

Reinventing Learning for the Always-On Generation

Strategies and Apps That Work

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Introduction

A Changing World

We live in a world that has profoundly and fundamentally changed—one that continues to change in incomprehensible, ever-accelerating ways. As a result of this age of profound change, we face a fundamentally different kind of student—one whose experiences, expectations, and assumptions about the world we live in have already begun to force us to rethink teaching, learning, and assessment of that learning.

A few years back, Ian, Ted McCain, and Lee Crockett (2010) wrote a book titled *Understanding the Digital Generation: Teaching and Learning in the New Digital Landscape*, based in part on one thousand interviews Ian undertook with young people between the ages of five and twenty-five years old. What that book, and many more books just like it, and a great deal of academic research and personal experiences are telling us is this: as parents, as citizens, and particularly as educators, what we need to understand is that while, on the outside, kids today pretty much look the same as we did when we were growing up, on the inside, neurologically, today's digital generations are completely different from previous generations.

This is not just because today's children physically mature years earlier than kids did even fifteen years ago. It's not because of the clothes they choose to wear or because they might want to dye their hair and style it differently than we did. It's not because of the music they listen to or the way they talk. It's not because of what they say or how they act. What we now understand is that because of *digital bombardment*—pervasive exposure to digital technology, which primarily happens outside of school hours—kids' brains are literally being wired and rewired on an ongoing basis. In particular, digital bombardment is enhancing their visual memory, visual processing, and visual learning skills.

As Ian notes in *Understanding the Digital Generation* (Jukes, McCain, & Crockett, 2010), what researchers are now beginning to conclude is that our students are neurologically processing information in a fundamentally different way than the older

generations do. This leaves many teachers wondering how to teach the kids of the digital generations. This book provides a pragmatic look at helping teachers do this one step at a time.

Reading This Book

You can read this book using two approaches: The traditional way is to start at the beginning and read until the end. If that strategy works for you, great! An alternative approach aligns with the way that many members of the digital generations prefer to learn; your entry point can be anywhere you want it to be. You can skim, scan, and scour the table of contents, or search the book itself for a topic you find interesting, relevant, or needed. Once you identify your starting point, you can dive right in. For example, if you are a classroom teacher facing the challenges of distracted and disengaged students, you might want to jump directly to chapter 4, “A Need for Speed,” and continue examining the chapters pertaining to the attributes of digital learners and the strategies and tools that work in the classroom. If you are a parent, we recommend you start with chapter 2, “What’s Wrong With Kids Today?” because it identifies and explains some of the common behaviors of today’s digital generations. If you are a school administrator or educational leader, the logical place to start is chapter 1, “Curriculum Standards, the Common Core, and Beyond,” because it addresses the eight-hundred-pound gorilla educators are facing today.

Regardless of your approach, you will find each chapter to be self-contained, starting with the identification of a core learning attribute for the digital generations. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the implications of this attribute to digital learners’ learning preferences and styles. Then we provide a summary of specific strategies and tools that work for the learning attribute. Finally, we pose a series of discussion questions to consider as well as providing some recommendations for further reading and reference.

Let’s get started.

Chapter 1

Curriculum Standards, the Common Core, and Beyond

*Knowing content doesn't make you competent—
nor does understanding content. Competence is the
ability to apply content in some useful way.*

—ANONYMOUS

Peter Drucker (2008), management consultant, educator, and author, once wrote, “What gets measured gets done” (p. 321). Conversely, what doesn't get measured doesn't get done. Clearly, there is an increased focus on standards and accountability measures in education today. Many nations have put into place comprehensive academic performance standards to be attained by all students. Initiatives such as the United States' Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Australia's Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), and New Zealand's National Standards identify a series of high-quality, academic standards for mathematics and English language arts, as well as other subject areas. The standards were created in an attempt to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to be college or career ready.

Debate about standards has had an enormously polarizing effect on both political and educational conversations around the world. We need to acknowledge up front that it is unrealistic to disregard or dismiss the CCSS, or any other local, state, provincial, or national curricula. Standards are the destination; however, the road to achieving the standards has not been built for educators brick by brick. While the standards dictate *what* must be taught, they do not prescribe *how* it must be taught. If we know where we want to go, there are many different roads we can follow to reach our destination. There will always be a need to learn content, but there are

multiple ways to introduce it. For content to stick, educators must be able to make connections to the real world, while at the same time making the content interesting and relevant to students.

Richard Saul Wurman (1989), the cofounder of the highly regarded TED conferences, once commented that “learning can be seen as the acquisition of knowledge. But before learning can take place, it must be of interest—that interest precedes learning. In order to acquire and remember new knowledge, it must stimulate curiosity in some way” (p. 87). Wurman said that learning is like Velcro. Only one side of learning is made up of facts; the other consists of stories, ideas, experiences, and personal interest. Wurman says presenting content to students without personal interest or relevance is like having only one side of a piece of Velcro—the content just doesn’t stick.

When adopting standards such as the Common Core, and while keeping in mind the needs of 21st century learners, teachers can exercise their creativity to deliver instruction in dynamic and engaging ways. As our good friend Douglas Reeves states,

The most powerful educational strategies and approaches are not those that merely keep up with the latest version of standards, but those that transcend every version of standards. If we had no standards and no national, provincial, or state mandates, the question would be, What is the right thing to do for students in the 21st century? We want our students to pursue digital fluency, critical thinking, and creativity, not because it is required by law, but because it is absolutely essential for the future world in which our students will live. (personal communication, April 10, 2014)

If educators are to be successful and make learning relevant to the lives of the digital generations, then they can no longer only be content dispensers. The secret to success in any classroom has very little to do with being a good content dispenser or classroom manager, and everything to do with creating an engaging methodology that compels students to want to be there. It’s not about *making* students learn; it’s about *getting them to want* to learn. Without motivation, there will be no learning.

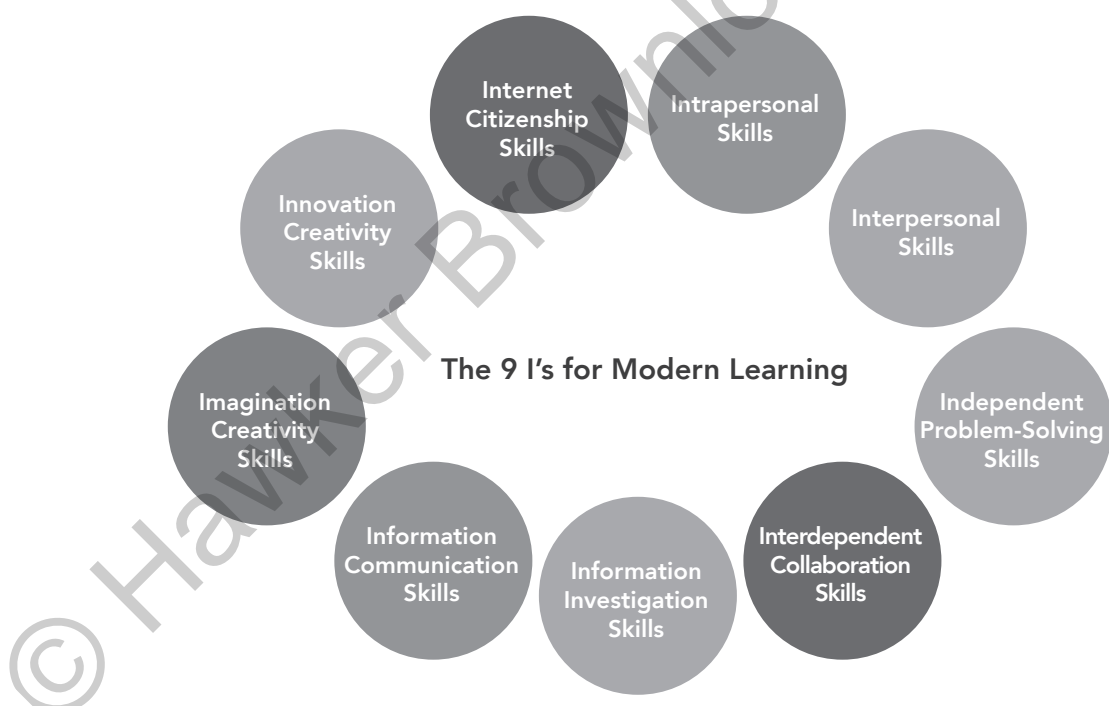
Students are increasingly disengaged and continue to leave both high schools and universities in disturbingly high numbers. According to the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) conducted by the Indiana University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) (Indiana University School of Education, 2010), 42 percent of respondents said they thought of dropping out (of schools) because they didn’t see the value in the work they were asked to do. This is happening in part because students see the disconnect between our focus on content recall rather than demonstrating competency through the application of content to solve

real-world problems. The reality is that the goals of schools are increasingly misaligned with the demands of the global marketplace.

If we are to stay relevant and fulfill our dual mandate of preparing students to be successful on exams and for their future beyond school, our focus must shift to providing them with what they need. We passionately believe that education cannot just be about the standards that are the driving force and primary fixation of schools today.

The New Basics

So what are the critical skills all students need to be successful both in school and in life beyond school? We have interviewed hundreds of parents, as well as business, political, community, and educational leaders from around the world. They have consistently identified a comprehensive list of essential skills. We have come to call this list the *new basics*. The new basics are the skills above and beyond being able to do well on a written exam that all students must cultivate to prepare themselves for success in the world that awaits them once they leave school. (See figure 1.1.)



Source: McCain, 2015. Used with permission.

Figure 1.1: The new basics for success in the future.