

Today we face a world that presents itself as confusing, frustrating, controversial, unclear, or just plain hard to explain. The 21st century has been eventful. Sometimes, the answers to the questions we do not know we are asking reveal themselves on the back of a car, a coffee mug, refrigerator magnet, slogan, cliché, or Hallmark greeting cards. Somebody can boil down the wisdom of the world to 140 characters in a tweet or in a space covering 11 inches wide and three inches tall. To describe clearly and concisely for all to comprehend a teacher for the 21st century, we only need to look for words written for entertainment, amusement, appreciation, provocation, or to sell a product to discover the truth.

“Here’s to teaching our children how to think, not what to think.”

A deep dive into the teacher for the 21st-century will uncover several constants that apply to all teachers, regardless of age, decade, century, or era. Teachers always have and will forever remain revered, despised, misunderstood, valued, undervalued, overpaid, underpaid, and lucky to have summers off. Always be responsible for teaching all other professions, teachers are the central figure in content-heavy classrooms, and rote learning enables short-term learning for measurable test scores. Teachers strive for organization, discipline, and predictability. The classroom has the appearance of rigor and quality learning, making parents and administrators happy and relieved.

“Conflict resolution skills learn early you must.”

But something has caused transition over time, for the teacher of the 20th century needed to adapt quickly and without direction or guidance. When they weren’t looking, teachers were shocked to see that the world had changed. Students were still students, but they brought new knowledge, needs, goals, and skills that required an evolution of teaching tools in the toolbox.

“Teachers are not technology experts; they are experts in the habits of the mind.”

To survive in the ever-changing world of technology, 21st-century teachers learned to add mindfulness skills to their already full plate. The modern teacher faced the promotion of skills to develop persistence, manage impulsivity, think flexibly, think about thinking, find humor, listen

with understanding and empathy, question and problem pose, respond with awe and amazement, strive for accuracy, and remain open to continuous learning. While teachers learned to conquer online learning, zoom calls, social and emotional development; the 21st-century teacher relinquished his or her spot at the front of the room, turned over significant amounts of control, and removed the “it’s all about me” badge. It was no longer anywhere close to being about the teacher.

“Those who can teach. Those who can’t pass laws about teaching.”

For many, the shifting of lines demanded of teachers caused significant discomfort, upset stomachs, calls to resume writing experts, and more wine. The expectation of teaching less content, go at a slower pace, be open-minded, and be committed to the changes was real. It was hard to break the mold that had “worked” for so many years before. The 21st-century classroom was full of students more animated, independent, mobile, technologically savvy, impatient, needy, with small attention spans, demanding immediate gratification, and bombarded with stimuli from a noisy world. The 21st-century classroom looked like constant chaos to parents and administrators’ dismay, but the students’ benefit.

“The mediocre teacher talks; the good teacher explains; the superior teacher demonstrates; the great teacher inspires.”

Demand for further adaptations grew to avoid being run over by the bus of change. Teachers in the 21st-century faced forced acceptance of the world as a much smaller place than 20 years ago. Technology, media, communication, and interdependence was guiding the learning of the future. Students could now find information in the blink of an eye and a few keystrokes; communication could circle the earth in less than a second. Media significantly influenced almost every aspect of life, no matter where someone was on the planet. This shift called upon teachers to relinquish control and turn over responsibility for learning to the students. Students may encounter less content, facts, absolutes, and rules in the long run but acquire more knowledge, wisdom, experience, and skills, becoming more engaged in their learning.

“The best teachers are those who show us where to look, but not what to see.”

As the world continues to shrink, the modern teacher is called upon more and more to teach, model, explain, describe, and practice thinking interdependently, working together, taking responsible risks, breaking out and imaging the what-ifs and what nows, rather than the so-whats. People may always see teachers as purveyors of knowledge, answers, instruction, and discipline. Still, the era of being a “sage on the stage” is gradually constricting to college professors in large lecture halls. The new norm asks teachers to challenge, foster, encourage, support, share, empathize, question, and guide the next generation’s students, hoping that these students will do a better job of taking care of the world than the people who came before them.

The Devil whispers to the 2020 teacher, “Your not strong enough to withstand this storm.” The 2020 teacher whispers back, “You’re.”

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