

**Differentiation in the 21st Century:
How Technology and Tools Can Solve Our 20th Century Problem
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Educators have known for years that personalizing education for each individual student has to be a priority in the classroom and on the campus. We've done the best we can do with what we have had. But what we have had is limited. Since the establishment of the modern Western educational system, we have used an industrial style of schooling that relies on a timed lock-step approach that, while doing a good job of managing large populations of people, eliminates any possibility of providing focused differentiated instruction for each student. We depend on the human teacher as our sole resource for learning. And we have created a system that focuses too much on the teaching process while minimizing the learning process.

There's only so much a teacher can do. Facing a number of students on a daily basis makes it impossible to provide each student with a personalized plan for learning. Yet, this is the only definition of differentiation. The sheer numbers force a teacher to do the best they can but eventually the reality sets in that you can't teach each student individually every day. We ask ourselves whether we taught everything we were supposed to teach and forget that we should ask ourselves whether they each learned what they were supposed to learn.

I am commonly referred to as a digital immigrant. When I was growing up, we had a party line for our phone system. Party lines were wonderful. There were six families that lived down our country road. When someone called one of these families, all six phones in all six homes rang. Which meant that all six phones could be answered and we could then sort out who the call was for and trust that everybody else hung up. That, my friends, was technology at its finest. I was not raised in a digital world. I am an immigrant to this land of skype, google, www, Wikipedia, smartphones and on and on. I love this land, I enjoy this land, but I was not born digital.

The student we educate today is a digital native. I watch my 2 year old granddaughter playing games on her mom's iphone. Students hold a multitude of connections, communications and resources in their hand and use them in many ways including social networking, open source content, tutoring, teaching, training, research and on and on. They are growing up in a digital world. They were born in this land and they know more about it than we do.

So, what does this mean for those of us who educate? It would be easy for us to see all this technology as distraction from our traditional classroom style. It would also be

dangerous. The fact is that kids will use technology because it's part of their world. And, this digital world offers our kids the ability to personalize everything. Every aspect of their life has adapted to digital environments. Sadly, according to research, the part of their world that has made little change is their classroom. Too many times we stubbornly stick to our 20th Century methods. Sure, we may let them use laptops and computers but taking better notes and learning PowerPoint seems to be as far as we go in innovation.

It's time for us to settle into this digital world. It's time to lay aside our reservations and jump into the 21st Century learning revolution. Think about it; we finally have the opportunity to do what we've always known we should do. We can truly provide differentiation on our campus and in our classrooms. The day has come when we can welcome every kind of technology as a tool in education. We have to remember, though, that it's the digital native who knows the lay of the land. They know how to use the tools better than we do. So, why not give them what they need (rigorous content) and allow them to learn it their way? Why not allow technology to drive the process for learning? Why not create a sharing relationship with students that benefit everybody?

It will take some rethinking of how we do what we do. It means letting technology stay in the hands of the student. They should decide what tools they use. We can still set the objectives, but we have to step aside and let each student learn the way they learn best. By doing so, we can finally say that we've solved our 20th Century differentiation problem by settling into the 21st Century digital nation.