

21st Century Skills: An Old Familiar Song
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The latest fad to sweep the wonderful world of pedagogy is called 21st Century Skills. States are now adding them to their standards, with the expectation that students will learn the skills needed for the 21st century. In the land of American pedagogy, innovation is frequently confused with progress, and whatever is thought to be new is always embraced more readily than what is known to be true. Thus, pedagogues, policymakers, thought leaders, facilitators, and elected officials are rushing to get aboard the 21st century skills express train, lest they appear to be old-fashioned or traditional, these terms being the worst sort of opprobrium that can be hurled at any educator.

A few days ago, I received an email from Professor John Richard Schrock, who is a professor of biology and director of biology education for Emporia State University in Kansas. He wrote as follows:

In 23 years of turning out over 200 strong biology teachers in Kansas, I have not faced a challenge as serious as this last fall. A cabal of Superintendents, independent of the State Board of Education, in at least eight mid-sized KS school districts have adopted a form of "21st Century Learning" that is directing veteran science teachers to shut up and assign students to "independent learning." The teachers are not to speak for more than a few minutes each class, and then only to give directions. Students are to work on projects to learn all science concepts on their own...The rationale for these superintendents' actions appears to be the "21st Century Learning" movement. That national plan has been endorsed by our State Board of Education (KSBE), although they are not enthusiastic about this specific interpretation, which they cannot prevent. The presentation at the KSBE was explicit in stating that "it is no longer important what bits of information a student knows, but only that students be able to locate information" in the new 21st Century model...

I am a historian of education. I have often written about the educational enthusiasms and fads of the past century. One of my books, titled *Left Back*, tells the story of the rise and fall of one fad after another across the twentieth century. Unfortunately the field of pedagogy is subject to frequent bouts of infatuation with fads and of lemming-like behavior in adopting the latest fad as holy writ.

After examining the materials associated with P21, I concluded, to quote the noted philosopher Yogi Berra, that "it's like déjà vu all over again."

There is nothing new in the proposals of the 21st century skills movement. The same ideas were iterated and reiterated by pedagogues across the twentieth century. Their call for 20th century skills sounds identical to the current effort to promote 21st century skills. If there was one cause that animated the schools of education in the 20th century, it was the search for the ultimate breakthrough that would finally loosen the shackles of subject matter and content.

For decade after decade, pedagogical leaders called upon the schools to free themselves from tradition and subject matter. Ellwood P. Cubberley, dean of the education school at Stanford, warned that it was dangerous for society to educate boys-and even girls-without reference to vocational ends. Whatever they learned, he insisted, should be relevant to their future lives and work. He thought it foolish to saturate them with "a mass of knowledge that can have little application for the lives which most of them must inevitably lead." They were sure to become disappointed and discontented, and who knew where all this discontent might lead? Cubberley called on his fellow educators to abandon their antiquated academic ideals and instead to adapt education to the real life and real needs of their students. This was in 1911.

The federal government issued a major report on the education of black students in 1916. Its author, Thomas Jesse Jones, scoffed at academic education, which lacked relevance to the lives of these students and was certainly not adapted to their needs. Jones wanted black children to "learn to do by doing," which was considered to be the modern, scientific approach to education. It was not knowledge of the printed page that black students needed, wrote Mr. Jones, but "knowledge of gardening, small farming, and the simple industries required in farming communities." Jones admired schools that were teaching black

students how to sew, cook, garden, milk cows, lay bricks, harvest crops, and raise poultry. This clarion call was sounded as America was changing from a rural to an urban nation.

Although there were many similar efforts to eliminate the academic curriculum and replace it with real-world interactions, none came as close to the ideals of 21st century learning skills as William Heard Kilpatrick's celebrated Project Method. Kilpatrick, a fabled Teachers College professor, took the educational world by storm in 1918 with his proposal for the Project Method. Instead of a sequential curriculum laid out in advance, Kilpatrick urged that boys and girls engage in hands-on projects of their own choosing. As Kilpatrick envisioned it, the Project was "whole-hearted purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment." Kilpatrick said that the Project shaped character and personality. It required activity, not docility. It awakened student motivation. Ideally the Project would be done collaboratively by a group.

Another forerunner to P21 was the activity movement of the 1920s and 1930s. As in the Project Method, students were encouraged to engage in activities and projects built on their interests. Studies were interdisciplinary, and academic subjects were called upon only when needed to solve a problem. Students built, measured, and figured things out, while solving real-life problems, like how to build a playhouse or a pet park or a puppet theater. Decision-making, critical thinking, cooperative group learning: it was an integral part of the activity movement.

Something similar happened in many high schools in the 1930s, where many avant-garde school districts replaced courses like science and history with interdisciplinary courses, which they called the "core curriculum" or "social living." Some districts merged several disciplines—such as English, social studies and science—into a single course, which was focused not on subject matter but on students' life experiences. In a typical class, students studied their own homes, made maps and scale drawings, and analyzed such questions as the cost of maintaining the home, the cost of fuel, light and power, and how to prepare nutritious meals.

But there were occasional parent protests. In Roslyn, New York, parents were incensed because their children couldn't read but spent an entire day baking nut bread. The Roslyn superintendent assured them that baking nut bread was an excellent way to learn mathematics.

One progressive educator in the 1930s looked forward to the day when students would learn everything first-hand; when there were no more schools; when students were learning everything they needed to know in fields, farms, factories, and workplaces. This was an early version of the deschooling movement, which got a fair amount of publicity in the 1960s. Again the goal was to make all schooling tactile, problem-based, and experiential.

Then in the 1950s came the Life Adjustment Movement, yet another stab at getting rid of subject matter and teaching students to prepare for real life. And in the 1980s, there was Outcome Based Education, which sought to make schooling relevant, hands-on, and attuned to the real interests and needs of young people.

In the early 1990s came SCANS—the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills—which recommended exactly the kinds of functional skills that are now called 21st Century skills. These documents were produced by a commission for the Secretary of Labor. I recall hearing the director of SCANS say that students didn't need to know anything about the Civil War or how to write a book report; these were obsolete kinds of skills and knowledge.

When the SCANS recommendations appeared in 1991, I was an Assistant Secretary at the US Department of Education and I discussed them with David Kearns, the Deputy Secretary who had been CEO of Xerox. I said, "David, the SCANS report says that young people don't need to know how to write a book report, they need to know how to write advertising jingles." He replied, "That's ridiculous. You can't write advertising jingles if you don't know how to write a book report."

I won't get into the reasons why none of these initiatives survived. They did have their impact, however. They left American education with a deeply ingrained suspicion of academic studies and subject matter. "It's academic" came to mean "it's purely theoretical and unreal." For the past century, our schools of education have obsessed over critical thinking skills, projects, cooperative learning, experiential learning, and so on. But they have paid precious little attention to the disciplinary knowledge that young people need to make sense of the world.

This deeply ingrained suspicion - hostility, even - towards subject matter is the single most significant reason for the failure of the standards movement in American education over the past generation.

We should have been educating future teachers to study their subject or subjects in depth. We should have paid attention to what Lee Shulman, educational psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford, calls "pedagogical content knowledge." We should have been helping teachers determine ways to light up young minds and to generate excitement about historical imagination or scientific discovery.

Instead, we have numbed the brains of future teachers with endless blather about process and abstract thinking skills. We have taught them about graphic organizers and Venn diagrams and accountable talk, data-based decision-making, rubrics, and leveled libraries, but we have ignored what matters most. We have neglected to teach them that one cannot think critically unless one has quite a lot of knowledge to think about. One thinks critically by comparing and contrasting and synthesizing what one has learned. One must know a great deal before she or he can begin to reflect on its meaning and look for alternative explanations.

The problem with skills-driven approaches to learning is that there are so many things we need to know that cannot be learned by hand-on experiences. The educated person learns not only from his or her own experience, but from the hard-earned experience of others. We do not restart the world anew in 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 learned capacity to understand the lessons of history, to engage in the adventures of literature, to grasp the inner logic of science and mathematics, and to realize the meaning of philosophical debates by studying them. Through literature, for example, we have the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of another person, to walk in their shoes, to experience life as it was lived in another century and another culture, to live vicariously beyond the bounds of our own time and family and place. What a gift! How sad to refuse it!

Until we teach our teachers and our students to love knowledge and to love learning, we cannot expect them to use their minds well.