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Perspectives on Communicating with the Net Generation

by Lynn Zimmerman and Anastasia Trekles Milligan

In an article in the *New York Times*, Jonathan Glayter ([2006](#)) explored university instructors' views about the benefits and challenges of using e-mail to communicate with students. All of the instructors interviewed for the article felt that e-mail's capacity to facilitate instructor feedback rendered the medium a potentially valuable teaching tool, as students could use it to clarify questions about course material. Many of these instructors also complained, however, that their students often used e-mail in ways that were not directly related to instruction. Examples of these non-instructional uses ranged from requests for information and demands for assistance to complaints and excuses; often, students used e-mail to criticize and critique in ways that they might not have in face-to-face communication. Some students assumed that e-mail accessibility meant that instructors were available to them at any time of the day or night. Instructors felt that students took advantage of that perceived accessibility, leaving instructors with a sense that e-mail communication was becoming an infringement on their time and, sometimes, privacy. In other instances, instructors felt that some of the messages they received from students were too informal or that they were inappropriate for academic communication in other ways. Unfortunately, Glayter notes, many "students seem unaware that what they write in an e-mail could adversely affect them" (¶18). These inappropriate and informal e-mails were perceived by the instructors as representing poor judgment on the parts of the students. Many instructors expressed displeasure with students who disclosed large amounts of personal and sensitive information over e-mail, and some were emphatically turned off by descriptions of inappropriate or irresponsible behavior.

These examples demonstrate a decided disconnect between educators' perceptions of appropriate communication and their students' ideas about or awareness of these issues. As college instructors, if we are to successfully educate these young people, we must consider this problem. Should we insist that students conform to the way things have always been done? Should we look past traditional conventions and embrace students and their digital communication modes as they are? Or can we meet them somewhere in the middle?

We attempt to answer some of these questions by examining the issue in terms of Marc Prensky's ([2001](#)) work regarding digital immigrants and digital natives. Lynn Zimmerman is of the digital immigrant generation; Anastasia Trekles Milligan is closer to what Prensky calls a digital native. Our separate reflections culminate in advice to facilitate communication across the divide.

Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants

Prensky ([2001](#)) has written extensively about the phenomenon of digital natives, younger people who have been reared in a world in which pervasive technology is the norm, as opposed to digital immigrants, older people who learned technology skills as adults. Digital natives, who are entering universities now, have grown up using e-mail, cell phones, the Internet, and more as part of their normal, daily routine. Digital immigrants, however, were not born into the world of Nextel and Nintendo. Some digital immigrants have moved into the new age of technology swiftly, without looking back; others have lagged behind, waiting to see if the early adopters sink or swim. No matter how readily they embrace new technologies, though, digital immigrants were socialized differently than today's children have been. They learn differently, they process information differently, and they may even speak and write differently.

The Digital Immigrant Perspective: Lynn Zimmerman

As someone who fits Prensky's (2001) definition of a digital immigrant, I learned to use computers as they evolved from punch cards to cyberspace. Since I was comfortable with using computer applications, I took to e-mail very readily, developing a network of people around the world with whom I communicate regularly. This network has grown over the 10 years that I have been using e-mail, and I feel now as though I could not live without it. I travel frequently; with e-mail, I can stay in touch with the neighbor watching my house, my friends, my colleagues, and, yes, even my students. The downside to this connectedness is that I am accessible whether or not I want to be reached.

Besides feeling that e-mail sometimes makes me too accessible, I share some of the other concerns of the instructors interviewed for the article mentioned above. Some of my students have overstepped professional bounds in their digital communications with me, writing things to me in e-mails that I do not think they would have said to my face. Such comments have generally fallen in two categories: accusations of unprofessional behavior for some perceived slight or disclosure of details of a personal nature that I really did not need or want to know. Indeed, many students seem to have a sense of anonymity in written communications. This notion has been confirmed when my students and I have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of online discussions in my classes. Since misunderstandings and miscommunications can occur in written as well as in oral communication, some students say that they prefer to have a face-to-face discussion so that they can use nonverbal cues such as tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions to better gauge the other person's reaction to what they are saying. However, many admit that they feel they can more readily express their true feelings about a topic that may be controversial if they are not looking at other people and are not seen by others, which leads me to believe that the concern is not about one's opinion about the topic, but about how one is perceived.

Perhaps this impression reflects my own views because, for me, how I communicate is integral to how I am perceived. Therefore, depending on how I want to be perceived, I make a choice between formal and informal communication. I believe that communications in the educational setting, whether oral or written, are professional communications which should be conducted in the formal register of language.

Of course, my expectations about communication and accessibility were shaped in a different linguistic landscape than that of most of my students. Modern American English is much less formal than it was even forty years ago, when I was in school. John McWhorter, a linguist, has written extensively about the changing linguistic landscape in the United States and how it reflects and shapes our worldview; he notes that if e-mail had been invented in the early 1900s, e-mails would have been written with the same elegance and formality as letters of that time (McWhorter 2003). My relationship with language, while not as formal as it might have been 100 years ago, does reflect my perception that written language is more formal than spoken language. Since informality in oral and written language has become more acceptable, the digital native, accordingly, does not seem to make the same distinctions between formal and informal language that I do.

That said, I believe that my students need to learn how to communicate with people who are different from themselves—including digital immigrants and others who subscribe to the same model of professionalism I do. Teaching is a profession with standards promulgated by such organizations as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). It is important that my pre-methods teacher education students begin realizing the importance of professional behavior, including professional communication. School is a social institution in which teachers interact not only with their students, but also with other teachers, staff, administrators, parents and family of students, and the larger community in which the school is located. As professionals, my students will be communicating with all of these stakeholders, and their communications will shape the community's perceptions of their effectiveness as teachers. As professional teaching standards have changed to take into account increased diversity in schools and the burgeoning use of technology in education, they will continue to evolve to meet the new situations. Already, the definition of literacy no longer includes only reading and writing; it has come to encompass the ability to interpret and create in the visual medium as well. The same is true of the standards associated with professional communication.

The problems and opportunities that accompany online communication come to the fore with another common classroom technology, online discussions. Besides frequently using videos and PowerPoint presentations, I model technology use by having students engage in at least two online discussions each semester. The first discussion is a practice session during which I explain my expectations for the graded discussion that follows later in the semester. I explain that I consider the online discussion assignment to be a professional communication, with well-organized contributions that use Standard English vocabulary and grammar. The online venue allows students to engage in discussion in a format different from the traditional classroom. Some students really engage the topic in a way that demonstrates their learning. However, even with my requirements explained, students often say and do things in this context—offering details about their weekend activities or submitting statements with numerous grammatical errors, for instance—that I do not think they would want saved for perusal by a professor or future employer.

My instructional methods reflect my awareness that, as more and more students come to school with technology skills, teachers need to become adept users of technology in order to better serve those students. My experiences as an instructor have also affirmed, however, my belief that there is more at stake in this tension between digital natives and digital immigrants than the how-to of technology. I maintain that students must develop critical thinking skills and literacy in online communication, since those who possess well-developed communication skills across platforms, along with problem-solving skills and technological capability, will be the ones who excel in today's digital world—and tomorrow's. It is our task as educators to help our students gain those skills.

The Digital Native Perspective: Anastasia Trekles Milligan

In the digital native's world, anyone can communicate with anyone else at any time, and the person on the other end will almost always answer quickly. Even though everyone, including the digital immigrant, tends to "write e-mails like we talk" (McWhorter 2003, 241), the digital immigrant frequently regards e-mail as analogous to letter-writing. The digital native's relationship with the written word reflects how the modern American's relationship with language has changed (McWhorter 2003). The digital immigrant admires the succinct and speedy communication offered by the modern tools of communication; the digital native, alternatively, understands e-mail as a nearly instantaneous mode of communication. When it is not, the digital native is irritated. The widespread availability of the Internet means that the digital native is used to instantly accessing all kinds of information resources. Why should school be any different? When students have a pressing need related to their coursework outside of class time, the instructor can seem like just another electronic resource.

Many digital natives expect immediate feedback for their efforts, not because they are simply impatient, but because they tend to work and learn at what Prensky refers to as "twitch speed" (2001, ¶3). While looking up information for a course and e-mailing the instructor, the digital native may also be listening to music and exchanging instant messages with several friends. Digital natives move quickly through information and prefer to seek out answers actively, rather than wait passively. For Prensky, this behavior is analogous to the way digital natives interact with the video games they have spent hours playing over the course of their lives. David Cameron (2005) discusses the digital native's preference for learning through multitasking and using hyperlinks to access information in a less linear fashion than is offered by the traditional experience of beginning-to-end reading. Technology is more than empowering for the digital native; it is an absolute necessity for achieving learning goals at the desired speed.

The online medium has offered digital natives new ways to express themselves and explore aspects of their personal identity, including core values, beliefs, and interpersonal traits (Huffaker and Calvert 2005). Technologies like blogs, wikis, and social networking sites like [MySpace](#) have opened avenues of communication that most digital immigrants could not have imagined when they were teenagers. These online interactions are important and frequent; with them has come an interesting phenomenon of language often called *netspeak*. Netspeak melds slang and nonstandard English with more traditional grammar

conventions and a horde of acronyms, such as “brb” (be right back), “lol” (laughing out loud), and “imho” (in my humble opinion). While it is far from standard, this language does allow digital natives to express themselves in ways that traditional writing does not accommodate (Huffaker and Calvert 2005). It is no wonder that so many digital natives, communicating with their instructors via the same media they use to communicate with peers, use the same linguistic models as well. After all, as Prensky's (2001) model makes clear, e-mail, blogs, and other online communication modes really belong to the digital natives, and they are comfortable with the language they have developed for use in those settings.

Communicating Across the Divide: Advice from Trekles Milligan

Despite being of different generations, as college instructors, Lynn and I agree that there should be certain standards of professional language and behavior. However, instructors of any generation need to recognize the realities of evolving communication styles in this increasingly technological world and understand the language of the Web and the way writing conventions become blurred on blogs and sites like [MySpace](#). Those modes of communication are to the average digital native a primary means of reaching out to the outside world, of staying connected to old friends and making new ones. Nalder (2006) notes that it is neither productive nor beneficial for teachers, at any level, to create an “us and them mentality when it comes to technology” (19). Educators must learn to bridge the gap by understanding this shifting linguistic and rhetorical landscape while also showing students the value of established linguistic conventions and helping them understand when the different registers of language are appropriate.

This philosophy has influenced my practices and policies in the classroom, where I am careful to lay ground rules for effective and respectful online communication practices. It helps to include in the course syllabus guidelines and policies for instructor-student communication online. My syllabus has my e-mail address and AOL Instant Messenger address, as well as an office telephone with weekly office hours. Instant messages, because they are a synchronous technology like the telephone, can only be sent while I am online; if I do not broadcast, students cannot use that method at that time. My [policy for e-mail](#) is that students should resend messages to which I do not reply within 48 hours. This policy allows for the possibility that the first message somehow got lost; this is life with technology and something that most of us have come to accept, albeit begrudgingly at times. Stating the policy upfront allows me to refer to the syllabus when students get overly impatient; I can explain that, for instance, I often will not reply to e-mail on Sunday afternoons, but I will get back to them on Monday morning. Most students understand and comply when boundaries are clearly set ahead of time. Without clearly established boundaries, students will see the instructor as fair game, 24/7.

My response when messages are unintelligible or ungrammatical depends on the context. I generally ask for clarification if I cannot discern the sender's intent, but I will not correct a student or refuse to read discussion board posts or e-mails because the message is not written in complete, Standard English sentences. If a discussion forum assignment requires use of Standard Written English (and most of mine do), then those expectations are spelled out in the assessment [rubric](#) for that assignment. As with accessibility, spelling out the rules in these situations is important.

Likewise, if an e-mail or instant message from a student contains personal information (e.g., a story about a wild party), I generally avoid the personal narrative in my response. However, it can sometimes be appropriate to offer some insights or a sympathetic ear. This is especially true if the student's narrative is relevant to the class or something I should be informed of, such as potential missed classes due to a family emergency. Often, especially in the 100% online course, sharing some personal information and showing some open-mindedness helps the instructor bridge the divide; once students begin to see the instructor as more than words at the other end of an Internet pipeline, they will begin to respond to the person rather than to the technology. Especially in courses delivered asynchronously, personal connections run the risk of being lost amidst all of the hyperlinks. Roberson and Klotz (2002) suggest that online instructors need to encourage the types of interpersonal interactions that are important to all learning situations by using as many modes of communication as possible—including e-mail, chat, and discussion forums—to engage students with each

other and with the instructor. Using questioning techniques and promoting a free exchange of ideas helps students see the instructor as more of a facilitator and less as a provider of content to be learned. In addition, developing such camaraderie in online courses tends to give students a better feeling for the course, and they tend to perceive the learning experience in a more positive light (Roberson and Klotz [2002](#)).

For many young people, technologies like e-mail, blogging, and Internet-based social networking sites are as important as face-to-face encounters for meeting people and learning more about them (Kornblum [2005](#)). While it may take some adjustment in perceptions and habits for some digital immigrants to use these technologies effectively, there is power in making connections with students at any level, and besides, as Nalder (2006) notes, "how can one teach students and yet know so little about the world they are immersed in?" (21). Being willingly involved in the digital native's world and harnessing these technologies will help digital immigrants make better connections with their students and allow them to set good examples of openness and understanding.

Conclusion

Many college instructors today are of the digital immigrant generation, while many students belong to the digital native generation. Bridging the gap between the two can be difficult, as technology has created cultural differences between the generations that transcend age. Differing visions of time and place manifest themselves in different notions of appropriate behavior. As university instructors, we need to realize that students may have what we perceive as gaps in their understandings of appropriate communication behavior, language registers, and interactions in the college classroom. Like most immigrants, the digital immigrant struggles with the tension between seeking assimilation and retaining identity. Since most university instructors currently fall into the digital immigrant category, we must make conscious choices about when to demand that students meet conventional expectations in their communications and when requirements are more flexible. Educators must decide how to handle these issues before they arise in the classroom. Clear expectations on both sides make for more effective communications in the classroom and online.

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