Progress Toward Digital Literacy

By Magali Meza

Advances in digital learning are bound to have a tremendous impact on classrooms and the way students are taught. We can already see a shift from traditional classrooms and instruction, which were mainly teacher-oriented, to instruction that is interactive, student-centered and collaborative.

While today's students, who regularly use MySpace, Facebook, text messages, video chat, and many other tools at home, are still forced to "power down" when they come to school, a growing number of schools are now committed to bringing digital technology and digital learning to their full potential.

At the state level, digital literacy and digital learning are becoming a priority. In May 2009, Gov. Schwarzenegger established the California ICT Digital Literacy Leadership Council to ensure that California residents are digitally literate and to seek strategies that will incorporate Digital Literacy into K-12 and higher education. At the same time, he launched a digital textbook initiative, placing California in the vanguard of an online movement that will undoubtedly transform education.

Today, educators agree that an important goal of education is to teach students 21st-century skills. Included among these skills are communication, collaboration and literacy, which is the ability to locate, organize, understand, evaluate and create information using digital technology. Students themselves understand that their peers who do not have access to online resources are disadvantaged in academic endeavors. Equitable connectivity and access to sources of digital information is a threshold issue—and one that the California K-12 High Speed Network (K12HSN), a state program funded by the California Department of Education—continues to work to improve. Equitable connectivity and access to enriching and edifying content are keys to a successful society, and this is why connectivity, content, access and equity are so important.

Teachers who are now charged with promoting 21st-century skills are incorporating digital content and new technologies into the curriculum as a way to engage students and improve student learning. Verizon Thinkfinity is one example of an organization providing digital content to enhance the 21st-century learning experience. Thinkfinity.org offers free, high-quality and engaging resources allowing educators to effectively prepare students to become productive citizens. These amazing resources facilitate project-based instruction and real-life application, helping educators teach math, civics, science, collaboration, leadership and more. Verizon Thinkfinity gives teachers access to thousands of educational resources, including standards-based, grade-specific, K-12 lesson plans, student interactive tools and reference materials. Thinkfinity.org is a great resource teachers can use to enrich their lessons, promote discovery learning, student-based learning and collaboration.

But Internet access and the availability of high-quality collections of digital content are just one example of the advances in digital learning. Many other technologies are also transforming the classroom. In recent years, educators have gained a wide range of technological tools to assist in teaching and learning. Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, podcasting and video hosting are now widely adopted. Interactive whiteboards and response systems are becoming the norm. Digital textbooks are rapidly gaining momentum. And while mobile devices are still largely prohibited at school, a growing number of districts are starting to incorporate cell phones and iPods into the curriculum.

School administrators, ed tech and IT departments are instrumental in the transition to digital learning. Their willingness to initiate change and support innovation is essential. Cooperation between ed tech, information technology and teachers has never been as critical to ensure the success of digital learning. Professional development is key as it allows teachers to use these new technologies efficiently. Good communication also helps ensure that the digital experience works well and that teachers can access the information and tools they consider useful. To address some of the issues related to content filtering, K12HSN decided to leverage the "trusted community" of its registered users and created a sheltered environment for the use of some of these tools. Calaxy is a suite of Web 2.0 tools that teachers can access when Web 2.0 tools hosted in the public domain are blocked. Calaxy allows educators to utilize the latest web technology and tools while simultaneously addressing concerns about appropriate content and providing access with risks minimized.

Creating an environment that promotes technology and digital learning will allow schools to engage students, enhance student learning and ultimately raise academic achievement. By embracing these advances in digital learning, schools have an opportunity to finally make education fit with today's world. ■

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