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Thomas, Michael (Ed.). (2011). *Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, Technologies and the New Literacies*. New York: Routledge.

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What does it mean to be a “digital native,” and from whence does this understanding spring?

In *Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, Technologies and the New Literacies*, editor Michael Thomas and his fellow author-contributors set out to unpack a series of decade-old assumptions about the make-up, needs, and tendencies of the so-called generation of digital natives, incorporating research from both a range of disciplines and a series of countries to better reveal the “temptations and dangers of technoevangelism” and “technoskepticism” (p. 4).

Primarily, the book examines three assumptions about the generation of young people born after 1980: first, that they “constitute a largely homogenous generation and speak a

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different language [than their parents] vis-à-vis digital technologies”; second, that they “learn differently from preceding generations of students;” and third, that they “demand a new way of teaching and learning involving technology” (p. 4). The purpose of the book is therefore, per the title, to “deconstruct” or denaturalize this trio of assumptions in light of research-based arguments and an overall global perspective.

Chapter 1, written by Thomas, summarizes the modern discourse of the digital natives and positions its development historically, in light of centuries-old conflicts between advocates for new technology, or “technoevangelists,” and dissenting groups, such as the Luddites of the Industrial Revolution (p. 1). His warnings regarding both extremes help shape the text’s aforementioned themes, and justify the need for additional context in research about how new digital technologies are used.

The rest of the book is divided into three parts: Part I, “Reflecting the Myth” (two chapters); Part II, “Perspectives” (seven chapters); and Part III, ‘Beyond Digital Natives’” (two chapters). The first and third parts represent larger discussions on the theory and viability of generational research in education, while the second part presents a series of studies and research projects based to some degree on the “digital natives” concept.

In Part I, readers are introduced to the notion of a digital natives discourse as it applies to educational research as well as the general imagination. In Chapter 2, for instance, Mark Prensky – author of the 2001 essay that helped popularize the digital natives metaphor – reviews the major strengths and weaknesses of the term’s original usage, even as he argues for a revised version of the concept, which he calls “digital wisdom.” This wisdom, which Prensky sees as both arising from new technology and in “prudent use of technology to enhance our capabilities” (p. 18), is countered by Chris Jones, author of Chapter 3 on “Students, the Net Generation, and Digital Natives,” who rejects the argument that technological enhancement is essential to individual success (p. 38). Later, Jones shifts this message on the dangers of technodeterminism into a more focused discussion of the intersections between young people, technology, and

options for educational change. “The idea that technologies simply determine the outlook of an entire generation is one that should be discarded,” he writes. “However, the idea that the area of choice in education has been greatly expanded by new technologies is one that still needs to be explored” (p. 43).

Part II of the book sees the expansion and effective exploration of Jones’ ideas regarding choice, technology, and education, with a series of seven chapters by authors who bring “perspective” to the digital natives conversation. Per the book’s deconstruction theme, each chapter tackles a slightly different assumption from the digital natives discourse, complicating it with the addition of a specific national, cultural, or disciplinary context. In chapter 4 for instance, “Disempowering by Assumption: Digital Natives and the EU Civic Web Project,” the author uses the findings of a three-year, seven-country project on young people, the Internet, and civic participation to argue against the assumption that digital and online tools necessarily enable new forms of creativity and engagement in European youth, particularly across sociocultural lines. By contrast, the author of chapter 5, “Japanese Youth and Mobile Media,” focuses on a single country’s digital culture and behaviors, and highlights numerous challenges to establishing a global sense of digital community.

Chapter 6, “Analyzing Students’ Multimodal Texts: The Product and the Process,” helps move the overall arc of Part II toward a larger conversation about educational reform by presenting data from two Australian studies that support more varied views of students’ technological skills. Chapters 7 and 8, “Citizens Navigating in Literate Worlds: The Case of Digital Literacy” and “Beyond Google and the ‘Satisficing’ Searching of Digital Natives” give this conversation momentum by recalibrating assumptions about the definition of digital literacy in light of digital culture and research into students’ superficial approaches to educational information retrieval. Literacy-related topics continue to dominate in the final two chapters of Part II, “Actual and Perceived Online Participation among Young People in Sweden,” and “Young Children, Digital Technology and Interaction with Text,” both of which question the presumed homogeneity of digital natives’ technological skills and practices, and

suggest the importance of further research into hidden digital diversities.

The third and final part of the book consists of two chapters, which together ask readers to return to and reflect upon the concerns and opportunities articulated in Part I. Chapter 10, “Intellectual Field or Faith-Based Religion,” convincingly summarizes the arguments for moving beyond the “moral panic” discourse of digital natives to pay closer attention to more measured approaches to education technology research and overall reform. Chapter 12, however, “Reclaiming an Awkward Term: What We Might Learn from ‘Digital Natives’” steps slightly back from this idea to recognize the valuable lessons learned from the last decade of digital natives research. There are, the chapter concludes, real opportunities and dangers in the future intersection between young people, technology, and education – which previous research has helped unveil, and which future, research will help influence for the better.

Overall, *Deconstructing Digital Natives* is a very worthwhile book, which successfully brings a thoughtful, international perspective to the rather infamous topic of digital natives research. While readers may occasionally find portions of Part II a bit disparate or dry, the final collection is both strong and entertaining to read.

About the Reviewer

Robin Chin Roemer is the Communication Librarian at American University in Washington, DC. Her research interests include interdisciplinary research support, embedded librarianship, online learning, and new media theory and practice. She received her MLIS from the University of Washington.

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