

# Digital Natives or Digital Learners?

By Lindsey Becker

## Digital Natives vs. Digital Immigrants

During my undergraduate career at Oakland University, I had specific views on technology and teaching. They were grounded in my own experiences and very limited knowledge to that point. One of my first real “teaching” assignments at OU was to read an article about Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants by Mark Prensky. I still remember this assignment vividly as I attribute it to one of my first major shifts in thinking. After reading the article I began to think of people in two categories: digital natives or digital immigrants.

Going into my first year of teaching at a private catholic school (Notre Dame Marist Academy), I knew that all of my students would obviously be digital natives. After implementing a flipped classroom approach (from a recent Google conference), however, I realized that the philosophy of digital natives and digital immigrants did not hold 100% true for everyone. I had originally attributed this philosophy to an age-gap or sorts - younger generations would obviously be natives and older generations would be immigrants. As I worked through various new technologies involved in the flipped approach ([read more here](#)), I had many students that needed to be guided through the process of watching videos and completing online quizzes. I was shocked to see that in some cases I knew more than the students about technology! How could this happen?

## Correction: Digital Learners

After a few more years of experience with technology and middle school students, I realized that we aren’t all born in a digital age or a non-digital age. Each student is going to come to us with varying levels of knowledge about technology. It is up to us as teachers to provide the instruction that will allow students to become digital learners in a 21st century environment. As future generations grow up and go out into the “real world” to find jobs - they are going to be pushed in all sorts of directions to adapt their knowledge to become proficient in the ever-changing area that is technology.

With this new-found epiphany, I became much more interested in incorporating these technology-rich experiences into my classroom. I quickly decided to pursue a degree in Educational Technology to further my knowledge about technology practices. Starting my graduate career at Michigan State University was a big step for me! Going into the program I had a few goals in mind of what I wanted to accomplish during this time...

1. Finish the MAET (Masters of Arts in Educational Technology) program by Summer 2015 (typically a 2 year schedule).
2. Seek out a position in Educational Technology or Instructional Technology (maybe even apply for a director of technology position for a district).
3. Begin to incorporate more technology within my own classroom to help students develop the 21st century skills they will need to excel in the future.

As I reflect on these goals and look back at what type of teacher I was when I began the MAET program and what type of teacher I am now, things have definitely changed (in just one short year!). One of my goals in starting this program was to learn new ways to incorporate technology within my own classroom to help students develop 21st century skills. During my time at MSU, I have been given many opportunities to achieve this goal. Each and every one of my classes has shaped my outlook on how to provide technology-rich experiences for my students. One of the second biggest changes I saw in my technology philosophy was during my first semester as I learned about TPACK theory (Technology, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge <http://www.tpack.org/>). This theory shifted my thinking to focus on LEARNING first and secondly to find technology that can support specific learning targets. Before learning about TPACK I would start with finding the technology I wanted to use and then search for ways to implement it into my curriculum. This was all backwards! Shifting my focus to the learning has allowed me to create much more organic, rich learning experiences for my students during the past year. Another course I took involved learning about the Stanford Design model. This course showed me that proper design does not come from haphazardly putting together resources and lessons. Good design involves thinking (and a lot of it) to produce quality outcomes from your students. Incorporating good design practices along with TPACK will ensure that my students experience an atmosphere that pushes them to develop 21st century skills through the use of technology.

Another one of my goals was to graduate in the summer of 2015. I'm so excited that this is actually happening and I will complete the program in August of this year. This is

typically a two year program and I wanted to complete it quicker so that I could gain the knowledge and information necessary to pursue other opportunities within the field.

My last goal was to seek out a position within the educational technology sector. Since I have shifted my technology focus in the classroom, I've been able to create many more opportunities for students to learn 21st century skills. I am becoming a little less interested in achieving this goal immediately and more interested in waiting a few years to move into a focused educational technology job. I just don't know if I'm ready to leave the classroom and work in an environment where I wouldn't have interaction with students on a daily basis like I do now. I have however acquired a position that allows me to stay in my teaching position but also offers me the flexibility to pursue a job within the field. This year our district created new positions for instructional technology coordinators at each building (as an extracurricular activity). I pursued this position and received the job! I now work with another colleague to create professional developments that teach other teachers how to incorporate technology within their classrooms. We also give one-on-one support to teachers who need help with specific technology within their classroom.