

Book review

From digital natives to digital wisdom: Hopeful essays for 21st century learning

Nicholas McGuigan
Macquarie University

Prensky, M. (2012). *From digital natives to digital wisdom: Hopeful essays for 21st century learning*. California: Corwin Press (pp. 240).

For many a ‘digital native’ Marc Prensky will need no introduction. He stands as a visionary and thought-provoking educational leader for the 21st century. Prensky’s writings have challenged, inspired, and motivated forward-thinking educators to look beyond the traditional classroom and embrace technology as a means to craft truly inspirational learning experiences for their audiences. This latest Prenskian text, *From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom*, pulls together a collection of essays written over the past decade to illustrate a point—learning has been transformed as a result of the digital age.

The world of today has embraced technology, allowing a truly global environment to exist, and resulting in a world dominated by financial markets, outsourcing, competition, and shifting political power—where ‘change’ is often the only remaining constant. Prensky provides criticism of our educational environment, suggesting that individuals need an educational experience that better prepares them for an often unpredictable and uncertain future.

Throughout his text, Prensky argues that the promise of greater access, enhanced technology, social networking, and widened participation creates a seismic shift in the educational context that we are all so familiar with—requiring us all to make a contextual change! This is not altogether surprising, given the recent announcement (July, 2012) of Coursera’s Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) where some of the most illustrious US universities will co-exist to offer online courses that are freely available to the global learner (Lewin, 2012). Coursera, the brainchild of two Stanford University computer scientists, is set to radically redefine online learning as we currently know it.

With this in mind, Prensky provides an easily accessible read that attempts to provide his vision for the future of education. His vision encapsulates a holistic framework and provides support for and advocates the scaffolding of skills necessary for educators to become aware of a changing educational context. The text does this through a diverse and informative collection of complementary chapters, ranging from detailed research-informed essays to short thought-provoking pieces that are intended to stimulate reflection and discussion amongst educators.

Prensky’s purpose in this text remains practical in nature, lifting the proverbial veil for educators to see education from “a different perspective—and, from that new perspective, to arrive on their own at new insights and ideas about what to do differently” (p. 5). This light and refreshing approach broadens your mind and challenges traditionally held convictions of education, asking you to unshackle the obstacles that have perhaps previously stood in the way, in an attempt to entice you into the digital age that your students currently experience.

The text is structured in two parts. The first, ‘Rethinking Education’, provides a frame and background to the text in which Prensky outlines the philosophical underpinning to his work, framing the changing nature of education and the resulting position of educational institutions, and clearly placing the ‘digital native’ at the forefront of his design. The second part, ‘21st Century Learning and Technology in the Classroom’, provides a more practical approach to what

educators can do to ensure heightened learning outcomes for their learners in an integrated digital age.

From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom is presented in a straightforward and easily readable manner that comprises, in a single volume, Prensky's best-known work. The advantage is that it provides the reader with a suitable foundation of the Prenskian philosophy in a single setting. It is tailored for all levels of interested individuals, forming a must-read for those of academic responsibility and senior management, educators, and curriculum designers looking for practical solutions to the challenges of 21st century classrooms (if they still exist!), and students and parents looking for more detailed information about a changing learning environment.

Prensky lays a foundation to his work through his introductory chapters, where he argues that the problem with the current education system is not *how* but rather *what* we teach (see 'The Reformers are Leaving our Schools in the 20th Century'). He has been praised for succinctly criticising current educational reform as simply "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic" (p. 7), claiming we exist in an environment in which an outdated curriculum fails to prepare individuals for a dynamic and changing professional world. Such educational reform is often fuelled by a lack of detailed understanding about educators' conceptions of learning, where, in many educational contexts, a widening gulf exists between what educators 'think' they do and what they 'actually' do (see 'On Learning'). This haphazard attempt to reinvigorate the curriculum, coupled with the limited knowledge about educators' conceptions of what they think they do, has resulted in a disjointed, patchwork approach to educational policy and planning reform.

Prensky calls for, and goes some way to provide, a workable integrated solution in which technology informs pedagogical design. In his writings (see 'The Role of Technology in Teaching and the Classroom') he muses on the increasing speed with which educators try to fill the perceived technological void in the curriculum through a saturation of technology without thinking through the pedagogical implications. In fact he goes further, demonstrating that such ill-planned endeavours often result in the technology becoming obsolete before it adds any real value. He advocates that technology should support a pedagogy of "partnering" (p. 32) in which one complements and informs the other.

Although challenging and provoking at times, the success of this work is truly encapsulated in Prensky's approach to consistently visualise the world from the learner's perspective. His enthusiastic advocacy for educators to listen to their students' experience clearly remains at the heart of the text, encapsulated by his statement, "I have come to see clearly that the conclusions about education one draws from this alternative perspective are very different from the ones nearly all educators, politicians and parents are currently drawing" (p. 1).

The wealth of practical experience that Prensky offers takes the forefront as he provides practical classroom activities and strategies that assist 'digital natives' to acquire 'digital wisdom' (p. 204) (see, for example, 'Simple Changes in Current Practices may Save our Schools', 'Why YouTube Matters?' and 'Beyond the Lemonade Stand'). Richly detailed with examples from classroom experience, Prensky provides particularly useful chapters on mobile phone technology in the classroom ('What Can you Learn from a Cellphone? Almost Anything!'), game simulation and why educationalists should embrace such a phenomenon ('Simulation Nation' and 'Beyond the Lemonade Stand'). He also posits programming as the 'True 21st Century Literacy'!

Further reinforcing the book's content, Prensky offers reflective questioning at the end of each section in the hope that one will start to actively reflect on and provoke a level of discourse with colleagues. Although that might not result in break-through revolutionary strategies, it might just enable a shift in the way we view educational practice. Prensky challenges 21st educators to

reboot learning in order to better prepare students for 21st century careers where, often, nothing remains constant.

It is testament to Prensky's educational thought leadership that many of these essays and the thoughts they contain, originally written 10 or so years ago, remain current in today's rapidly evolving technological age. The future of education as portrayed by Prensky is one of 'digital wisdom', in which digitally enhanced individuals differ from those of today in two key aspects:

...he or she accepts digital enhancement as an integral fact of human existence, and he or she is digitally wise, a trait exhibited both in the considered use of enhancements to complement his or her innate abilities and in the way and degree to which he or she uses enhancements to facilitate wiser decision making (p. 204).

Prensky provides an actionable philosophy that challenges the educator to answer the question: Does the key to learning reside not so much in what we experience, but in the personal frame of reference through which we experience it? It remains to be seen whether such digital wisdom will occur and whether we as educators can create a virtual world of learning, dominated by simulation and social networking, that engages the 21st century learner. However, by downloading this text and slowly thumbing through the pages on your iPad or Kindle, you might be off to a good start!

References

Lewin, T. (2012, July 17). Universities reshaping education on the web. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/17/education/consortium-of-colleges-takes-online-education-to-new-level.html?pagewanted=all>