

It's a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there ...

Updating the 'Digital Native' concept

As part of the JISC-funded Isthmus project, we took a close look not at *what* technologies our students use but at *how* they use them. We found that our students could not be usefully categorised as 'Digital Natives' or 'Digital Immigrants'. This distinction does not help guide the implementation of technologies; it simply provides the excuse that "some people 'just don't get it'".

Appropriation by our students (mature online distance learners) of online services did not seem to follow a simple pattern based on skill level. It seemed to depend on whether they saw the web as a 'place to live' or as a collection of useful tools. This underlying motivation led us to outline two main categories of online student.

THE 'RESIDENT'

The Resident is an individual who lives a percentage of their life online. The web supports the projection of their identity and facilitates relationships. These are people who have a persona online which they regularly maintain. This persona is found primarily in social networking sites but it is also likely to be in evidence in blogs or comments, via image sharing services, etc. The Resident will of course interact with all the practical services such as banking, information retrieval, shopping, and so on, but they will also use the web to socialise and to express themselves. They are likely to see the web as a worthwhile place to put forward an opinion. They use the web in all aspects of their lives, including professionally, for study and for recreation. In fact the Resident considers that a certain portion of their life is lived out online. The web has become a crucial aspect of how they present themselves and how they remain part of networks of friends or colleagues.

THE 'VISITOR'

The Visitor is an individual who uses the web as a tool in an organised manner whenever the need arises. They may book a holiday or research a specific subject. They may choose to use a voice chat tool if they have friends or family abroad. Often the Visitor puts aside a specific time to go online rather than visiting the internet for its own sake. They always have an appropriate and focused need to use the web but don't 'reside' there. They are sceptical of services that offer them the ability to put their identity online as they don't feel the need to express themselves by participating in online culture in the same manner as a Resident.

In effect the Resident has a presence online, which they are constantly developing, while the Visitor logs on, performs a specific task and then logs off. It is a useful distinction because it is not based on gender or age. While our data would indicate that the portion of the population over 55 is predominantly made up of Visitors, there are examples of Residents in this section of the demographic. Similarly it is the case that not everyone younger than 25 is a Resident.

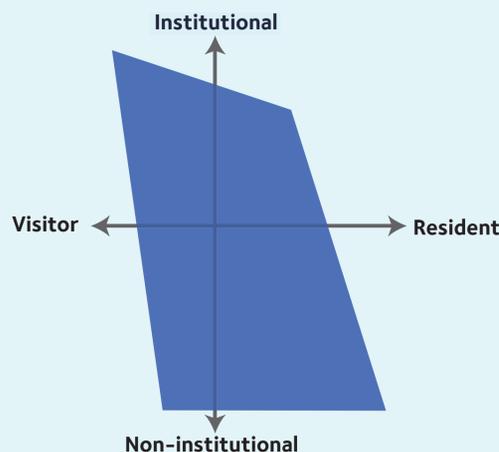
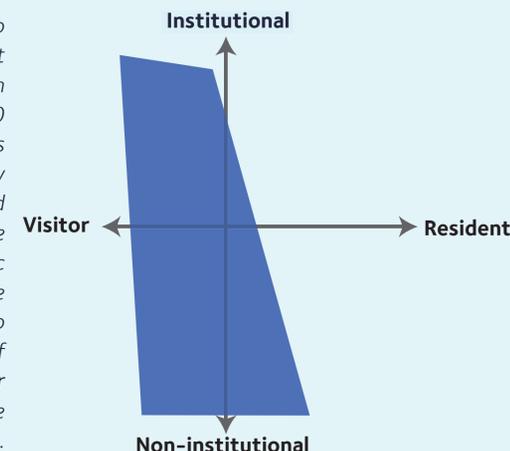
It is not always easy to spot who is in each category as the level of sophistication with which a Visitor might use any single service might well be greater than that of a Resident: this is not a skill-based distinction. The Resident is likely to have arranged some sort of system to manage the relationship between services and the flow of information through their browser, but this does not mean that they will be any more effective at researching a specific topic than a Visitor.

This is of course not a polar distinction. A continuum exists, of which the Resident and the Visitor represent two extremes. See the mappings to the right for examples of how the Visitor / Resident principle can be used to characterise individuals and groups of students.

THE MAPPINGS REPRESENT ZONES OF POTENTIAL ACTIVITY

EXAMPLE MAPPINGS OF TWO STUDENT GROUPS

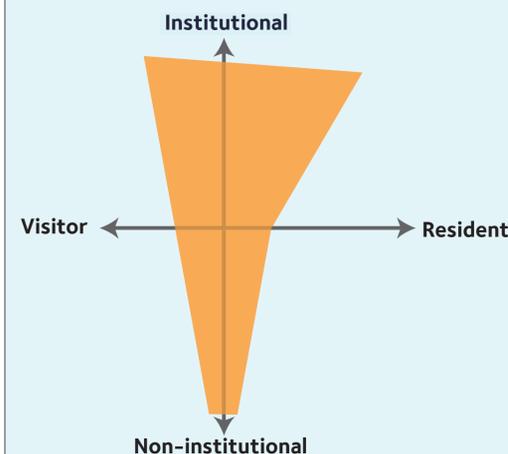
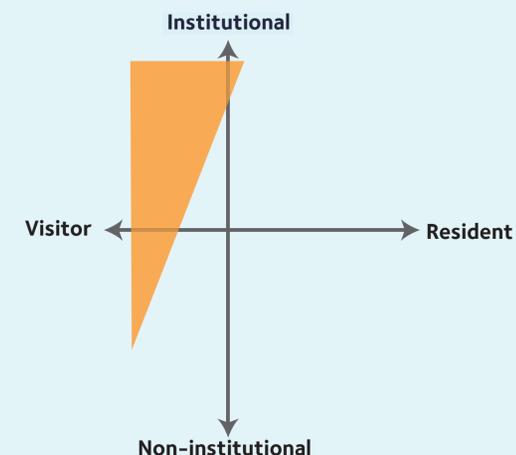
The blue area is a mapping of the general approach to the web of mature distance learners who take part in the online short courses delivered by the Department for Continuing Education at the University of Oxford. These tutored courses run for 10 weeks via a Moodle VLE and are mainly in humanities subjects such as art history, philosophy and literature. The majority of these students have pre-formed learning strategies and existing peer networks. While they might use Resident-style technologies non-institutionally, their traditional, individualistic approach to learning means that they don't tend to see the relevance of informal or 'social' online services in relation to their courses. Motivated to learn and with strong networks of friends and family these students don't generally look to their courses as an opportunity to socialise and prefer to concentrate on moving deeper into their chosen subject.



Here is what we implicitly assume a traditional, 18-21 year old undergraduate student group to be. Being Resident on the web is crucial for their personal lives, a process which is normally mediated via social networking sites. They are also fairly comfortable with bringing their use of social networking/ blogging/microblogging across to facilitate their learning. For example, setting up a Facebook group to organise a collaborative project or getting involved in an institutional blogging system. This type of student group would be looking to an institution to provide both an opportunity to learn and a new network of friends. However, it is dangerous to assume that this mapping is accurate. Many student groups are homogeneously mapped as being 'Digital Natives' or assumed to be highly Resident even though the truth is much more complex.

EXAMPLE MAPPINGS OF TWO STUDENT 'TYPES'

This represents a mature Visitor-style individual taking an online distance course. They rarely use the web in their personal lives and consider the medium to be not much more than a convenient method of delivering content. Their most Resident activity would be occasionally contributing to discussion forums on their course. They don't see lifelong learning as an opportunity to socialise and therefore don't see any value in participatory services that don't focus on course content.



This is an example of an individual who is happy to engage with online informal/social services as part of their learning strategy but does not feel the need to be Resident at a strictly personal level. They might manage their collaborative learning via microblogging, for example, but have no personal photos uploaded to a social networking site.