

Digital Natives, Immigrants and Convicts

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The terms ‘digital natives’, ‘digital immigrants’, and ‘digital convicts’ are often used to describe people’s relationship with technology in the modern world. There is a consensus that Prensky (2001) was correct in his view that there are digital natives and digital immigrants – and that such personas would impact on future notions of learning and subsequently teaching.

I hasten to add that there is a third category – digital convicts. And I suggest this relates more to teachers than students. There may even be a case to argue that ‘older’ teachers are the convicts while younger ‘teachers’ are the immigrants.

Digital Natives

Digital natives are individuals who have grown up surrounded by digital technology such as computers, the internet, and various mobile devices. For them, using technology is *second nature*, and they are typically quick to adapt to new digital tools and platforms. My own children (now 31 and 26 years of age) fit into this category. As youngsters they had remote controls in the hands and took to the mobile phone – ‘like ducks to water’.

Digital Immigrants

Digital immigrants, on the other hand, are those who were born before the widespread adoption of digital technology and have had to adapt to it later in life. While many digital immigrants become proficient users, they may retain some habits or preferences from a pre-digital era and might not feel as naturally comfortable with technology as digital natives do. I slot myself into this category – it became essential to embrace technology given the higher education industry in which I found myself embedded – but from time to time I wonder how I got here.

Digital Convicts

Digital convicts is a more recent and sometimes tongue-in-cheek term describing people who feel trapped or constrained by the constant demands of digital technology - such as endless emails, notifications, and the expectation of being always online (24/7). Unlike digital natives or immigrants, digital convicts experience technology as an obligation rather than an opportunity, sometimes feeling overwhelmed by its pervasiveness. I have quite a few 'older' friends who find themselves in this category – quite understandably.

Understanding these categories can help in recognising the diverse experiences and challenges people face with digital technology, especially in educational, workplace, and social settings across Australia.

The COVID effect

During the COVID 19 pandemic - all education providers were abruptly faced with the need to shift from face-to-face teaching to a fully online model. For those with no online class delivery established at the time, many teaching staff (at all levels) were the epitome of *digital convicts* – suddenly transported to an unfamiliar cyber land by government decree in a bid to safeguard the wider populace.

The risks of this sudden pivot were not unsubstantial -

- Students falling behind in their studies
- Educators falling behind on the course schedule
- Technology problems
- Cost imposts for new software/technology acquisition
- Reputational damage to the school as a whole

Then there was, of course, the *elephant in the room* – the uncertainty as to how COVID would spread within Australia and how long remote learning would be necessary. The impact was felt at all levels – primary, secondary and tertiary.

Digital conviction

The COVID 19 situation (effect) delivered substantial lessons for the tertiary education sector - in particular. Yet none more so than the importance of adaptability.

We now know there is considerable potential to expand into offshore markets (including TNE) using online and hybrid models to support quality learning and teaching.

Navigating their way through the online landscape - as digital convicts - was no easy task, especially when required at such short notice. But educators demonstrated not only that such a shift is possible, but that it can in fact deliver positive learning and business outcomes.

And for that, our convicts (especially) deserve high praise.

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