The First Digital Native Writing Instructors and the Future Multimodal Composition Classroom

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Lutkewitte acknowledges that digital natives read and write differently than people whose literacy practices primarily involve printed materials. After describing these differences, the author explores implications for future digital native writing instructors as both teachers and scholars. As they put their digital literacies into practice in academia, digital native writing instructors will challenge 20th century modes of writing instruction and notions of authorship to foster the 21ˢᵗ century literacies developing in and outside of the academy.

Digital natives, those who were born after 1980 and grew up interacting daily in networked digital technologies, have unique characteristics and identities which they often express using Web 2.0 applications (Palfrey and Gasser 1). While composition professionals have discussed these characteristics and identities in terms of *students*,[1] they have not discussed these characteristics and identities in terms of *instructors*. For example, the September 2010 issue of *College Composition and Communication* was devoted to "The Future of Rhetoric and Composition," yet none of the authors addressed digital natives as future instructors who might

impact composition instruction and curriculum. In this essay, I will explore differences between first-generation native digital instructors (DNIs) and instructors who were not born digital and comment on the potential roles of future DNIs in the teaching of writing.[2]

Future DNIs

In *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser define digital settlers as those "not native to the digital environment, because they grew up in an analog-only world," but "who have helped to shape its contours" (4). Digital immigrants, they write, are those "less familiar with this [digital] environment" because they "learned how to e-mail and use social networks late in life" (4). For example, many professors are learning to use technology as mature adults (see for example the work of Jennifer Sheppard and Jody Shipka). While digital settlers and digital immigrants may work effectively within digital environments, they can also remember an analog-only world, when many of the current technological innovations, like the Internet, did not exist. Digital natives, on the other hand, can only imagine an analog-only world because since birth, their lives have been mediated by digital technologies (Palfrey and Gasser 2).

In 2002, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 85% of college students owned their own computers (Jones 2). In 2002, those college students (who began using computers between the ages of 5 and 8) frequently used the Internet to download music, email friends and professors, browse for fun, and subscribe to mailing lists (Jones 2-3). Today (in 2012), college students are using digital technologies daily to do so much more, e.g., participating in social networks, blogging, and creating digital videos. As a result, their

identities, their thinking processes, and even their writing abilities are different from those of

digital immigrants and digital settlers.[3]

In addition to the ability to work fluently with digital technology and media, future DNIs

will be skilled social networker communicators and collaborators. Future DNIs will connect with

others, even strangers, by building and moving back and forth between social networks. For

several years now, DNIs have already been experts at using digital technologies to socialize

(Lenhart *et al.* 18). Palfrey and Gasser suggest that the 24/7 networks created by digital natives

merge "the human with the technical to a degree we haven't seen before, and . . . [are]

transforming human relationships in fundamental ways" (4). In the future, DNIs will collaborate

on designing and conducting research within these social networks; in so doing, they will

produce scholarship, shape curricula, and develop new pedagogies. They will also use these

networks to connect with their students in order to offer them feedback on their work, to

schedule appointments, and to provide academic advisement.

Because they will be skilled at social networking, DNIs will also be more open about

themselves and more willing to share with the public than any other previous population of

instructors. As Palfrey and Gasser note, digital natives "are leaving more traces of themselves in

public places online" (7). In the future, DNIs will freely make their work public, often without

hesitation. They will bypass old means of publishing via traditional print production and opt

instead to publish their work in open-access forums (i.e., wikis, blogs, websites, and so forth).

They will also accept feedback more readily from the public and their peers in order to revise

again and again. Using social platforms, they will build online teaching portfolios for their

students, colleagues, institutions, and anyone else who has access to the Internet. Pew reports that by 2020, when digital natives have matured and assumed more significant responsibilities, they will still disclose "a great deal of personal information in order to stay connected and take advantage of social, economic, and political opportunities" (Anderson and Rainie 2). DNIs will expect their students to be open to sharing their work with the public and their peers; thus, digital native instructors will design activities and assignments that promote sharing texts in public forums.

Because reading strategies are different for digital natives, future DNIs will be skilled grazers of information, relying on sites like Wikipedia and Google. They will use such websites to search for information and to participate in ongoing public conversations on blogs, wikis, and social platforms yet to be imagined. In the future, DNIs will need to become experts at gathering, organizing, managing, and making sense of digital information, and they will have to teach their students to do the same.

Digital natives' thought processes and writing practices will lead them to write scholarly multimodal texts rather than traditional print journal articles and books. As Jeff Rice reminds us, research strategies and expectations will change, since "[t]o write to a weblog is not the same as to write a personal essay; to engage with a wiki is not the same as to write a thesis; to construct a hypertextual project is not the same as to create a print-based research essay" (156). DNIs and their students will use more than words—for instance, images, videos, sounds, hyperlinks—to construct their arguments and contribute to scholarship that will grow increasingly digital.

Because they will "perceive information to be malleable" and "something they can

control and reshape in new and interesting ways," their composing and research skills will show that they are mixers and mashers (Palfrey and Gasser 6). As Palfrey and Gasser point out, "Digital Natives have developed excellent research skills when it comes to digging up digital materials that can be remixed" (116). DNIs will gather bits of information from several sources and will remix and/or mash them in order to create something new. The composition projects they assign will teach students how to best utilize their mixing and mashing skills.

While we cannot predict every effect this transitional moment will have on teaching and scholarship, we can make a few predictions. The first generation of DNIs grew up collaborating and writing mostly outside of classrooms: they are therefore likely to study writers and their habits outside of classrooms. Recently, Christine Greenhow, Beth Robelia, and Joan Hughes predicted that "[w]eb 2.0's affordances of *interconnections, content creation and remixing*, and *interactivity* might facilitate an increased research interest in learners' creative practices, participation, and production" and that educators "ought to expand lines of research to focus on students' use of Web 2.0 for participation, invention, and knowledge building in and beyond school settings" (249). The research skills and composing habits that DNIs possess will make them prime candidates to take on these areas of research.

Since DNIs are social networkers, they will most likely be similar to what Laura Cohen describes as "social scholars." Cohen writes that social scholars conduct research activities in the public arena, use social software services and tools to initiate or join online communities devoted to the subject matter under study, consult several non-traditional sources, welcome online feedback from peers, and publish their work openly or in restricted wiki-like applications.

In other words, social scholarship merges traditional research practices with non-traditional research practices (Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes 253). The first DNIs are already merging old and new forms of research. In the future, their scholarship will be almost entirely digital. They will present research in web texts, webinars and websites as well as in online journals and conferences.

Future Basic Writing and Composition Classrooms

Future classroom practices will not resemble the classroom practices currently employed by digital settlers and digital immigrants. Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes believe that instructors will need to use Web 2.0 technologies more often in order to prepare and engage their students (247). In an attempt to encourage composition instructors to think more critically about the types of skills their students will need for the future, NCTE created a position statement on 21st century literacies. According to this position statement, 21st century readers and writers need to

- develop proficiency with the tools of technology

- build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally

- design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes

- manage, analyze and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information

- create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts

- attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments

  ("The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies")

If future DNIs are skilled in these areas, then what kinds of classroom practices will they employ to teach their students?

First, since an increasing amount of data on digital natives is being stored online—not just by moguls like Google but by many other companies who are in the business of collecting and selling data—they will certainly use classroom practices that demonstrate how to effectively "manage, analyze and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information" ("The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies"). For example, DNIs will engage their students in critical conversations about how search engines organize and disseminate information. They will discuss characteristics of reliable information and explore strategies for communicating in digital forums. As Palfrey and Gasser contend, "Those who come to understand the dynamics of information production in the digital era will be better prepared than anyone else to thrive in the integrated digital world" (159). Michael Wesch explains that "it becomes less important for students to know, memorize, or recall information, and more important for them to be able to find, sort, analyze, share, discuss, critique, and create information" because students need to be "knowledge-*able*," rather than "simply knowledgeable." DNIs will assess not how well students can regurgitate information on a test, but how well they can sift through and remix information to compose multimodal texts.

Contemporary students already manage a great deal of personal information that they choose to reveal in online public forums.   In the years to come, digital natives will learn about the consequences of keeping records and sharing information about themselves with the online public (Palfrey and Gasser 62). In their classrooms, therefore, DNIs will likely lead discussions

on researchers' ethical responsibilities associated with gathering and remixing information, especially information about themselves and others.

Future DNIs will design activities and assignments that prepare students to use their skills as information gatherers and remixers, to take more active roles as citizens, and to work together to shape their environments. Palfrey and Gasser note,

> The school of the future will put students in digitally supported environments
> where they can work, and learn, in teams. Digital Natives are proving, all the
> time, that they can build communities around ideas, good and bad. Interaction and
> a sense of community are the key requests of those born digital when it comes to
> online learning. (248)

By emphasizing gathering and remixing activities, DNIs will challenge long-standing traditional practices and beliefs, e.g., the privileged status of singular authorship/ownership. In addition, remixing will "allow Digital Natives and others to interact with cultural objects in a way that affects how cultures develop and are understood" (Palfrey and Gasser 115). Through remixing, there will be an emphasis on how knowledge is created and shared among cultures. DNIs' assignments and activities will have students practicing remixing techniques and will resemble those described by Jeff Rice in *The Rhetoric of Cool*, Anne Wysocki *et al.* in *Writing New Media*, and Cynthia Selfe in *Multimodal Composition*. Practices such as juxtaposition, appropriation, navigation, visual organization, nonlinearity, chora, and so forth will be commonly taught.

The Basic Writing Classroom

DNIs might find some of their greatest challenges in the basic writing classroom. Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark contend that "while most basic writers are adept at accessing information digitally, they are not as proficient when it comes to producing digital information, nor are they able to code-switch between informal cyber-situations and the more formal academic and professional expectations of cyber-literacy" (33). In other words, they later write, "basic writers often do not have the educational access, training, and critical engagement to use technology well" (48). In the near future, DNIs will need to employ pedagogical strategies that help basic writing students develop *both* digital writing and reading proficiencies *and* traditional print-based reading and writing competencies.

When basic writers enroll in online basic writing courses, they might lack technological skills necessary for successful online communication. Instructors cannot assume that just because a student enrolls in an online course, the student can use a computer in a way that is conducive to learning. As Linda Stine notes in "Basically Unheard: Developmental Writers and the Conversation on Online Learning," online courses "may actually increase rather than diminish the gap between elites and non-elites" and they can "provide a false perception of eliminating the technology gap while in actuality maintaining it" (136). As more universities offer online writing courses, digital native instructors will have to be careful about the types of assignments they use, particularly as they integrate new technologies into their instructional practices. Stine warns that instructors who teach online, especially to adult learners, need to "design assignments that take advantage of the Internet and its multiple modalities without placing undue technical demands on

our students" (140). Rather than setting aside their digital native skills entirely, digital native basic writing instructors will need to model digital literacy skills in order to (1) showcase the relevancy of such skills in the everyday lives of students and (2) facilitate the learning process for students who are inexperienced with Web 2.0 technologies.

To achieve these goals, DNIs can begin with what has already taken place in the basic writing classroom. Basic writing instructors already know about pedagogies that successfully integrate technology into the classroom. And some basic writing instructors have employed multimodal composition practices that involve technological skills. For example, Klages and Clark describe a pedagogical approach that helps students to effectively "merge Web 2.0 digital literacies and multimodal composing strategies" (33). Their approach is to help students create ePortfolios, digital spaces where students have to consider multiple modes for composing. They argue for "using the ePortfolio as a platform for multimodal work in the basic writing course and for showcasing revision," and they are able to "make visible the expectations of a digital culture and help our students to become proficient authors of a twenty-first century narrative" (48).

Conclusion: A Call for Action

The first population of DNIs has found itself in a paradoxical transitional moment. On the one hand, they have been challenged by long-standing traditions and infrastructures that *do not support* open collaboration on campuses, *value* sharing information with others, or *promote* skills that DNIs use daily. On the other hand, DNIs possess literacy skills that are and will continue to be increasingly in demand. As hybrid classes and online courses continue to proliferate in college programs, the literacy skills possessed by digital native instructors will

become more and more sought after despite the ambivalent attitudes of some colleagues and administrators.

Moreover, despite the fact that academia has long rewarded the privileged status of single authorship, social scholarship, so central to DNI learning and communication, will pose a significant challenge to the status quo in academia. Although their work is undervalued or even discounted, digital native instructors will persist in producing social scholarship because social learning and communicating will have become so essential to their their learning and writing lives. There may even be an attitudinal shift on privacy and ownership of ideas. Digital natives might place a higher value on openness and access to information than on intellectual property.

As they move into the professorial ranks, digital native instructors will face many challenges. One challenge is that educational institutions undergoing change often do so very slowly. Composition professionals must take notice of warnings such as that of Clark, who writes, "many of the ideas of the academy are far behind social and cultural innovation, not leading them" (28). Clark's observation echoes the views of many other scholars. For instance, Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe warn that college students "raised on visual media find school increasingly irrelevant" (57). The stakes are high: formal education may risk appearing irrelevant to digital native students' lives. And if educational institutions lag too far behind, they risk losing tech-savvy teachers who are able to connect with digital native students but prefer to invest their energies in more up-to-date tech-friendly work environments.

While Palfrey and Gasser conclude that institutions "ought to incentivize and reward experimentation by its faculty" and "strive to make it easy for faculty to experiment with new

technologies in support of their teaching," there are issues beyond formal teaching and learning (246-248). Certainly, technological training for faculty is necessary and important, but there are related social, cultural, political, and economic issues that need to be addressed. For instance, Wesch believes "technology is secondary" because we are in the midst of "a social revolution, not a technological one, and its most revolutionary aspect may be the ways in which it empowers us to rethink education and the teacher-student relationship in an almost limitless variety of ways." Seconding Wesch's viewpoint, Clark writes, "[T]he digital imperative is about transforming the classroom," and about engaging in "an intentional pedagogy of digital rhetoric . . . emphasizes the civic importance of education, the cultural and social imperative of 'the now,' and the 'cultural software' that engages students in the interactivity, collaboration, ownership, authority, and malleability of texts" (28).

Perhaps the very best way for writing instructors and program administrators to capitalize on this complex transitional moment is to revise those practices, traditions, and infrastructures that work against or constrain the strengths of digital natives—both students and teachers. Colleges must allow digital native instructors to assume leadership roles in their own departments as well as in the wider college communities. These instructors will then be authorized to design curricula and build programs that facilitate learning digital literacy skills and attitudes. Finally, we all need to learn and communicate with one another about writing curricula that best meets the needs of 21st century students who, with varying degrees of skill and motivation, are and will continue to be inhabiting increasingly digitalized communicative worlds.

Notes

[1]In 2004, in her chair's address at CCCC, Kathleen Blake Yancey painted a picture of the Digital Natives currently enrolled in composition classes. She described those students as students who "compose words and images and create audio files on Web logs (blogs), in word processors, with video editors and Web editors and in e-mail and on presentation software and in instant messaging and on listservs and on bulletin boards—and no doubt in whatever genre will emerge in the next ten minutes" (298). Yancey points out why those students were starkly different from the students who came before them; namely, that those students participated in new digital composing tasks outside of the composition classroom and without anyone telling them to do so. Her observations of the types of students and the types of writing they do warranted her call for the field to reconsider what it meant to write at that moment. In 2009, Yancey returns to make yet another call in a report from NCTE. In the report, she calls into question what "writing" should be now that we have entered a new era in literacy, an era she names the Age of Composition, and again describes what technologically savvy students are doing outside of the composition classroom ("Writing" 5). In this era, she contends, "composers become composers not through direct formal instruction alone," but "through what we might call an extracurricular social co-apprenticeship" ("Writing" 5). In other words, composers are composing by working with their peers in new ways, and they are doing so with the help of digital technologies.

[2]All recent PhD graduates who enter the composition classroom are *not* digital natives. Not everyone born after 1980 had access to technology, and not everyone born after 1980 led lives mediated by digital technologies.

[3]The producers of "A Vision of K-12 Students Today" portray a visual picture of Digital Natives and what they need as students inhabiting a highly digitalized world.

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