

Teaching and Learning, Anew.

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Editor's Choice

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As the new Courselinks editor for Education, I thought it might be appropriate for my first Editor's Choice to focus on that very topic—new. What should we expect to be *new* about teaching and learning as we enter a new century, a new millennium? What new challenges might we face? What new skills might we need? I'm not certain, but I *do* have some thoughts ...

What students learn

As we prepare students for life in the next age, what will they need to know? Are “the basics” the key? Or, will we be teaching our students something all together different? More and more, educators are moving away from a *fact* orientation and toward a more *function* basis for learning experiences. My guess is we will find an increasing interest in interdisciplinary programs, thematic curricula, and instruction stemming from problems rather than solutions. Students will spent less time learning “things” and more time learning “ways”—that is, less of *what to know* and more of *how to know*. This is a very important distinction. As we move into an information era, our students will have to learn to function in very different ways. Technology has opened the doors to an unprecedented amount of data and information for students. The challenge will not be for students to learn all of it, but rather to learn how to make *sense* of all of it. This sense-making is perhaps the most important skill our students will need to develop, and my guess is this will require more opportunities for students to solve problems and less need for students to memorize “facts.” For many, this will require a dramatic shift in the content of what teachers will teach in the future.

How students learn

Some of the most intriguing work in education these days is occurring in the area of understanding the way students actually *learn*. We are discovering exciting information about the power of social networks and the intricate workings of the brain—and the impact these have on how students come to know. For example, many now believe learning to be a much more social activity than we perhaps suspected. Peer interactions and groupwork are important activities for students because they engage students in behaviors that are more likely to promote deeper understanding and growth. Brain researchers are suggesting that we have “windows of opportunity” for promoting certain cognitive developments that, if we do not capitalize on them at appropriate times, we decrease the probability of optimal learning. The more we understand, the better we can provide appropriate environments most conducive to learning and growth. I suspect these environments will be very different in the future from what they are today.

Where students learn

The very nature of what it means to “go to school” is probably one of the biggest changes we might expect. For over 100 years, going to school has looked pretty much the same for generations of kids. You wake up, you go to school, you gather with others who live near you and who are about your age—and you “learn.” Then, you go home, play, eat, wash, sleep...and wake up the next morning to do it all again. For a few months when it is *really hot*, you get to stop “learning.” But then fall comes, and you must begin again put your “thinking cap” back on and head back to the schoolhouse.

But this is likely to change in dramatic ways. For instance, fewer children each year are making the trek to the schoolhouse to learn. According to homeschooling experts, over 1 million children in the U.S. are homeschooled—and this number is rising. Experiential-based learning—where students are put in authentic situations to learn—is of growing interest. Parents, community members, and others appear to be growing increasingly disenchanted with the experiences the traditional schools are providing and are actively investigating alternatives. I suspect that the traditional schoolhouse will evolve and will accommodate the philosophical and functional shifts the community appears to be making.

So, what’s new? A whole lot, at least where education is concerned! This is an exciting time to be an educator and I look forward to spending this time with you via Courselinks as we investigate the new role of education in the new millennium.