

Chapter 9

Digital Natives in Online Learning Environments: New Bottle Old Wine – The Design of Online Learning Environments for Today's Generation

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ABSTRACT

With the developments of information technologies there exists two different generations. One of these generations was born into the technology age and grew up with technology. The other one meet with technology in the late ages. Thus, they have different habits, different expectations and different learning preferences. In the meantime, with the developments in technology and Internet infrastructure, online learning environments have become popular as an alternative learning environment in higher education. The aim of this chapter is to guide instructors to design their online learning environments based on the new generation's needs and expectations. To learn about new generations' needs a survey questionnaire was conducted on higher education students. The results indicated that, today's students spend a lot of time on the Internet specifically in social media environments and they commonly get connected to the Internet with their mobile phones which necessitates a new design in online learning environments.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid developments in information and communication technologies have expanded the differences between old and young generations. In the literature, these differences emerged with two generations which were known as “Digital Natives” and “Digital Immigrants” (Prensky, 2001). These new young generations were also called as “N (for Net)-Gen,” “D (for Digital)-Gen,” “Net Generation” and “Millennials” in the literature (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998). Throughout this chapter, they will be referred as digital natives.

Digital natives are the people who grew up with technology, who do every job through Internet and who live online in their daily life. On the other hand, digital immigrants are the older generation who have met with technology later in their life and need to adapt themselves to these new developing technologies. These two generations have different characteristics and habits which cause different needs both in their daily life and in their education. Prensky (2001) points out that today, digital natives grow up using digital media tools such as the Internet, computers and mobile phones and consequently their learning and information processing differ from those of their teachers who in their turn grew up in environments where predominantly printed sources were being used.

Furthermore, online learning environments have recently been more common in higher education with parallel to increasing use of technologies in education. In recent years, the demand for online courses continues to increase with the emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The number of online students is growing day by day. Thus, population growth and geographical conditions are used as the most important reason why higher education institutions started developing online learning environments. Most of the higher education institutes are using online learning environments both to serve completely online courses and to support face to face instruction.

These online environments are designed to support students’ learning with online activities like wikis, blogs, forum discussions, quizzes, and videos. Assignment and course materials are served via these online learning environments as well. In the meantime, since digital native learners’ population is increasing in the higher education institutions (Dewitt, Naime & Siraj, 2013), digital native student population is gradually increasing in online learning environments in higher education as well. On the other hand, most of the instructors who create and manage these online learning environments in the higher education institutions are defined as members of digital immigrant generation. Since digital natives differ from older generations in terms of their learning preferences and needs, it is an essential point for these instructors who are members of the digital immigrant generation to understand digital native learners’ needs and expectations in creating effective learning environments. Thus, content and method of delivery in higher education need to be changed based on the new needs. Instructors might design online learning environments differently in order to motivate students when attending their classes or when being part of any other kind of online activities to be more effective. In this respect, it can be suggested that when developing online learning environments, digital natives’ characteristics, their needs and expectations should be taken into consideration while designing these environments and activities.

The expected target of this chapter is today’s instructors who aim to teach today’s digital native generation. This study proposed to determine the main issues in engaging digital natives’ needs and expectations to online learning environments in higher education. Based on the results of the survey conducted and the body of the literature, a proposal was developed as to how the online learning environments in higher education institutes could be improved according to digital native generation students’ needs and expectations. This study is important because instructors need to be

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