



21ST CENTURY SKILLS: DOOMED PEDAGOGICAL FAD OR KEY TO THE FUTURE?

September 2009, Forum for Youth Investment

Supporters and critics of the 21st century skills movement agree that students should master analytical skills, technological skills and “soft” skills such as team work and communication. Furthermore, they agree that the development of these skills is part of a well-rounded education and that obtaining them is an important part of preparing young people for college, work and life. Critics of the movement part ways on *how* such skills are best developed. They argue that skills and content knowledge are not independent of one other, citing cognitive science research demonstrating that a base of knowledge must be present to gain deeper knowledge and build skills. Critics further believe the 21st century skills movement erodes opportunities for a well-rounded education and further forces schools that are constrained by NCLB to reduce subject matter options in order to increase 21st century skills classes.

Supporters contend that they believe in the value of teaching skills and content together. They argue that their main goal is in fact to integrate 21st century skills into core subjects. However, they also want to set better standards, improve professional and learning environments, increase assessment options, and make core subjects more relevant to students. Supporters argue that not incorporating these skills and making changes such as increasing academic standards will further stagnate students, particularly low-income students in low performing schools.

KEY ARGUMENTS

Critique against P21 Skills in Schools

- Core content and analytical skills cannot be independent of one other
 - Students need to have certain levels of content knowledge in order to develop analytic skills
 - Cognitive science has demonstrated that skills and knowledge are interdependent; a base of knowledge is needed to gain more knowledge and build skills
 - Skills cannot be taught or applied without knowledge
- Marginalizes liberal education and core content subjects because the emphasis on 21st century skills
 - As a result, dilutes education standards and turns out less prepared/educated students
- Desire a full core curriculum that is liberal arts based (history, literature, civics, arts, etc.)
- 21st Century skills has been reincarnated in several forms over several decades but has not succeeded
- Fear that not all students will have access to a well-rounded education
 - Lower-income students are more likely to receive an education with lower standards

Supporters Response to Critique

- Core subjects are important but we need to move beyond competency in core subjects to understanding academic content at much higher level
- Promote weaving 21st century interdisciplinary themes (global awareness, financial/economic literacy, civic literacy, and health literacy) into core subjects
- Each element of 21st century skills (life and career skills, learning and innovations skills, core subjects, information/media/technology skills) are fully connected in the process of 21st century teaching and learning
- Seek to establish clearer standards, better assessments, and improved professional development and learning environments
- Integrating these skills make core subjects more relevant to students
- Better defined 21st century skills framework by fleshing out specific skills and how to incorporate into teaching and learning
 - Several media pieces (cover stories on North Carolina and West Virginia) highlight how 21st century skills can be incorporated into core subjects

MEDIA COVERAGE

Critiques of the 21st Century Skills Movement

Critical Thinking? You Need Knowledge

September 2009; Boston Globe (Op-Ed by Common Core)

We have neglected to teach them that one cannot think critically without quite a lot of knowledge to think about. Thinking critically involves comparing and contrasting and synthesizing what one has learned. And a great deal of knowledge is necessary before one can begin to reflect on its meaning and look for alternative explanations. Proponents of 21st-Century Skills might wish it was otherwise, but we do not restart the world anew with each generation. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. What matters most in the use of our brains is our capacity to make generalizations, to see beyond our own immediate experience. The intelligent person, the one who truly is a practitioner of critical thinking, has the capacity to understand the lessons of history, to grasp the inner logic of science and mathematics, and to realize the meaning of philosophical debates by studying them.

www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/09/15/critical_thinking_you_need_knowledge/

The Latest Doomed Pedagogical Fad: 21st Century Skills

January 2009; Washington Post

I get nervous whenever I hear of some brilliant new teaching method that is going to sweep our students into a new century, wise beyond their years. It takes hard work to teach this stuff, and even harder work, by poorly motivated adolescents, to learn it. Kay told me he knows that, but I don't see the point emphasized in his promotional materials. Great educators tell me that teaching and learning are more about relationships than content, more about asking questions every day of everyone in class than depending on students to soak it up on their own. In our poorest

neighborhoods, we still have some of our weakest teachers, either too inexperienced to handle methods like modeling instruction or too cynical to consider 21st-century skills anything more than another doomed fad. There might be a way to turn them around, but if there isn't, instead of engaged and inspired students, we will have just one more big waste of time.

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/04/AR2009010401532.html

Common Core (the main organization that opposes 21st century skills movement)

We believe that a child who graduates from high school without an understanding of culture, the arts, history, literature, civics, and language has in fact been left behind. So to improve education in America, we're promoting programs, policies, and initiatives at the local, state, and federal levels that provide students with challenging, rigorous instruction in the full range of liberal arts and sciences.

www.commoncore.org

Support for 21st Century Skills Movement

Crucial Lessons, Not a "Pedagogical Fad"

January 2009; Washington Post (LTE by NEA and Partnership for 21st Century Skills)

Our definition of 21st-century skills includes learning and innovation skills, core subjects and 21st-century themes, and life and career skills -- not just information, media and technology skills. Thoughtfully integrating 21st-century skills into education represents an important challenge that the country cannot afford to ignore.

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/10/AR2009011001765.html

Framework for 21st Century Learning

January 2009; Partnership for 21st Century Skills

The framework presents a holistic view of 21st century teaching and learning that combines a discrete focus on 21st century student outcomes (a blending of specific skills, content knowledge, expertise and literacies) with innovative support systems to help students master the multi-dimensional abilities required of them in the 21st century. The key elements of 21st century learning are represented in the graphic and descriptions below. The graphic represents both 21st century skills *student outcomes* (as represented by the arches of the rainbow) and 21st century skills *support systems* (as represented by the pools at the bottom).

www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=120

Partnership for 21st Century Skills (main organization that advocates for 21st century skills in the classroom)

Every child in America needs 21st century knowledge and skills to succeed as effective citizens, workers and leaders in the 21st century. There is a profound gap between the knowledge and skills most students learn in school and the knowledge and skills they need in typical 21st century communities and workplaces. To successfully face rigorous higher education coursework, career challenges and a globally competitive workforce, U.S. schools must align classroom environments with real world environments by infusing 21st century skills.

www.21stcenturyskills.org

School's Tap 21st Century Skills

January 2009; Christian Science Monitor

There have always been innovative teachers who use engaging projects or new technology. But the US should have "a system built around the idea that every kid needs to be able to critically think and problem-solve," says Ken Kay, president of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a national advocacy group in Tucson, Ariz., which includes businesses, educational organizations, and policymakers. To do this, teacher training, state curricula, and testing all need to be aligned with such goals, Mr. Kay says. So far, 10 states have signed on with the Partnership to try to do that. In North Carolina, one of the partner states, graduation starting next year will depend partly on the completion of an in-depth research project that incorporates skills needed for college or the workplace. Students will pair up with a mentor who works in a field related to their research problem. They will produce a portfolio that includes reflective writing, "so they are thinking about not just an end product, but really a process for solving complex problems," says Tricia Willoughby, executive director of the North Carolina Business Committee for Education, a public-private partnership. West Virginia, meanwhile, is changing teacher-preparation courses. And for teachers already in the system, it's providing significant professional development.

www.csmonitor.com/2009/0108/p03s03-usqn.html

21st Century Skills Focus Shifts West Virginia Teachers' Role

January 2009; Education Week

The story details how the West Virginia increasingly emphasizes teaching content along with 21st century skills and how this impacts a teacher's role in the classroom. The story discusses how West Virginia plans to "[reorient] the training and professional support of its...teachers to ensure that they are capable of" embedding 21st century skills into core subjects.

www.edweek.org/login.html?source=http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/01/07/16skills_ep.h28.html&destination=http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/01/07/16skills_ep.h28.html&levelId=2100

Backers of 21st Century Skills Take Flak

March 2009; Education Week

The phrase "21st-century skills" is everywhere in education policy discussions these days, from faculty lounges to the highest echelons of the U.S. education system. Broadly speaking, it refers to a push for schools to teach critical-thinking, analytical, and technology skills, in addition to the "soft skills" of creativity, collaboration, and communication that some experts argue will be in high demand as the world increasingly shifts to a global, entrepreneurial, and service-based workplace. But now a group of researchers, historians, and policymakers from across the political spectrum are raising a red flag about the agenda as embodied by the Tucson, Ariz.-based Partnership for 21st Century Skills, or P21, the leading advocacy group for 21st-century skills.

www.edweek.org/login.html?source=http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/03/04/23pushback_ep.h28.html&destination=http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/03/04/23pushback_ep.h28.html&levelId=2100