across generations. Further, more digital native teachers have entered the field in the past decade. By recognizing the power of our own digital fluency, we as educators can model the academic use of technology and responsible digital interaction for our students as we migrate with them towards the future of learning.
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Biography

Tiffany Wycoff

Tiffany Wycoff is an innovative educational leader and author with a specialization in blended learning and change leadership. She was an early adopter of blended learning at the K-12 level, teaching and leading in both online and face-to-face settings. Tiffany is the co-author of the bestselling book, Blended Learning in Action: a Practical Guide Toward Sustainable Change and a Co-Founder of Learning Innovation Catalyst, an organization dedicated to helping teachers transform their classrooms through blended learning design and innovative support. She holds a B.A. in Elementary Education and an MA in Educational Leadership from Florida Atlantic University, and an Executive MS in Technology Management from Columbia University. Tiffany writes an educational leadership blog at www.TeachOntheEdge.com, contributes thought leadership to BLinAction.com, and is active on Twitter @TeachOnTheEdge.
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FUJITSU AMERICA, INC.
Address: 1250 East Arques Avenue Sunnyvale, CA 94085-3470, U.S.A.
Telephone: 800 831 3183 or 408 746 6000
Website: [www.fujitsu.com/us](http://www.fujitsu.com/us)
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