

Excerpts from: "Generational Myth"

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1. Consider all the pundits, professors, and pop critics who have wrung their hands over the inadequacies of the so-called digital generation of young people filling our colleges and jobs. Then consider those commentators who celebrate the creative brilliance of digitally adept youth. To them all, I want to ask: Whom are you talking about? There is no such thing as a "digital generation."
4. When I read that, I shuddered. I shook my head. I rolled my eyes. And I sighed. I have been hearing some version of the "kids today" or "this generation believes" argument for more than a dozen years of studying and teaching about digital culture and technology. As a professor, I am in the constant company of 18- to 23-year-olds. I have taught at both public and private universities, and I have to report that the levels of comfort with, understanding of, and dexterity with digital technology varies greatly within every class. Yet it has not changed in the aggregate in more than 10 years.
6. College students in America are not as "digital" as we might wish to pretend. And even at elite universities, many are not rich enough. All this mystical talk about a generational shift and all the claims that kids won't read books are just not true. Our students read books when books work for them (and when I tell them to). And they all (I mean all) tell me that they prefer the technology of the bound book to the PDF or Web page. What kids, like the rest of us, don't like is the price of books.
7. Talk of a "digital generation" or people who are "born digital" willfully ignores the vast range of skills, knowledge, and experience of many segments of society. It ignores the needs and perspectives of those young people who are not socially or financially privileged. It presumes a level playing field and equal access to time, knowledge, skills, and technologies. The ethnic, national, gender, and class biases of any sort of generation talk are troubling. And they could not be more obvious than when discussing assumptions about digital media.
11. Once we assume that all young people love certain forms of interaction and hate others, we forge policies and design systems and devices that match those presumptions. By doing so, we either pander to some marketing cliché or force an otherwise diverse group of potential users into a one-size-fits-all system that might not meet their needs. Then, lo and behold, young people rush to adapt to those changes that we assumed all along that they wanted. More precisely, we take actions like rushing to digitize entire state-university library systems with an emphasis on speed and size rather than on quality and utility.