The 21st Century Learners and Teachers  
By  
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There has been a significant shift over the last century from manufacturing to emphasizing information and knowledge services. Knowledge itself is growing ever more specialized and expanding exponentially. Information and communication technology is transforming how we learn and the nature of how work is conducted and the meaning of social relationships. Shared decision-making, information sharing, collaboration, innovation, and speed are essential in today’s enterprises. No longer can students look forward to middle class success in the conduct of manual labor or use of routine skills – work that can be accomplished by machines or easily out-sourced to less expensive labor markets.

Today, much success lies in being able to communicate, share, and use information to solve complex problems, in being able to adapt and innovate in response to new demands and changing circumstances, in being able to command and expand the power of technology to create new knowledge.

Hence, new standards for what students should be able to do are replacing the basic skill competencies and knowledge expectations of the past. To meet this challenge schools must be transformed in ways that will enable students to acquire the creative thinking, flexible problem solving, collaboration and innovative skills they will need to be successful in work and life.

How are 21st Century Learning Skills Defined?

According to Digital Transformation: A Literacy Framework for ICT Literacy(2007), defines 21st century learning skills as the ability to a) collect and/or retrieve information, b) organize and manage information, c) evaluate the quality, relevance, and usefulness of information, and d) generate accurate information through the use of existing resources.

I identified broader 21st century skills as achieving 21st century learning through digital age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity. The Partnership for 21st century skills identifies six key elements for fostering 21st century learning: 1) emphasize core subjects, 2) emphasize learning skills, 3) use 21st century tools to develop learning skills, 4) teach and learn in a 21st century context, 5) teach and learn 21st century content, and 6) use 21st century assessments that measure 21st century skills.

How do we best prepare our students for a future of work that does not yet exist, careers that have not yet been created, and an economy that prizes creativity and innovation?
Emerging research encourages teachers and other educational stakeholders to a) focus on real-world problems and processes, b) support inquiry-based learning experiences, c) provide opportunities for collaborative project approaches to learning, d) and focus on teaching students how to learn (above “what” to learn).

How might we best prepare our teachers to support student acquisition of 21st century skills?

Teachers of 21st-century skills will need to be experts and have expertise in teaching the same 21st century skills that they are encouraging their students to excel in. Teachers will have to take conscious efforts to communicate and collaborate with each other and with students; become flexible with managing new classroom dynamics; be able to support and enable independent student learning, and be willing to adapt their teaching styles to accommodate new pedagogical approaches to learning. For the above to occur, teachers will need professional development opportunities and strong support systems.

The professional development of our nation’s workforce must be a top priority and teachers will need to become 21st-century learners themselves. Developing successful 21st-century teacher education programs and initiatives requires flexible and coordinated leadership. All of those involved in education need to be able to reflect and learn from each other’s experiences as new methods and processes are piloted and implemented.

I strongly suggest a) developing teacher professional development programs and workshops that focus specifically on 21st-century skills instruction, b) integrating 21st-century skills training into teacher preparation and certification programs, c) developing on-line professional learning communities to provide support for teachers, d) invest in a ICT and provide professional development opportunities for both ICT staff and teachers, e) develop professional development opportunities for the faculty of colleges of education that address 21st-century skills, and f) integrate 21st-century skills into both student and teacher standards.