

Review

Teaching digital natives: Partnering for real learning

Marc Prensky (2010)
Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin

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Prensky introduced us to the “digital natives” in 2001, claiming that the generation of students born in the 1980s and the 1990s are so steeped in the use of digital technologies that they think, act and are motivated differently to older generations. Digital natives have been also described as “millenials” (Howe and Strauss, 2003) and members of the “net-generation”(Tapscott, 1998). These labels, along with their technological determinism, have polarised debates in education about adapting teaching approaches to different learning styles and ‘new’ media technologies. Those critical of Prensky highlight his “weak empirical and theoretical foundations” (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008, p.777) and similar charges might be laid against his latest book, *Teaching digital natives: Partnering for real learning* (2010). However, I find that Prensky writes with a practical and experiential integrity that grounds his latest pedagogical offering.

Teaching digital natives offers a pragmatic approach to reframing the use of technology in both teachers’ and students’ experiences of learning. Prensky’s ‘partnering’ model offers a way for teachers to transform mobile phones, social networks, video games and other digital and new media technologies from being the ‘enemies’ of education into potential allies by incorporating them within formal processes of knowledge formation. The partnership pedagogy encourages teachers to allow students to use whatever technologies at their disposal, and actively discourages teachers from using the same technologies themselves, except to model appropriate behaviours and strategies. What sounds like a remarkably simple approach is actually quite complex to achieve, and while Prensky’s book is unlikely to shift the opinions of those who maintain that lectures, exams, essays and the ‘walled gardens’ of learning management systems are the pinnacle of the educational technology experience, for those seeking to gain their students’ attention, respect, and that near mythical element of ‘engagement’, there are some helpful core strategies to be found in this book.

For those educators who have been at the bleeding edge of innovation in the use of digital technologies in the classroom, Prensky’s latest volume also offers some valuable reminders and structures for evaluating and expanding our own progress. The approach described in *Teaching digital natives* is largely aimed at primary and secondary teachers, but also includes pertinent strategies for those in the higher education sector. Although I still maintain reservations about the broad claims Prensky makes about ‘digital natives’, and was initially sceptical of a book that is

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framed around teaching these ‘digizens’, I recognize that much of Prensky’s partnering model is already at work in my own pedagogical philosophy and have found a series of parallels in Prensky’s account to my own teaching experiences.

Prensky’s approach has many labels – for instance, constructivism, student-centered learning, or project-based learning – but none of these fully encompass the partnering framework. Prensky makes a number of important distinctions but he also overlooks (or reduces) key problems. The strengths of the partnering model include: considering students as researchers; a dedication to a Socratic methodology of well prepared ‘guided’ questions; a focus on individual student’s interest and passion; and strategies for overcoming anxieties about the use of technology in the classroom. Teachers, he argues, should not be using interactive whiteboards, blogs or *Facebook* to make information available to students. In the partnering model it is the students’ job to use the technology to answer well prepared questions and engage in scaffolded learning debates, exercises and research projects. Institutional budgets are also not an issue, as the model is not concerned with the specifics of the technology in use. Instead, Prensky recommends using any and all technologies that are readily available to the individual students in particular contexts, which might include laptops, game consoles, social networking sites, games, or phones – it doesn’t matter, as the emphasis should be on *how* the technology is used to encourage critical knowledge formation and desired learning skills, rather than requiring the teacher to be an expert in the use of that technology.

The focus in the partnering model is on providing situations in which students can acquire the ‘verbs’, as Prensky describes the “skills mandated in the curriculum” (p.92), and which include traditional learning practices and literacies, from thinking effectively and critically to communicating and negotiating content and context. Teachers focus on connecting learning tasks to the ‘verbs’ and allow the students themselves to decide what ‘nouns’ (the hardware and software tools) they will call on to do the learning, such as Web 2.0 sites, PowerPoint presentations, Wikipedia, and so on. Prensky’s partnering model therefore shifts the location of learning: teachers are no longer required to provide the answers up front for their students, in lectures and talks, but are required to propose well formulated ‘guiding questions’ and provide an environment for students to get on with learning “in whatever ways they prefer, as long as they are in pursuit of the necessary and required goals” (p.17).

In Prensky’s model, students don’t take notes, they become researchers, while teachers don’t become experts in technologies, they observe, learn and collaborate with their students. Being an educator in this model is not about being an expert in the latest developments in *YouTube*, *iPads* or *World of Warcraft*, but about being ready to coach, guide and support students, connecting their individual interests to a collective learning potential. Knowing your students, tapping into their interests and allowing them to introduce their own motivation to the classroom is therefore crucial. This can be as simple, Prensky says, as changing the room layout and thereby the relationship dynamics in the classroom, or of making learning ‘real’ – that is, about students everyday lives, interests and networks – and providing pathways to connect their experience directly to the curriculum.

I have three main issues with Prensky’s model, where I think he has not developed the most effective strategies for educators to help implement this proposed partnering. Chapter 7 serves as a useful (if unattractively formatted) glossary of the ‘nouns’ of technologies and tools that can be of use, but Prensky does not offer a similarly exhaustive methodology for integrating the ‘verbs’ within various curricula. The approach to assessment in the partnering methodology is also under-developed. Suggested assessment strategies like the *ipsative* method (selecting students’ personal best) and peer assessment are great, but when it comes to the production of things like wikis, online video, blogs or podcasts as assessment tasks, especially in a

higher education setting, it is often less crucial to assess the final results than to assess the students' personal understandings of what they have learnt, discovered and accomplished. Rather than assessing the final product, I advocate that students be required to document their weekly, if not daily, processes and their own understanding, and that we focus our assessment on the reflective learning outcomes rather than the technologically generated product.

Finally, Prensky's model lacks critical attention to what might be called an 'integrity of failure'. The emphasis of partnering pedagogy is on the teacher's working relationship with individual students, tapping into what interests and motivates them, and then connecting that passion to their assessment tasks and processes of finding out, critically analysing and communicating the results. This does not allow for outright failure by either the teacher or the student. When using new technologies, both student and teacher must be able express an understanding of their own successes and failures. Accepting failure - a bad podcast, a terrible web video, or a poor blog post - as a necessary part of the learning process is crucial to fully understanding the successes. By separating out the final product from the assessment task, we encourage students and teachers to accept failure as a useful position from which to expand further learning. However, the US-centricism of Prensky's approach, with its focus on individualism and individual achievement, leaves little room for understanding or even potentially celebrating failure as an important part of the learning process.

References

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