

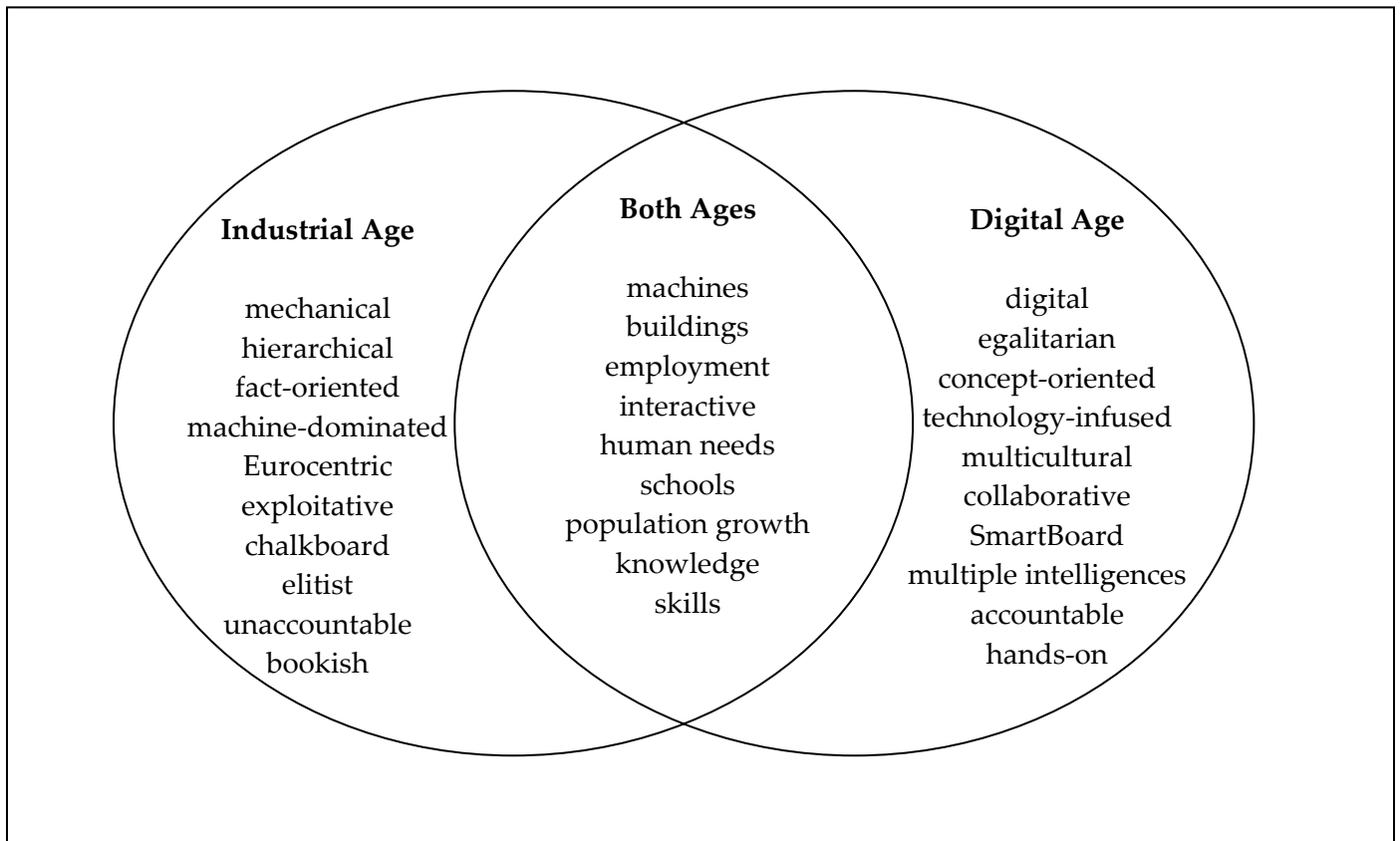
NO TIME TO LOSE: THE NEED FOR 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

Nine years ago, we entered the 21st century and the Digital Age. Many of us had foreseen this occurrence and fought to prepare our schools for its arrival. Unfortunately we were thwarted by traditionalists who clung to familiar methods, ignoring all warnings of a new era. Although they substantially delayed the progress of our schools, we do not condemn them or engage with them in an either/or battle. [We see much room for common ground.](#) The hard knowledge they defend is an essential component of our larger conceptual view. **Many traditionalists have good intentions but are unconsciously attached to the Industrial Age, whose structures and values are incompatible with those of the global market today.**



Strategy Tip: Working with your partner, use clues such as **boldface** to locate the main idea in the above paragraph.

To illustrate the differences between the Industrial Age and the Digital Age, we have prepared a Venn Diagram, which would have been unthinkable in the Industrial Age, when [writing was essentially labor.](#)



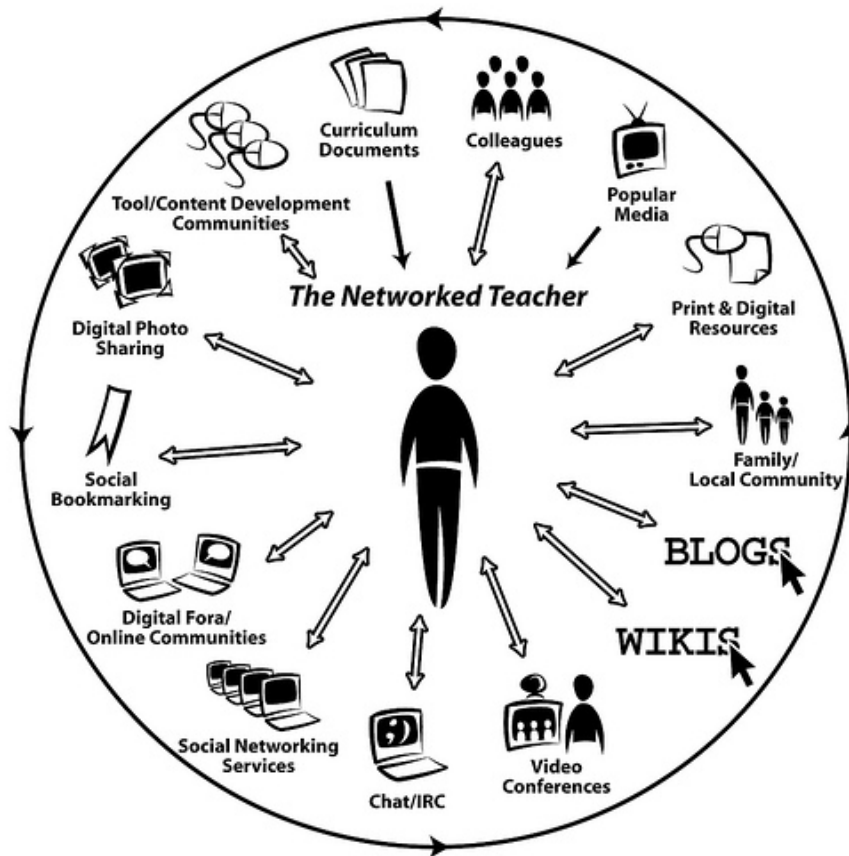
Critical Thinking Question: Which age would you rather live in, and why?
(Teachers: This is an excellent think-pair-share activity.)

In short, the Digital Age is digital. This means that the machines of today are based on codes consisting of ones and zeros. Curiously, [research has shown that human minds and computers have similar codes](#). Thus the Digital Age represents a convergence of the human and the machine. The machine is no longer an instrument of alienation but rather one of communication. Through computers, our world has become smaller. We no longer have to travel or even pay a phone bill to speak to someone in India.



Strategy Tip: Follow the above hyperlink in order to learn more about the similarity between humans and computers. Also see the diagram below.

Like a computer, the 21st century teacher is part of a network (graphic by [Alec Couros](#)):



The networking opportunities are so vast and rich that any teacher who ignores them is subjecting herself and her students to social impoverishment. As [The Innovative Educator](#) writes, "It is no longer acceptable for innovative educators not to be involved in social networks." Facebook is not simply an option. It is a must.



Critical Thinking Question: What are some of the social networks in your life, and how do you plan to expand them? Use a graphic organizer to illustrate your current social structures and networking strategy.

Where does knowledge fit into the minds of computers and humans? Let us take a look at the computer's "brain." We know that it relies entirely on the information we feed it. Without such information, it can do nothing. We also know that it is almost infinitely malleable. If we wipe a hard drive clean, it will not suffer. We need only install a new operating system. It may be the same as the old one, a newer version, or an entirely different system. **The specifics do not matter. What matters is that the computer has the tools to interpret the data.**



Strategy Tip: What do you remember about finding the *main idea*? Try to apply the same strategy as before. **Bonus Strategy:** If you don't remember it, you can always scroll up!

Wouldn't it be great if we could work as flexibly, quickly, and resourcefully as a computer? To do so, we need to embrace the computer's knowledge indifference. We need knowledge, but we must not give preference to one kind over another. We reject the antiquated theory that intellectual knowledge is best. Instead, we embrace all knowledge that produces desired results. **Our approach to knowledge is multicultural, identity-affirming, team-based, outcome-oriented, and egalitarian.**

While some might decry the erosion of "subject matter," we point to the infinite creativity that our conception of knowledge allows. In a social studies class, for instance, students [would not have to learn history as it is commonly conceived](#). One group could prepare a strategy for selling snacks; another could work in mini-groups to discuss bullying. One group might make a spreadsheet of the per-pupil funding to several school districts; another might use digital databases to gather information about gas prices. Everyone would be using knowledge, but not the same knowledge. The phrase "in one ear and out the other" would no longer have a negative connotation, for students would be practicing [flexibility and adaptability](#), necessary skills in the global workplace.



Critical Thinking Question: How can you practice flexibility and adaptability in a way that would make you more employable? Use a chart to illustrate your ideas. See the example below.

Evidence of F&A

**work in any group
change topics readily
embrace the future**

Employability

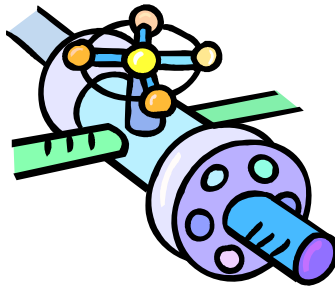
**work on any team
accept layoff gracefully
work long hours**

Now we need only address one lingering question. How can we ensure that all companies will require the same 21st century skills? How can we prevent the unemployment and consternation that could result if students were learning one skill and the job market required another? Hint: Scroll down!

Diana Senechal

The good news about 21st century skills is that they are identical everywhere. If they are not, we can make them so. In its “[Transition Brief: Policy Recommendations on Preparing Americans for the Global Skills Race](#),” the [Partnership for 21st Century Skills](#) recommends:

Create an Office of 21st Century Skills within the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Labor at the U.S. Department of Labor. This office would guide the development of a national workforce development policy that ensures every aspect of the workforce pipeline is infused with the same set of 21st century skills.



Strategy Tip and Critical Thinking Question: Visualize the pipeline. Visualize all your skills in it! How does that make you feel? Express your feelings in a podcast.

With the same set of 21st century skills infused everywhere, we can all be happy!



THE END—OR MAYBE THE BEGINNING!