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OPINION

The Latest Doomed Pedagogical Fad: 21st-Century Skills

By Jay Mathews

Today on this page, we are ushering in the new year with the hottest trend in pedagogy, the latest program teachers are told they cannot live without. It is called 21st-century skills. Education policymakers, press agents and pundits can't get enough of it.

I am not so impressed. I have been writing cranky columns about 21st-century skills on washingtonpost.com, calling the movement a pipe dream whose literature should be tossed in the trash.

Granted, the 21st-century skills idea has important business and political advocates, including President-elect Barack Obama. It calls for students to learn to think and work creatively and collaboratively. There is nothing wrong with that. Young Plato and his classmates did the same thing in ancient Greece. But I see little guidance for classroom teachers in 21st-century skills materials. How are millions of students still struggling to acquire 19th-century skills in reading, writing and math supposed to learn this stuff?

There are ways, some teachers tell me. Tim Burgess, a physics and chemistry teacher in Alabama, said he tried coaxing students to think for themselves. He laid out clues and let students sort them out together -- and it worked. "Suddenly, it became clear how 21st-century thinking was far more important than the mounds of content we were expected to force-feed our victims (I mean students)," Burgess said. Elena Silva, a senior policy analyst at the Education Sector think tank in the District, concluded that 21st-century skills could improve teaching of the basics, in a report quoted elsewhere on this page.

However, teachers who say this approach works agree with me that the marketing of the concept has not been entirely honest or wise. A sentence from a report by the Tucson-based Partnership for 21st Century Skills illustrates the problem: "Every aspect of our education system -- preK-12, postsecondary and adult education, after-school and youth development, workforce development and training, and teacher preparation programs -- must be aligned to prepare citizens with the 21st century skills they need to compete." This is the all-at-once syndrome, a common failing of reform movements. They say changes must be made all at once, or else. In this democracy, we never make changes all at once.

The past few months of the financial crisis prove that, once again. So please don't tell us we have to. (Ken Kay, president of the partnership, told me that he doesn't think it all has to be done at once, but that is not what his handouts say.)

I won't discount that good teachers say their students are learning more this way. Many mention a system called modeling instruction, based on the work of Arizona State University physicist David Hestenes. Matt Greenwolfe, who teaches this way in Cary, N.C., sent a student's reaction: "In small groups we would use whiteboards to write down ideas, draw graphs and solve for unknown variables. Using webcams I would take pictures of the whiteboards and post them on the class Web site for everyone to use as a resource. . . . Physics class has helped me look at problems in different ways so I can solve them. If I don't understand the data when it is presented in one way I am able to ask questions and change it, using a method I can understand."

Greenwolfe said it took him years of effort to learn this, which reminds me of my last personal encounter with what I now realize were 21st-century skills. I needed a science credit to graduate from college. I signed up for Celestial Navigation. I was assured it was a gut, the popular term then for a course that required little or no effort. I was in love, soon to be married, obsessing over what to do with my life, with no time or patience for study. I was a classic case of delayed social development, thinking and acting at age 22 like a typical high school senior. My college treated me like most high schools treat distracted 18-year-olds. It wanted me to graduate. It was not going to let a trivial thing like academic standards stand in the way.

My final exam would be applauded today by promoters of 21st-century skills. We had to plot a course on a Boston Harbor cruise ship, strategizing, analyzing, collaborating. I don't recall understanding any of what was going on, but I turned som thing in. As I expected, I got a good grade and a bachelor's degree, despite learning no science.

That's why 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.

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