

Digital native or digital immigrant (or does it matter?)

By NMAH, September 7, 2010

With today's classrooms full of [digital natives](#), teachers are considering how to incorporate technology into their classrooms. Verizon Thinkfinity (funder and partner for [Smithsonian's History Explorer](#)) recently posed a question to teachers on its new site, the Thinkfinity Community (community.thinkfinity.org), about technology integration. Sort of an enhanced Facebook page for educators, this space allows teachers to talk with each other and with out-of-classroom educators, like those of us at the museum, about issues of interest and to tag and easily share online resources.

Thinkfinity asked teachers: Are you a “digital native” or a “digital immigrant”* and does it make a difference in technology integration in your classroom? Based on my age (I am exactly on the digital split) and my work with education here at the museum, I was intrigued by the Thinkfinity Community discussion and wondered what responses teachers, and especially library/media specialists and technology instructors, would have. After an initial discussion of terms—defining natives and immigrants by age or ability—one instructor noted the danger in defining oneself at all. In the end, the conversation suggested that some teachers found these terms counterproductive, that defining themselves as one or the other encouraged the idea that one must choose to do things the “old way” or the “new way”—a false choice!

In determining how to teach comfortably a subject that is ever changing, one instructor noted that, while she is sometimes overwhelmed with the pace of change, she has discovered that she can help students “moderate their own exploration” and that teaching technology can help students learn that they can share ideas and teach each other. While several teachers noted that they feel as though their students, at times, are quicker to catch on to the functions of new media, one pointed out that students are not always sufficiently critical of the information they receive or think about the implications of the tools they use. As she noted, “[a]s we immigrants are more cautious, we may do a better job of evaluation of what we find.” The comment is a useful reminder of the value of multiple perspectives, and that as educators we have a responsibility to help students better evaluate the information and the opportunities that they encounter in this “new” world.

The comment reminded me, too, of the importance of not losing the “integration” in technology integration, a thought that I like to think we are promoting here at the museum and that I shared in the community discussion. We try to reinforce the idea that it is important to blend approaches; on our [History Explorer website](#), we are doing our best to meet students where they are with cool [interactives](#), but we also are promoting more traditional object lessons using our [artifacts](#). And, we’re eager to work with teachers to help them think about ways to integrate our materials into their classroom, no matter their initial level of familiarity or comfort with the platform.



If you want to learn more about this conversation, you can find it at the [Thinkfinity Community](#)—it’s free, new, and open to anyone with an interest in teaching and education. We’d love to know what matters to you, and you’ll find me there, too, thinking about this and other issues in education today. Hope you’ll join us!

Naomi Coquillon is an education specialist at the National Museum of American History.

*For more on the origin of the terms described above, see Mark Prensky’s article, [Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants](#), originally published in 2001.