

21st Century Skills

What You Should Know

Today’s “digital natives” have grown up with computers, MP3 players, email, and a steady diet of technological marvels. According to the National Council of Teachers of English, over 80 percent of kindergartners use computers and over 50 percent of children under 9 use the Internet. But how is all this digital fluency translating to the educational process? Slowly, say the experts.

Most American classrooms have not embraced the technologies essential to teach 21st Century Skills. As *District Administration* points out in a piece entitled *The New Literacies*, “unfortunately, many administrators, although they are beginning to recognize the need to revise their districts’ media skills instruction, lack the resources, and more importantly the vision, to bring the new literacies into the classroom.”

Pearson author Donald Leu and his colleagues at the New Literacies Research Lab at the University of Connecticut, in their paper *What Is New About The New Literacies of Online Reading Comprehension?*, state that many of these “new literacies” are not appearing in schools due to deliberate educational policies or by educators who are not as literate with the Internet as the students they teach.

Talking to *District Administration*, Leu said that new curriculum guidelines and professional development can help teachers to help their students. “We’ve got to coach current teachers to become newly literate, understand how to use the Internet, so they can pass along a lot of these skills, and then we have to implement effective instructional models.”

But what exactly are 21st Century Skills?

According to Dr. Leu, the new literacies are skills involved with identifying problems, searching for information, critically evaluating information, synthesizing it, and communicating it. While these skills help ensure success with new technologies, they are not restricted to that use, says Dr. Leu, who believes that they also “transfer back” to reading books.

In her Education Sector report, *Measuring Skills for the 21st Century*, author Elena Silva describes them as an emphasis



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on what students can do with knowledge, rather than what units of knowledge they have. But, she points out, that particular concept is often lost in the numerous terms used to describe 21st Century Skills: “Workforce and management-training groups often call 21st Century Skills ‘soft’ or ‘interpersonal’ skills. Vocational education programs call them ‘applied’ skills or ‘workforce’ skills. Many youth development programs refer to them as ‘life and career’ skills. And researchers often use the term ‘non-cognitive’ skills’. ‘Technology literacy’ is a frequently mentioned 21st Century sub-skill. But it’s defined in myriad ways. To various educational organizations and businesses, it’s information-science skills, digital media fluency, advanced computer and internet communications, and “technacy,” a newer term used to describe a deep knowledge of technological systems.”

However these skills are defined, people increasingly recognize them as essential for the education of our youth. Some statistics:

- **80 percent of voters say the things students need to learn today are different than 20 years ago.**
- **There is near universal agreement (99 percent) among U.S. voters that teaching 21st Century Skills is important to our country’s future economic success.**
- **Six in 10 voters say our schools are not keeping pace with changing educational needs.**

As Dr. Leu has said, “The central question for each of us is not ‘How do we teach children to be literate?’ Instead, the central question is ‘How do we teach children to continuously become literate?’ That is, ‘How do we help children learn to learn the literacies that will continuously emerge?’... Literacy is no longer an end point to be achieved and tested, but rather a process of continuously learning how to become literate.”

