

“The age of empowerment” and the new expected abilities from the teachers: Interview with Marc Prensky

“A era do empoderamento” e as novas habilidades esperadas do professor: entrevista com Marc Prensky

Tatiana Ramalho Barbosa¹
Henrique Miguel de Lima Silva²
Laurênia Souto Sales³

In this issue, the journal **Díálogo das Letras** has the honor of publishing the interview with the American author Marc Prensky, an American writer and educational consultant who coined the terms “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”. Professor Prensky is known for his work in the application of digital technologies in education and the use of games as teaching tools. Marc has a BA from Yale University, and an MBA from Harvard University. He is the author of several books on education, technology and digital games, including “Digital game-based learning” and “Don’t bother me, Mom – I’m learning”, both published in Brazil. Marc is also the author of the award-winning book “Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning”, in which he discusses adapting the education system to the learning style of young people born in the digital age. Marc Prensky has lectured in over 45 countries on 6 continents. His most recent book is EMPOWERED!: Re-framing ‘Growing Up’ for a New Age, in which he discusses the reframing that needs to be done so that 21st century children can truly grow up in a completely digital world. To help these young people reach their full potential, the author created a Non-Governmental Organization which can be accessed through the website: <http://eai-institute.org/>

Next, we have the transcript of the interview that the author gave, in April/2023, to doctoral student Tatiana Ramalho Barbosa (UFPB) and professors Henrique Miguel de Lima Silva (UFPB), and Laurênia Souto Sales (UFPB).

Interviewers: Some years ago, you wrote about “digital natives”. We would like to know why you decided to write about that generation at that time.

Prensky: I think it's important to understand that I wrote the article “Digital natives, digital immigrants” almost 20 years ago. That time frame is important because that is how much time it takes, often, for something to become mainstream for a big change to take place.

¹Doctorate student in the Postgraduate Program in Linguistics (PROLING/UFPB); she holds a Master degree in Linguistics and teaching from Postgraduate Program in Linguistics and Teaching (PGLE/UFPB); and a Master degree Journalism from PPJ/UFPB. João Pessoa/PB, Brazil. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7355-3058>. E-mail: tatiramalho@hotmail.com.

²Adjunct Professor II at the Federal University of Paraíba - UFPB/Campus I, assigned to the Department of Portuguese Language and Linguistics - DLPL/CCHLA. Ph.D. in Linguistics from PROLING/UFPB; He holds a Post-Doctorate in Teaching from PPGE/UERN. Permanent professor at Postgraduate Program in Linguistics and Teaching PGLE/UFPB and at Postgraduate Program in Linguistics PROLING/UFPB. João Pessoa/PB, Brazil. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1394-9173>. E-mail: henrique.miguel.91@gmail.com.

³Associate Professor I at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB)- Campus IV. Associate Professor I at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) - Campus IV. She holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from PROLING/UFPB. Permanent professor at the Postgraduate Program in Portuguese -PROFLETRAS/UFPB and at the Postgraduate Program in Linguistics – PROLING/UFPB. João Pessoa/PB, Brazil ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7462-9755>. E-mail: laureniasouto@gmail.com.

Those terms are in the Oxford Dictionary, and just today somebody sent me an article in the Financial Times talking about "digital natives"... but it took a lot of time for them to catch on. The reason they did catch on it's because I started observing something that was different in the people working for me and how they behave, how they did things... and I wrote about that, and that turned out to be something that people were observing all over the world. They were observing these changes and they just didn't really have a name for them. They didn't really have a way to name what they saw in their own kids. And young people generally were behaving in new and different ways because they had new access to things. That is why the term caught on. You can't predict these things. They just happen when they happen to meet a need.

Interviewers: But in what ways were the digital natives different from the previous generations?

Prensky: What I observed in the young people was that they did things differently when they had the same problem. For example, suppose one of the problems they had was "I don't know something". My answer, as somebody who grew up in the 20th century, would be: "I'll just call the person who I think knows it". And I knew a lot of people and they knew a lot of things. I could do that. Or if that failed, I could go to the library and do some research. These people would just go online. And if they have a question that they don't know the answer to, these people would just post it to something new called a bulletin board. Online. And they would often get responses very quickly, sometimes in less than an hour. And they were very good responses that I couldn't have gotten possibly at all or possibly in the same time frame. So that was one Thing I observed. Going further in my analysis, I discovered that they liked different things too. They didn't like the idea of being locked in an office; they liked working from home. They realized they could do things online because the people they work with were all connected. They could do things much more easily in a much more comfortable setting. And they preferred things differently: they liked things to come faster, they liked to access information from videos, than in long books, or in short ways rather than long ways. And they liked things, perhaps to be more entertaining... and so I saw these differences, and I wrote about them in an article.

Interviewers: And everybody talks about this until today...

Prensky: That's really odd! That article got published in a very obscure journal online. And I thought that was it. And then I got an email one day from the Gifted Children's Association of New Zealand, and they said: we read your article in the newsletter of the Gifted Children's Association of Tasmania, can we republish it? And what I realized is, with the new online world, there were people everywhere who were looking for information that they could never ever find and now it is accessible for everyone. And especially people in remote places were looking to see what other people in the world were doing. And that to me was such a different world. A world of connections that just didn't exist in the past.



Interviewers: Everything is brand new for us, digital immigrants! And since then, it has been difficult for us to understand the way everything is happening, right?

Prensky: Yes, but it keeps getting better. If you publish something interesting in Portuguese, and I search for it on the Internet, it will come up. And I can just hit a button and then it would be in English. It wouldn't even require a translator, the machine could probably do it itself, well enough for me to understand. And that improves every day. We could be talking, very soon, each in our own language and hearing in the language we prefer. That already exists. The speed that these changes are coming, as one person said as he was interviewing me: "mind bugling".

Interviewers: Yes, a lot of things are already changing.... Differences can be noticed in language schools here in Brazil. In the past they were full of students who studied English, Spanish, French... This reminds us that you once said that "in the future there will be no more English teachers" and that nobody would have to study languages like in the past. The other day at an event⁴ we were discussing this and there were teachers there who said, "we will not be alive to see the day that English teachers will no longer be needed".

Prensky: Even if you are not there when it happens, your children will be. And your grandchildren will be. As teachers, as people who have chosen to help young people, I see that our job must be to prepare them for the world they will live in, in the middle of the 21st century. And not for the world we came from. So far, all we know how to do is: prepare young people for the world we came from. And there is a good reason for that: the world did not change that fast. We live for most of our lives in a relative equal world. What we had to teach our children, we were sure it would be useful when they grew up, because they would be in the same world we live in. So, all the wisdom that we had gained from all our lifetimes was going to be useful and therefore it made sense to pass on all this knowledge from the past to them. That was one of the reasons we put the kids in school for so many years. We used to say, "look, we know how to prepare you for the future, we know what will work, what won't work, so we're going to teach you everything, and we hope that, in the course of your lifetimes, this will help you". But that's not true anymore. And that's what is so different. Because things change so fast, nothing is going to be the same. That is something we have to understand as adults: in some ways we will live in a different world, but we also already lived most of our lives in the world we grew up in. They are different worlds. But not our children. They will never know many of the things we had in the past. They will never know what a dial-up phone is. They will never know what a wall-plugged phone is. They grew up in a digital world, in a wireless world, in a world incredibly different from ours. Some things maybe not so good, and some others much better. But it's a different world. And that's the world they need to be prepared for.

⁴ The event mentioned was the Cambridge Day, for English teachers, which the doctorate student Tatiana Ramalho took part.



Interviewers: Different. Some things are better, others are worse, but they are all different. Different ways to see and to live. People are now talking about the Alphas, the new generation described by social researchers. Are the Alphas different from the digital natives?

Prensky: I like the name Alpha. The Alphas. They live in a fast-changing world so they will evolve very quickly in many ways. We've seen this. There are two things I think that are different, that make these alphas, today's young people, different from the past ones. The first one is attitude. Their attitude is: "I can". The previous generations of young people were brought up pretty much with an attitude of "I can't", "you can't", "you can't until you've gone to school for 12 years", "until you've learned all the things that we have to teach you about our culture", "till you've learned all the things that we have to teach you about our past you can't accomplish anything". I grew up with that idea in my mind. I may have resisted it a little, but that came very strongly from parents, from school, from our culture. But that is really changing. In fact, it's still in the process of changing, but young people today are more and more growing up with the idea "I can". "Don't tell me I can't because I can!, and I have the means, I have the desire and I will go and do it". So the first thing that changed is the attitude. The second thing is, how to do it, the means. Young people couldn't really do certain things before because they just didn't have access to the ways to do them. Now, they have that access at a very early age. Once you have a smartphone or whatever the device's name is, you have access to the entire world's knowledge. You have access to everybody with a phone on the planet. So that is so different and empowers you so much to do so much more. We are just in the beginning of discovering what it means. It's frightening to some people, and it's empowering and exciting to other people. Perhaps more to young people than to the old ones. But that's what's going on. We are suddenly put in a situation of power, and it scares the old people who always had the power for many years. And I think it excites the young people who are starting to get the great power they have, the biggest issue is that they don't know they have it yet, a hundred percent. So, we have to help them. If we truly want to help them, we have to help them understand the power they have and how to use it in a positive way.

Interviewers: And talking about people who are scared with that power, can we start talking about the teachers? They must be the most scared people with this power that the children have nowadays. Here in Brazil, we have been talking a lot about that. As we've told you before, we are too behind from the ideas that you have in the United States, because we are still debating about whether to use or not any kind of technology in the classroom. And some schools even forbid students to take cell phones and the professors are not used to have computers or Internet in the classroom. What do you think of the use of technology in education nowadays?

Prensky: This answer will depend on what we think we are trying to do. If we're trying to prepare kids for the past, for the 20th century we don't need any technology at all. We knew how to do that, we knew how to teach the curriculum from the past, we can keep doing that. But what we have to understand is that we are preparing kids for the 21st century. If our desire, on the other hand, is to prepare young people for when they will live in the 21st century, and especially in the latter half of the 21st century, we'd better make sure that they know how to use all of the parts of their body. And technology is becoming

a new body part. I call it symbiosis. And surely it could be used in a bad way, but if somebody uses their fist, which is truly part of their body, for example, to punch somebody in the face, we don't cut off their hand. We just show them how to use it in better ways. Why, if somebody uses the phone in a distracting way, would we cut off their phone? It's the same kind of thing. I used to hear a lot of people, and a lot of them were from Latin America, who were talking about power and control in education, you probably know who they are. And I said: "is it the same thing!". I've come to realize it really is a way we keep our young people in the place that we want them to be, which is essentially like we were in the past, through a very strong process of control. Fear and control. We control them as parents, we tell them what they can and can't do. We control them as educators, we tell them what they should and shouldn't learn. We control them as culture, we tell them what is acceptable and not acceptable. And that was, perhaps, efficient in the past. But now people resist it. And they are living in a different world, and they see they can do little things, they are more powerful, and they want to be able to do what they think they should do. One of the things that occurred to me which reinforces this idea: "what is the worst thing that you can tell a teacher? What is the worst sin that they could commit?". The answer is: "your kids are out of control". If you were not in control and controlling your class and getting them to do what you think they should do, which is obviously what people tell you they think they should do, then you're failing. So, it turns out that control is the thing that we often require from teachers and from adults. It could be good in some situations. We don't want people becoming barbaric or wild. On the other hand, the kind of control that we need is self-control. We need people who choose what they want to do, who control themselves and go, not because we tell them to go in certain directions but because they want to. And that is what we need, that is what we are not getting in the current system. And that is a lot of the reason that the system we have today is expiring, it's not going to be a useful system for the future as good as it was for the past.

Interviewers: Your thoughts are very interesting. It makes us think a lot about the intensive work that the teachers have in schools nowadays. You talked before about changing the curriculum, changing the content that we teach nowadays, and it looks like here in Brazil we teach a lot of content. Most of them are useless or will be useless somehow in the future. You mentioned some of the subjects which have been included recently, for example, the fad now is a subject called socio-emotional, they included it in the curriculum here in Brazil. We have a feeling that is not enough. So, what would be, in your opinion, or a good subject to be taught in schools?

Prensky: Here is my view of how people should work and what are the basic principles in education. I think that there are three things that we need to start to teach as early as possible. The first is: do not do harm. Do not hurt other people, do not hurt other things, do not hurt the planet. Try to do the least harm the best you can. The second thing is: do unto others as you have them do unto you. The golden rule. The third thing is: try to make the world better all the time. Those are three things that if people internalized, that would be the greatest way to start education. That is education. Those are the things that, as humans, we would like to have. Not everybody may agree with all of them, but I think the majority of humans would agree. And that's how the majority of societies have evolved. After that, it's whatever you want to do in service of those three things, respecting those three rules. Rather than having a curriculum that everybody should learn, I think we need two billion



curricula, one for each person because each person is unique, each person is an individual, and the uniqueness comes from the projects they choose to get involved in. It would be a system where young people could choose from the very beginning what they were interested in, what they dreamed about, what they cared about, and we help them as adults, organizing them into teams to figure out what really matters for each one. Then do projects which improve the world, even the local area, the family, or the bigger world, in ways that they wanted to do. Then we would have a much better system that young people would want to do. I think that every young person cares about something, has dreams, has strengths, can improve the world.

Interviewers: You started talking about the theme you wrote in this book, which we really liked, it is about the age of empowerment. Can you tell us about this new era described in your book?

Prensky: In the age that I grew up, we didn't have a lot of power, and when we were young, we could do a few things. Yes, we could follow our interests, have hobbies and play certain sports, perhaps. But we couldn't do much to change the world as individuals, as young people. And that was the world up to the end of the twentieth century, more or less. Now young people starting at a very young age, at age three, can see something that they don't like in the world, that they think is wrong, and they can change it. There is a wonderful video of 3-year-old kids in Spain getting the garbage bin on the lamp post lower to their own heights because they were not happy with that. That are more and more examples of young people able to take action. There is the famous story of the boy who captured the wind in Africa who said: "I want to do this, I see a way to do it". And he was able to do it. Some people in the MIT, in the US, realized that a lot of energy is expended in kicking the footballs (that gets not use for anything else). And they figured out a way to create a ball that, somehow, could capture the energy from those kicks in the football and use it later. Another young person is thinking about how to capture the energy generated at a football match, all that shouting and cheering is energy. How do you capture that? There are enormous things that young people can dream about doing, and then do. And we are seeing so much come out of young people and teams of young people. That is the point. Education, as we have defined it for centuries, perhaps millenniums, is expiring for human beings. We have to outgrow the idea of teaching a lot of "curriculum in advance", which are things that when they grow up, one day, in the future, they can hopefully do them. They can do things now, not in the future. And that is what I mean by the age of empowerment.

Interviewers: How can we, as teachers, help these young people grow up empowered? Do you think it is a matter of changing all the curricula or it is a question of including new ideas in the same curriculum that we have, or creating a new subject to teach at school? What can we do now?

Prensky: The first thing that I would like to see is a change in attitude. I admire teachers very much. The reason I admire them is that they have chosen as their mission, to help young people. That's what they have chosen as their life's work: to help young people grow up. The issue is that they've gotten into a system that does it in an old fashion way. It's as if they thought all the students should learn to raise horses because that was the way people got around in the past: horse-drawn carts. And all those learners could be very good at helping

people ride horses. and tame horses. And make horseshoes and do all things related to horses. But, suddenly, cars were invented. Raising horses is still fine, but it's not useful anymore to the people who want to get around. People want to do things the modern way now, they want to own cars. There's nothing wrong with that. Ideas change. The world changes. And we've seen this a lot lately: the whole world has changed in many ways: many things about how we move around, how we cook, how we live, how we communicate, are completely different. It just hasn't changed the way we educate our children. And we can go back and ask: why does this happen? It has to do with the idea that we want to control them, we want to be in charge, we want to keep teaching the way we learned. Unfortunately, education is no longer able to teach today's young people. We want to teach content during all these years, between the ages of three and twenty, when perhaps they are fully developed as human beings. But what we must teach during this time needs to be effective and useful in the environment they live in today. My perspective is that we need to offer them the opportunity to do work projects that can improve the real world they live in. Things they want to do, that meet their needs, their dreams, their desires. Not everyone knows in advance what they want for the future, but we can help them find out. We can certainly help them engage with teams from all over the world who share the same desires. One of the big problems in the past was that we had to do education only locally. You went to school, at about the same time as perhaps everyone else who lived nearby. If you were lucky, there were a lot of people like you, around you, and that was good. If you weren't lucky, you might be interested in something that nobody at your school cared about. That is over now. Once you're connected, you have the whole world to choose from, and to find people with whom you share interest, and want to do things, to accomplish things. Education, the way it is being done nowadays does not allow you do that. It's not structured to do that at all. In fact, it doesn't want to do that because it sees that it is being, in many ways, dangerous. So we take a whole piece of what we can do, that we could not do before and we say we are not going to do that. That is what it means to go back to the past and to stay the past. Go to the future is to say: what can we do now that we could not do before but that's really wonderful and important to do? If we stop to think a little, we can see that, for example, YouTube has practically everything you want to learn. Including the entire medical curriculum. So young people think: "why would I go to school to listen to someone talk for hours and hours about something I can learn at home?" I believe that, as teachers, we can organize ourselves in new ways to do positive things and be much happier. Technology is part of that. Some people have used the term "edutech" to combine technology with education. I usually call it "empotech": technology that empowers. Once we think of technology as a tool, a means to grow, which I call "growing empowered", then we will be building a new way of teaching.

Interviewers: We don't know if this happens in the United States, but some people here in Brazil still resist accepting the use of technology in the classroom. In our opinion, this happens for several reasons. One of them is that many teachers still see technology as an "adornment" and not as a tool to really provide new meanings, new learning. There is a certain impulse to use "any" digital platform, without associating it with the content that needs to be taught.

Prensky: This happens everywhere. But we must not forget that in Brazil, here in the United States and in all parts of the world, teachers receive a huge curriculum with contents that

need to be taught within a school year. These are matters, as I said before, that some people (those who make the rules) think will be needed in the future, when these children become adults. It doesn't make sense to them now. So, what needs to happen is a mindset shift. A cell phone, a tablet, a computer... are not "something extra" to be offered at any time during any class to "please" a generation of students who have these devices as part of their bodies. It is necessary to reframe the way of teaching. Everything needs to be connected: what you are going to teach (which needs to be significant for those who are going to learn it), how you are going to teach it (which will certainly have to be different from a 100% expository class, in which you are in charge and students should only listen carefully and "learn") and, mainly, teachers and students need to know why that content is being taught and what they can do with it today.

After the interview, we registered our thanks to Professor Marc Prensky for his availability for our interview, as well as for the learning resulting from this and the great contributions that, in turn, will be unfolded in countless resignifications of teaching and the use of technologies in formal and informal teaching contexts.

Received on: 07/20/2023
Approved on: 07/24/2023
Published on: 07/27/2023

COMO CITAR

BARBOSA, T. R.; SILVA, H. M. L.; SALES, L. The age of empowerment" and the new expected abilities from the teachers: Interview with Marc Prensky. **Diálogo das Letras**, Pau dos Ferros, v. 12, p. 1-8, e02315, 2023.