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It's About Verbs, Not Tools

by BILL FERRITER • APRIL 20, 2011

By Bill Ferriter

One of the pivotal moments in my career as an educator came during an email exchange with Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach, a long-time Teacher Leaders Network colleague and friend. We were wrestling with the role that technology should play in our classrooms and I was arguing that today's students couldn't possibly be successful unless they knew how to use a blog or a wiki.

"It's not about the tools, Bill," Sheryl pushed back. "It's about the behaviors that the tools enable."

As semantically simple as that linguistic shift may seem, it's a remarkably important lesson that teachers and school leaders need to learn if we ever hope to see technology being used in meaningful ways in our classrooms. Instead of trying to find ways to integrate blogging, movie-making, and videoconferencing—or worse yet, Animoto, Skype, Wordle, or Voicethread—into our instruction, we need to spend our time and energy focusing on the kinds of essential skills that students can polish, explore, and master with the help of tech-driven learning experiences.

I address many of these issues in my 2010 book Teaching the iGeneration. Below I've included an excerpt from the book's introduction, to give you a better sense of how I approach the issue. After the excerpt, I'll be back with some closing thoughts.

The 'Dumbest Generation'

Despite living in a world of cutthroat global competition for knowledge-based work, American students continue to underachieve in the classroom. As McKinsey & Company demonstrated in a 2009 review of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, the mathematical and scientific abilities of U.S. children lag behind students in countries that compete with the United States for high-value jobs. What's more, the gap between American teens and their international peers only grows larger the longer they stay in school.

Scholars have increasing concerns about the level of critical thought students express through writing—due, perhaps, to the kind of inarticulate expression found in the 96 text messages the average American teen sends and receives per day, a statistic that James Billington, the librarian of Congress, declared the "biggest casualty" of the Internet age.

Knowledge of the core historical events and defining pieces of literature that have shaped thinking for generations is also waning. Less than half of our teens can place the Civil War in the proper century, almost 40 percent are unsure of when World War I happened, and almost 30 percent don't know that Columbus sailed for America before 1750.

Statistics and trends like these led Mark Bauerlein—a professor of English at Emory University in Atlanta and one-time director of research and analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts—to declare the iGeneration America's "dumbest generation":

> " Whatever their other virtues, these minds know far too little, and they read and write and calculate and reflect way too poorly. However many hours they pass at the screen from age 11 to 25, however many blog comments they compose, intricate games they play, videos they create, personal profiles they craft, and gadgets they master, the transfer doesn't happen. The Web grows, and the young adult mind stalls.

Bauerlein is particularly hard on teachers and other technology advocates, arguing that the millions of dollars districts have invested in digital tools to support learning have been largely ineffectual. Combating the view that schools should provide students with more time to explore and create online, Bauerlein writes:

> " Ever optimistic, techno-cheerleaders view the digital learning experience through their own motivated eyes, and they picture something that doesn't yet exist: classrooms illuminating the wide, wide world, teachers becoming 21st-century techno-facilitators, and students at screens inspired to ponder, imagine, reflect, analyze, memorize, recite, and create.

And a closer look at the technology integration efforts in most schools might just reaffirm Bauerlein's doubts. After all, most schools are investing their professional-development technology budget in training teachers to use computers for non-instructional purposes even though new tools allow for a significant shift in pedagogy.

Instead of exploring how new digital opportunities can support student-centered inquiry or otherwise enhance existing practices, today's schools are preparing their teachers to use office automation and productivity tools like Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. While fewer than half of America's teachers believe that they can use technology to plan individualized lessons, almost 70 percent feel comfortable with using technology to complete administrative tasks, according to a 2008 National Education Association report. This results in digital change efforts that, to use the NEA's words, achieve nothing more than "adding power to a marginal teaching approach."

Moving Learning Forward

How does this under-preparation play out in our classrooms? The numbers are discouraging. Even as 95 percent of our teachers believe that technology improves student learning, according to the NEA, only 40 percent report using technology to monitor individual student progress, only 37 percent report using technology to research and gather information, and only 32 percent report using technology in their daily instruction. Fewer than one classroom in five sees students engaged in collaborative work around shared digital projects.

Moving learning forward, then, begins by introducing teachers to ways in which digital tools can be used to encourage higher-order thinking and innovative instruction across the curriculum. iGeneration students, regardless of demographics, have shown an excitement for digital opportunities to learn, and technologists all over the world have created a range of tools that make collaboration, innovation, and individual exploration possible.

Despite Bauerlein's skepticism and a mountain of statistical doubt, today's students *can* be inspired by technology to ponder, imagine, reflect, analyze, memorize, recite, and create—but only after we build a bridge between what they know about new tools and what we know about good teaching.

Building that bridge begins by revisiting exactly what it is that we know about good teaching.

While the calendar may have pushed us into the 21st century, the same traits have always defined inquisitive learners, haven't they? As noted educational historian and skeptic of the 21st-century skills movement Diane Ravitch writes:

> I . . . have heard quite enough about the 21st-century skills that are sweeping the nation. Now, for the first time, children will be taught to think critically (never heard a word about that in the 20th century, did you?), to work in groups (I remember getting a grade on that very skill when I was in 3rd grade a century ago), to solve problems (a brand new idea in education), and so on. Let me suggest that it is time to be done with this unnecessary conflict about 21st-century skills. Let us agree that we need all those forenamed skills, plus lots others, in addition to a deep understanding of history, literature, the arts, geography, civics, the sciences, and foreign languages.

This discovery—that learning depends on skills instead of tools—is one that many educators are struggling to make.

Instead of recognizing that tomorrow's professions will require workers who are intellectually adept—able to identify bias, manage huge volumes of information, persuade, create, and adapt—teachers and district

technology leaders wrongly believe that tomorrow's professions will require workers who know how to blog, use wikis, or create podcasts. As a result, schools sprint in new digital directions with little thought, spending thousands on technology before carefully defining the kinds of learning that they value most. The consequences are high-tech classrooms delivering meaningless, low-level instructional experiences.

"You can't *buy* change," argues Sylvia Martinez of Generation YES. "It's a process, not a purchase. The right shopping list won't change education."

Successful digital integration projects, on the other hand, build on the foundational belief that new technologies are nothing more than tools that can be used to teach the kinds of old-school skills that have been important in the academic and social growth of all children, regardless of what generation they were born in.

Focusing on the Verbs

For Marc Prensky, digital learning expert and author, refocusing our instructional attention requires a dedicated effort to separate nouns from verbs in conversations about teaching with technology. Verbs are the kinds of knowledge-driven, lifelong skills that teachers know matter: thinking critically, persuading peers, presenting information in an organized and convincing fashion. Nouns are the tools that students use to practice those skills. As Prensky writes:

> In teaching, our focus needs to be on the verbs, which don't change very much, and NOT on the nouns (i.e. the technologies) which change rapidly and which are only a means. For teachers to fixate on any particular noun as the "best" way (be it books or blogs, for example) is not good for our students, as new and better nouns will shortly emerge and will continue to emerge over the course of their lifetimes.
>
> Our teaching should instead focus on the verbs (i.e. skills) students need to master, making it clear to the students (and to the teachers) that there are many tools learners can use to practice and apply them.

Following Prensky's advice by placing verbs first in instructional decision-making should make 21st-century learning more approachable for every teacher, including those who are uncomfortable online.

While today's nouns—social-bookmarking services, content aggregators, blogs, Web conferences, personal learning networks, asynchronous discussion forums, instant messaging applications—can be intimidating, educators have spoken the language of higher-order thinking since our first pedagogy classes when we were introduced to Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956).

We inherently recognize the difference between—and have a polished collection of strategies to support—

experiences ranging from those that require simple application of knowledge to those that ask students to synthesize information or to make judgments.

[Excerpted from *Teaching the iGeneration: 5 Easy Ways to Introduce Essential Skills With Web 2.0 Tools* by William M. Ferriter and Adam Garry. (2010). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, pp. 5–7. Used with permission.]

In Closing: Ideas From My Own Classroom

Embracing Prensky's noun-verb framework for making instructional choices in my classroom, I've settled on five skills that I believe define the most successful individuals: The ability to communicate effectively, the ability to manage information, the ability to use the written word to persuade audiences, the ability to use images to persuade audiences, and the ability to solve problems collaboratively.

Teaching the iGeneration is a practical book that I wrote with the intention that teachers can pick it up and begin using it tomorrow. It is my attempt to document the strategies—both traditional and tech-enhanced—that I've used to introduce students to these skills.

Every resource—from the scenarios that prepare students with proper collaborative dialogue behaviors to the checklists and rubrics designed to evaluate the digitally rich projects students are creating in my classroom—is something that I've actually used with my 6th graders.

I hope you find some of the ideas I've touched upon here stimulating. If so, check out the book and feel free to browse and use any of the nearly 70 reproducibles you'll find at the bottom of this page at my publisher's website.

What's your own take on preparing students with the skills they'll need in the 21st century? Leave a comment below. And drop by my blog The Tempered Radical where this conversation is always going on.

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