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Schools converting consumers into creators

Teachers are using tech to encourage students to expand their horizons

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

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Cutting-edge classroom technology isn't about smudged whiteboards and overhead projectors, and it hasn't been for at least a generation. Parents who have learned to integrate new technology into their lives have raised kids who may take it for granted, and teachers have to forge a path through the digital landscape while teaching subjects and life skills as old as a quill pen.

At St. Michael's College School, a private Toronto Catholic boys school, Mark Viola is the school's educational tech integration leader and a teacher in the visual arts department. He says the really surprising thing for students with a reputation for unprecedented technological literacy is a classroom challenge that asks them to work with software and hardware that isn't based around a cellphone.

"They're very good consumers of information, where they'll go online so they're willing to do that process. But on the creative side, where they're asked to create a video, we've found that they're not as sophisticated as we thought they'd be. In that respect, they are not afraid to try new things."

"When we talk about that generation gap, teachers are afraid to try new things because they're afraid they won't work, whereas I'm finding with students that they'll try anything because they get excited about it."

At St. Clement's, a private girls



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Students at St. Michael's College School work with technology, which private schools use to design comprehensive curricula and to implement concepts, such as experiential learning.

school in midtown Toronto, classroom tech is based around Chromebooks and the Google ecosystem. Heather Henricks, vice-principal: learning, research and innovation, says students develop an easy familiarity with the software.

"With students, they seem to adapt naturally. When you are teaching them to use aspects of Google and you tell them it's great that you never have to save anything — they ask what do you mean by 'save?'"

"With teachers, it varies, but all are diving into it in a way that makes sense for them — because they see the benefits."

The technology and opportunities available to students at private schools can be astonishing for someone who remembers classrooms that didn't change for decades. The old-style AV Club, for instance, has evolved at St. Mike's into a multimedia club and a 3D printing club and a team of students that produces video announcements screened at the start of classes every morning, starting work at 7:30 a.m. in the school's studio.

Daniel Douglas is on the music faculty at St. Michael's and chairs its Deep Learning Committee. He describes how per-

formance reviews have changed for music students at the school — tests once involved a student playing a piece for a jury of teachers, but now the student can record a piece, review it, re-record it and send it in for evaluation.

"That takes a lot more of their time, but that's more time with a horn on their face, so they're developing more, they're growing more, and it takes us a lot longer to mark those, but the advantage is that I can go back and hear it twice, and I can give some critical feedback. But if I'm hearing it on the spot, I can't do that."

Private schools find technology useful in designing comprehensive curriculum plans like Deep Learning and in implementing concepts such as experiential learning, which schools employ to help deal with the different learning styles of students.

At Blyth Academy, which has several campuses in Toronto, principal Adam Hurley is enthusiastic about Edwin, a new software suite being rolled out this year at the school. "Each student is provided with their own Dell laptop with Edwin programming, which provides them with access to endless amounts of resources and ensures an equitable playing field for each student. The technology helps to cater to each individual student, allowing the teacher to differentiate the learning experience to support the needs of all of their students.

"There are many unique aspects to the technology, including the ability to schedule live virtual presentations and tours at well-known facilities around the world in order to enhance the curriculum and expose the students to experiential learn-

ing opportunities," Hurley adds.

"The technology fosters collaboration in real-time, allowing students to share seamlessly amongst their peers and with their teachers. It also encourages integration of video creation and editing. The resources and opportunities to further engage students are endless."

Private schools have the advantage of being able to source their own software and hardware solutions for students and teachers, and land on unique choices — the Google ecosystem at St. Clement's, Edwin at Blyth Academy and Edsby at St. Mike's, with faculties and clubs bringing in programs such as Adobe Creative Suite in visual arts, Sibelius and Dorico in music, and programs for coding, 3D printing, robotics and storyboarding those morning video announcements.

The biggest challenge is a basic one: helping students organize their time and commitments during and after school, to deal with the demands of course work, extracurriculars and burgeoning social lives.

David Lee, a vice-principal at St. Michael's College School, says that even with the best software available, students still need to be taught how to boost their organizational skills and get the most out of the technology at their fingertips.

"Our student affairs department has been spending a lot of time going into classes to talk about managing your time — organizational skills — because these guys are very busy, (most of them are) probably overscheduled. They're not just doing high school and it's tough to keep things straight."

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