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ARTICLE

THE SIXTH LANGUAGE: A NEW CODE FOR DIGITAL NATIVES

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According to a global survey by Cisco, digital natives are people who value internet access as much as the air they breathe, the home they live in and the food they eat (56 percent) and say they could not live without it (60 percent). Their lives are organized around their internet connections, touch screens, wireless connectivity and the physical objects and people that surround them. Digital natives experience and move through the world in an entirely different way. They are neurologically different and will likely soon be anthropologically different as well.

The world has changed since 1995 and, naturally, our students have changed with it. Change did not come from a single platform or person, but has come about from a convergence of events that built up in 1960's and '70s, then came together starting in the 1990's.

The World Wide Web was created just a few years before 1995, but by then, there were already some 15 million internet users. There were, however, good arguments to suggest that it was a wholly American phenomenon, as 85 percent

of users lived stateside. Just three years later, Stanford University Ph.D. students Larry Page and Sergei Brin created Google Inc. With a free search engine as its only device, Google's mission was to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

This was not the first search engine to come out of Silicon Valley (Alta Vista had been around since 1995), but it was the one that fundamentally changed the way information around the world is organized and shared. The 1990's also saw the birth of the free open-source software Linux (1991), Bezos's online Amazon store (1994), the eBay internet auction platform (1995), Netflix (1997), PayPal (1998), Napster (1999), Survey Monkey (1999), Salesforce (1999), Alibaba (1999) and Despegar (1999), to name just a few giants. The birth of these internet business platforms occurred in a climate of stock market euphoria—one that came to an abrupt halt in March 2000, when the dotcom bubble burst.

In 2001, once the collapse in stock market value of new tech companies had passed, Jimmy Wales

¹ ["The Cisco Connected World Technology Report,"](#) Sept. 21, 2011.

and Larry Sanger gave life to another equally ambitious project: An online encyclopedia, free of charge and universally accessible, whose content could be created, corrected, and supervised via collaboration with a non-expert user community. Wikipedia, launched by the Wikimedia Foundation, set out from the beginning to “empower and engage people around the world to compile and develop educational content under a free license or in the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally.” With a small organizational and administrative structure, without advertising or equity partners, financed entirely by microdonations, the emblematic encyclopedia came into being, disregarding all the business standards codified during the industrial revolution.

Facebook was created in 2004 and YouTube the following year, two platforms deeply rooted in the idea of a society starting to link together to share, tag and produce online content. They took what previous social networks (SixDegrees, Friendster, MySpace) had done and applied those ideas to a community of internet users that already numbered 500 million. They offered users streamlined, clean interfaces with effortless access and navigability that allowed them to view simple, fun, social content. Over time, these principles would become the ABCs of social media, all of which had to be social, simple and fun.

Between Wikipedia’s creation and the advent of these social networks, the number of cellphones in the world had reached 1.1 billion, finally exceeding the number of total landlines. This jump happened even before smartphones or the mass use of global broadband.

As the internet continued to grow exponentially, Time magazine honored internet users in its 2006 Person of the Year special. On the cover the word “You” was displayed on a computer screen and under it, the legend read “Yes, you. You control the information age. Welcome to your world.” In the same year, microblogging site Twitter came into being, as did streaming service Spotify—and Julian Assange brought WikiLeaks to life. We now know how these platforms brought down longstanding institutions, modified the dynamics of political debate and brought many governments, companies and conventions to their knees. But when they started out, few could have

predicted they would have such a transformative impact, and even fewer predicted it would occur in such a short period of time.

In June 2007, Apple launched the iPhone, the first truly “smart” phone and the precursor to a wide category of devices, including all touchscreen tablets. Just a few months later, Amazon launched its first generation of Kindle e-readers. In 2008, Airbnb entered the scene, challenging the hotel industry, and Uber did the same thing with the road passenger transport industry in 2009. During the same period came the advent of the Android operating system, which would later take over 80 percent of the world’s cellphone operating system market, and the introduction of the Bitcoin protocol—quasi-money supported by blockchain technology.

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These beginnings have led to many significant ends. In 2010, after a 305-year history, global online newspaper advertising surpassed print advertising for the first time, and two years later, the Encyclopaedia Britannica announced it would cease to produce its printed version after 244 years.

To date, there are some 4.5 billion internet users who go online every day, even though internet coverage reaches only 54 percent of Asia and less than 40 percent of Africa. Wikipedia is up to 40 million articles in over 290 different languages (despite the resistance it continues to face in older generations), Facebook is worth over \$500 billion just 15 years after its creation, there are 4 billion smartphones in the world, over 500 hours of new videos are uploaded to YouTube every minute and Google not only has self-driving cars, but also acknowledges that its Google Brain project spans across all the company’s major future developments. In 2014, Amazon announced it would start delivering books by drone, then



announced the launch of an online tool for elementary school teachers in 2017, displaying an interest in education management.

Though they were all created in the last 50 years, Microsoft (1975), Apple (1978), Amazon (1994), Google (1998) and Facebook (2004) are the most valuable companies in the world today. These five have been key players in this new emerging world, fundamentally reshaping communications, institutions and educational practices.

You do not need to be an expert to see the tension currently present in every level of the education system. These problems are not unique to any one institution, country or format, but rather reflect an industry's consistent failing to adapt to the digital age.

We must reflect on the fact that, on any given educational blog, you can find a list of items, situations and school practices obsolete in the 21st century. The list includes computer rooms, building isolated classrooms, the absence of Wi-Fi covering every inch of a school building, bans on using smartphones and tablets in class, the presence of an IT director with an access profile

as general system administrator and overseer, schools with no active social media profile, traditional libraries and classes for teenagers that start at 8 a.m., among other outdated practices. We must consider what basic structures and practices have begun to hinder us in an age where information is at our fingertips.

Schools, like universities, have many clear and everyday manifestations of this tension. Setting aside extreme cases of physical, verbal and psychological violence, more mundane trends come to the surface, including selfishness, lack of interest, an absence of love and charity, detachment from essential norms of coexistence and behavior and, perhaps most noticeably, a lack of respect for authority.

One particularly uncertain territory adults handle incorrectly is language. If one condition distinguishes the human species, it is our capacity to develop communication systems that give shape to and transform our thinking. Language enables conceptualization, abstraction and reflection. Through this, humans have increased our collective ability dominate our environments and utilize them for our benefit. Animals also have communication systems, albeit rudimentary, limited and static, with at most some 50 combinations of sounds and gestures. In contrast, humans possess a generative communication system, with infinite combinations, allowing us to put together, take apart and reorganize meanings and formats to our liking. Human language is a kind of living, dynamic organism, constantly growing, mutating, evolving and becoming more sophisticated. The fact that Diderot's Encyclopédie condensed all the knowledge of his time into just 64,000 definitions at the height of Enlightenment France, while Wikipedia now stores tens of millions of definitions gives us some indication of the way our species makes use of this vital survival tool. Language, therefore, not only allows us to communicate and inform, but above all else, it allows us to discuss and manage problems, conflicts, conventions, inheritances, challenges and opportunities.

According to Robert K. Logan, an MIT physician and disciple of Marshall McLuhan, the evolution of language is presented as a continuous, sequential chain. Spoken language appeared as the first form of communication and information, then written language and mathematics, which

appeared around 3500 BCE, followed by scientific language around 2000 BCE, and then the great leap in time to computational language (around the 1950's), before coming finally to internet language, which arose at the start of the 21st century. Logan's studies led him to firmly state that education should be concerned with developing the necessary skills to use all available forms of language. According to Logan, the two new forms of language that have appeared in the last 70 years should be absorbed and integrated into the education system.

“Digital natives will continue to grow more sophisticated in their skills and abilities to successfully use cultural codes”

Elsewhere, writer Edith Litwin encouraged us to think about texting language as a decomposition of literary, narrative and conversational genres. She claims that textspeak—Logan's sixth language—is the most fragmented and conversational of all written languages. Think for a second: When you read a message from your child on their wall or social media profile, do you often feel like you are looking at a piece of writing, or part of a conversation? Many adults interpret it as a piece of writing, but children and teenagers view it differently. When they are texting, they are conversing, and so they therefore take the same liberties and make the same concessions as you or I do when we speak. These conflicting meanings and practices cause tension between teachers and students.

Digital natives will continue to grow more sophisticated in their skills and abilities to successfully use cultural codes and languages rather than just the externally visible skills of utilizing tools, platforms and technologies. While the education system continues to ignore this and fails to adapt to changing circumstances, it will have no choice other than to step to aside to let other institutional formats arise, one better adapted to the needs, practices and realities of this era, and teach our youth.

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