

The “C’s of Change”

Students—and Teachers— Learn 21st Century Skills

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—Karl Fisch

Karl Fisch remembers how presidential campaigns were covered 30 years ago: with 10-minute nightly news spots on three network TV channels, plus maybe an article or two in his local daily newspaper.

Compare that to today, and you have a sense of what has happened to information in the 21st century.

As Fisch—director of technology at Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado—points out, “I still have the networks and the local papers, but I also have pretty much every newspaper in the world available to me [online]. I have CNN, the Daily Show, Rush Limbaugh, MoveOn.org, etc. etc.”

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The same can be said about almost every topic we encounter today, not just the presidential campaign. Whether it’s a current issue or a historical one, students, as well as teachers, are faced with a tidal wave of information, much of it unfiltered and unreliable.

The ability to evaluate and analyze information critically is one crucial 21st century literacy—but it’s not the only one. Others include producing information using multimodal tools (audio and video as well as text); publishing what you’ve created; and networking with others online.

The skills today’s students need “are often referred to as ‘the C’s of change,’” says Donald Leu, co-director of the New Literacies Research Lab at the University of Connecticut. They include creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, self-control, and comprehension.

Yet, too often today, schools don’t teach these needed skills, because they are stuck in a 20th-century time warp, says Leu.

“It is an unfortunate fact that there are only minimal differences in classrooms today, compared to classrooms of the previous century. Students continue to be asked to master basic, factual knowledge in the classroom and then are assessed on this knowledge.”

Ernest Morrell, associate professor of urban education and cultural studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, agrees, calling the tension between an outdated curricula and new literacies the biggest challenge teachers face.



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“How do I incorporate these multiple cultures and multiple literacies inside of my traditional *Romeo and Juliet* and *Great Gatsby* units, where the short essay paper is the standard format for students to submit their knowledge?” says Morrell.

As Fisch points out, to continue teaching only this curriculum “prepares kids really well for 1985—unfortunately, that’s not the world they are living in.”

Not that essay writing or the study of classic works of literature should be abandoned, say Fisch and others. But today’s students need to learn 21st century skills, too—and teachers shouldn’t assume their computer-savvy kids already know them.

While students often seem technically literate by the ease and speed with which they use computers, this can be misleading, says Bill Bass, technology integration specialist at Parkway School District in Chesterfield, Missouri. “They know how to use a computer, but it’s at a very surface level.”

Students still need teachers to show them how to navigate the digital age, how to mine the information overload for meaning, and how to make wise connections through social networks. But teachers, to be effective, need to know how to do this themselves first.

Unfortunately, while teachers may be experienced at using the Internet to research information, many have not ventured into the world of social networks.

Will Richardson, an author, speaker, and blogger on the

topic of 21st century literacies, often presents programs for educators. He always asks his audience how many are using social networking tools, such as Facebook, MySpace, or a blog. At most, says Richardson, 10 to 12 percent of teachers raise their hands.

“This is a very relevant indicator,” says Richardson. “Kids use those tools in ways teachers don’t. Kids understand those connections in ways teachers simply don’t.”

In addition, 21st century literacies are leading to changes in classroom dynamics, say many observers. The teacher is not as likely to be the expert, handing out information to passive recipients; students instead will find experts and data online, while relying on the teacher for help in evaluating the information.

Teachers who experience online networking firsthand are more likely to understand these new ways to learn, says Richardson.

Schools that are starting to move toward “more inquiry-based, more passion-based learning, where kids have more ownership over what they do and are learning how to connect and collaborate and work collectively with other people, those places are led by teachers and administrators who do that themselves,” he says.

Morrell says he has noticed this shift in the teacher’s role occurring during the last decade.

“Teachers are more comfortable in the past ten years or so with classrooms being places where knowledge is

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co-constructed, where it's important for kids to be seen as critical thinkers, and where their opinions matter," says Morrell. "We're starting to see some changes there, as opposed to the teacher being the iron fist in the classroom, and the student's task being to repeat back what he or she said."

Lisa Zawalinski, an elementary school teacher, doctoral student and team member at the New Literacies Research Lab, agrees.

"Teachers must develop a comfort with students becoming teachers," she says. "I can't tell you how much I have learned from my students. Sharing the teaching with them has been a remarkable, life-changing experience for me. Not only are we learning much more, the classroom culture has changed.

"Students understand that a number of 'experts' exist outside of the teacher. They go to each other for help. I can't go back to being the only one doing the teaching."

Some school districts have tried to meet 21st century needs by bringing in new equipment—laptops, interactive whiteboards, clicker systems, document cameras, and more. But dollars spent on technological "bling" don't automatically create 21st century classrooms.

Bass, a former English teacher, says that even in his district, as well as others he has observed, "the emphasis is far more on 'the stuff'—for example, doing a PowerPoint presentation just because you have PowerPoint

available to you doesn't necessarily mean PowerPoint is the right tool for the job."

Instead, teachers need to figure out which of many available tools best fit the lessons being taught. In his district, says Bass, "we try very hard to make it about the curriculum as opposed to the stuff."

Teachers also need to realize what tools can do, says Bass, so that computers don't become glorified word processors, or websites become simply repositories for the same old worksheets.

One key, says Bass, is to have the tech staff work as part of the curriculum department, as opposed to part of the technology department. Using former teachers in technology integration jobs can also help, because they understand classroom needs better than someone whose experience is limited to the technology world.

In addition, teachers need training, as well as time to explore new equipment, new software, and tools available online.

Students, meanwhile, should be encouraged to value the time they spend outside the classroom in Internet pursuits, says Bass and others.

"Many people have written about how when a student comes into our classroom we ask them to unplug and leave their technology behind," he says. "At this point, that's not appropriate anymore, but we still have a large faction of people—of teachers and administrators—who

really are hesitant to embrace it because it's unknown, there hasn't been research on it that has really come to the fore-front and said this is a good thing."

Students need to be shown how their online activities outside the classroom—Facebooking or instant-messaging or writing fanfiction, for example—are part of their literacy, since they involve reading and writing, says Morrell.

"Part of the problem with engagement is that [students] don't see themselves as having any skills that are valuable," says Morrell. "Part of the learning process is having them see the sophisticated intellect that's required to engage in activities that they do on a day-to-day basis. That's when the lights come on a lot of times for students, when you say, "These things that you are doing, you have to be smart to do them."

Teachers shouldn't fear that students who text and instant-message will lose the ability to also communicate grammatically, says Greg McVerry, a sixth-grade teacher, doctoral student and team member at the New Literacies Research Lab.

"If you talk to anyone over thirty the first thing they lament is the destruction of spelling because of instant messaging," says McVerry. "Yet, this reality does not play out in the research. . . . Students can address and switch audiences. When writing to a teacher or friend, they may not use the same 'voice' as with a text."

McVerry and Zawalinski suggest teachers find ways to capitalize on students' attraction to social networking sites. For

example, they could set up a small private network using an online service such as Ning and then have students interact—perhaps as literary characters—with other students in another classroom who

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are studying the same text. Such an exercise would encourage writing skills and collaboration.

Morrell is hopeful teachers will continue to incorporate 21st century skills and literacies into their classrooms.

"What I've seen is that teachers are able to integrate 21st century literacies in powerful ways that reshape the discipline but don't make it unnecessary. In other words, the core of what English has always meant can incorporate 21st century literacies.

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Lorna Collier is a freelance writer based in northern Illinois.

Related Resources

NCTE's *Definition of 21st Century Literacies*

<http://www.ncte.org/announce/governance/literacies>

"Shift Happens" video presentation

After this video presentation was developed by Karl Fisch for his school district, it was subsequently posted to youtube and began to be shared and referenced widely by educators. This presentation also happens to be the inspiration for the title of this year's NCTE Convention. <http://thefischbowl.blogspot.com/2006/08/did-you-know.html>

Karl Fisch's education blog, *The Fisch Bowl*

<http://thefischbowl.blogspot.com>

Will Richardson

Weblogg-ed

<http://weblogg-ed.com/>

Dawn Hogue

The Pollywog Journal

<http://dhogue.edublogs.org>

Bud Hunt

Bud the Teacher

<http://budtheteacher.com/blog>

"Internet Project: Preparing Students for New

Literacies in a Global Village" by Donald Leu

http://www.readingonline.org/electronic/RT/3-01_Column/index.html

CCCC *Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments*

<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/digitalenvironments>

Report from the Pew Survey: Writing, Technology, and Teens (April 2008)

http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/247/report_display.asp

NCTE's *Assembly on Computers in English* (ACE)

<http://aceworkshop.org/>

Read More

Additional thoughts from Donald Leu and the New Literacies team are available on the NCTE website. Visit <http://www.ncte.org/magazine>