



Digital Literacy:

Empowering Students to Thrive In
Careers of the Future





Gen Z students are digital natives. They were using iPads before they could write, and they snap, tweet, text, and swipe faster than most institutional staff members can decide what to write. But could higher education institutions be making the dangerous assumption that digital natives are naturally digitally literate?

Welcome to the digital skills gap: where students enter the workforce without the ability to use and deploy technology to meet work-related goals. Despite billions of dollars being poured into educational technology,¹ studies find that much of the digital literacy training in higher education only requires students to consume and evaluate information and media rather than create it using digital resources.² Especially considering the level of transformation and automation taking place in the workforce, this lack of skills application is a fundamental challenge that universities need to address by working with a digital literacy partner like Adobe. Adobe Creative Cloud provides the tools to help students communicate their ideas, projects, research findings and more in digitally compelling ways. Everyone needs to be a good digital storyteller, no matter what their discipline.

“Institutions need to be thinking about how to raise the digital literacy level of their students and faculty,” says Debbie Morrison, digital education consultant and founder of Online Learning Insights.³ “Students need to have experiences locating, curating, and organizing digital information for academic and professional use, and they need to be able to create digital content that contributes to and engages in



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community and national events and conversations. Otherwise, students will lack the depth and breadth of digital skills they need to thrive in a global economy in which an abundance of knowledge and digitization is transforming business and social institutions.”

Gen Z students head into college burning with a passion to change the world – but they’re rarely exposed to projects and assignments that help them learn the digital skills needed to thrive in a modern career. It’s up to higher education institutions to provide the tools and training students need – like Adobe Creative Cloud – to develop viable skills for the workforce of today and tomorrow.



Making Digital Literacy a Priority

Due to a dramatic shift in student and employer expectations, schools are increasingly viewed as sources of job and skills preparation rather than just institutions of advanced learning.⁴ And unfortunately, employers are finding that the most recent graduates simply aren't prepared for the working world: in one study for the Association of American Colleges & Universities, employers report that the majority of college graduates are not well prepared to locate, organize, or evaluate information (71%), stay current on technologies (63%), or stay current on global developments (82%).⁵ And, despite the fact that 96% of chief academic officers and 44% of college students believe new graduates have the requisite digital skills for the workforce, only 11% of business leaders agree.⁶

This misalignment between what schools teach and what employers want is even impacting how companies hire: a majority of recruiters find non-traditional credentials like digital badges and open courses to be more desirable evaluating recent graduates than bachelor's degrees alone and 71% of companies include testing as a part of the hiring process to verify reasoning, problem-solving, and technical skills.⁷ Clearly universities that don't bridge the digital skills gap and build digital literacy into their student's educational experience aren't preparing their students for the real world of knowledge and information work – or for how that world will change in the future.



Preparing Gen Z for Jobs of the Future

“It used to be that people thought about digital technology as belonging only to certain areas and disciplines like communication, journalism, or marketing,” says Todd Taylor, professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “But now there’s no profession that’s not touched by the need for digital storytelling, data visualization, and information networks. Students seeking careers in any organization in any industry will need to be able to negotiate digital spaces effectively.”

Giving every student access to Adobe Creative Cloud tools and incorporating digital literacy throughout the curricula is one of the most direct ways higher education institutions are ensuring that their students develop these skills. Because when students use digital tools to create instead of consume, their understanding of the subject matter improves, they engage more deeply with their learning, and they develop a creative mindset.

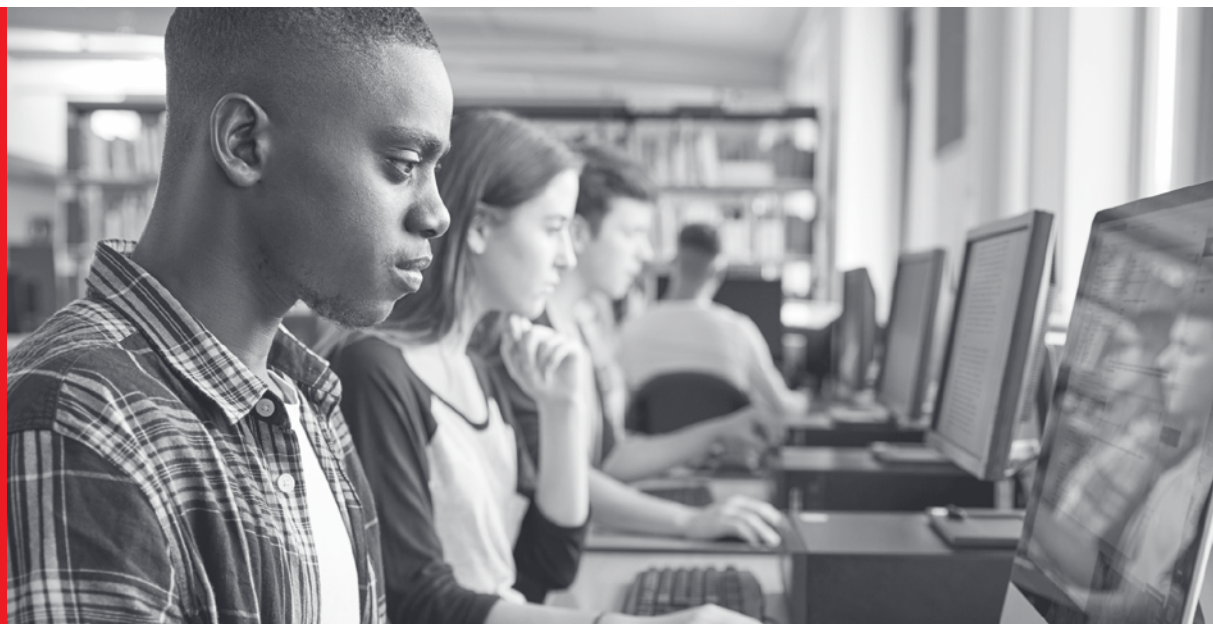
This is a critical mindset to bring into the workforce of the future because the global workforce expects automation technology to replace 7 million jobs over the next five years.⁸ In response, employers are recruiting for skills that can't be automated, and in particular uniquely human skills outlined by the World Economic Forum, like creativity, collaboration, creative problem-solving, and critical thinking.⁹ But simply being creative won't help students meet the demands of workplaces driven and connected by technology – students of all backgrounds must be able to exhibit these soft skills in a digital context.

“Students with digital literacy skills excel,” says Karen McCavitt, senior group manager, education marketing at Adobe. “Research shows they are more engaged and perform better academically, and when they matriculate they're more likely to get the job in the first place. Digitally literate students can communicate information in new and varied ways, and that skill grows with them as they gain real-world experience.”

The job description for the majority of Gen Z students may not exist yet, but we do know what will be listed in the “required skills” section:

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■ Creativity

Gen Z students see themselves as more creative than previous generations, but they struggle to see how their creativity will play out in the workforce.¹⁰ Building opportunities to strengthen creativity in the classroom is a crucial way to prepare students to display this skill in the workplace.

“Creativity is much broader than art and design,” says McCavitt. “For the modern workforce, creativity builds the ability to think about the world in new ways and consider the impossible. Developing the intellectual capacity to see new possibilities will set students apart from other job candidates and help them outperform their employer’s expectations.”

■ Collaboration

Gen Z students are natural born digital communicators who grew up using technology to build relationships.¹¹ But texting, snapping, and chatting to exchange information is not the same thing as collaborating.

“Communicating through a chat window is not necessarily collaborating,” says McCavitt. “Students need access to technology that lets them work together seamlessly with faculty, professors, and other students. The ability to pick up a project where someone else left off, or even work on a project on one part of campus at the same time another student is working on it from home is pivotal.”





■ Creative problem-solving

Closely connected to creativity, creative problem-solving taps into an ability to redefine issues and opportunities and respond in a new and unexpected way.¹² That's why it's so important that students spend their time learning a specific technology as part of the process of solving a particular problem.

"True creative problem-solving creates a different kind of classroom experience," says Taylor. "Students aren't processing knowledge and proving they read something – they're connecting what's happening in the classroom with the world. You never want to have a class on a piece of software. You want to have a class try to solve a problem and see how technology can help you innovate and experiment with ways of solving it."

■ Critical thinking

Gen Z's early experience with global communication and intuitive technology primes them to see potential and possibility in ordinary situations – but few feel they've had enough educational experiences to prepare them to bring this ability to think critically into the workplace.¹³

"The best way to build critical thinking skills is for students to make something themselves and make strategic choices about what they're going to include and exclude," says Taylor. "In my general education writing course, we layer critical thinking skills into our assignments by students interpreting a story in six different modes: photograph, video, audio, web design, publishing, and a mobile app. It doesn't matter if any student ends up pursuing a career in production – what matters is that whatever profession they end up in, they'll be able to think critically about how their professional community tells its story."

Having students create and share new knowledge is the new mission of higher education. If you aren't nurturing digital skills and embedding digital literacy across your higher education curriculum, there will be a gap between the skills your students have and the skills employers need in the workforce that will limit their opportunities for career placement and advancement. Set your students up for success by giving them the digital literacy skills they need to succeed in a world of automation and transformation – give them Adobe Creative Cloud.

For more information on digital literacy:

[Learn More](#)

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