

Seven Steps to Recovery for Digital Immigrants

Educating digital natives in analog schools, Part II

by Dr. Richard E. Riedl



In our last issue, Dr. Richard Riedl confessed that he is a Digital Immigrant among the epidemic increase of digital natives in our society. Confession, of course, is the first step toward Recovery; here he reveals how we can function in a world where everyone younger than we are knows more about technology than we do—including our students and our children. No doubt his suggestions will become part of a worldwide support network for those with this disorder. Remember: you read it here first!

If you read the last issue of *The Catalyst* you are aware that you are a digital immigrant. There is no cure for this condition. You will always be a digital immigrant. The question is: can you cope with this condition in a world that is growing more and more digital and in which a growing number of people are digital natives? This question is more critical if you are an educator, since the school or district you are working with is being overrun by digital natives.

Our schools are clearly analog. It doesn't make any difference how many computers we put into them; the schools still operate as analog institutions. Digital natives come to school and are immersed in the same processes that have been in place for a hundred years or more, including an agricultural calendar (the nine-month school year to release children to work the fields in the summer) and the semblance of the assembly line from the industrialization of America. That, in and of itself, is not bad except that these analog processes are out of step with the ways digital natives have come to interact with the world. The question each of us must confront is how we are going to work effectively with our digital natives, within an institution that is clearly not digital.

One thing we must do is cope with our own condition...our *immigrant-ness*. Believe it or not, there is a recovery plan for this condition. It can help us be more effective in working with digital natives, even in our analog settings, if, that is, we can apply ourselves to it and give each other support in our efforts to recover. This plan has seven steps and requires constant vigilance so that we don't stray, but it is worth the effort. We will be far more effective when we consider the issues and questions involved when working with digital natives.

The seven steps for recovery

1. *I must admit that I am a digital immigrant.*

It doesn't make any difference how much I use computers or other digital technologies. I am still an immigrant who grew up in an analog world. Everything I do is an adaptation to the digital world. My experiences are "old world"

experiences. This is not necessarily a bad thing as long as I acknowledge it.

2. *I must understand that I don't always understand.*

History is full of examples of how someone or some organization didn't understand an innovation. For instance, not many of us know that Alexander Graham Bell took his invention to Western Union, as what seemed to him to be a very logical organization to use the telephone. Western Union officials couldn't understand why they would want a technology that allowed their operators to talk to each other. Since they were a company that had operators communicating the messages of clients to other operators who then gave them message to the receiving client, they could not make the leap to a world where clients communicated with other clients.

Television was going to revolutionize education. Yet we don't see a lot of television in our schools. In fact, except for some very specialized educational programs there is very little or no inclusion of television programming in school settings. So maybe television didn't revolutionize education. Well, actually, it did, but our schools didn't really notice. Children come to school with a very different knowledge and experience set because of television. As educators we often don't acknowledge those differences or understand that a change has taken place. And we do very little to help our students become wise consumers of television programming and commercialization.

And on a personal note that I bet that many of you can relate to, I never understood the whole text messaging thing. I couldn't understand why two people with phones would want to do that cumbersome thumb typing thing when they could talk to each other. I didn't begin to understand until I was on a plane that had just landed but had to wait for a gate. As we sat on the taxiway, a large number of people whipped out their cell phones and began calling friends and relatives to let them know what was going on. One woman, across the aisle and a few rows back from me, made numerous calls and before long had most of us wishing she would shut up.

In the meantime the young man next to me also whipped out his cell phone but, instead of talking, began texting. I have no idea what his message said, even though we were in the forced intimacy of coach class. Yet I knew almost everything about this woman who was further away, whether I wanted to or not. I was beginning to understand.

Before I began to understand I was inclined to condemn. As soon as I realized I didn't understand, I could be patient and open myself up to learning. Until I could do that I had little hope of communicating with digital natives.

3. I must be open to change.

Don't automatically condemn change or assume the negatives of a change, even when that change makes us uncomfortable. But, also, don't automatically change. All change is not good and there is still wisdom in our "old world" knowledge. It's just very difficult to know when it applies. Patience is a key here, as is willingness to admit that I don't understand.

4. I must avoid teaching "technology" to natives.

Immigrants need to be taught how to use digital technologies but digital natives learn it. If they have a use for the digital tool they will figure out how to make it work. They aren't afraid to break it. If we use digital technologies for authentic purposes, and remember that authenticity must be perceived by the student and not just the teacher, then the job of using them becomes much easier and our students will teach us much.

5. I must not assume that because natives know how to make the "technology" work that they know how to use it.

Huh?

Ultimately, digital technologies are tools of the mind, and it takes knowing how to think and feel about what you are engaged in that makes the difference. We have to help those who know how to make a computer work to make the connection between its use and something worth making it work with. It is easy to become fascinated by the "neat" things that can be done, without having any idea how to use those neat things. Our "old world experience," if used well and tempered by our openness to change and our lack of understanding, can be valuable in helping digital natives figure out how to use their technologies.

6. I shouldn't assume comfort with digital tools means:

- a. knowledge of right and wrong*
- b. knowledge of what is safe and unsafe*

c. or that natives know how to use digital tools the way we want them to use them

"Old world experience" again comes into play. Children are trusting. They have not learned many of the lessons that we have learned over time about how to treat others and how to be safe. As immigrants, our problem is to learn enough about the digital world to be good guides in these critical areas: a daunting but necessary challenge.

And, despite their proficiencies with and expectations of digital technologies, they don't always understand how the rest of the world still uses them. Digital immigrants will bring about huge changes in the way we do things when they grow up but until then they still have to learn what is being done now.

7. I must understand that what is social in my world may not be social in a digital world.

One of the most common things for teachers to say is that they are concerned that children are not being "socialized" because they are spending so much time on computers. But what does being socialized mean? To most of us it means how to meet and speak to people in certain social contexts and how different social contexts require some changes in behavior. That is still true but our limitation is that we think mostly in terms of those social contexts being face-to-face or telephone interactions. Digital natives have an entire world of social contact open to them that most immigrants don't think of as being social. Yet those digital social contexts are vibrant and active with their own rules and, in some cases, slang.

Don't assume that a child who spends a lot of time on a computer is isolated. Don't assume that this child has no social skills. The child can't ignore our face-to-face social settings so we do need to guide him/her as we would any other child, but be aware that this child has a much broader and richer social environment than we do and may be more skilled at code switching (the ability to adjust language and social behavior between different contexts) than we imagine.

So there we are, the seven steps to recovery for those of us who are immigrants—a perpetual process of attempting to cope. We now know who *we* are and what we must do to work with digital natives. But who are these digital natives? What is their world really like?

That, alas, must wait for the next issue of *The Catalyst*.

Dr. Richard E. (Dick) Riedl, Department of Leadership & Educational Studies, Reich College of Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, (704) 262-2328 riedlre@appstate.edu