

21st-Century Students and Skills

by Nancy Knowlton

Some people say that the problem with education today is we all believe we're experts. After all, we went to school and have some memory of what we liked and didn't like. If something was good enough for us, then it should be good enough for students today, the thinking goes.



The problem with this thinking is that the world has changed dramatically since we attended school. Today's students have different expectations and a different environment than we had. They also face different challenges. Only a 21st-century education focused on developing 21st-century skills will do for these young learners.

Just who are the children entering classrooms today, and what skills will they need to succeed in the 21st century?

Digitally Switched On

There is no question that students today are the most switched-on generation the world has ever known. They have never known life without computers. They take special effects in movies for granted. They use text messaging and instant messaging. They find the information they need on the Internet. They connect and collaborate with others around the world.

Time Slicers

Students today often have several tasks underway at once, applying their attention to each one for a short period. They move from task to task quickly and keep track of everything easily. Some call it multitasking, but I call it time slicing. Children are dividing their attention into short bursts simply because they want to. They are mirroring their switched on, sound-bite, multimedia world.

Curious Experimenters

Today's students expect to be able to experience their lessons, and it is perhaps their preferred mode of learning. Even at play, they discover the special levels in video games that most adults wouldn't even know to look for.

Anytime, Anywhere Learning

Watching how 21st-century students complete a homework assignment can provide particular insight into their learning style. They start their computer and get on to the Internet. They open up several instant messaging sessions with classmates and friends. They text message a friend on their cell phone while on a multiparty call with a study group. With these experiences part of their everyday

lives, it is no wonder children in today's classrooms have different expectations of their education than we had.

The skills demanded of them as they enter the workforce will also be different from the ones we needed. Chances are good, for example, that today's children will work in the new knowledge economy where their once-youthful time-slicing ability becomes a critical career-building skill.

Ability to Adapt and Re-learn

Today's students must also be prepared for multiple careers, not just multiple employers. Skills that they learn in university will quickly become passé as technology leaps forward or whole industries shift in a global economy. Students must know that multiple careers require continuous learning, which requires personal commitment throughout their lives.

Global Players

The world is becoming a smaller place, and 21st-century students will need to compete to get into university – in their hometown or on the other side of the world. Then they will compete for 21st-century jobs – anywhere in the world. In order to fully participate, students will need to know more about the global community.

Collaborators and Team Players

While individual contributions will still be highly valued, 21st-century students will also function as team players making strategic contributions to the groups, organizations and communities to which they belong. Group communication and collaboration skills will be critical.

Emotional Intelligence

Because 21st-century students will work with people in other cultures and time zones, emotional intelligence and maturity will be expected. Forming teams quickly and productively will separate winners from losers.

Technology Literacy

Some of the skills to be mastered will encompass new technology that changes the world of work. It's just a given that technology will be assimilated and put to productive use quickly after it emerges.

It's not life as we knew it when we were growing up. Our classrooms and schools must reflect this new reality.

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