

DIGITAL NATIVES, DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS: ORIGINS OF TERMS

Updated version of Marc Prensky's blog post of June 12, 2006

By Marc Prensky

I have received a number of emails from people who are concerned about who "coined" the terms "Digital Native" and "Digital Immigrant." Here are the facts as I know them:

Although I thought up the terms up on my own, I have never claimed to be the first to use or publish either the metaphor, or either term.

In fact, in my first book, *Digital Game-Based Learning* (Published 2001), there is a note on page 414 (#54) that reads as follows:

"Although the term digital immigrants may be mine, I am not the first to use the immigrant metaphor. Douglas Rushkoff, author of *Playing the Future: How Kids' Culture Can Teach Us to Thrive in an Age of Chaos*, is quoted as saying "kids are natives in a place that most adults are immigrants" (Elizabeth Weil, "The Future is Younger than you think," *Fast Company*, 1997"

Rushkoff, in turn, in the preface to the paperback edition of his 1994 work *Cyberia* (<http://www.voidspace.org.uk/cyberpunk/cyberia.shtml>), cites John Perry Barlow as writing "On the most rudimentary level there is simply terror of feeling like an immigrant in a place where your children are natives...."

And Barlow also wrote, in his 1996 Manifesto "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" (<http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>), "You are terrified of your own children, since they are natives in a world where you will always be immigrants."

And, even before that, is this passage in *Slow River*, a Nebula Award-winning novel by Nicola Griffith, published in 1995:

"Those born before 1960 had the hardest time adjusting to change. They were the ones who would suddenly stop in the middle of the street as if they had vertigo when some shop window flared or called out, or get that haunted, bewildered look when the PDA readers changed again, or the newstanks swapped to a different format.

It was a very specific expression: hollow-cheeked, eyes darting, looking for somewhere to hide. I had seen that same look on the faces of war refugees, or the foreign-speaking parents of native-speaking children. Older people were immigrants in their own country. They had not been born to the idea of rapid change – not like us."

So, as far as I know, Rushkoff, Griffith and Barlow were the first to think up and publish the concept of natives and immigrants. But they did not use the precise terms "Digital Native" and "Digital Immigrant."

Another correspondent also suggested recently that Don Tapscott may have used the term "Digital Native"

but provided no citations. I remember Tapscott in *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* using the terms net-gen or “n-gen”. However without a digital copy of his works, I cannot search to see if he used the terms “Digital Native” prior to 2001. (If you have a citation in which he does, please send it along.)

Bottom line: I am the person who should get credit for adding the descriptor “digital” to the terms “native” and “immigrant” unless an earlier citation arises.* I am also the person who should get the credit for popularizing – but not for being the “first to think up,” – the native/immigrant distinction. This is, of course, somewhat like Marconi getting credit for the radio that Tesla thought up first, or Bell for the telephone thought up first by Elisha Gray and Lars Ericsson: See this table by Jerry Michalski:

Invention	Inventor	Who Got the Fame
Television	Philo Farnsworth	David Sarnoff
Telephone	Elisha Gray, Lars Ericsson	Alexander Graham Bell
Transistor	Herbert Matare	William Shockley
Alternating Current	Nicolas Tesla	Thomas Edison
Radio	Nicolas Tesla	Guglielmo Marconi

So it appears that one’s name gets associated with an idea not necessarily when one invents it, but when one does a good job of spreading it around. I am happy to take credit for spreading “Digital Natives” and “Digital Immigrants,” as I have put forth a lot of effort to do so.

And with great success I might add – the terms are used around the world. I ascribe the use of the metaphor in so many places not to my own brilliance – which I do not claim – but rather to the fact that it captures an important truth in a way that is instantly understandable to many people.

Still I have no problem in citing, if true, what others have said or published earlier. * If anyone has a citation (work, page number) of the use of the actual terms “Digital Native” and “Digital Immigrant” (individually or together) prior to my 2001 article in *On The Horizon*, please send it along. [Note: None were sent.]

Many thanks.

Best,
Marc

Update: Douglas Rushkoff writes: "I guess I started "popularizing" the term, myself, in lectures and films starting in about 1994. But many more of the TV interviews and such were in Europe. I didn't start making major use of the terms here in the US until 1996 or 1997. In America, I was definitely the first person to get heat for suggesting our kids were different - better - than us because they were digital natives."

Good for you, Doug! Thanks for being such a pioneer! - M