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Immigrant Song: A Cautionary Note about Technology and Honors

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In an influential 2001 essay, Marc Prensky discusses the vast divide that exists between two generations, what he terms “digital natives” and “digital immigrants.” The former group consists of students who have lived their entire lives with computers, cell phones, video games, “and all the other toys and tools of the digital age,” whereas the latter group is made up of everyone else, those adults who have adopted these new technologies as they have come online (“Digital” 1). While “natives” like our current students move seamlessly among the many devices of the digital age and appear entirely comfortable employing such paraphernalia, immigrants (a group that includes the majority of faculty currently involved in honors education) learn to operate these tools along the way but never fully shed their immigrant status, using the technologies in slightly improper, awkward, or gauche ways, like printing out a document rather than editing it onscreen, for example. Prensky designates such clumsy behaviors “accents,” markers that make the discourse of immigrant instructors seem almost like a foreign language, and then alarmingly proposes that “the single biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language” (“Digital” 2).

Oddly, after delineating this divide, Prensky’s solution turns on asking immigrants to behave more like the natives—moving faster through material, coming at ideas more randomly, and even inventing computer games to deliver content (“Digital” 4). If educators would just learn to speak the language of the natives, he suggests, most of our problems would disappear. Yet this is where Prensky’s analogy seemingly breaks down, for an immigrant can never fully shed his non-native status no matter how vigorously he seeks to erase his past. In fact, the harder he tries, the more ridiculous the immigrant looks when trying to assimilate. No less than T. S. Eliot became a cautionary example when he turned his back on his country and family by emigrating to England, where he dressed in a three-piece suit, carried an umbrella, joined

the Church of England, and eventually ended up speaking in a clipped British accent. Many observers have commented on this get-up with a particularly cutting backhanded jab, calling Eliot “more British than the British” (Kenner 58).

I would like to argue that the majority of current honors faculty and staff will always be immigrants, and, in trying to “keep up” with our native students, we run the risk of looking slightly silly; more importantly, we might end up endorsing (tacitly or overtly) a shift of priorities in honors education that is distracting, costly, and damaging. In a later essay, Prensky seems to admit the futility of such attempts at cultural adaptation when he asserts that the natives “will continue to evolve and change so rapidly that we won’t be able to keep up” (“Listen” 9).

Much of Prensky’s original argument concerns accommodating new learning styles, making the educational experience easier, more approachable, and more accessible for the natives. Yet I wonder if following such a path is not defeating the very purpose of honors education. After all, George Mariz makes the valid point that part of what attracts honors students to the honors classroom is the challenge they find there, especially in a classroom that emphasizes active learning, interaction with other students, and struggles with the material. Digital technologies, on the other hand, often cultivate passivity, lack of awareness of the larger world, and the type of cocoon-like isolation that honors education attempts to overcome. I find it hard to believe that the New York teenager who recently fell into a sewer because she was walking and texting at the same time is somehow emblematic of progress—unless you happen to be the lawyer representing the teen’s parents, who rather predictably have threatened to sue the city over the consequences of their daughter’s idiotic behavior (Cavaliere). Indeed, recent neurobiological research demonstrates that one of the underlying motivators of an apparent need to surround ourselves with digital playthings is that the use of such devices delivers what Harvard professor of psychiatry John Ratey calls a “dopamine squirt,” much like a shot of narcotics into the bloodstream (Richtel). This culture of immediate gratification is an insidious ethos that the honors classroom directly challenges in its demand that students slow down, read and think carefully, and actually engage the ideas of their professors and classmates.

I’m no Luddite. I love technology as much as the next person. I have three different PCs running during any given day, keep up two webpages, and have hosted sessions on technology at NCHC’s annual meeting. But I would like to steer us back to what we do and know best in honors: teaching, learning, thinking, and writing. It is possible to do these things—and do them very well—without making the latest technologies the centerpiece. I think it is

especially important to make this point in an era of shrinking budgets, when faculty and administrators will increasingly be asked to identify their educational priorities in allocating scarce resources.

There is no way around the fact that technology is enormously expensive. To take one representative example, the University of Kansas has increased its information technology budget in the past two decades from \$11 million to \$26 million annually, with over \$1 million of that amount devoted to IT security and services (Blumenstyk A12). Technology also operates like a multi-headed Hydra, mysteriously breeding a succession of heads that make the beast even more ravenous. The digitization of archival materials in libraries, for example, has required *additional* electronic tools, training, and staff. Richard Ovenden, associate director of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, points out that resources devoted to digital curation must come from somewhere, most likely from “more traditional areas” (Kolowich A8).

The increasing budgetary demands associated with the explosion in IT spending have been satisfied primarily through higher tuition revenues and a curbing of instructional costs due to the insidious practice in the past thirty years of retiring full-time tenure-track positions and farming out that work to itinerant part-time labor in the form of adjuncts, teaching assistants, and other contingent instructors. Marc Bousquet notes that tenured and tenure-track faculty made up only 25% of the faculty population in fall 2007, down from 33% just a decade early. He predicts that twenty years from now, that percentage will fall to the single digits if current trends hold (Bousquet B24). Such diminution of faculty resources has a direct, negative impact on student learning, especially the types of learning undertaken by honors students, who tend to be more engaged with their professors and require a higher level of interaction during their education. In other industries, technology enables the achievement of enormous efficiencies, but these advances occur less commonly in higher education where the primary costs revolve around labor. Some gains have no doubt been remarkable, especially in the areas of content delivery and access—digitization of information and its availability through search engines—as well as in the ability to communicate efficiently with students through tools like email, chat, texting, blogging, Blackboard, etc. Computer modeling, data crunching, and like practices have also opened up almost limitless possibilities in fields like math, engineering, business, and the sciences. But overload and redundancy also occur, as in the case of Boston College’s experiment with using college email addresses in 2009–10 simply as forwarding devices because students were being digitally overwhelmed by the plethora of communication forms (Young A9).

What are some of the other costs of devoting too much time and too many resources to technology? In one recent book, Carl Honoré identifies a

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range of different effects on children who have made the toys of the digital age essential tools of their lives: drastically increased rates of obesity, a decline in basic motor skills and physical stamina, a decrease in amounts of time spent sleeping, an upsurge in rates of social isolation, and a disturbing trend of narcissistic behaviors (95–9). He also cites studies performed at a neuroscience laboratory at the University of Michigan that reveal the decreased quality of work performed while multitasking, the very type of behavior that digital immigrants typically imagine natives excel at. In fact, the part of the brain that facilitates multitasking actually develops fairly late, suggesting that children in particular are less adept at juggling multiple activities (Honoré 106–7). Now more than ever, the honors classroom should provide a sanctuary from this 24-7 technological assault on the senses, the non-stop connectivity that seems increasingly tied to detrimental psychological outcomes, especially in light of research demonstrating that “the human brain needs moments of quiet and rest to process and consolidate ideas, memories, and experiences” (Honoré 107). The honors classroom can provide a refuge from this digitized world, a place where students might have ninety minutes twice a week to breathe, to reflect, to be at peace. We seem to have arrived at a point where the technological tail is wagging the dog of learning; schools are experimenting with initiatives like “A Day without Email,” and teachers are asking their students to suffer through twenty-four hours without using any electronic devices and then to reflect on the difficulty of the experience. Surely such developments signal a need to step back slightly from the promises of technology and take a closer look at its costs.

Oh, and if you were wondering whether or not you’re an immigrant, just glance once more at my title—if you caught the Led Zeppelin reference (circa 1970), then you’re definitely not a native.

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