Real-World Ready: Leveraging Digital Tools
by Bill Daggett and Eric Sheninger

In today's digitized world, educators are challenged to be nimble and skillful in using technology to their advantage. Social media, games, and mobile devices dominate the landscape and teachers often wonder, "Which digital tools can I use and how can I use them to drive exceptional, results-oriented instruction?" Teachers need grounding in rigor and relevance *and* in smart use of digital tools to enhance effective instruction. How can you as school leader guide teachers to harness digital tools in effective ways, ways which will drive rigor and relevance in their instruction?

BASE EDUCATING IN A GOAL-ORIENTED APPLICATION OF DIGITAL TOOLS

The main driver of successful, effective teaching originates is educators who are scaffolding learning in relevant and strong ways. A grounding in the Rigor/Relevance Framework® -- an action-oriented continuum that describes putting knowledge to use -- gives teachers a method for charting learning. This framework is based on traditional elements of education yet encourages movement from acquisition of knowledge to application of knowledge. Although digital tools themselves are no substitute for a clear framework, they can underpin it. No matter what digital tool is considered, introduced, or integrated into the classroom, capable teacher presence and teacher-centered instruction always belongs in the foreground.

HOW ARE DIGITAL TOOLS IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING?

Digital tools are transforming essential elements of the education space. Understanding how they are impacting teaching and learning will help guide your consideration of which tools are useful and how to best implement them.

Currently, online tools are...

1. **Increasing collaboration**: Just as social media has given rise to new definitions of community, digital tools are transforming community and the give-and-take between students and teachers. Platforms for web-based discussion threads and creation of course or class wikis alter the types of student involvements in project-based and writing-specific assignments. A piece of student writing can become a diverse and substantive document when it is the basis for a step-by-step exchange of ideas and questions between teacher, peers, authors, and mentors.

2. **Innovating assessment**: As formats and contexts for assignments evolve, the methods of assessment has had to keep pace. The openness of the online environment and the integration of such things as game attributes, shape all kinds of assessment, especially formative assessment, which measures learning progress (not only end-points in learning).

3. **Enabling learning about information and research**: Research projects will always require substantive research, accurate and relevant synthesis, and defined audience-oriented approaches. However, in an information-saturated world, students are drawing on tools that help them analyze and understand multiple representations from a range of disciplines and subjects, such as texts, data, and photographs.

4. **Transforming time-frames around learning**: In many instances, digital tools offer an asynchronous (not simultaneous) environment for response and inquiry not present in brick-and-mortar environments. Written and video discussions online can enable diverse views, opportunities for collaboration, and time to think

and plan before responding in ways that in-class discussions do not provide. This is true for both online classrooms as well as "blended" classrooms, those integrating online and digital tools into a traditional learning setting.

GETTING DIGITAL TOOLS ON YOUR SIDE: 4 STEPS

How can you, as a school leader, take your understanding of the strengths behind some digital tools and create pathways for rigorous and relevant use of digital tools? Use the following best practices when assessing digital tools and their use in your school:

1. Prioritize Instructional Excellence

Technology can be an effective tool but it remains just that -- a tool. Educators provide the backbone of the student's learning experience. A teacher should always have concrete answers to these questions:

- What capabilities do I want my students to develop? In what specific ways is my instructional design rigorous and relevant?
- What are my benchmarks for rigor? relevance? relationships? creativity? inquiry?

Armed with responses to these questions, a teacher can then go on to consider a specific digital tool, asking:

- How does this digital tool provide a way towards full development of the capability I want to develop in my students?
- Is my teaching, using this tool, still just as structured, rigorous, and relevant as it would be without this tool?

2. Identify Student Needs Around Use of Digital Tools

Information should not be confused with knowledge in evaluating digital tools. Knowledge is the recall of information, discovery, observation, or naming. Teachers should be able to define what knowledge (not information) students will need to apply when using a digital tool.

3. Create a Game Plan for Managing Student Use of Online Tools

It takes work and careful planning to implement the use of digital tools in defined ways. Before introducing a digital tool into a learning context, teachers should understand:

- how she will be able to support students in using a tool that might be unfamiliar
- how each student will be able to manage it independently
- how she will take advantage of students' diversity and inclination towards building community online
- how students and instructor will connect across sometimes great distance

4. Maximize Opportunities for Diverse Forms of Feedback

Rather than relying on feedback or evaluation models suited to older models of assignments, have teachers ask:

- *How will this online tool allow me to hone in on each student's thought process and provide targeted, formative feedback that can be immediately and usefully applied?*
- *How can my feedback help pave the way for next steps in learning and in reaching established, articulated, or modeled goals?*

CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

Educational landscape and digital landscape have become inherently intertwined. Learners are teachers alike are enmeshed in digital life and need effective, specific ways to best use digital tools in rigorous and relevant ways. Educators must be able to develop and enact rigorous, relevant instructional methods and formats, while learning about and using effective digital tools to underpin their instruction. As long as educators are clear about the learning objectives, digital tools can be a powerful supporting tool.

SOURCES:

"What should we focus on learning when almost all information is at your fingertips" (more focused on information than on tools for education)
http://www.quora.com/What-should-we-focus-on-learning-in-an-age-where-almost-all-information-is-at-your-fingertips

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Inside Higher Ed / "Learning Analytics"
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NAIS / "Learning How to Learn Online" (GOA)
http://www.nais.org/Magazines-Newsletters/ITMagazine/Pages/Learning-How-to-Learn-Online.aspx#sthash.

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