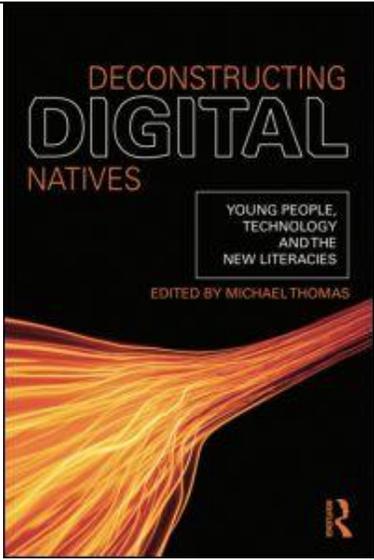# REVIEW OF *DECONSTRUCTING DIGITAL NATIVES*

Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, Technology, and the New Literacies Michael Thomas (Ed.) 2011 ISBN: 9780415889964 US $ 39.95 (paperback) 216 pp. Routledge New York, NY	

Review by Mark Evan Nelson, *Deakin University, Australia*

Deconstructing Digital Natives is a volume much needed and a long time in coming: ten years, to be precise. This book, edited by Michael Thomas, is an unprecedented assemblage of critical scholarly perspectives on the *digital native*, a concept contraposed to the *digital immigrant* within Marc Prensky's bipartite formulation for "describing the differences that many people observed, around the turn of the twenty-first century, between the attitudes of younger and older people regarding digital technology" (p. 15) as Prensky explains in his own contributed article to this collection. In his first published discussion of these ideas ten years ago, a short two-part essay in 2001, Prensky identifies digital natives as "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet" and digital immigrants as "[t]hose of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by or adopted many or most aspects of the new technology" (Prensky, pp. 1–2). Since its introduction a decade ago, this metaphoric distinction has penetrated seemingly every scholarly, professional, and even political conversation on digital technologies, youth, and education; virtually hundreds of thousands of pages of internet real estate are now dedicated to discussion of this particular "discontinuity" or "singularity" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). More, this and similar conceptions—a notable example being Tapscott's (1998, 2009) *net generation*—have incited widespread, heated debate: fervent support of its explanatory value in understanding the peculiarities, needs, and preferences of supposedly distinct younger cohorts of digitally networked cyber-citizens, as well as acerbic criticism of the purportedly reductive, if not also potentially harmful segregation of youth from their elders on opposing sides of a yawning digital generation gap, among other hotly contested positions. *Deconstructing Digital Natives* presents what is arguably the most comprehensive, nuanced treatment to date of these complex, impassioned debates.

This edited volume features an insightful foreword by David Buckingham and twelve chapters, among whose authors are some of the most notable contributors thus far to the international scholarly conversation on digital natives and education. The chapters are divided into three sections, titled *Reflecting on the Myth, Perspectives*, and *Beyond Digital Natives*, respectively introducing and examining the varied interpretations and significance of Prensky's ideas; reporting on research that empirically grounds and tests the digital natives/digital immigrants formulation; and attempting to reconcile heretofore entrenched oppositions and move the conversation in productive new directions.

Professor Buckingham's foreword is, honestly, the review I would like to have written myself. His concise remarks cut to the heart of the issues and problems at hand, rightly asserting for instance that "technologies have possibilities and limitations (or 'affordances'), but they do not produce social change in themselves" (p. x). Yet, he also admits the potential utility of thinking in generational terms about technological and social change, setting an appropriately even tone for the succeeding chapters. In Chapter One, Thomas examines the discourse of *techno-evangelism*, its implications—including the contagious appeal of the notions of the digital native and net generation and consequent calls for new pedagogical priorities—and the positions of notable "dissenters" (p. 1). In so doing, he lays further necessary groundwork for the chapters that follow, which, Thomas explains, set out "a number of research directions for future studies shown in the concerns of the contributors" (p. 7).

Part One, *Reflecting on the Myth*, begins with Chapter Two, a version of a recent article by Marc Prensky himself, in which he addresses what, to his mind, have been misconceptions and exaggerations on the parts of his critics. Prensky then reframes his original formulation of the digital native/digital immigrant distinction so as to highlight the necessity of cultivating "digital wisdom" (p. 20), the profit of enhancing natural human intellectual capacities through digital technology. Concluding Part One is Chapter Three, Jones's critical analysis of several conceptual underpinnings of the net generation and the digital native/digital immigrant divide (e.g., technological and generational determinism). Jones regards Prensky's updated formulation, focused on digital wisdom, as persistently deterministic: "even though it moves beyond a straightforward divide between immigrants and natives, the argument retains a simple moral imperative: digital enhancement has to be accepted in order to succeed" (p. 38). Jones suggests that the changing ways that young people adopt and use technology are certainly worthy of attention from an educational perspective, but also asserts that assumptions that digital technologies might "determine the outlook of an entire generation" (p. 43) are wrongheaded and unhelpful.

Part Two (*Perspectives*) consists of Chapters Four through Ten, variously contributing empirical support to the process of *deconstruction*. Banaji's paper is centered on the European CivicWeb project, "the largest existing cross-national study of young people, the Internet, and civic participation" (p. 52). Findings from this project suggest that any general presumption of young people being digitally networked, civically and politically active, and so also primed to develop digital wisdom, is misguided, especially in that it "sidesteps issues of power, ideology, and privilege" (p. 62). In Chapter Five, Takahashi looks at mobile-internet use among youth in the Tokyo area and demonstrates in vivid ethnographic terms the inherent diversity of Japanese young people and the roles digital technologies play in the dynamic performance of varied individual and cultural identities, to both reproductive and innovative effects. Chapters Six (M. Levy and Michael) and Seven (Erstad), respectively referring to work in Australian and Nordic contexts, further develop what emerge as key themes in the volume: that young people's relationships to and uses of new media are both complex and diverse and that automatically competent—or *fluent* to apply Prensky's metaphor—use and production of digital texts cannot be assumed in young people, nor are such capacities well understood as yet. Kennedy and Judd, in Chapter Eight, review research on tertiary students' use of Google for information gathering, concluding that criticality and digital wisdom are often subordinated to expediency, "somewhat counter-intuitively" (p. 132), the authors point out—referring to the expectation of masterful, conscious use of technologies that the digital native concept would evoke—putting "more not less onus on faculty to support 'Digital Native' students in the development of their information literacy skills" (ibid.). In Chapter Nine, recruiting Jenkins's participatory culture framework, Zimic and Dalin analyze the types and levels of participation of youth and younger adults on the Internet in relation to the participants' perceptions about their participation. The authors find that individual sense of involvement in the information society varied in degree according both to type of internet-enabled activity and age, suggesting that frequent use of the Internet does not imply a feeling of positive participation in the broader digital culture. With Chapter Ten, Rachael Levy brings an interesting close to Part Two inasmuch as her case studies of three primary-age

school children both acknowledge the digital heterogeneity that other contributors have highlighted, and illustrate the homogenization of digital expression that may occur within educational institutions, frustrating the development of digital wisdom, which resonates with core arguments of Prensky, Tapscott, and likeminded others.

Part Three (*Beyond Digital Natives*), paralleling Part One, comprises two chapters. Bennett and Maton are the authors of Chapter Eleven, in which they reassert and elaborate their earlier arguments (see Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008) as to the lack of evidentiary support for Prensky's claims. Quite helpfully, I believe, these authors emphasize in this chapter the importance of "sound and transparent research" (p. 181) around these contentious issues and questions and recommend a shift in focus away from generational differences and effects of technologies, and toward "studies of young people's experiences with technology" and "how these are integrated into the array of contexts and practices in daily life" (p. 180). In the concluding piece, Chapter Twelve, Palfrey and Gasser ask whether the term digital natives can, in fact, be productively reclaimed for use in moving the conversation forward. While supporting the critical perspectives in the preceding chapters (e.g., by roundly dismissing any technological and generational determinism), these authors also raise important questions about the dimensions of safety, privacy, and responsibility in communicating and creating with new media. "Most important," Palfrey and Gasser recommend to concerned readers, "is that we share a common commitment to understanding of what is going on with new media practices and, in turn, that we work together to seize the opportunities and mitigate the challenges associated with media practices of youth and adults alike" (p. 201). The simplest advice is often the best, I believe.

Still, one might ask if we couldn't have just begun with such a commonsense prescription. Why such ado over the digital native, which is, after all, only a metaphor? And doesn't the illustrative force of any metaphor naturally depend on its simplified comparative representation of only selected qualities of things and aspects of experience, as Prensky himself is quick to point out in Chapter Two?

Reductive though such tropes may necessarily be, they may also be anything but simple, or innocuous, as scholars of metaphor George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Mark Turner, and colleagues remind us. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) cogently demonstrate the fundamental organizing function of metaphor in human cognition, communication, and action, explaining in particular how so-called *structural metaphors* admit other extended meanings, or *entailments*, that give shape to our thoughts, language, and behavior (pp. 61–68). The common metaphorical mapping of characteristics and functions of machines onto those of the human mind, for instance, has profoundly influenced educational theories and approaches, compelling teachers and students to think, speak, and act in terms of input and output, online processing, and the like. On the specific entailments of the digital immigrants metaphor, media scholar Henry Jenkins (2007) colorfully remarks,

> [It] tends to exaggerate the gaps between adults, seen as fumbling and hopelessly out of touch, and youth, seen as masterful. It invites us to see contemporary youth as feral, cut off from all adult influences, inhabiting a world where adults sound like the parents in the old *Peanuts* cartoons—whah, whah, whah, whah—rather than having anything meaningful to say to their offspring. In the process, it disempowers adults, encouraging them to feel helpless, and thus justifying their decision not to know and not to care what happens to young people as they move into the online world (n.p., italics in original).

Jenkins's comments implicitly support Lakoff and Johnson's conclusions, that such metaphors are not mere illustrations or analogies. In concrete social realities, metaphors do matter. Notwithstanding Prensky's intent to usefully proffer only an intuitively persuasive "broad generalization" (Chapter 2, p. 16) and his admitted confusion over why "so many supposedly well educated, thinking people 'just can't take a metaphor'" (p. 15), I hope that he and other so-called techno-evangelists come to see ardent

skepticism and careful examination of that metaphor, which *Deconstructing Digital Natives* provides and invites, as healthy and necessary.

My criticisms of this volume are few, but worth noting here. First, as persuasive as the included perspectives are, I think that a somewhat more balanced representation of voices might make the *deconstructing* seem a bit less like *debunking*, which I do not imagine was the intent. At a recent conference, I ran into Sue Bennett, a contributor here and co-author of one of the most widely cited critiques of Prensky's work (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). When I expressed my admiration for that 2008 paper, she explained how difficult it was to get the article published, having received a number of reviews that assessed their arguments as simply "wrong" (personal communication). The problems associated with the digital native/digital immigrant formulation are quite evident, and the critics are legion; but there are other scholars who would make more supportive arguments, clearly, and they might also be heard.

Two other criticisms I would are offer relate to the format of the volume itself. At certain points I felt that the absence of any images or figures was conspicuous, if not problematic. For instance, in Chapter Five, which reports on students' multimodal composing practices, the analysis would be much clearer and more cogent if the students' works were visible. Another issue is with the index, comprising only a sparse and rather random collection of terms and names, which I found particularly odd given the relatively narrow ranges of topics discussed and works referenced. In a volume such as this that aims to circumscribe the array of considerations, concepts, and contributors associated with a particular complex of issues, a more complete, better organized index would be helpful to the reader in making connections among the various positions within the conversation.

Overall, however, *Deconstructing Digital Natives* does fulfill the promise of its title. It helpfully breaks down the assumptions, metaphors, mythology, and "moral panic" (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008, pp. 782–3) according to which relations between youth, digital technologies and education are commonly understood and renders sensible and comprehensible the particular value and shortcomings of the digital natives/digital immigrants distinction and the social and pedagogical exigencies that this and similar explanatory frameworks would convey. This book should be of significant interest and use to scholars, university students, teachers, and policy makers alike, in any area of education or communication. It would be most enlightening, I imagine, to all those who regard the metaphorical digital chasm between digital natives and digital immigrants—with tech-savvy children, teens and twenty-somethings on one side and their quaintly outmoded elders on the other—as somehow self-evident.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, Technology and the New Literacies. Young people belonging to this generation are therefore supposed to be "native" to the digital lifestyle, always connected to the internet and comfortable with a range of cutting-edge technologies. Deconstructing Digital Natives offers the most balanced, research-based view of this group to date. Existing studies of digital natives lack application to specific disciplines or conditions, ignoring the differences of educational fields and gender. How, and how much, are learners changing in the digital age? How can a more pluralistic understanding of these learners be developed? Contrib