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Digital moxie helps change focus

Anyone who reads my writing regularly knows that I've drunk the digital Kool-Aid in a serious way. I'm a blogger who maintains wikis, a Skyper who voicethreads, and a podcaster who jumps into discussion forums. Enthusiasm for electronic tools comes easy, because they've changed the way I learn.

I constantly read and write online, articulating my practice and tailoring others' innovations to my work. I participate in several digital networks with accomplished peers, sharing ideas and support. Nothing is more professionally meaningful than the free learning that I stumble across every day on the Internet.

Unfortunately, electronic tools have yet to change learning in the American classroom.

Schools and districts, wrapped in an electronic frenzy and afraid of leaving children unprepared for "the global economy," are investing in interactive whiteboards and class sets of student responders. Ads for video cameras and ceiling mounted LCD projectors, along with promotions for subscriptions to countless student learning services, promise to "revolutionize learning."

Despite the millions of dollars invested in this digital eye-candy, most kids still spend their days sitting silently, listening far more than learning. Fooled into thinking that 21st century teaching means rolling clickers into their classrooms, old-school educators change little about their broadcast-model instructional practices and remain hopelessly muddled in yesterday.

So how can your building avoid this embarrassing — and expensive — mistake?

Start with one straightforward understanding: 21st century classrooms are not created by putting tools into the hands of teachers. Instead, they're defined by the skills demonstrated by stu-

dents. Twenty-first century learners are experts at managing information. In an era when content multiplies exponentially, skilled citizens must efficiently identify and evaluate the sources of knowledge available to them.

Twenty-first century learners also are creative, recognizing that they can be contributors — rather than simply consumers — of knowledge. Buoyed and unintimidated by invention, they design new ways to organize understandings and express individual passions. Finally, 21st century learners are communicators and collaborators — working toward shared outcomes and skilled at compromise.

Our most accomplished educators have been engaging students in creative and collaborative efforts forever, proving that tools alone cannot ensure that classrooms today prepare students for tomorrow. Technology can, however, make lessons that are driven by invention and collective effort easier for every teacher to manage.

With a bit of digital moxie polished through professional development, learning can be transformed from a static experience to a student-centered, two-way exploration of content. Kids in any building can become instant publishers — connecting to, sharing with, and learning from the world.

The key is shifting the focus of the digital dialogue in your workroom. Stop pushing for improved tools and start pushing for improved teaching. Once you begin seeing technology as nothing more than an effective vehicle for supporting high-quality instruction, your school will finally be on the way to properly preparing students for the 21st century. ♦



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