Teachers Must Be Confident With Technology to Effectively Employ It in Their Lessons

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When my mother was in her 80s, my brother bought her a computer so that she could participate in e-mail exchanges and receive digital pictures of her grandchildren. It was a disaster. Though her mind was sharp, this lifelong learner with a master’s degree could not “read” the screen, and every window that popped up represented a paralyzing choice for her: “If I click wrong, I might fail again.”

We know that humans who do not develop language in childhood may never speak, that young minds need countless hours of exposure to letters, words, phonemes, to be ready to learn to read. We have learned that writing, too, is a developmental process. Students, regardless of when they start, tend to go through many stages on the way to becoming competent writers and readers; and learning to read and write for the many challenges and purposes that we face in school, in work and in the community is a lifelong task. But as a society, we agree that we must invest in literacy because reading and writing are critical skills.

In the 21st century, the ability to use computers and other digital technology is a critical skill. If education is the “great equalizer,” as Horace Mann put it, then it is up to the public schools to provide access, time and direction for students to learn to use these technologies for the full range of purposes our students will pursue in school, work and in the community. Such is literacy in the 21st century: Writing is a digital activity.

As governor of West Virginia from 1988 to 1996, Gaston Caperton instituted a statewide program to place three computers and reliable basic skills software in every classroom. This introduced basic computer skills to students and teachers, and my state’s early embrace of computer technology has been maintained and upgraded by subsequent administrations. For a mountainous rural state, technology offers the possibility of overcoming physical obstacles and bringing the world into isolated classrooms.

In the 23 years I have taught in West Virginia elementary schools, many students have benefited tremendously from these computers, but I’ve also seen many computers sitting unused in the backs of classrooms, or used for games and activities with limited educational value. Though teachers received some training in using the hardware and software, from what I’ve seen, few integrated these powerful tools into their everyday lessons. Only recently, as teachers have started receiving an array of in-classroom equipment like laptops and projectors, am I seeing a shift.

But simply providing equipment is not enough. I have learned through my involvement with the National Writing Project that teachers need to be comfortable with their own writing process before they can be effective teachers of writing. They must also be comfortable and confident users of technology before they can effectively employ technology in their lessons.

I was very fortunate to have had a principal in 2000 who recognized that a teacher enthused about writing and technology with a computer lab would not only ensure that all students in the school were using the computers for reading, writing and enhancing content learning, but also collaborate with other teachers, increasing their knowledge and skills. Since then, I have found that when my colleagues see the power of computers to motivate students to
engage in the writing process, including dreaded revisions and editing, and when they get support in using the technology to enhance their classroom objectives, they embrace writing and technology.

The National Writing Project model of sustained professional development led by teachers is the most promising way to influence the nation’s teaching force to embrace both writing and technology in the digital age. In our local writing project workshops, we have led many K–12 teachers in their first use of computers to revise and edit writing, create PowerPoint presentations and digital stories, publish blogs and engage in online discussions. They have reported returning to their classrooms and making better use of computers in their teaching.

Technology spending is necessary and important to increase availability of technology tools and Internet infrastructure. But teachers must be at the center of change aimed at preparing students for the 21st century. The National Writing Project has put extensive time and expertise into developing and researching teacher leadership. The Teachers Are the Center of Education: Writing, Learning and Leading in the Digital Age report should remind those who lead schools, districts and teacher preparation programs that there are among them teachers who are exploring innovative uses of technology to enhance students’ educational experiences. Teachers must be given the time and opportunity to share the most promising practices in their schools and districts through mentorship, coaching or professional development programs in order to effectively implement a 21st-century curriculum for all students.