



The first assignment for my foundations UX/UI course is simple - sign up for a Figma education account. I explain why, show my account as an example, and link a detailed Figma FAQ page with more explicit instructions on how to upgrade an existing Figma account. And yet it doesn't happen.

When confronted, students look at me, dumbfounded. "I have an education account...don't I? How do I know if I have one? How can I get one?"

Now I look at them, dumbfounded. I question myself...

Maybe my instructions weren't clear enough. The following term, I assigned the same assignment but followed up with a real-time, step-by-step in-class demonstration of how to upgrade their accounts.

And yet, it still didn't happen.

After more individual troubleshooting, I realized the problem wasn't just that the students didn't understand how to complete a task, (despite access to the instruction manual), they couldn't comprehend troubleshooting as a viable solution. They didn't seem to understand account settings or how to explore menus - they made little to no effort to resolve their problems.



Other educators have also witnessed students, primarily Gen-Z, struggling with printing basic documents, locating digital files, sharing screens, and even navigating the internet. Some students complain of slow processing speeds, failing to understand how to fully close out of a program. Even when online, a digital space where they spend most of their time, students were at a loss on how or what to search. My students are constantly immersed in technology - they're addicted to their phones, our design programs require laptops or tablets, required programs like Adobe and Figma are accessible online, even our classroom management systems are online!

## How then, can a generation of digital natives be so tech illiterate?



Gen-Z, the generation born between the late 1990s to early 2010s, are often referred to as digital natives due to their life-long exposure to and use of the internet of things. Most of their time and interactions, from shopping, socializing, and working is all online. It is assumed these digital natives should be well versed in all things technology.

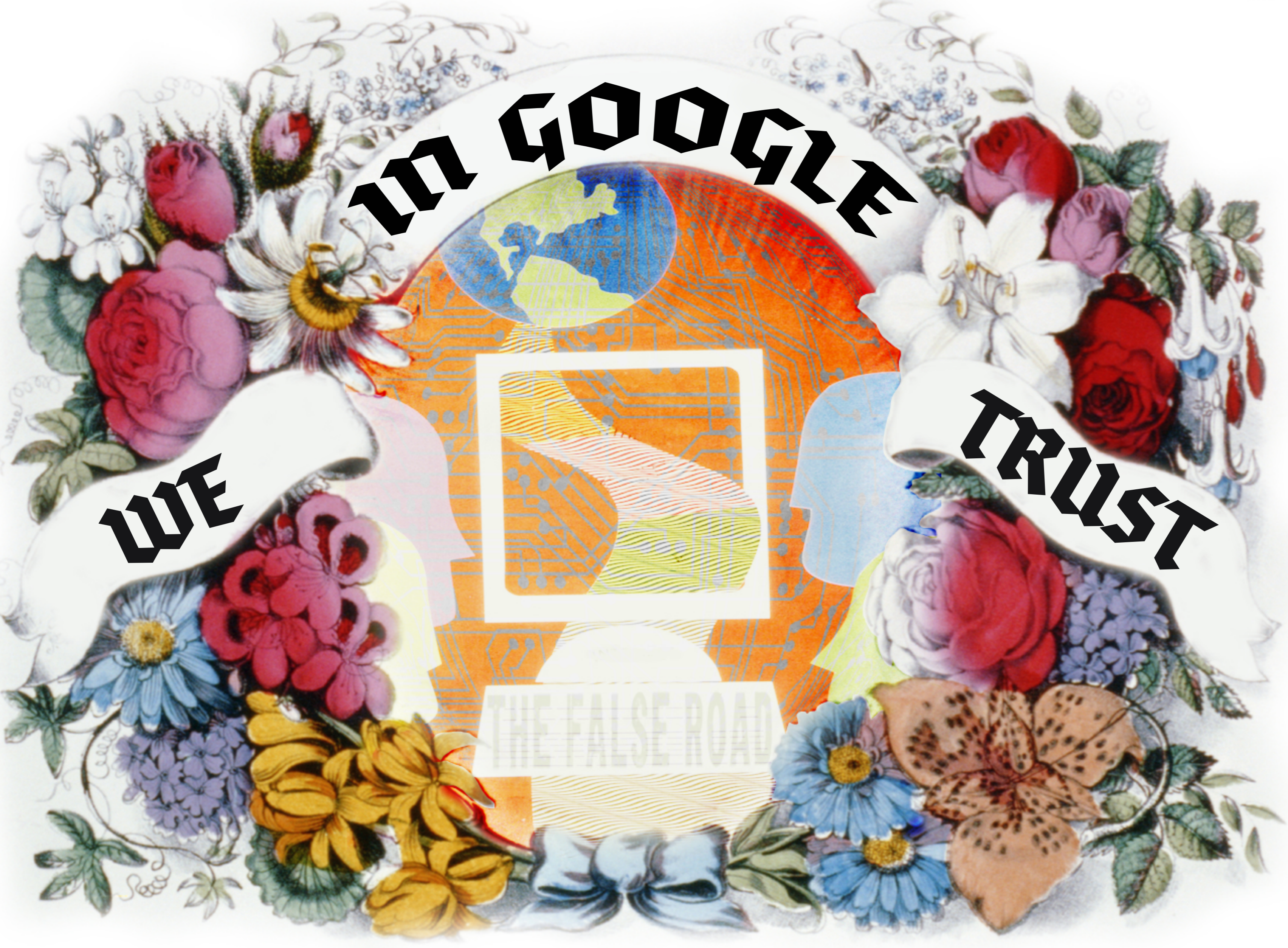
### Is this learned helplessness? Weaponized incompetence?

Unlike millennials who grew up alongside the emergence of technology, Gen-Z has grown up in a mobile-centric, app-focused world complete with optimized, seamless user experiences. They haven't always needed troubleshoot or think critically about how the technology works. This misconception that familiarity guarantees competence along with the lack of computer skills educational courses, has resulted in a deep digital literacy gap.

In a recent study by Dell, 56% of Gen-Z surveyed claimed to have received minimal to no digital skills education (Skonnard, 2023). Digital literacy however, is more than using a browser window

or saving something to a desktop. It necessitates skills to have the knowledge and judgement to access, process, and communicate information with technology. Aspects of the digital literacy gap may be a form of learned helplessness or weaponized incompetence, though Greenwood et al., considers this gap in knowledge as unknown knowns, arguing the individual (the student) is competent and knows how to use the digital tools. Instead of utter helplessness however, the individual is unable to make the connection between the problem in front of them and the tool's ability to help. Learned behaviors from tech have resulted in short attention spans and an insatiable desire for instantaneous results.

Michael Patrick Lynch, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut, dubbed a term "Google-knowing" in reference to the seamless acquisition of receiving information from search engines, apps, and social media platforms. The internet is often akin to the Wild West, a pay-to-play web of highly outsourced networked knowledge. Literacy skills are imperative for people to really begin to understand the information they receive. Understanding is knowing the what as well as the why. Google-knowing isn't knowing at all.



I am of the argument that most students are not lazy, not helpless, and not weaponizing their incompetence. They're lost. Rapidly transforming digital landscapes have altered what and how people search. Almost 40% of young people prefers using social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram in lieu of Google Search (Huang, 2022). Search is rapidly shifting from blocks of text to visual search results - videos, images, audio, and generative AI. It is becoming less about finding information and more about finding quality information. It is predicted that 90% of content on the internet could be artificially generated within a few years (Nicoletti & Bass, 2023). It is imperative for younger generations to hone critical thinking and media literacy skills to differentiate and probably decode and source credible sources. We need to teach students how to think, not just what to think.