

# **Redefining the Roles of Information Professionals in Higher Education to Engage the Net Generation**

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## **Abstract:**

Abstract: While we all recognize that Net Generation students are different, it is the extent to which they differ from the generations that precede them that often comes as a surprise. They have been referred to as "digital natives" because they are all "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky 2001). While the Internet and digital technologies have changed all of our lives, most information professionals in higher education, particularly those with the greatest positional authority, are "digital immigrants."

Net Generation students do things different. They communicate differently (e.g. text messaging and instant messenger). They have a different written language (e.g. lol, cya, l8r). They interact and socialize differently (e.g. via avatars and Facebook). They have a different sense of authorship (e.g. blogs and YouTube). And, most important to the context of higher education, they acquire, create, and transmit knowledge differently.

We cannot simply rest on our knowledge that today's students are different. We must understand how and why, and embrace those differences, not ignore, reject, or dismiss them. In an effort to better understand Net Generation students, the University of Rochester Libraries (New York, USA) undertook a two-year study of undergraduate students, focusing specifically on how they do research. Borrowing methodologies from the discipline of anthropology, the project team was able to construct a rich and informative picture of the lives of undergraduate students in higher education using ethnographic observations, photo-elicitation, mapping exercises, intellectual self-assessment, and cultural probes. From this rich compilation of data, we have been able to make decisions about new services, redesigned our digital presence, and improved our physical facilities in ways that we can be sure are well-aligned with the needs and expectations of our undergraduate students population.