

Solutions for Digital Learner-Centered Classrooms

From Master Teacher to Master Learner



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Introduction

The 1980s saw the advent of a “digital revolution,” the moment when personal computers and online networks merged to allow individuals to “create, disseminate, and access information anywhere” (Isaacson, 2014, p. 3). Since then, the revolution has progressed full steam, with digital services and tools becoming more powerful, more mobile, and more ubiquitous. Many of us now carry powerful computers and devices in our pockets and backpacks, and we are no doubt becoming more and more dependent on them for organizing and capturing our daily lives. Even those of us old enough to know a time before this revolution may find it hard to recall a life without the creative, connected, curated, networked world at our fingertips.

It’s somewhat ironic (and frustrating), then, that well into what is arguably one of the biggest, most transformative periods in history we still feel the need to point to a *digital* classroom in schools. Surely the modifier is unnecessary and classrooms are naturally digital. Surely a current of learning pulses through the technologies and networks inside schools just as much as the current of information pulses outside school walls. Modern students use technologies of all types in school as easily and as widely as the paper and pencil used by students before the revolution, right?

Not so.

As author Larry Cuban (2001) and many others point out, schools have spent billions of dollars over the years on technologies that have, in fact, changed very little of how we think about or mete out

an “education” in the developed world. More often than not, we strip the agency and freedoms that digital tools give to learners and creators outside of school when they bring those same tools into the building. The system of schooling that most of us are products of is based on a series of structures and efficiencies that do not work well with the messier, less linear, more self-organized ways we can learn, create, and connect on the Internet. In fact, the system almost unwittingly marginalizes digital technologies in schools. We relegate them to labs or libraries, or if we place them in students’ hands, they’re used only for discrete, narrow purposes like reading textbooks, creating documents, or taking assessments. Few would argue that in schools today, we see technology primarily as an institutional teaching tool, not a personal learning tool.

A disinterested observer might quickly conclude, then, that schools must change, that they cannot and should not be a holdout in a society that has by and large accepted the revolution, however grudgingly. There is no question that many institutions are suffering; for a taste of the complexities and challenges afoot, ask any journalist or musician if the digital transition has been an easy adjustment. Ask the lawyers, publishers, or almost any other professionals who now face a connected, global slate of competitors if the last decade has been business as usual. It hasn’t, and odds are that despite the seeming intractability of schools, they are about to embark on a similarly difficult period of truly transformative change. As the bulwarks that hold back real transformation in schools begin to weaken, we may finally be at a point where we’ll begin to embrace, rather than resist, the fundamental shifts that are unquestionably coming at us.

That’s a good thing, because while there is still much to debate about the merits and applications of technology in schools, at the center of this revolution is a profound, positive shift in the way we can learn and interact with the world. And that is the premise of this series: digital classrooms are not those where technology is layered over the traditional practices and pedagogies in service of

age-old outcomes. Instead, in a world where information, knowledge, and teachers are everywhere, digital classrooms are those where learning is valued over knowing, where making and doing are more important than consuming and memorizing, and where our students are empowered to learn deeply, richly, and authentically using the modern tools and technologies that are so common in their lives.

As you read the books in this series, know that they represent a mix of philosophy and pedagogy intended to stretch your brain as well as your practice. These are discussions about context first and foremost, building new lenses through which you can focus on and discuss your role as an educator, and framing backdrops for the new roles that each of us must embrace sooner rather than later. And finally, these books comprise a roadmap for all educators to reach the place where one word, *classroom*, is enough to describe the space where teachers and students learn, create, and collaborate while making use of tools and technologies of the modern world.