Chapter 2
21st Century Learning:
The New Frontier

ABSTRACT

Decades ago, researchers thought about 21st century learning and created different frameworks. The frameworks were similar and refocused learning from low-level skills to higher cognitive strategies. These frameworks called for thinking, working together, finding information, and problem solving. One popular framework, the Four Cs model, included critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, which the National Association of Education promoted. The Four Cs framework became popular at the same time Common Core State Standards were distributed. Districts and schools incorporated the Four Cs framework with the Common Core State Standards. Implicit in the Four Cs model is the integration of technology. Over time, the Four Cs was expanded to include social and emotional learning. The insight from the research helps educators to construct a holistic framework. This chapter gives historical background, defines terms, explains a new model called Four Cs Plus SEL, and suggests future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

Children who are currently in middle school know how to Tweet, Skype, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. They use one or more of these platforms every day, especially outside of school. In middle school, students' use of technology sometimes leads to the practices that might be occurring in

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classrooms. We live in a digital world—a world in which we rely on various technologies to assist us in daily activities. Therefore, our classrooms need to adjust and adapt to the reality of our digital world. Not only do we need to adapt classrooms to incorporate digital literacy, but we also need to develop classrooms that include core competencies of what 21st century middle school students need to be successful in school. We then need to use and practice these competencies so that students will have tools to use in the future. These competencies generally comprise not only digital literacy but include skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Voogt and Roblin, 2012). These competencies vary from the traditional literacy curriculum of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which were the core building blocks in the 20th century. However, the traditional building blocks of the 20th century are not adequate for the global society in which students are currently living, nor their future careers where students will eventually work. To understand 21st century learning, educators, researchers, and other stakeholders have tried to create a vision about what students will need to create a framework for all schools.

The most prominent of these frameworks, the Four Cs will be examined in this chapter. A review of the Four Cs framework will first provide a historical context of current practices in many schools. Then, it will offer a more recent framework, published by a group of Australian researchers, that expands the Four C's into a broader context for 21st century learning. This modern re-framing not only offers expanded context, but it also creates the opportunity to refresh the current Four Cs framework that most schools are using.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FOUR C's

Educators, researchers, and stakeholders, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of this century, started thinking about the skills and competencies that students would need for future career and college readiness. Many organizations and partnerships in the United States, as well as in other countries, not only started looking into the future competencies but also created frameworks for better schools. The goals of these frameworks were not only to design better schools but also to improve learning and teaching within schools.

One of these created organizations was the National Education Association (NEA, 2010), which published a framework that included competencies for students to learn and goals for teachers to teach. The NEA developed one of the initial frameworks for the 21st century. The NEA's framework titled, the