15 Characteristics of a 21st-Century Teacher

By Tsisana Palmer for edutopia.org

Recent technological advances have affected many areas of our lives: the way we communicate, collaborate, learn, and, of course, teach. Along with that, those advances necessitated an expansion of our vocabulary, producing definitions such as digital natives, digital immigrants, and, the topic of this post -- "21st-century teacher."

As I am writing this post, I am trying to recall if I ever had heard phrases such as "20th-century teacher" or "19th-century teacher." Quick Google search reassures me that there is no such word combination. Changing the "20th" to "21st" brings different results: a 21st-century school, 21st-century education, 21st-century teacher, 21st-century skills -- all there! I then searched for Twitter hashtags and Amazon books, and the results were just the same; nothing for the "20th-century teacher" while a lot for the "21st": #teacher21, #21stcenturyskills, #21stCTeaching and no books with titles #containing "20th century" while quite a few on the 21st-century teaching and learning.

Obviously, teaching in the 21-century is an altogether different phenomenon; never before could learning be happening the way it is now -- everywhere, all the time, on any possible topic, supporting any possible learning style or preference. But what does being a 21st-century teacher really mean?

Below are 15 characteristics of a 21st-century teacher:

1. Learner-Centered Classroom and Personalized Instructions

As students have access to any information possible, there certainly is no need to "spoon-feed" the knowledge or teach "one-size fits all" content. As students have different personalities, goals, and needs, offering personalized instructions is not just possible but also desirable. When students are allowed to make their own choices, they own their learning, increase intrinsic motivation, and put in more effort -- an ideal recipe for better learning outcomes!

2. Students as Producers

Today's students have the latest and greatest tools, yet, the usage in many cases barely goes beyond communicating with family and friends via chat, text, or calls. Even though students are now viewed as digital natives, many are far from producing any digital content. While they do own expensive devices with capabilities to produce blogs, infographics, books, how-to videos, and tutorials, just to name a few, in many classes, they are still asked to turn those devices off and work with handouts and worksheets. Sadly, often times these papers are simply thrown away once graded. Many students don't even want to do them, let alone keep or return them later. When given a chance, students can produce beautiful and creative blogs, movies, or digital stories that they feel proud of and share with others.

3. Learn New Technologies

In order to be able to offer students choices, having one's own hands-on experience and expertise will be useful. Since technology keeps developing, learning a tool once and for all is not a option. The good news is that new technologies are new for the novice and experienced teachers alike, so everyone can jump in at any time! I used a short-term subscription to www.lynda.com, which has many resources for learning new technologies.
4. Go Global

Today's tools make it possible to learn about other countries and people first hand. Of course, textbooks are still sufficient, yet, there is nothing like learning languages, cultures, and communication skills from actually talking to people from other parts of the world.

It's a shame that with all the tools available, we still learn about other cultures, people, and events from the media. Teaching students how to use the tools in their hands to "visit" any corner of this planet will hopefully make us more knowledgeable and sympathetic.

5. Be Smart and Use Smart Phones

Once again -- when students are encouraged to view their devices as valuable tools that support knowledge (rather than distractions), they start using them as such. I remember my first years of teaching when I would not allow cell phones in class and I’d try to explain every new vocabulary word or answer any question myself -- something I would not even think of doing today!

I have learned that different students have different needs when it comes to help with new vocabulary or questions; therefore, there is no need to waste time and explain something that perhaps only one or two students would benefit from. Instead, teaching students to be independent and know how to find answers they need makes the class a different environment!

I have seen positive changes ever since I started viewing students' devices as useful aid. In fact, sometimes I even respond by saying "I don't know -- use Google and tell us all!" What a difference in their reactions and outcomes!

6. Blog

I have written on the importance of both student and teacher blogging. Even my beginners of English could see the value of writing for real audience and establishing their digital presence. To blog or not to blog should not be a question any more!

7. Go Digital

Another important attribute is to go paperless -- organizing teaching resources and activities on one's own website and integrating technology bring students learning experience to a different level. Sharing links and offering digital discussions as opposed to a constant paper flow allows students to access and share class resources in a more organized fashion.

8. Collaborate

Technology allows collaboration between teachers & students. Creating digital resources, presentations, and projects together with other educators and students will make classroom activities resemble the real world. Collaboration should go beyond sharing documents via e-mail or creating PowerPoint presentations. Many great ideas never go beyond a conversation or paper copy, which is a great loss! Collaboration globally can change our entire experience!

9. Use Twitter Chat

Participating in Twitter chat is the cheapest and most efficient way to organize one's own PD, share research and ideas, and stay current with issues and updates in the field. We can grow professionally and expand our knowledge as there is a great conversation happening every day,
and going to conferences is no longer the only way to meet others and build professional learning networks.

10. Connect

Connect with like-minded individuals. Again, today’s tools allow us to connect anyone, anywhere, anytime. Have a question for an expert or colleague? Simply connect via social media: follow, join, ask, or tell!

11. Project-Based Learning

As today’s students have an access to authentic resources on the web, experts anywhere in the world, and peers learning the same subject somewhere else, teaching with textbooks is very "20th-century” (when the previously listed option were not available). Today’s students should develop their own driving questions, conduct their research, contact experts, and create final projects to share all using devices already in their hands. All they need from their teacher is guidance!

12. Build Your Positive Digital Footprint

It might sound obvious, but it is for today’s teachers to model how to appropriately use social media, how to produce and publish valuable content, and how to create sharable resources. Even though it’s true that teachers are people, and they want to use social media and post their pictures and thoughts, we cannot ask our students not to do inappropriate things online if we ourselves do it. Maintaining professional behavior both in class and online will help build positive digital footprint and model appropriate actions for students.

13. Code

While this one might sound complicated, coding is nothing but today’s literacy. As a pencil or pen were "the tools" of the 20th-century, making it impossible to picture a teacher not capable to operate with it, today’s teacher must be able to operate with today’s pen and pencil, i.e., computers. Coding is very interesting to learn -- the feeling of writing a page with HTML is amazing! Even though I have ways to go, just like in every other field, a step at a time can take go a long way. Again, lynda.com is a great resource to start with!

14. Innovate

I invite you to expand your teaching toolbox and try new ways you have not tried before, such as teaching with social media or replacing textbooks with web resources. Not for the sake of tools but for the sake of students!

Ever since I started using TED talks and my own activities based on those videos, my students have been giving a very different feedback. They love it! They love using Facebook for class discussions and announcements. They appreciate novelty -- not the new tools, but the new, more productive and interesting ways of using them.

15. Keep Learning

As new ways and new technology keep emerging, learning and adapting is essential. The good news is: it’s fun, and even 20 min a day will take you a long way!
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