



**Prensky, M. (2016). *Education to better their world: Unleashing the power of 21st-century kids*. New York: Teachers College Press.**

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Marc Prensky, the author of *Education to Better Their World*, is an innovative speaker, author, and advocate for educational change in the K-12 school system who has adopted a global educational perspective. He argues that students need greater autonomy and agency in education than what has currently been afforded them. He proposes that our current education system needs to evolve from an individual to a global mindset that focuses on empowering students to make lasting impact in their communities and the world. According to this mindset, education should encompass inquiry-based learning to afford students opportunities to engage in real-world, hands-on projects that require that they utilize multiple life-skills outside of the schoolhouse. The traditional academic model of educating students today is contrary to this; his proposed Empowerment to Better the World Model advocates for greater real-world and hands-on learning, grounded in solving community problems and global issues. The author's vision for this text is to convince readers that his model for reconceptualizing and restructuring the educational system is

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“paradigmatic and indicative of things to come” (p. 4).

To guide the reader through this transformation of K-12 education, Prensky identifies four major shifts: a shift in ends, a shift in means, a shift in expectations for kids, and a shift in how educators teach. It is in accord with these shifts in mindset that the author divides the chapters of the book. Chapters 1-4 present the challenges facing our current educational system, address the essential need for dramatic change, and introduce the dynamic capabilities and accomplishments of 21st century kids. Chapters 5-8 provide examples of kids' life accomplishments based on the desire to improve on one's community and passion for global change. Prensky further makes the distinction between *achievement*, which is purely centered on the individual learner, and *accomplishment*, which is group-oriented and communally centered. Chapter 9 presents a new core curriculum based on supporting effective thinking, effective action, and effective relationships to replace the current core subjects of Math, English, Science, and Social Science, what Prensky captures in the acronym MESS. In chapters 10-11, the author addresses the importance of technology in playing a central role that collectively unifies and empowers 21st century learners. He expresses the need for educational technologists to dedicate the use of digital tools for true innovation that promotes his Empowerment to Better the World Model and articulates the changing roles of educators by transitioning from traditional teaching to “empowerment teaching” (p. 92). Chapters 12-13 focus on the possible hurdles and backlash to his proposals for systemic change and what stakeholders can do to promote fundamental metamorphosis to a more sustainably empowering educational system that better prepares globally minded futurists.

Prensky has what might be considered a pedagogically radical view of what education

should be. In order to address undetermined global issues and empower young 21st century learners to make positive change in their communities, he promotes cooperative learning that utilizes critical community-based thinking and problem-solving to address pertinent issues of all principalities. In emphasizing how traditional education incorporates imitative experiences to enhance student learning, Prensky promotes simulations that may have real-world application and hands-on learning opportunities that can be applied to real-world problems. He provides examples of community-service learning to reinforce his claim for a K-12, student-centered education based on accomplishments. In Prensky's view, it is imperative that our K-12 education system change because the 21st century student population has adapted to the societal changes introduced by technology advancement. The traditional lecture-style, standardized testing culture of schooling today is no longer adequately preparing students to take on global change.

I appreciate Prensky's distinction between theory and practice as he plausibly claims that students are leaving school unprepared for practical application because their education was purely hypothetical and theoretical. “The model of K-12 education is changing from kids just learning about the world to actually improving it while they are students” (p. 23). In short, the main goal for students is to accomplish tasks that produce communal change through which learning is an indirect result. What Prensky seems to be promoting is more of what already exists in many schools that emphasize internships and work-experience programs. Yet the differences lie in the impact factor of such real-world experiences – the need to accomplish change in one's community and the world.

The author hopes that this generation of kids will take on the world's problems and find solutions to global issues. Prensky claims that

this generation of young kids, whom he previously called “digital natives” (2001), are generally disregarded for not contributing to the community or global beneficence and offers multiple examples of kids’ accomplishments that have benefitted society. Prensky seems to assume that kids are able to make dramatic change due to their close link to digital technologies, having been born into a digital age and not knowing life without technology influences like the internet and social media. However, one essential question arises: Do all kids know how to effectively maximize the true potential of advanced technologies for global change without having been taught how to do so? There is an assumption throughout the text that promotes an educational shift toward self-directed learning without guided structure or specific, established learning goals and standards that assist educators and students alike in navigating the trajectory of K-12 education as a whole.

According to Prensky (2001), digital natives are distinctly different from digital immigrants, distinguished by the generational gap and the technological influences that separate them. Digital natives are those 21st century learners (i.e., post-millennials, pluralists, Gen Z, or iGens) who do not know life without the influences of advanced technology including the internet and social media. Digital immigrants were born before the introduction of such technology and have had to adapt to the growing digital influences that have become so socially prevalent. Through their “newly enhanced power and connectivity” (p. 28), 21st century kids possess the means to achieve real-world accomplishments that were not previously feasible since “kids were too powerless and isolated” (p. 29) before advanced technologies (e.g., internet, social media, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality) existed.

While Prensky’s grand ideas of educational change and his Empowerment to Better the

World model demand a reflective pause for all stakeholders in education today about best practices in pedagogy and preparing students for the harsh reality of global problems, his book falls short in detailing specific steps to successfully implement a K-12 education system solely based on the accomplishments of student-driven community-based projects. Even though Prensky recognizes that much work is yet to be done to transform his conceptual model into a fully functioning education system that regulates skill-based accomplishment learning, his radical criticism of current academic learning and willingness to replace it with a progressive model that lacks structural details is cause for concern. Prensky’s presentation of his model remains premature and thereby disregards many logistical factors on its systemic implementation. The author’s global empowerment project lacks sufficient details about fundamental infrastructure needed for proper application, standards for student achievement, and overall accountability measures for students and educators alike.

The author seems to devalue the basics of reading, writing, and numeracy, assuming that kids will eventually figure it out by teaching themselves with the help of technology. Furthermore, he makes gross assumptions that suggest that technology is the cure-all for basic scholastic deficiencies. While Prensky places an emphasis on educational technology’s ability to teach, and leaves teachers to facilitate the learning process, it is unclear as to how this will be managed. He places less attention on subject matter and content learning and more emphasis on accomplishing real-world results and self-reflecting on the project-producing processes. The author is not wrong to state that K-12 students would benefit from learning a number of skills mentioned in the new core curriculum (e.g., grit, growth mindset, and ethics), as well as pursuing personal passions to increase motivation and overall engagement in and out of school. However, when the majority of basic core

content (e.g., MESS) is replaced by individualized project learning, students lack the background knowledge required to take on globally transformative enterprises. Moreover, he does not consider the multitude of diverse learners (e.g., English language learners, homeless, foster youth, and students with special learning needs) that make up American public schools, the many disparate needs each group has, and how they will be supported in his new model.

Prensky's belief that digital natives are somehow "more technologically sophisticated than adults" (pp. 80-81) has been contested in the literature (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010; Jones, 2010; Koutropoulos, 2011). Yet the ways in which educators address technology use in the curriculum and approach the onslaught of digital stimuli on 21st century learners are undeniably a continual concern for all stakeholders. It is also fair to say that learners of every generation have been influenced by the societal trends that surround

them. And 21st century learners are no exception. Technology advancement has afforded today's youth unbridled access to information concerning the political, environmental, and social issues that plague their world. Regardless of distance and geographical boundaries, the internet provides a universal platform of connectivity through which 21st century learners can collectively collaborate and create global change. This is certainly worth exploring further concerning future educational goals, new pedagogical standards, and networks of educators and students. While the faces and mindsets of our 21st century learners may have adapted to the times in which they live, drastic systemic change is often slow to surface. In the meantime, educational movements and revolutionary trends like Prensky's *Empowerment to Better the World Model* will continue to challenge the ways in which the world addresses the growing needs of the young 21st century learners it serves.

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## About the Reviewer

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