

Six Recommendations for Learning in the Digital Age

By Tanya Roscorla, ON JUNE 19, 2014, Shutterstock.com

An alphabet soup of ideas to improve learning in the Digital Age fills a report from the Aspen Task Force on Learning and the Internet.

The 20-member task force, which includes three former Federal Communications Commission leaders, made six recommendations comprised of 26 action steps for policymakers, education leaders and others in a report released on Tuesday, June 17. But the central idea of this report is that learning should revolve around the student, not the institution of school.

Some of the action steps in each of the recommendations pose big challenges for school districts and government leaders. These challenging steps include establishing open standards that allow different technology programs to work together, much like the open standards that made the Internet successful, said John Bailey, co-chair of the task force and executive director of Digital Learning Now.

The shift to competency-based education will also take a lot of work because it requires a change in thinking and policy. And making sure student data is secure and private is "a major challenge and tension point that a lot of schools are struggling with," Bailey said.

These challenging action steps are nested under six recommendations that the task force made in its report.

1. Redesign learning environments so that students can learn anywhere, any time, at any place and at any pace.

Public education organizations in the U.S. have traditionally dictated that learning happens in school buildings according to a set bell schedule. But today, many organizations, advocates and education leaders are pushing back on this system and emphasizing that learning can happen everywhere without limitations on time or place.

Schools that implement blended- and competency-based learning allow students to learn both online and offline on their own time schedule and measure learning progress by competencies rather than seat time. In some cases, these schools give students freedom to do internships, visit museums, travel and experience other real-world opportunities that help them learn the competencies they're striving for.

The task force suggests four action steps to carry out this recommendation: Invest in developing learning models that revolve around the student, pilot competency-based learning, share what's working in these pilots and create assessments that

show student progress toward competencies.

2. Enhance the ability of educators to support and guide learners in a networked learning environment.

Two action steps in the educator professional development arena include increasing funding for professional development and matching up this funding with teacher quality policies. That way, educators have the tools and the knowledge to lead students in digital learning.

3. Build an infrastructure that will connect students no matter where they learn

This recommendation ties into President Barack Obama's ConnectED initiative that calls for almost every student to have access to high-speed broadband by 2018. Instead of focusing on the schools' needs, the task force emphasizes the importance of students having enough broadband access, along with mobile devices, online content and applications.

The E-Rate program currently does not subsidize broadband access outside of schools and libraries, but task force members stressed that students need coverage at school, home and elsewhere.

The action items for this recommendation include the following:

- Base broadband needs around students, not schools or libraries
- Create public-private partnerships to bring broadband to students
- Connect learners with devices through bring your own device, leasing and cooperative purchasing strategies
- Build learning pathways through apps and platforms
- Develop effective and appropriate filtering policies

4. Ensure that digital resources can work together.

With so many education technology tools on the market, schools have a hard time getting them to talk to each other. As a Clayton Christensen Institute report on schools and software shows, many vendors focus on proprietary systems that don't work in the way that schools want to use them, which is as a suite of connected tools.

The task force recommended open standard and protocol adoption, as well as tying technology development funding to open standard support. The system that the U.S. has does not focus on great outcomes for students, so it's time to create new technology systems that revolve around the learner and don't cause friction, said Cathy Casserly, former CEO of Creative Commons. The system has to be fluid, open to learners, and flow among institutions, individuals and data systems.

5. Adopt policies that rank digital, media and social-emotional literacies as basic skills in the Digital Age.

Talk of digital literacy has been around for a long time, but hasn't necessarily been put into practice in most schools. The task force would like to see digital literacy skills become a requirement for students and educators.

Actions under this recommendation give schools and policymakers plenty of options to make literacy in the Digital Age a priority, including the creation of a credential system to recognize digital literacy, funding online programs and researching state curricula that includes digital literacy.

This idea of literacy includes not just how to use apps, but also how students can share materials under fair use, evaluate information, and integrate sexting and cyberbullying into risk prevention programs.

"If we're not surrounding this issue completely and treating it holistically, we're not solving it at all," said Anil Dash, cofounder and CEO of ThinkUp and co-founder of Activate.

6. Create trusted learning environments.

This recommendation touches on a number of different points, including student safety, data privacy and regulatory revisions to open up learning for younger students.

Schools may have all the broadband in the world, but if sites like YouTube and Facebook are blocked, students are missing out on potential educational resources including Khan Academy videos. It doesn't make sense to have student broadband connections and still restrict access to sites online, Bailey said. He suggests that federal privacy laws including FERPA and COPPA need to be modernized so that younger students can access cloud-based services just like their older peers.

"Right now that's a major barrier to students having access to a variety of education services," Bailey said.

Similarly, if online learning sites maintain a reputation as a place for bullies to pick on other students, then students will not feel comfortable learning there. For example, third-parties such as Khan Academy are using Facebook to distribute their learning content. But students also use the platform to bully and put down other students.

"We can build all of these great systems, and we can build all these great educational platforms," said Brooke Oberwetter from Facebook, "but if people don't feel safe on them, they won't use them."

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