21st Century Skills

The World Our Students Will Inherit

What does it mean to prepare young people to live and work successfully in the 21st century? This is a question that all educators must grapple with, and it is not a simple question to answer. The technology we use in our home and at work changes with lightning speed, and the needs of the global economy are in constant flux. People across the globe have access to information and opportunities that they never had before. Students no longer have to rely on a local teacher or librarian for information—and workers no longer have to rely on local employers for jobs. Many of today’s jobs no longer require workers to come to an office at all. In today’s world, the work can be sent to the workers, wherever they happen to live. This is radically changing not only the nature of jobs, but also the nature of competition for those jobs.

How will our current students set themselves apart from the global pack, when they graduate and seek good, stable, and meaningful employment? Do they have the knowledge, the skills, and the intellectual dispositions needed to compete against the best, wherever the best may be? And if they do secure a good job, will they have the communication and collaboration skills needed to work with team members who do not share a common culture, primary language, or even time zone?

As the pool of applicants for good jobs increases, rippling out to include workers from across the globe, the pool of good jobs available to those workers may be shrinking. Occupations and tasks that once required a human touch are increasingly being given over to robots, computers, and other machines. Especially in challenging economic times, jobs that can be performed by machines will be given to machines,
and jobs that can be performed remotely will be given to highly skilled but lower paid workers living in developing countries.

Obviously, not all industries are contracting. As the figure below demonstrates, some areas of employment offer real opportunities for growth in the coming years, including health care, education, and the service industries (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Employment and Percent of Total Employment for the Largest and Smallest Occupational Groups, May 2010**

![Employment and Percent of Total Employment for the Largest and Smallest Occupational Groups, May 2010](chart.png)


What do these fields have in common? Many of them place a premium on interpersonal skills, the production and dissemination of information, and creativity. Manual labor and rote production may be on the decrease, but the need for creative, collaborative thinkers and workers is on the rise.
What kind of education will students need to be competitive and well-prepared for these jobs? According to a report from the National Center on Education and the Economy (2007):

This is a world in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce. It is a world in which comfort with ideas and abstractions is the passport to a good job, in which creativity and innovation are the key to the good life, in which high levels of education—a very different kind of education than most of us have had—are going to be the only security there is. (pp. 6-7)

Obviously, core academic skills remain an essential foundation for any young person’s education. However, the good jobs of tomorrow will require much more than the core skills we teach and test in our schools. They will require creativity and innovation, among other things. Do we teach these in our schools?

The Skills Our Students Need

In a recent poll, voters were asked about the skills currently being taught in their local schools and the skills that needed to be taught. An overwhelming majority of those who responded cited a serious gap between what they felt their students needed to be learning and what their schools were, in fact, focusing on. Among the areas that voters felt were crucial included

- Critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Ethics and social responsibility.
- Teamwork and collaboration.
• Lifelong learning and self-direction.

Voters in the poll did not give their local schools high marks in any of these areas (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007, p. 3).

This should not come as a surprise. After all, these topics would be considered non-curricular or non-academic by most educators. They rarely appear in standards documents, and they rarely are formally tested. They are what traditionally were considered life skills—things to be taught by parents, clergy, or leaders of youth groups of various kinds. But are these things, in fact, still being taught? If we find that our young people are growing up without some of these skills, and these skills are becoming increasingly important to their future well-being, aren’t there ways for us to build these skills into the school day?

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2006), an advocacy organization made up of business, education, and policy leaders, has taken these skills and built them into a framework for 21st century learning to help teachers and curriculum developers, a framework that comprises four major strands:

- Life and career skills.
- Learning and innovation skills.
- Core subjects and 21st century themes.
- Information, media, and technology skills.

The first two items on the list are becoming increasingly important for young people entering the job market. Fewer and fewer people enter the workforce with the expectation that they will remain in one job, with one company, or even in one industry, for the length of their work lives. This ever-shifting landscape means

that flexibility and adaptability are crucial for young people. Tomorrow’s workers will need to be lifelong learners, able to adapt to a shifting job market—not simply to survive, but to grow, prosper, and thrive (Nation Center on Education and Economy, 2007).

No longer can we, as educators, define our role narrowly as disseminators or deliverers of information. Increasingly, our job must be to help students learn how to analyze and use information in a variety of creative, innovative, and personal ways. As education historian, Diane Ravitch, says:

Schools must do far more than teach children “how to learn” and “how to look things up”; they must teach them what knowledge has most value, how to use that knowledge, how to organize what they know, how to understand the relationship between past and present, how to tell the difference between accurate information and propaganda, and how to turn information into understanding. (ENA, 2006, p. 13)

A young person’s education can no longer end with a diploma. In fact, graduation into the working world will only be the beginning of a lifelong journey of learning.

References

