Passport to the Digital Nation
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Abstract - The term digital natives was coined by Marc Prensky to describe individuals who grew up with digital technology as opposed to digital immigrants, those who were born before the existence of digital technology and adopted it to some extent later in life. Majority of university lecturers are immigrants in terms of culture and lifestyle, albeit proficient in subject content. This paper discusses guidance on social aspect for those who are prepared to get their passport to join the natives to share their expertise in the field and to help the natives become productive citizen of future society.

Keywords - blended learning, digital immigrant, digital literacy, digital native, elearning, teaching and learning

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the Population Reference Bureau [1], the world population is today at seven billion with 27 percent under 15 years old (roughly two billion). These large demographic cohort, join together with their Millennial Generation or Generation Y fellows (demographic cohort born during 1980 and 1989), are 3.6 billion strong, over half of the world population. The members of these two large cohorts are distinctive from their predecessors as they grew up digitally, also known as digital natives, the term coined by Marc Prensky [2]. The previous generations, also known as digital immigrants, are baby boomers and generation X that were born before the existence of digital technology and adopted it to some extent later in life. These immigrants are catching up in adopting technology and many of them are running behind.

This global trend also reveals itself in Thailand during the recent survey from National Statistical Office [3] indicating that about half of natives (51.88%) use computer and about one-third of them (32.33%) use internet. Quite the contrary, only 11.81% of the immigrants are accustomed to computer usage and 8.4% use internet. The comparison is shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.

Fig. 1 Computer usage by demographic cohort

Fig. 2 Internet usage by demographic cohort

Based on another nationwide survey by National Statistical Office [4], it is evident that every sector in Thailand utilizes technology, especially in business. While education sector was not included in the survey, a large scale literature review of technology integration in Thai education [5] illustrated how technology was utilized
during 1964 to 2002. The study categorized technology use into three groups: local (book, print, graphic, and programmed instruction), medium (radio, slide, TV, and VDO), and high (CAI, MIS, multimedia, and CMC). During the most recent time spans (1989 to 1995, and 1996 to 2002), the study found that high technology has been utilized around 36.94%, the highest proportion of all three categories. However, it also indicated that 30.18% of all the body of literature did not mention any use of technology.

These figures indicate that the use of technology is gradually increasing, although choice of technology from the study is rather outdated.

At the turn of the century, social networking service (SNS) has been the main focus in many industries. Thailand is ranked 16 in world ranking [6] and Thai digital natives represent 83.8% of the total population of 13,276,200 facebook users in 2011 [7]. However, only a handful of studies emerged indicating that education sector is too slow to catch up with this trend.

II. SOCIAL NETWORK SERVICE IN EDUCATION

In its third cycle of national ICT master plans, Thailand is more than ready infrastructure–wise, the low level of adoption could be attributed to pedagogical culture [8]. A few attempts have been made to integrate SNS into classroom practice in Asia. An English department from Indonesian university utilized discussion application in Facebook as to replace typical web discussion forum or CMC application [9], another study proposed that SNS can promote better learning [10].

The strength of SNS is rather obvious, a power of socialization, and to go beyond building and reflecting social networks among group of people would be far–fetched. According to the theory of community of inquiry [11], students must feel free to express themselves openly and develop relationships necessary to commit to gain a sense of belonging to the community. Yet it is a daunting task to encourage students to project themselves personally and academically within a typical four-month semester.

SNS seems fitting as a tool for building community in classroom as it extends interaction time beyond classroom between students and an instructor. More importantly, the natives spend most of their time in SNS anyway.

III. BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH SNS

Learning community does not happen overnight. It takes time and effort to build community that can genuinely stay together. Let’s turn our attention to some anecdotal evidence the author has observed recently regarding how faculty use some mainstream SNS in teaching and learning. Two departments, with aliases A and B respectively, under a large undergraduate faculty have made community spaces available through facebook. Department A (48x members) chose facebook open group while department B (22x members) opted for facebook closed group (i.e., users must get approval to join).

Department A clearly states in its group information that the space is a linkage of students and alumni. Members are encouraged to share work experiences with others. The group is moderated by two faculty member. Department B’s closed group does not specify its purpose and anyone in the group has access to group administrative settings. However, it appears that an unstated purpose of the group is
similar to that of department A but currents and alums mingle in the group without any authoritative figures. Instinctively the notion of open group in department A is more transparent and welcoming. But a first glance at each group (without retrieving older posts), Department A’s facebook open group has about one post per month at best with some ‘likes’ and only a few comments. Department B’s facebook closed group is far more active with many posts per day and a lot of ‘likes’ and comments.

What makes a difference in these two groups is not about being an open or closed group. Rather, it is about four important issues: tool, tier, timing and tone.

A. Tool
Facebook group is intended to be used as a community space, while facebook page is designed for public sphere. Since facebook is so prevalent among the Thai digital natives and both departments chose group other than page, they perhaps made the right move on tool or platform of SNS. But department A attempt to build community fell short of what it has expected because of the following issues.

B. Tier
While Department A actually made the group more inviting at first with an open-public group setting, the decision to have only two faculty members as administrators over other members break the expectation of the SNS platform. Students bring with them set behaviors for using SNS such as being informal and using slang in an ever-present community. Many natives also expect SNS to be private and exclusively for peers. This is why accepting friend requests from parents is such disputable issue among the natives. Even though the group of department A is ‘open,’ setting faculty members as administrators make it feels like having parents hovering over their space other than a private community. Department B, on the other hand, has leveled the playing field and make the group more like a virtual student hub where students and faculty actually hangout.

C. Timing
It could not be stressed enough about the important of consistency in community. Posting regularly and responding to inquiries in a timely manner are vital to virtual community. Again, department A’s moderators failed to live up to this promise and never respond to crucial inquiries such as “when will be major declaration?” Digging deeper to the older posts, the moderators has requested new members to say hello to others by putting name and batch number, and it was quite active at the time. But it is apparent that the interactions gradually decrease because there were no responses to posts, albeit large number of members. Department B’s members, with only two hundred members, actively participate their community. Information could spread faster because everyone chips in. Further, when everybody participates, it is more likely to create an always-on community, which is another expectation of the natives.

D. Tone
Students spend time in SNS because they want to socialize with friends. They expect a water-cooler talk. Having faculty members hovering over them would defeat the whole purpose of fostering community. One post in For department A’s group asked the moderator as follows: “we cannot post funny stuff, must be serious right? (very careful about spelling ha ha ha ha).” The moderator then replied “If you post something that benefits to others, especially about [department], it will be better ja ^___^.” Quite clearly, the moderator signaled members that this space is not casual.

On the contrary, department B group apparently is a hub for many activities ranging from job posting to photo sharing to MMORPG discussion.

IV. CONCLUSIONS
Tool, tier, timing and tone are issues in consideration of fostering community in SNS. The paper exemplifies the use of SNS as a foundation of social interactions at department level. However, the same notion can also be applied to course level.
Designing SNS with these issues in mind to gain natives’ buy-in and to close the gap between natives and immigrants.

V. RECOMMENDATION

Although learning is not the focus of the discussion of this paper. With a close–knit community, students would feel more comfortable to share information and to collaborate on extracurricular activities. It is imperative that instructors know when and how to move from social interaction to meaningful learning. Platforms for learning are learning management systems (LMSs) such as Moodle, Blackboard+Web CT, and Sakai, as they can better manage and organize learning materials as opposed to SNS. They can also keep track of activities during learning. To move from social presence to learning presence, the course should be designed to interweave SNS and LMS throughout the semester to keep the sense of community while promoting learning.

REFERENCES