

15 Ways to Become a Smarter Teacher



Introduction

A solution only makes sense once you understand what the problem is. The more I travel, the more I'm convinced that most educators simply don't understand the true problem we face. The challenge is that, for the first time in our history, we're expected to prepare all students to have high skill levels. And unfortunately, as it operates today, our system either can't or won't do that.

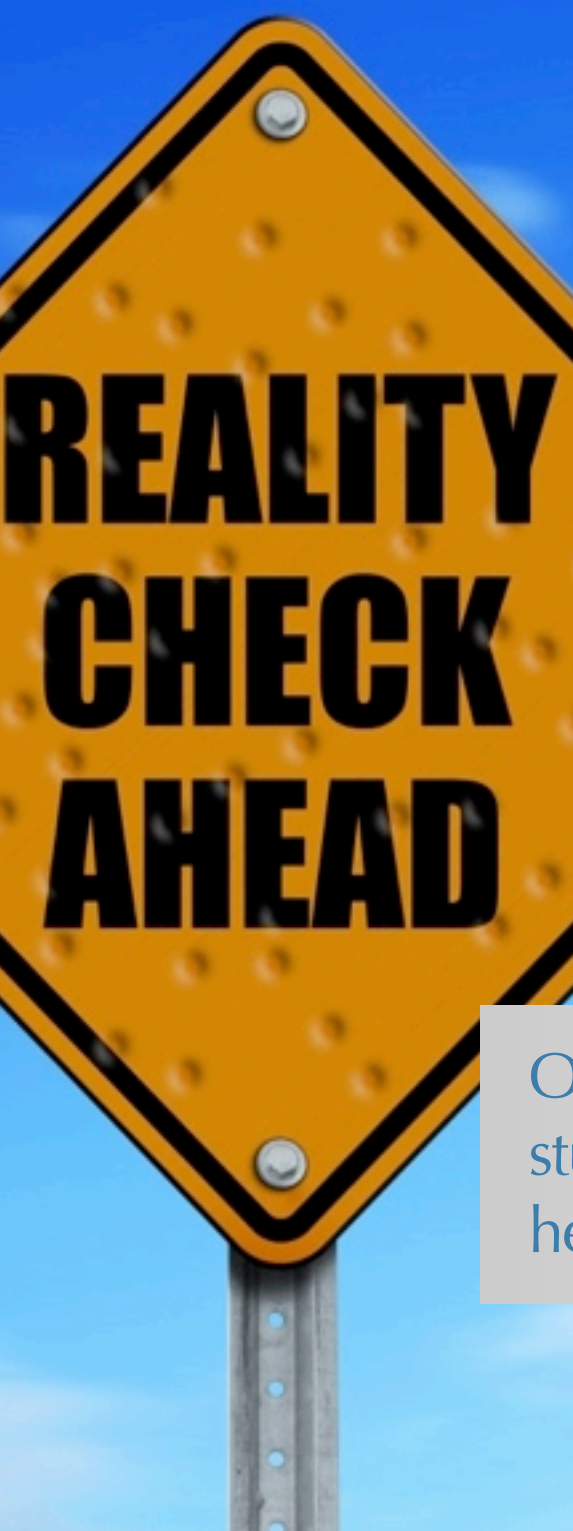
Far too many students leave before they complete high school. Even if they do graduate, many of them graduate learning disabled, learning delayed, or learning deficient. What's more, many students today are increasingly disengaged. There's a huge and growing issue of disconnect between what these students learn in school, what's available for them outside of schools, and what they need to succeed in life beyond school.

The problem we have as teachers is that, in a lot of respects, our digital learners are leaving us behind. We need to catch up, and to do this we need to become smarter teachers. But the question is, how? What can we do to bridge the gap between us and our future leaders?

In our attempts to fix things in education, we constantly focus on the symptoms, not the causes, of problems. That's why we see people looking for packaged answers, rather than looking at the root causes and doing what needs to be done to change the system. Sometimes we seek complex solutions for what are truly simple problems.

With this in mind, what follows are my observations about some simple things we can do to change that. Let's take a look at 15 different steps you can take to becoming a smarter teacher.





1. Understand That It's About Them, Not Us

First, we need to understand that it's not about us; it's about them. Many teachers see themselves as the designated expert whose role is to impart their knowledge to students who are seen as relatively empty vessels. This is the oft-quoted notion of the teacher being the "sage on the stage."

That's the wrong metaphor. The best instructors see themselves as "guides on the side." They share what they know, but they understand that they are not the focus. This doesn't mean that we as teachers don't matter. What it does mean is that instead of asking, "What am I going to do today?", we have to ask, "What are my students going to do today?"

Our job as educators is not just to stand up in front of students and show them how smart we are. Rather, our job is to help students discover how smart they can become. Our job is to help them become men and women who are capable of thinking outside the lines—of doing new and creative things, and not simply repeating what other generations have done before them.

This is the difference between school skills—the skills that simply enable students to move to the next level of the school system by teaching them how to prepare for tests—and 21st-century life skills, which they will constantly adapt and apply for the rest of their lives.

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We can only help them develop these skills by invoking a fundamental policy of progressive withdrawal into learning experiences, by progressively empowering them to become independent thinkers.



When children enter kindergarten, they are completely dependent on the teacher to tell them what they need to do to pass the test, the course, or the grade. But if throughout their entire educational experience the primary focus continues to be on content and memorization as being more valuable than thinking for themselves, then as 17- and 18-year olds they are still operating in a culture of dependency.

They are dependent on someone to tell them what they need to do to pass the test, pass the course, and pass the grade. And then, when they graduate and everything they have depended on for 13 years is taken away from them, they inevitably fall flat on their faces.

Our job as educators is to make sure that by the time they graduate, they don't need us anymore. Our job is the same job we have as parents: to help our children learn to walk—and then walk away. We are responsible for helping them move from a culture of dependency to a culture of self-reliance. We need to show them how to walk on their own.

2. Study the Students

It's not enough to know our material. We also need to know the people we're teaching. Research and experience tell us that one of the most critical factors in determining the success of students in school is that educators must have a deep understanding of their students' talents, interests, prior experiences, and needs. Otherwise, how can we know for certain what they already know and what they need to learn?

This was perfectly explained by the great American philosopher Yogi Berra, who once commented that if you didn't know where you were going, you would probably end up somewhere else. But if we don't know first where we are, how can we determine where we're going? We have to know where the person is starting from before we can help them reach their destination.

It may sound obvious and trite, but as teachers, we sometimes begin the journey and forget to first ask our students, "Where are you? Where are you starting from?"



This is a classic ready-fire-aim or ready-aim-backfire approach. If we want results, whatever those results might be—academic success, dealing with cultural diversity, dealing with issues of violence or substance abuse—there are three things we need to know:

- where we are right now
- where we need to be; what it looks like in compelling, juicy terms; and how we are going to measure success
- what the gap is between where we are right now and where we need to be

As Jennifer James wrote, this requires us to think in “future tense.” This requires us to understand that the present is nothing more than the past of the future. We must start with the end in mind by identifying what skills and knowledge and habits of mind our students need to have in order to both survive and thrive in the world of tomorrow. Once we measure that, we can begin building backwards to determine what we need to do now in order to get them there.

3. Create Safe Environments

Learning requires vulnerability. Students have to re-examine what they think they know, acknowledge what they don’t know, and be willing to take risks. But doing this can be an uncomfortable or even scary situation for anyone. We have to help students become comfortable by doing simple things, such as having a couch and floor pillows in one corner of the classroom or decorating the walls with students work, because it’s their space, after all. This results in a learning environment that is emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically safe.

If they aren’t feeling well, we need to make them a cup of peppermint tea. If they’re hungry, we need to feed them. It can be the simplest thing, but it sends an important silent message to them. Students need to know that they can trust their instructor. So, of course, this means that sarcasm and confrontational humiliation in the classroom have to be avoided at all costs.

Negative experiences like this create the fear that we’re going to make our students look bad, which causes immediate and frequently permanent disengagement.



A recent British study at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/education/4602178.stm> says that pupils do better if they are allowed to look away when answering a teacher's question. Stirling University psychologists found that children who are allowed avert their gaze when considering their response are more likely to come up with the correct answer. When looking away, students answered 72 percent of questions correctly. But when children had not been instructed or allowed to look away when thinking, they answered just 50 percent correctly.

4. Exude Passion as well as Purpose

Research and experience tell us that the difference between a good teacher and a great one isn't found in subject expertise. It comes down to passion and enthusiasm—passion for the material, passion for teaching, and passion for learning. Their desire is infectious.

Anyone who has ever seen Ben Stein's famous full-frontal lecture in the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* knows how painful it is to listen to an uninspired and dispassionate teacher. If the teacher doesn't or can't exude passion, they'll lose their students.

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However, if the teacher has passion, the students will most likely catch it. But the passion has to be genuine. It isn't something you can fake. Students can tell whether a teacher cares.

I have had students tell me that they can usually figure out whether a teacher is real and cares, or is just going through the motions, within 15 minutes. And if they sense the teacher doesn't care, they will shut down and will be very reluctant to let the teacher back in.

5. Show Students How Much They Need to Learn

There are four stages of awareness. The first is that learners don't know that they don't know. This is known as being *unconsciously unaware*. The next stage is that learners know they don't know, otherwise known as being *consciously unaware*. Next, they know they know—they are *consciously aware*. And finally, they don't know they know, and are *unconsciously aware* or *fluent*.

The need to learn never ends. Educators need to promote the idea that learning can happen anytime, anywhere. When a student is ready and really hungry to learn, teaching is easy. But some learners aren't ready because they don't think they need to improve. They don't see the gap between where they are and where they need to be.

In our book *Understanding the Digital Generation*, we point out that if we want retention and success on exams, and if we want to address curriculum mandates and if we want children to demonstrate proficiency beyond content recall, the content must have a context. The tools they use must be used to perform real-life tasks. The end product of teaching and learning must be taught within a process, and assessment must be qualitative and formative, not just quantitative and summative.

6. Keep It Clear, Even If You Can't Keep It Simple

One of the chief attributes of a great teacher is the ability to break down complex ideas and make them simple and understandable. Thus, the essence of teaching and learning is communication. The biggest issue that teachers face is whether their students understand them. Whether a teacher is talking about osmosis, the Constitution, or trinomial equations, students must be able to understand the who, what, when, where, why, and how of concepts.



It's easy for teachers to slip into "teacherese." It's easy for teachers to start speaking in tongues, channeling the teachers that instructed them when they were growing up. Way back when I was in high school, long before dirt was invented, I was really good at Math. But in first year of university, I took Calculus. I swear my professor spoke English as his 25th language.

Any sign of vulnerability or ignorance is seen as a sign of weakness. Those people make the worst teachers.

Two weeks in, I was failing math for the first time in my life. Out of desperation, I approached my professor, who was working at his desk, and explained to him that I didn't understand one of the concepts he had introduced. He looked at me and said, "Vell, I do!," and then turned back to his papers. That was it.

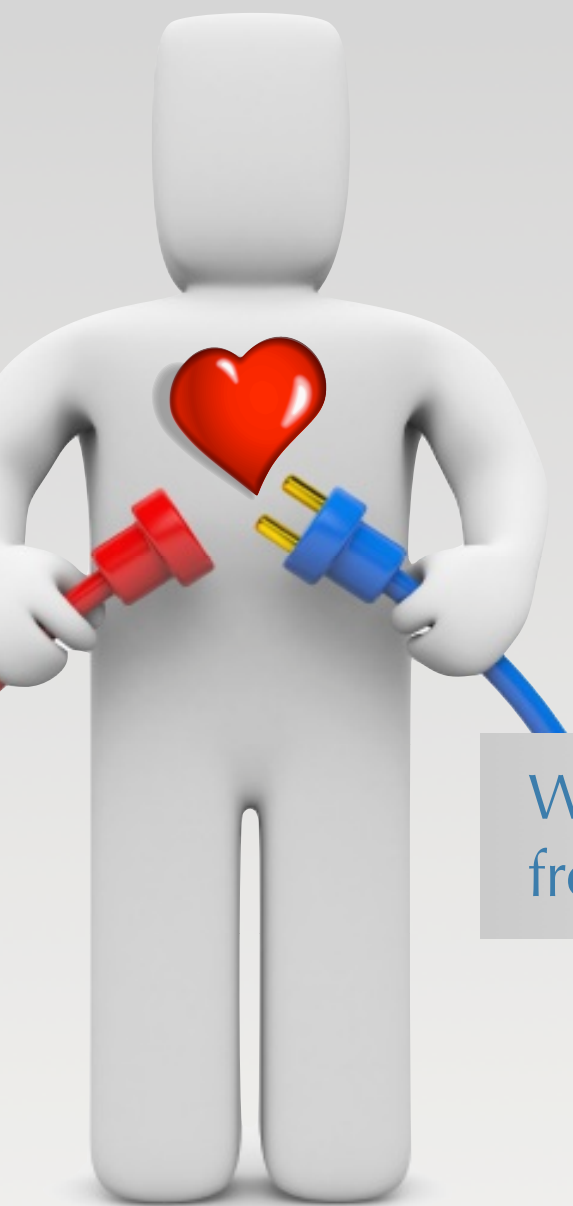
But then, I sat in on another session of the same course that was being taught by an elderly gentleman who was legendary for his ability to make complex subjects completely clear and understandable. Even though there were more than 3,000 students in the classroom, I felt that he was speaking *directly* to me. That's exactly what we need to do.

7. Be Vulnerable While Still Being Credible

To some, being a teacher means appearing as though you have all the answers. Any sign of vulnerability or ignorance is seen as a sign of weakness. Those people make the worst teachers. Sometimes the best answer a teacher can give is, "I don't know." Instead of losing credibility, they gain students' trust, and that trust is the basis of a productive relationship.

We all know that perfection is a mask. We don't trust the people behind know-it-all masks. They're not being honest with us.





The people with whom we have the deepest connection are those who acknowledge their struggles and limitations to us. Acknowledging what you don't know shows that you're still learning—that you, the teacher, are still a student.

8. Teach From the Heart

We need to teach from the heart, not just the head, and from the soul, not just the textbook. The best teaching isn't formulaic; the best teaching is personal. Different people teach Shakespeare or differential equations or anatomy in different ways because of who they are and how they see the world. Teachers must teach who they are.

The act of teaching requires the courage to explore one's sense of identity. If you don't know yourself, you can't fully know your students, and therefore, you can't connect with them.

Teachers compensate by using clever techniques until they figure this out. Jazz musician Charlie Parker put it best when he said, "If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn." So if you make a mistake, if you screw up, if it doesn't work perfectly the first time, don't beat yourself up. It's okay—you can forgive yourself.

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This is called *useful failure*. In his book *In Search of Excellence*, business guru Tom Peters wrote that the secret to success is the pursuit of failure. He said there is no progress without failure, and no big progress without big failure—that failing is good!

Inventor Thomas Edison failed more than 2,000 times in trying to create the lightbulb. Finally, one of his assistants approached him and said words to the effect of, "You must feel like a complete failure."



Edison thought about this for a moment and replied, “Nonsense. I now know more than 2,000 ways how *not* to make a lightbulb.”

Edison was stating his version of the “poorly rule,” which states that anything worth doing is worth doing poorly the first time. Failure is not a crime—the crime is in failure to learn from failure. Teaching from the heart allows us to admit that failure is an everyday part of life.

9. Repeat the Important Parts

If you want your students to remember, you need to give it to them more than once. The first time you say something, it’s heard; the second time, it’s recognized; and the third time, it’s learned. In fact, research tells us that if we truly want to retain a concept, it has to be repeated between 10 and 20 times before it will be internalized.

The challenge, then, is to be consistent without becoming predictable or boring. The best teachers keep it fresh by finding new ways to express the same points. We have to cheat a little bit and disguise the themes so that people think they haven’t heard this before, finding a new slant while the underlying message doesn’t change. Research and experience tell us that for learning to take place, learners have to be given differentiated learning opportunities, distributed over extended periods of time. What this means is that learners need lots of practice and exposure to the materials in different ways, and from different contexts and perspectives. Learning just doesn’t stick the first time—you have to provide repeated and differentiated experiences, allowing time and context for the ideas to be internalized.

10. Ask Good Questions

Effective teachers understand that learning is about exploring the unknown, and that such exploration begins with questions. These are not questions that are simply lectures in disguise, and not questions that simply ask students to regurgitate information. These are not yes-or-no questions that don’t spark lively discussion.



These are questions that open a door to deeper understanding, such as, “How does that work?” or, “What does that mean?” or “Why?” If you want to get to the heart of something, one way to teach sound decision making is by playing devil’s advocate. Ask things like, “What if we did the opposite of what you’re suggesting?”

The idea is not to undermine an answer but to bolster it through a thorough examination of the options—even the outlandish, crazy, off-the-wall ones. Our job as educators is no longer just to get the right answers from our students—because although they get marks for having the right answer, it’s just as important to ask the right questions and to get them to ask the right questions.

11. Don’t Just Pass Out Information

Academic success based on memorization is not the same as understanding. Outside of education, there has been a fundamental shift from equating success based on rote memorization of facts, because it simply won’t work in the age of InfoWhelm. Because of InfoWhelm, we are nearing the end of the age of the specialist. A specialist is someone who knows more and more about less and less, until they get to the point of knowing absolutely everything about nothing.

In the world outside of education, we have seen a fundamental shift away from a need for specialists to a demand for generalists with effective analytical processing and construction skills. The culture of 21st-century learning is not just about information recall! It’s about what you can perceive from information. It’s about deriving the significance of the information, what it means, and how you can apply that information to solve a real-world problem. The last thing educators should be doing is just standing up and telling learners what to do or giving students the answers that we want to hear.

The best teachers are less interested in the answers than in the thinking behind the answers. What matters most is the process, as opposed to just the end product. It’s all about the journey, not simply the destination.

Learning is about what you can perceive from information, and how you can apply that information within the context of real-time, real-life experiences.

The last thing educators should be doing is just standing up and telling learners what to do or giving students the answers that we want to hear.

Management guru Tom Peters observed that what gets measured gets done and, conversely, that what didn't get measured didn't get done. Right now in education the primary focus continues to be on LOTS, or lower order thinking skills—simple data recall and lots and lots of information.

The best teachers help students learn how to think on their own rather than telling them what to think, and focus on the process of learning as much as on the end product of learning.

12. Stop Talking and Start Listening

When it comes to teaching, what we do is nearly as important as what we say. After all, our students are watching us. One way to show that we care about them and that we're interested in them is to listen.

Effective learning is a two-way street. It's a dialogue, not a monologue. After asking a question, bad teachers fill in the silence rather than wait for a response. Try waiting 10 seconds. Good teachers are comfortable with silence.

It's in those quiet, perhaps awkward, moments that some of the most productive thinking occurs. Don't interrupt it.





13. Let The Students Teach Each Other

We're not the only ones our students learn from. They also learn on their own and from their peers. That's how what we call the "triangle of learning" works. We're big believers in small groups. Give the groups a question that is based on the book the students are reading, and have them respond to the previous comment before making a new point.

Maybe someone has a new insight that they hadn't thought about before. Maybe it's something they can build on. It's exciting to watch.

Or, we can designate small groups to become experts on different topics, and then intermingle students in new groups so that they have to teach another person what they've learned. This method replicates how problems occur in life and reinforces the fact that one of the most effective ways of helping students learn is to have them reteach a new concept to someone else, and then to have them apply the concept within the context of real-time, real-life experiences.

14. Avoid Using the Same Approach for Everyone

Great teachers understand that every student can learn, but they also understand that students learn differently. Some are visual. Some grasp the abstract. Some learn best by reading. Great teachers understand that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all teaching strategy, and so they use a multidimensional approach.

This is exactly what Howard Gardner has been talking about for years with respect to multiple intelligences and learning styles. He says that learning is personal. It's all about the relevance of the learning to the learner, not the relevance of the learning to the teacher. And if it's not relevant to the learner, even if it is relevant to the teacher, it will quickly be discarded.



Learners have to be given repeated, differentiated learning opportunities, distributed over extended periods of time. If kids don't get it when concepts are first introduced to them, we can't just start talking slower and louder. We have to come at the concepts from other points of view and give them time to improve. How do we get better at anything? How did we get better at driving a car, playing a sport, or knitting? By practicing!

What this means is that children need lots of practice and exposure to the materials in different ways and from different contexts and perspectives. Learning just doesn't stick the first time, so you have to provide repeated and differentiated experiences that allow time and context for the ideas to be internalized.

15. Never Stop Teaching

Effective teaching is about the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student. This doesn't end when the class or the workday is over. More than anything, that means we have to stay away from a 9-to-5 attitude: For the hour you're here, I care about you, but don't bother me afterwards.

One of the most important ingredients of teaching is loving it. If you don't love teaching and learning, maybe you're in the wrong business.

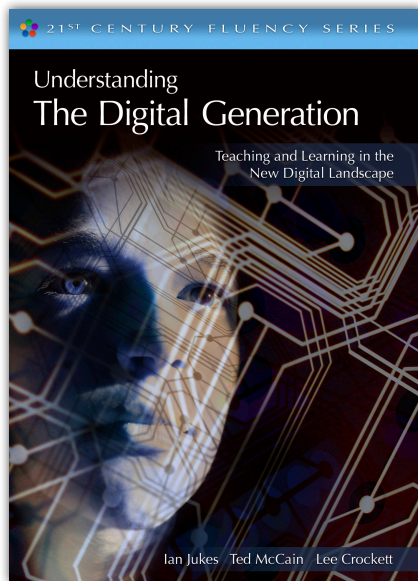
Change is inevitable. Improvement is essential. Survival is optional.

The digital learners are leading the way, and the time has come for us to catch up.

There's no question this will be a hard road, but as educators we must understand that our job is not just to serve what is or has been. It's our job to shape what can be and, most of all, what must be. Change is hard and change is inevitable, but change is necessary. And as said by the great Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, "A journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step."

The greatest movement starts with a single individual. It starts here, and it starts now. It starts with me, and it starts with you.

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