**Digital Natives**

Children and young people born into and raised in a digital world (post 1980) may work, study, and interact in very different ways from “digital immigrants,” those who were born just a generation before.

**How It’s Developing**

Marc Prensky introduced the concepts of digital natives and digital immigrants in his 2001 On the Horizon article, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” The article argues that the advent of new digital technologies have fundamentally changed young people so much so that they “think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors,” making them “’native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet.” [[1](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/digitalnatives#Notes and Resources)] They are distinct from digital immigrants, who might still shows their “accents” as demonstrated by their use of the internet as a reference source, their adherence to use manuals, or editing on paper rather than on screen.

Distinctions between digital natives and digital immigrants might play out in workplaces, the classroom, or even in families. Prensky identified the classroom as a key area for concern, where digital immigrants were working to educate a population of digital natives that may not have seen the world in the same way, whose minds might not work in the same way, and who not regard information and collaboration in the same way. [[2](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/digitalnatives#Notes and Resources)] Digital natives will likely seek to incorporate more technology into their professional lives, which may be used to improve workplace efficiency or increase productivity, but they may also seek increased access to technology, more virtual and physical spaces for sharing with colleagues and peers, more comfortable working environments to support work-life blurring, and more sustainable work environments. [[3](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/digitalnatives#Notes and Resources)] Increasingly, differences are identified in the ways that digital natives and digital immigrants conduct business, gather news and information, spend money, define personal privacy, experience entertainment, and engage socially. [[4](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/digitalnatives#Notes and Resources)]

**Why It Matters**

Digital natives have grown up with internet access and depend heavily on mobile devices, are heavy consumers of social networking services, consider speed to be among the most important characteristics of digital products and services, and multitask across devices and between work and entertainment. [[5](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/digitalnatives#Notes and Resources)] Combined, these characteristics may require libraries and librarians to adapt services and programs to the new unique needs and expectations of digital natives.

At the same time, according to research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, younger Americans’ media and technology behaviors straddle the print and digital environments and they use and appreciate library spaces as both places for quiet study and as places to collaborate and hang out. [[6](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/digitalnatives#Notes and Resources)]

As with most broad labels, the characteristics of digital natives may not apply universally to all people from this generation. Young people who grew up in low-income communities, who are immigrants or the children of immigrants, or who simply have alternate preferences may not have experienced the same level of digital and technological influence in their early lives. [[7](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/digitalnatives#Notes and Resources)] Libraries and librarians may still provide an opportunity for digital natives to experience new technologies, resources, and collaborations that might otherwise have been missed.

Within our multi-generational workforce, collaboration between digital native and digital immigrant professionals may be particularly important, especially as libraries seek to serve users across a broad generational spectrum.

Research on the brain’s response to electronic media suggests that digital natives might have higher activity in the parts of the brain responsible for short-term memory, the sorting of complex information, and the integration of sensations and thought; other research suggests similar exposure to electronic media might diminish the ability to develop empathy, interpersonal relations, and nonverbal communication skills. [[8](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/digitalnatives#Notes and Resources)] This may influence how librarians work with each other and with the public.

**Notes and Resources**

[1] “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” Marc Prensky. On the Horizon. October 2001. Available from[http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Di...](http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives%2C%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf)

[2] “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” Marc Prensky. On the Horizon. October 2001. Available from[http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Di...](http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives%2C%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf)

[3] “Digital Natives: A More Tech-Savvy Generation Enters the Wiorkplace.” Marie Puybaraud and Hannah Hahn. WorkDesign Magazine. February 1, 2012. Available from [http://workdesign.com/2012/02/digital-natives-a-tech-savvy-generation-en...](http://workdesign.com/2012/02/digital-natives-a-tech-savvy-generation-enters-the-workplace/)

[4] “Closer Together or Further Apart? Digital Devices and the New Generation Gap.” Robert Weiss. The Huffington Post. April 1, 2014. Available from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-weiss/closer-together-or-furthe\_b\_4...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-weiss/closer-together-or-furthe_b_4690748.html)

[5] “Creating Outstanding Experiences for Digital Natives.” Saskia Schippers and Meike Mak. UX Magazine. July 24, 2014. Available from [http://uxmag.com/articles/creating-outstanding-experiences-for-digital-n...](http://uxmag.com/articles/creating-outstanding-experiences-for-digital-natives)

[6] “’Digital Natives’ Are Still Bound to Printed Media.” Pew Internet and American Life Project. June 25, 2013. Available from[http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/06/25/press-release-digital-native...](http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/06/25/press-release-digital-natives-are-still-bound-to-printed-media/)

[7] “The Digital Native Fallacy: Teaching New Skills While Learning From Their Strengths.” Jared Chung. The Huffington Post. April 29, 2013. Available from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jared-chung/the-digital-native-fallac\_b\_27...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jared-chung/the-digital-native-fallac_b_2774480.html)

[8] “Digital Natives are Slow to Pick Up Nonverbal Cues.” John K. Mullen. Harvard Business Review. March 6, 2012. Available from <https://hbr.org/2012/03/digital-natives-are-slow-to-pi/>