

The Changing Role of the Teacher in the 21st Century

By

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By the authors of [The Edutainer: Connecting the Art and Science of Teaching](#)

Dr. Brad Johnson and Tammy Maxson McElroy are the authors of *The Edutainer: Connecting the Art and Science of Teaching*. The Edutainer concept is based upon the collaborative effort of the authors' 30+ years of combined teaching and administrative experience at the k-12 level within public and independent school systems. Through these experiences, advanced degrees, and scholarly research they discovered, quantified and developed the key principles for success in the classroom of the 21st Century. More information on the authors can be found at www.encoreedutainment.com

“Many of our schools are good schools, if only this were 1965.”-Louise Stoll & Dean Fink



The irony of this quote is not the fact that our educational system is antiquated, but that most new initiatives and programs are still focused on perfecting the antiquated school of 1965 rather than transforming formal education to be relevant in the world of today.

It seems that while business models, technology, and even religion (steeped in tradition) have adapted to an ever changing culture, education has remained comparatively unchanged. The global business market has moved from an assembly-line manufacturing culture to a more service oriented culture. The Information Age of technology has moved us into an era of instant information. The world is literally at our finger tips. However, one glance into a classroom and you would find very little has changed over the past 30 or more years. Oh, there might better lighting, air conditioning or even a computer or a smart board in the room, if you are lucky, but the process of formal educating has changed very little over the past several decades.

Education still mainly involves teachers “data dumping” information to students to cover the curriculum in preparation for a standardized test. So, if education has not kept up with the changing times, then one has to question its relevance in preparing students for the world of today – not to mention the world of tomorrow. And if education has not changed with the times, then it is reasonable to assume that the role of educators has not changed as well. Therefore, one could conclude that the role of the teacher is effective... if only this were 1965.

So, the question becomes, is the role of the teacher effective in the year 2010.

With research suggesting that students are seemingly unprepared for college and the world, it is apparent that there is disconnect between formal learning and the world beyond the classroom. And when you consider that the attrition rate is around 50% for teachers within their first five years of service, one would have to conclude that they are not prepared for the reality of the classroom in the 21st Century. These teachers graduate with a degree, pass certification exams, participate in professional development and still half of them will burnout within the first 5 years of teaching.

It is clear that the teacher's role must be redefined to meet the needs and demands of today's culture. The present method of school and teacher improvement is much like trying to create a new and improved 8-track tape player. It sounds great in theory, in but in reality, although it might have new bells and whistle; it is still just an 8-track player.

So, this does not mean more emphasis on preparing the teacher for the classroom of 1965, which is the standard protocol, but rather to help teachers develop the skills needed to thrive and students flourish in today's culture.

The role of the teacher has traditionally been the gatekeeper of information. She had access to the information that her students needed. This was an important role 30 years ago when the classroom was the focal point of information dissemination. There wasn't internet access, 24 hour cable news, or cell phones to access exorbitant amounts of information instantly. Information was a sparse commodity, and it was the teacher who held the keys to the knowledge kingdom. We are not downplaying the importance of memorizing certain information or establishing a strong foundation on which to build. For instance, students need to memorize multiplication tables, so they can do advanced math with more ease, and we wouldn't want a heart surgeon to be "googling" a heart procedure during surgery.

There is foundational information needed to build on future learning. However, if that information is never given relevance to the real world or made applicable to other learning, then how effective is the information?

However, today it is not a lack of information that exists for students. In fact, did you know that students are exposed to more information by the age of five than their grandparents were by the age of twenty? This means that children entering kindergarten today have been exposed to more information than their grandparents were two years after graduating high school. A ten year old child can access information through a cell phone more efficiently than our own government could 50 years ago.

Our students are inundated with information from television, radio, magazines, movies, video games and other technology. When interviewing Mary Dimino (2008 Gracie Allen award winner) about cultural changes she explained, "Today, a short attention span can be attributed to the fact that our brains are trained in short sound bytes and video clips.

Think about it, when we watch TV, we are inundated with hundreds of images a minute. TV is quick; a lot of flash with sometimes very little content. Watching TV can be hypnotizing in its effect- mindless, almost mind numbing; not much brainpower or thought has to go into television watching. All that, along with having access to texting, Internet, media, and email in the phone that is in the palm of our hands makes us over stimulated with nonsense and under-stimulated mentally at the same time... a huge dilemma that can leave a person unfulfilled yet feeling very busy, too busy for getting anything done. It's a lot of noise in the mind.

This overload of information also means that the teacher now has to compete for the students' attention. Since students are inundated with so many stimuli, they may quickly tune out a lesson if it doesn't appear relevant. Therefore, the focus of education today should be on the personalization and application of relevant knowledge rather than simply filling them with random facts. Yet, the focus of most classrooms still involves the "data dumping" mentality. To prepare our students for the world of today and tomorrow, the role of the teacher has to meet the needs of current culture.

Since the teacher is the single most important factor in student success, it would make sense to focus on this role in today's culture.

When we interviewed, Kathy Cox, former state superintendent of Georgia, about the influence of teachers on student success she explained, "Nothing is more important to the student's success than a positive relationship with the teacher regardless of interferences to their education such as a tough home life, limited parental support or socioeconomic level." The teacher is indeed the most important factor in student success, especially in the early years. Therefore, if the teacher can create a positive classroom environment, and make learning relevant and engaging, then students will be successful.

But, if the teacher is key to student success, then how can students be successful if teachers are continually experiencing burn out and leaving the field in large numbers.

One of the major reasons that teachers burn out and leave the field is that they often lack the core "operational" and "interpersonal" skills to create an optimal environment. Teachers often have a strong foundation in content area or they wouldn't have graduated, but current teacher preparation programs have little time to devote to

operational and interpersonal skills that are so crucial to the classroom of today. The operational skills include multi managing, planning, and organization of the classroom and learning environment.

This also includes developing relevant applicable lessons that relate to the lives of the students, so that they find the information meaningful and will ultimately take responsibility for their own learning. The interpersonal skills include developing authentic relationships with students, parents, and faculty, as well as creating a respectful environment where all stakeholders take responsibility in the learning process. What does all of this tell us? If the world in which the students will live has changed so dramatically, then the role of the teacher must change as well.

These operational and interpersonal skills are examined in detail in *The Edutainer: Connecting the Art and Science of Teaching*. For the purpose of this article, we will discuss some of the interpersonal relationships that teachers need to develop in the 21st Century and how they are affected by today's culture. Excerpts from the book have been included in this section.

Culture today

With easy access to cable television, music, video games, cell phones, movies, and all other multi media outlets, it is easy to see how culture can influence the education of students. But did you know that research suggests culture influences student learning more than formal education? This means we can no longer separate the classroom from the real world, but rather have to find ways to make learning relevant and applicable to the real world so that students are influenced by intellectual information rather than simply the pop culture of today, which has changed drastically over the past 30 years.

Think of the great advice that was given by Andy Griffith, or the parents on *The Cosby Show*. How many television shows and teen movies can you think of today where the parents are seen as wise and instrumental in the development of their children? Rather today, television and movies portray parents as slow-witted, aloof, and easily manipulated by their children. The children on programs today are seen as more intelligent than their parents. We have come along way from the wisdom of "Father Knows Best" to the most famous line of the bumbling Homer Simpson, "Doh", which unfortunately has become a part of our cultural language.

It appears as though the media is slowly "dumbing down" America. You have to look no further than the present reality shows to see how television has sunk to an all time low. And how does someone like Paris Hilton become an icon simply because she was born to a rich hotel owner? Will the next national icon be the child of William Becker the founder of the Motel 6 chain? Even when surveyed, guess what most children want to be when they are older? A lawyer, doctor or professional you say? No, they want to be famous. When children would rather emulate Miley Cyrus, Lebron James, or Julia Roberts, than do well in school, it does pose a challenge for educators in the 21st Century.

The effective educator of today has to understand the importance of making education applicable to the lives of the students. Students have to understand the world in which they will live and understand how to survive and thrive in that world. The effective educator understands that part of her responsibility is to help the students become educated consumers. Because of the influence of media, corporations, and businesses, students need to become aware of the power of these entities to persuade and manipulate their decisions and possibly even their beliefs. This innovative educator of today utilizes authentic relationships and relevant teaching to connect education with the real world.

The School Community

One major difference between the antiquated teacher role and the changing teacher role of today is the involvement of everyone in the educational community. The antiquated teacher doesn't seek interaction with parents, but prefers working in an isolated environment. This is often because she is not equipped to handle confrontation, or possibly lacks the confidence to engage in genuine conversation with parents or others. However, today's effective educator embraces interaction with parents because it is beneficial for the student and her. She welcomes dialogue and building authentic relationships with all key members involved. She sees this as an opportunity to develop classroom support for the students and her.

What is an authentic relationship you may ask? It is a relationship built upon respect between all the members of the school community. Each member has responsibilities in developing and nurturing these relationships. All key

individuals are important because of the experiences and abilities they bring to the educational community. It takes the whole “village” or educational community to produce an intentional relationship.



Authentic relationships with students

The changing role of the teacher requires personalizing instruction and presenting relevant information. This authentic relationship with the student is particularly important because the teacher has the potential to greatly influence the student. However, the dominant teaching style of the past has been the antiquated “Task Master” style of teaching. This is the old “drill and kill” method of teaching which simply requires the student to memorize and recall the learning. Unfortunately this knowledge is isolated and quickly forgotten.

The effective teacher has to be the ‘thermostat’ who controls the environment of the classroom. She is the one who either creates an environment where learning can occur or she creates an environment where students dread coming to class. The effective teacher creates a safe, and engaging learning environment where learning is deemed valuable to the student. This teacher will have high expectations for student behavior and academic achievement, but since she has created authentic relationships, the students will work hard to meet and exceed those expectations. However, high expectations without building relationships reverts the classroom back to a taskmaster environment. Ultimately teachers should reflect the same behavior that they expect from their students.

Effective instructional methodologies must include opportunities for the students to understand these educational concepts in a manner that is both relevant for today’s fast paced world and also personalized in order to apply the learning to tomorrow’s world.

Whether it is your rules, expectations, or how you deliver the material, keep these thoughts in mind... Am I presenting the material in a manner that is engaging for the students?... Am I treating them the way I would want someone to treat my child? At the end of the day remember they are still children, facing real problems in a tough world, so they need all the support they can get. Therefore, the effective teacher of today is genuine. When this teacher exhibits vulnerability, transparency, and humor, a real connection is made with the students. This can be as simple as beginning lessons with personal stories to connect with the concept, or even using humor to draw their interest.

This connection allows for true and lasting learning to take place. Ultimately, a sense of community is built within the classroom. Why? The student is able to see the teacher as not only the supervising adult but also as a human being.

Understanding Parents

The changing role of the teacher today requires a different perspective with the parents; it is no longer teaching and working in isolation but cultivating a relationship with the parents. The effective teacher today understands that the 21st Century family has greatly changed in dynamics and is under immense pressure due to the demands of today’s culture. Many adults today have one of the toughest and most demanding jobs simply being a parent. The job of parenting is not made any easier by the generational gap that exists between parents and their technological savvy children.

This generation gap exists because parents grew up with limited technology, while their children appear to be cyborgs (part human and part computer). In our interview with Lily Eskelsen (VP of the NEA), she explained when it

comes to technology, “Kids are fearless natives and their parents and teachers are more like immigrants who don’t speak the language”. While the effective teacher of today is technologically savvy, she is aware that parents may not be, so she communicates in methods in addition to the computer, such as students’ agendas and weekly folders.

The dynamics of the home life have changed in recent years as well. In most cases, students today live in a single parent home or a home where both parents work. In fact from the 1970’s the number of working moms has almost doubled from around 30 percent to nearly 60 percent. Research also shows that Americans work approximately 160 hours more per year, or the equivalent of an extra month per year, than they did twenty years ago.

“Keeping up with the Joneses” has become our new national anthem. However, parents often feel a sense of guilt for the long hours at work and time spent away from their children. Because of this guilt, there is a small percentage of parents who try to buy their children’s affection or become their friend rather than be their parent. These parents often purchase items for their children in place of parental gifts such as support, guidance, and limitations.

These are also the parents who will act more like a lawyer than a parent when their child exhibits poor behavior or weak study habits. They don’t want to discuss the issue; they only want the teacher to “fix” the problem. They are looking for a quick answer, rather than an opportunity for their child to learn from the experience. It is easier to be their child’s friend than it is to be an authority figure.

It is important for the educator to learn to relate with the parents of the 21st Century. First, remember the parents have a story, and they have a vested interest in the education of their child. So, respect their role and work to build a relationship which allows ownership in the educational process. However on the flip side, encourage parents to have their child learn from his mistakes. Some of the most important learning experiences and life lessons have come through struggles and failures. A parent is doing a disservice to their child if they don’t allow them the opportunity for these experiences. How will the student be able to function when he enters the work world? Will the parent still be bailing them out? An authentic relationship between the teacher and parents ultimately seeks the best interest of the child.

Partners in Crime

The changing role of the teacher means to move away from the isolation of the past and embrace the collegiality, expertise, and support of colleagues. One of the most important aspects of collegiality is the sense of community that it builds among teachers. Research even suggests that collegiality among teachers has a positive correlation with student success. It is almost ironic that education which is very social in nature has often limited the interaction of its teachers.

We have already discussed the importance of developing relationships with parents, but it is time for the effective educator to reintroduce herself to her “partners in crime”, her colleagues. Effective teachers are a great resource of knowledge, ideas, and even activities that can be shared with teammates. Collaborating may seem like a foreign idea in a profession that is known for its isolative qualities, but today’s culture requires a new relationship among all the members of the school. This supportive and respectful environment also includes your administrators as well as the school staff. Since you all have the same goal, student success, be supportive of each other. It is important to have a relationship with your peers that are both supportive and positive. Building a school community is beneficial to all stake holders of the educational setting.

Beyond the school walls

The changing role of the teacher includes reaching beyond the walls of the school. Presently, the school remains an isolated building that is disconnected from the world in which we are preparing students to live. As we have mentioned, education should be a community effort, but this means including the whole community. Utilize the experts that exist in your community to really develop lessons or reinforce ideas from a lesson. Did you just teach a lesson on finance? Bring in the CFO of a corporation to speak with your students. Do you want your students to have an impact on your community? Do a class project where you help a local food bank by bringing in food, or working at the food bank for a day. A student may not remember what was taught in social studies on a particular day in 8th grade, but he would have if the lesson was shared at a retirement home while listening to the stories of a woman who may have lived during the depression.

Education is about making learning alive and relevant. Therefore, don't confine education to the walls of the classroom but connect it to the real world. In our information age, it doesn't even have to be limited to your immediate community. Connect with a school in Africa, India, or South America and do a project together, or let students learn a lesson via the Internet with students from across the world. The 21st Century teacher utilizes the effectiveness of all our available technology.

Teacher Leader

The term teacher leader has been in the educational conversation for several years now, but it still hasn't been given its due diligence in the educational process of the 21st Century. If there is one aspect of the teacher role that needs to be changed it is the "voice" of the teacher. Beyond the classroom, the teacher has really had no voice in education. Politicians tell us how they will "fix" the problems of education. Unions tell us how they will "represent" the teacher. School boards and administrators tell us how they will "direct and manage" the teachers. Yet the teacher, the most important aspect of student success has very little opportunity to take on leadership responsibilities that actually influence the process of education.

It is our belief that, "Leadership is about responsibility and action, not title or position". The teacher is the leader of her classroom. However, every teacher has the ability and really the duty to be a leader in the school community. One of the reasons that more teachers don't feel like leaders is because they underestimate their abilities, especially when they enter the classroom unprepared for the realities of teaching in today's culture. However, when the teacher has both the operational and interpersonal skills to complement her content expertise, then she can step outside of the proverbial box, and her comfort zone to be a leader in the educational community.

With leadership as part of her new role, the teacher of today can influence the culture of the school and school community. She will build strong relationships with all the stakeholders in the community and exhibit the competence and confidence to inspire and motivate everyone involved in the educational process. . The effective teacher will not only be an expert teacher, but is an asset to the school and the educational community. The teacher is the expert, and understands the needs of education in the 21st Century.

Conclusion

Effective teaching has to be fluid and adaptive to current culture. The effective teacher understands that there are core skills and knowledge that have to be learned, but must be presented in a manner that students find relevant, even if not in their immediate lives. This requires an art and a science to teaching that makes the teacher of the 21st Century effective.

The science of teaching requires content knowledge, organization, management skills, and detailed planning. The art of teaching is not about possessing an outgoing personality, but making connections to students, parents, as well as connecting the curriculum to the real world in a relevant manner. Thus the 21st Century teacher creates and maintains intentional relationships with her students, parents, and colleagues for the sake of tomorrow's success.

This is not an easy task, but when the teacher understands how her role in the process has changed, it does make the process much easier. Success of students is the ultimate goal of education; however we have to remember what makes that success possible, an effective teacher. An effective teacher is not someone utilizing the methods and initiatives of 1965, but rather embracing the culture of 2010 and adapting to the needs of students today. The effective teacher will connect the art and science of teaching to make the learning environment relevant and applicable for her students. In the end, the teacher will thrive and the students will flourish when the role of the teacher adapts to the needs of culture of today.