My 21st Century Instructional Dream by Nicole Campbell

My true instructional dream is to instill in my students the desire to learn deeper and broader than they ever thought possible. I want them to: learn about new cultures, new sciences, and unexplored histories, discuss different ideas, and to develop theories and conclusions based on their own thoughts, not those of others. I feel new technology really opens up new avenues to accomplish this dream. The possibilities are endless for students to see new worlds and experience a vast amount of adventures from live streaming Nelson Mandella’s funeral to skyping with a teacher in China to emailing with a class in Zimbabwe to a virtual field trip to Ellis Island. These are all things I have been able to bring to my students to expand their knowledge and understanding of the world through technology and I believe that doesn’t even scrape the top of it.

 “Access for K-5 teachers is often limited as most 21st century learning initiatives are geared towards middle school and high school classrooms.” (Lindsey) Lindsey’s statement rang very true to me and I followed the link she gave during our discussion to begin my search: <http://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/2012/05/what-does-21st-century-learning-look-like-in-an-elementary-school.html>. A summary of this article was a discussion of the lack of information on the 21st century classroom for K-5 teachers. The article challenged how do teachers find resources to support the 4 C’s for the 21st century classroom (collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking) when most professional development sites do not offer them for elementary teachers. I agreed with this assessment; many of my technology curriculum trainings are focused toward high school leveled courses. I, then, have to take that knowledge and adapt it to support my students and standards. This not only takes time and effort but also knowledge of how to adapt and differentiate the 4 C’s for high school students to benefit students in my fifth grade classroom. The article recommended a few resource sites which I used to begin my research. I was sent to a prezi about sites and ideas of how to transform your elementary classroom to prepare 21st century learners. I found this prezi (<http://prezi.com/jwfvjzlvmr_w/an-elementary-classroom-in-the-21st-century/>) connected well with my idea of my dream classroom. One resource this prezi presented was a blog of a fifth grade teacher who had her classroom video blog around the world in one night. They did a number of activities throughout the night such as skyping with a number of teachers/classrooms, studying the winter Olympics (which was going on at the time), working on a number of math skills that connected to their “travels” and holding conversations throughout the night. From here I was connected to a conversation on the blog about backchanneling in the classroom (<http://www.trailsoptional.com/2010/01/backchanneling-with-grade-5/>). This conversation discussed that “Today’s Meet” could be used to help students Collaborate and Communicate about a single idea with ease and speed. As I searched through this site, I found many ideas of how to have my students practice the 4 C’s to support 5th grade Common Core State Standards. While reading, I was intrigued by the mention of “bridging apps.” I learned that these are apps that try to bridge the gap for students with disabilities using technology. As more than half my classroom has some sort of disability or disadvantage, I found this to be an unexpected amendment to my “instructional dream”; how to have my “dream tech classroom” benefit all students beyond our/their greatest imagination and close the gap between what our standards teach and what my students need to be successful. (<http://bridgingapps.org/bridgingapps-roadmap/>) I found this exercise quite interesting as I took a quote that my group found inspirational and felt it reflected my passion for technology and teaching well and began to research not focused in on a closed goal but an open one. I was intrigued where I ended up. I began to realize that there were many teachers out there who felt the same way I did about technology, teaching, and 21st century learning, however, it was not supported on educational sites or sponsored forums, but blogs and prezi links.

I then went into investigating my conclusions on “Chunkier” learning. “In relation to attention span, I believe having a chunkier approach better assists in their learning.  First of all, activities change every 10-15 minutes.  Secondly, having a chunkier content allows for various technologies and other approaches to learning to be arranged.  Students know they will be approached in multiple ways; therefore, if one way does not speak to them, another will.  I believe this approach can also be beneficial to a teacher's management structure.  Because students are aware they will be learning in many ways and through various technologies, they are more willing to try to stumble through the material even if it is difficult. “ said Aubrey McClain. I have always said students today are no longer one Multiple-Intelligence leaners, but they are multiple Multiple-Intelligence learners. They take what they learn in multiple Medias to collaborate and create multiple activities simintanously expanding their thinking/findings to continue to evolve and sculpt what they know and don’t know to become 21st century lifelong learners. It is only with a “chunkier approach” in teaching can we help our students achieve their highest potential. Jason Simpson stated in one discussion “A classroom that utilizes technologies, manipulatives, and an environment that is built around the needs of the students within it. I feel that it is important to incorporate whatever resources are available to meet the students’ needs and to engage them in learning the content required to succeed. A chunkier structure creates an environment accessible to all learners. A flexible learning environment that moves as slow or as fast as the students need it to be.” With a “chunky” approach to teaching and technology, we can begin to close the education gap for our lowest and neediest students. Students with special needs or slower learners can begin to feel confident that they can learn on their own terms without feeling insolated or different from those in their class. With that confidence, they can begin to grow and learn how to accommodate for their weaknesses by using their strengths. I have witnessed my lowest, struggling students beam with pride as they wrote page long stories and presented them to a room full of their peers because they used a digital workshop versus a traditional one. A “chunkier” classroom strategy may be more work in the beginning but time and time again I have seen how it reaps more benefits and rewards than a traditional approach.

 As I reflect over this course, my hope is that as educators we are preparing our students for their future. Even those participants who were not confident in using technology seemed eager and willing to learn as much as they could and try a few new things at a time. That is really all one can ask as we learn how to use the advances in technology to support our teaching and standards in and out of the classroom. A new generation of students have entered our rooms and we have to change how we teach, not just what we teach, if we are going to reach them and train them for the 21st century. I found some great resources to pass on to the teachers in my school who often feel overwhelmed or unsure of the new direction in education. In the end, I felt empowered that I myself am on the right track and will continue to learn and be passionate about the power of technology in learning and in my ability to differentiate and reach every student.