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Deconstructing the Digital Natives Discourse

Summary

In this video, Dr. Mark Bullen looks at the Digital Natives discourse, the idea that young people are fundamentally different than previous generations because of their exposure to digital technology. He suggests we should be skeptical of the key claims associated with this discourse because they are not supported by empirical research.

<Digital Learners>

The idea that young people are fundamentally different than previous generations because of their exposure to digital technology is something we have been hearing about for nearly 20 years now.

It's what I call the Digital Natives discourse and in the next few minutes I will explore the claims that are associated with this discourse and argue that we need to take a much more critical and skeptical approach to them.

<The Claims>

So what are the claims of the digital natives discourse?

Well, the foundational claim is that people born after approximately 1980 have been fundamentally affected in a variety of different ways by their exposure to, and use of, digital technology.

Unlike older people who had to learn how to use these technologies later in life, young people were immersed in digital technology, almost from birth. As Marc Prensky said, they are digital natives, older people are digital immigrants.

At first glance, this idea seems to make a lot of sense. It's like a language. If you are immersed in it from birth you learn it easily and you become fluent and you don't' have an accent. When you learn a language later in life, it is much more difficult to become fluent and to sound like a native speaker.

But people like Marc Prensky, Don Tapscott and others go much further than that. They argue that this technological immersion is having an impact on a whole range of characteristics, particularly on how young people learn.

Here's a summary of the key claims made about this generation of learners:

- They prefer experiential, hands on learning
- The prefer to learn in groups
- They prefer images over text and learn better as a result.
- They are goal oriented, highly social and community minded
- They are expert multi-taskers
- They prefer highly structured learning.
- And of course, they are digitally literate, meaning they are sophisticated users of digital technology.

<Reasons to be Skeptical>

Those are some pretty significant claims that clearly could have an enormous impact on our educational systems if they were true.

There are three key reasons why I believe we need to be skeptical of these claims.

First, there is no research to support them.

Second, it's a simplistic discourse

Third, it's a deterministic discourse

<Lack of Research Support>

In 2008 I led a research group that investigated these claims by conducting research with learners at one post secondary institution and thoroughly reviewing the existing research and publications. We found no support for these claims. Since then dozens of excellent research studies have been published that confirm our findings in a variety of different countries and educational contexts.

At the end of this presentation we have provided a link to our website that has an extensive list of published research.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not denying that young people are using digital technologies intensively. There is overwhelming evidence of this and this use has been growing consistently.

But what the research shows conclusively is that this is not a generational or age issue. Digital technology use is growing across the board. In fact, a newly-released study shows that Internet use is growing fastest among people over 65.

What we don't know with any certainty is what impact this growing and pervasive use of digital technology is having on how we learn.

<Simplistic Discourse>

A second key reason I think we need to be skeptical is that this is a simplistic discourse that treats a complex social phenomenon superficially and fails to examine it critically.

First it treats technology use as a one dimensional, quantitative issue. In other words, there is an assumption that just because young people are constantly connected to and using their devices they must know how to use them for all purposes and have a sophisticated understanding of digital technology.

The research just doesn't support that.

Second, it makes no distinction between social, educational and entertainment uses. There is an assumption that use in one area translates into use in other areas. Again, the research doesn't support that.

Finally, the discourse exaggerates gaps between youth and adults and perpetuates stereotypes of both. Adults are seen as technologically incompetent and youth as technologically sophisticated. This reinforces the fear that some people have of technology as something they are too old to learn.

<Deterministic Discourse>

The third key reason for being skeptical is that this is a deterministic discourse. There is a sense of urgency, almost panic…a sense that if we don't respond to technology quickly we will be failing our young people and they will be unprepared. Young people are using more and more digital technology with increasing frequency so we should use it in education. End of discussion.

Sherry Turkell provides what I think this a very thoughtful response to this perspective well. She says:

"I don't really care what technology wants. It's up to people to develop technologies, see what affordances the technology has. Very often these affordances tap into our vulnerabilities. I would feel bereft if, because technology wants us to read short, simple stories, we bequeath to our children a world of short, simple stories. What technology makes easy is not always what nurtures the human spirit."

<Why Should We Care>

At this point, you may be thinking this is all very interesting but why should we care about a bunch of unsupported claims about young people and technology.

Well, the main reason I became concerned about this issue is that I began to see institutional leaders making significant decisions about expensive technology purchases and organizational restructuring that were driven by the digital natives discourse.

I heard teachers and instructors talking about the need to change their teaching to accommodate the "digital natives" in their classroom based on an uncritical acceptance of this generational stereotype rather than an understanding of the students in their classrooms.

This discourse has the potential to affect how our educational systems are organized and how teachers do their work. It has the potential to influence costly decisions about technology purchases.

That's why we should care.

Now I'm not advocating the status quo but I think if we are going to make significant changes to education, it should be based on evidence, not hype and speculation.

<Ask the Right Questions>

What we need to be doing is asking the right questions, not making unfounded assumptions about young people and technology.

- Do young people really understand the difference between social and academic use?
- What impact, if any, does this pervasive social use of technology have on education?
- What is the relationship between social and educational use?
- Are there intrageneration differences in the use of technology and if so, what does this mean.
- What about socio-economic and cultural differences in the use of technology?

These are just a few questions that would allow us to dig deeper into this issue.

Treating this as a generational issue is just not supported by research and it is superficial and simplistic.