6 Reasons Why Students Need 21st-Century Skills

There's plenty of talk about what to include on a 21st-century skills list, but why students need such skills is a different question.

Ever since the late 1990s, "21st-century skills" has been a catch-phrase racketing around the education and business worlds. It continues to do so. Part of its persistence may be due to the excitement in defining a new age: we're leaving behind an entire thousand-year set and advancing into a new one. But have things really changed that much? They certainly have.

Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs, social networking, iPhones, and on and on are all very recently arrived influencers on the cultural scene. Behind those platforms, concepts and new ways of doing business and learning is a mindset change. The world is less static, collaboration is vital, and learning is a continual process. Want to uncover up-to-the-second information? Go online and find out. We are in a transition from a send-out-your-resume-and-wait world to a create-your-online-presence-and-take-charge one. There is a shift in how people get jobs, how companies advertise, how new ventures present themselves, how corporations gain business, how students learn, how everything works. That said, here are six interesting reasons why students need 21st-century skills:

1. The Old Spice Guy says so. America is still a land of opportunity, and we still live in a world where a little ingenuity goes a long way. With 14 million hits and counting, a single video clip on YouTube can influence the world, and often does. It may be silly, but just the fact that you know what I am talking

about right now demonstrates that we no longer live in a Nightly News world with three dominant anchormen telling us the way it is and quicker-picker-upper commercials telling us what to buy.

2. Phone booths are Smithsonian artifacts. The iPhone, PDAs, androids, smartphones and basically anything that resembles a cell phone has more computing power and connectivity than a 1980s Mac or a DOS-based IBM PC ever had. Mobile means no walking into a glass booth, depositing a coin and waiting for someone to walk to their end of the line, pick up and talk. With phone booths now solid Smithsonian material, communication, collaboration and community have completed their transition from a physical to a conceptual place and are here for good.

3. Websites are dead. In the late 1990s, the web was a place to digitize a company brochure, or to hang out your sign and hope someone stopped by and called you up. In 2010, websites have blurred with blogs, social networking campaigns have usurped billboards, and videos built for a YouTube crowd have made the overall tone of slick, professional television ads seem very strange indeed. We live in a transparent world where real products and services are the only survivors in a see-through economy--along with students who get this.

Economic conditions are forcing ingenuity, and technology has advanced to a point where cloud-based services are more efficient.

4. Clouds aren't just puffy anymore. Gartner Group and other research firms have been expecting it for years: the cloud (internet-based services that once required a business or school district to pay an IT team to monitor a roomful of boxes and wires) is expanding. Schools and businesses can do more with less, and they have to. Economic conditions are forcing ingenuity, and the

technology has advanced to a point where cloud-based services are actually less expensive and more efficient. For a clear explanation, click here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae_DKNwK_ms&feature=related

5. Facebook is a country. With over 500 million users as of July 2010, Facebook, were it a country, would be the 4th largest in the world. If you are an English-speaking American who has lived most of your life in one small town, how would you like to be dropped off on a street corner in China to find your way? You might want to learn the language and know a few of the local customs before you set out to do much of anything.

6. Learning is For You. In an interesting way, Google has pretty much set the bar for how to learn. First, you must start with a question. Then, you must put it into words. You need to know what subject area you are dealing with and what a few of the key words are in the area that you are wondering about. From there, anything is possible, and if you can imagine what it is you are looking for, on the other side of things—you just may find it. But they didn't stop there. Nearly 8 million students worldwide benefit from Google Apps for Education. Students and teachers get free (and ad-free) collaboration tools that help them email, calendarize, video chat and share documents. Google provides them with the ability to build sites with videos, images, gadgets and documents and it's all done in the cloud—there are no servers, no messy software installations, nothing. It's partly why Wired magazine recently proclaimed that The Web is Dead.

Students must have the skills that will help them move themselves forward into the future.

And that last reference to a Google-oriented, cloud-based mindset is not a bad metaphor for learning in the 21st century, where key technology-based influencers are shaping our world, and students must have the skills that will help them move themselves, the ideas, and the business that will build our new world—forward into the future.

Michael Spencer is senior vice president of American Education Corporation. An education and technology industry veteran, he is the former president and founder of One2OneMate and has received multiple awards for innovation and product development.