



Digital Settlers and Digital Immigrants Working With Digital Natives

When it comes to understanding the impact of technology on society, Marshall McLuhan, the well known media theorist suggested that much of the time; "...we are looking at the present through a rearview mirror and marching backward to the future."

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a Canadian-born educator and philosopher known especially for his work as a communications theorist. In his field he was considered both influential and controversial. The ideas that once made McLuhan controversial now seem prophetic of these times of information sharing technology.

McLuhan's work on the topic of evolving communications technology focused on the following ideas:

- The understanding of the effects of any technology on society—regardless of its degree of innovation—always begins with the individual, because any medium of technology is merely an *extension of the person*.
- *The medium is the message!* A medium affects society not by the content it carries, but by the characteristics of the medium itself. A light bulb carries no message. But a light bulb creates a social effect by creating an environment of light in which people exist, act, create and interact.
- While technology in itself has no moral attributes, it has the power to shape an individual's self-concept and reality—as goes the individual, so may go society.
- A principal challenge of educating about media and technology is the training perception.
- Basically, the effects of a new technology on society can be studied by asking four basic questions: 1. *What does the medium enhance?* 2. *What does the medium make obsolete?* 3. *What does the medium retrieve that had been obsolesced earlier.* 4. *What does the medium flip into when pushed to extremes?* The questions can be used to create a simultaneous tetrad of critical effects.

McLuhan never predicted the types or sophistication of future technology. He did, however, look forward with insight and caution, regarding the influence of technology on the perceptions of individuals and their relationships within communities. He observed that society was moving forward with perceptions about technology forged in times long past. He was quoted as noting that when a new technology extends one or more of our senses, then new ratios among all of our senses will occur—what had appeared lucid before may suddenly become opaque and what had been vague or opaque will become translucent.

What and How Can Digital Settlers and Digital Immigrants Teach Digital Natives?

In their book *Digital Born*, authors John Palfrey and Urs Gasser define Digital Natives as those born post 1980, when the world came on-line. As Digital Natives they are constantly *connected!* Digital Settlers are identified as those who grew up in an analog-only world, but function on a sophisticated and creative level with regard to popular technology. Digital Immigrants have figured out how to use e-mail!

I. A. Richards, one of McLuhan's teachers, postulated that "meaning does not reside in words but in people." He stressed the importance of being aware of and respecting personal perspectives while engaging in the challenge of discovering and training personal perceptions. He also coined the term feedforward. *Feedforward* might be the instructional language used to shape the emerging behaviors of technological neophytes. In turn, *feedback* might be the motivational



language used to influence or reshape current information sharing behaviors of experienced students.

Accordingly, as we Digital Settlers and Digital Natives teach and talk with youth about the influences, benefits and consequences of using information sharing technology, a unique challenge exists. We must be careful to avoid merely interpreting what we believe to be fact and truth; for the facts and truths about the roles and impact of technology in the lives of our young people, are personally and intimately theirs.

Perhaps the best way to proceed is to collaborate with our students to construct the meaning of the roles and influences of information sharing technologies on our world. We must invite our Digital Natives to become true co-creators of the spirit, content and meaning of our instructional dialogues, and their resulting insights. Perhaps we should admit that this particular meaning will always be “under construction” as information sharing technologies will continue to evolve!

What About Cyber-bullying?

In the case of addressing cyber-bullying, the McLuhan’s tetrad can be used to design questions to open student discussions about the nature of being on-line and its benefits and consequences.

- What does being on-line make easier for you?
- What does being on-line intensify or exaggerate for you?
- What does being on-line bring back into style for you?
- What does being on-line destroy or diminish for you?
- What can being on-line do when you push it to the limits—What are the benefits and consequences?
- How does being on-line change you?

During such a discussion we can challenge students to explain how a private conscience must now extend to cover on-line interactions. We can also present the following ideas for consideration and discussion:

- Every type of technology you use is an extension of your thoughts, feelings and intentions. The technology is nothing without you.
- Every time you communicate on-line it has the potential to have far-reaching effects or consequences.
- The person on the other end is like you. He/she has similar thoughts and feelings--happiness, curiosity, pride, frustration, fear and embarrassment.
- Every step on-line starts in the real world where you have a real name, a real face, and responsibility for all you choose to express and do.
- On-line is a tricky place that makes things seem to disappear that are still really there.

One final challenge in facilitating student discussions about cyber-bullying is accurately explaining the behavior. If students enter the discussion with the idea that cyber-bullying is merely *traditional* bullying on-line, perceptions about the behavior might occur that make it easier to miss or deny their involvement.

The emerging consensus is that cyber-bullying is a phenomenon unto itself. In comparison to traditional bullying, a cyber-bully:

- does not have to be more powerful than his/her target.
- does not have to act more than once.
- is restricted to the use of written words and images.
- needs no immediate feedback, reward or satisfaction.
- may be a person who would never risk bullying in person.
- when shielded by anonymity, may act in unexpectedly coarse and cruel ways.



What traditional and cyber-bullying do have in common is that they are both acts of intentional harm-doing and aggression. *(Note: Circumstances change when the cyber-bullying is an extension of a traditional bullying relationship.)*

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