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Create, Collaborate, Communicate: Empowering Students With 21st Century Skills

by Chris Riedel

"We need to change the way we teach," said Howie DiBlasi, speaking at FETC 2009 in Orlando, FL last week. DiBlasi, retired district CIO and emerging technology evangelist, pointed to a statistic from the United States Department of Commerce that left many in the audience shaking their heads: According to a study that ranked 55 industry sectors by their level of IT intensiveness, "education ranked 55 ... below coal mining."

DiBlasi shared his thoughts on the need for educators to infuse 21st century skills into their curriculum in order to motivate and inspire their students.

If we're going to be competitive, he said, we need to change our curriculum so that it embraces the development and use of 21st century skills. "We need to move away from the traditional classroom," he said, "and into an environment where the students are at the center of the stage."

According to DiBlasi, there are several questions educators need to ask when confronting the issue of what tools and technologies to include in their day-to-day instruction. Prime among them, he insisted, is, "how do we prepare our students to become not only readers and writers of content, but editors and collaborators as well?" Because let's face it, he said, these are the things employers are looking for.

Referring to a survey of 50 corporations, organizations, and small businesses, "the top three things employers are looking for in new recruits are:

- Creative problem solving;
- Critical and analytical thinking skills; and
- Information gathering and evaluation."

"We are doing our students a disservice," he said, by taking away the robust set of tools they use in their everyday lives the minute they walk through the classroom door. Instead, he urged, we should be leveraging those assets--and the students' natural propensity to use them--when we engage them in our schools.

Following his own advice, DiBlasi used a range of audio, video, and visual imagery as he outlined his list of the top-16 things educators need to do in order to prepare young learners to be the emerging leaders of tomorrow.

Hug a Geek

This one, said DiBlasi, is fairly obvious. The best way to know what tools work and how to use them is

to find people who thrive in the digital world and ask them for help. "If you don't know how to do it yourself," he said, "find somebody who can be a mentor."

Create a Social Network

DiBlasi suggested using one of the Web-based platforms such as Ning to create an individualized social network that can be deployed in the district, school, or classroom and leveraged as a community asset. "It takes two minutes to set this up," he said, and has unlimited possibilities.

Develop Problem-Solving Skills

Critical thinking and problem solving, according to DiBlasi, are at the top of the list of things educators need to integrate into their curriculum. It can be as simple as taking a few minutes every day, he said, to challenge students with brainteasers or other puzzles.

Start Collaborating

This is at the heart of the 21st century skill set, according to DiBlasi, and Google Docs provides an easily accessible way to get students to interact with both the curriculum and each other.

Use Project-Based Learning

DiBlasi showcased a school in Alabama that uses real-world scenarios to teach young students a range of traditional skills. From planning a trip, to working in an imaginary retail store, students are engaged in every aspect of the assignment, including the development of the project itself. "True project-based learning," he said, "will transform your district."

Develop Information Processing Skills

Given the ubiquitous nature of the Web and the ability for all users to become content publishers, DiBlasi stressed the importance of teaching students how to assess the validity of information. It can be as simple as understanding the structure of a valid URL, he said, or as complex as evaluating the content of individual Web pages.

Give Kids a Global Voice

DiBlasi also stressed the need to take the curriculum outside of the classroom walls. "One way to do that," he argued, "is to use the free ePals platform to collaborate on assignments with other classes across the country or around the world."

Discover RSS

RSS is not new, admitted DiBlasi, but it is powerful. And the power, he said, is not only the ability to aggregate updated information on a range of subjects, but also the ability to publish information for members of the broader community to see and interact with.

Improve Critical Thinking Skills

DiBlasi said he considers many of the tools discussed during his session to help in the development of critical thinking skills. Among his favorites is the Web site FantasticContraption.com where students participate in an online physics project in either an individual or collaborative setting.

Teach Our Kids To Be Self-Directed

Getting kids to be self directed, said DiBlasi, is really about getting the students to be invested in driving the project through to completion, no matter what tools are used for production. If they are excited about the idea of the final product, he insisted, they are more likely to take the initiative to get things done.

Create, Collaborate, Communicate

There are several things you can do, according to DiBlasi, to get a range of disciplines working together in a collaborative environment. One example he shared was the establishment of a school blog, where students were responsible for every facet of production, from content creation, to editorial control, to publicity and public relations.

Discover Social Bookmarking

The power of social bookmarking, argued DiBlasi, is that it is a simple, effective way to share information with a broad range of stakeholders. Delicious is his platform of choice, and offers the ability to "tag" the various bookmarks for another level of individual customization.

Use Interactive Video Conferencing

Interactive video conferencing (IVC) is a good way to connect classrooms and students throughout the district, he said. Other opportunities include using the technology--via Skype, for example--to take students on virtual field trips to a range of otherwise inaccessible locations.

Integrate Web 2.0 Tools into Every Aspect of the Curriculum

DiBlasi assured the audience that there is always some type of Web 2.0 tool that can be integrated into classroom assignments, and offered a worksheet--available on his site--outlining 25 different options.

Promote 1:1 Computing

"This one made a huge difference in our district," DiBlasi said, adding, "and I know some of you are going to say, 'That's great, but I just can't do it.' But you can." According to DiBlasi, refurbished computers are a great way to implement 1:1 initiatives without compromising current district budgetary constraints.

Staff Development Is Fundamental

Not originally on his list, DiBlasi said that the inclusion of staff development is fundamental to the successful implementation of 21st century teaching and learning. "It's important," he said, to be sure that you are following up on the initiatives that are being instituted over time. "That is the piece that really makes this work."

DiBlasi concluded his talk by reminding the audience, "The question you have to ask as the leadership is: 'Can you bring about this change?'" Can you bring these skills into the classroom and transform the way your students think and learn?

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