



CRITICAL THINKING? YOU NEED KNOWLEDGE

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The latest fad to sweep K–12 education is called “21st-Century Skills.” States—including Massachusetts—are adding them to their learning standards, with the expectation that students will master skills such as cooperative learning and critical thinking and therefore be better able to compete for jobs in the global economy. Inevitably, putting a priority on skills pushes other subjects, including history, literature, and the arts, to the margins. But skill-centered, knowledge-free education has never worked.

The same ideas proposed today by the 21st-Century Skills movement were iterated and reiterated by pedagogues across the 20th century. In 1911, the dean of the education school at Stanford called on his fellow educators to abandon their antiquated academic ideals and adapt education to the real life and real needs of students.

In 1916, a federal government report scoffed at academic education as lacking relevance. The report's author said black children should "learn to do by doing," which he considered to be the modern, scientific approach to education.

- 4 Just a couple of years later, "the project method" took the education world by storm. Instead of a sequential curriculum laid out in advance, the program urged that boys and girls engage in hands-on projects of their own choosing, ideally working cooperatively in a group. It required activity, not docility, and awakened student motivation. It's remarkably similar to the model advocated by 21st-century skills enthusiasts.

The list goes on: students built, measured, and figured things out while solving real-life problems, like how to build a playhouse, pet park, or a puppet theater, as part of the 1920s and 1930s "Activity Movement." From the "Life Adjustment Movement" of the 1950s to "Outcome-Based Education" in the 1980s, one "innovation" after another devalued academic subject matter while making schooling relevant, hands-on, and attuned to the real interests and needs of young people.

To be sure, there has been resistance. In Roslyn, Long Island, in the 1930s, parents were incensed because their children couldn't read but spent an entire day baking nut bread. The Roslyn superintendent assured them that baking was an excellent way to learn mathematics.

None of these initiatives survived. They did have impact, however: They inserted into American education a deeply ingrained suspicion of academic studies and subject matter. 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.

- 8 For over a century we have numbed the brains of 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 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.

Through literature, for example, we have the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of another person, to walk in his 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.

- 12 Until we teach both teachers and students to value knowledge and to love learning, we cannot expect them to use their minds well.