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Hard Facts and Soft Skills

Preparing the next generation for a lifetime of learning™

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Hard Facts and Soft Skills

In the 21st century facts matter. So too does an ability to collaborate in the formation of authentic opinions; the application of critical thinking to a range of problems; and the clear communication of the outcomes.

The argument now raging in academic circles pits those who espouse teaching 21st century skills against those who believe that we should be teaching explicit and well-sequenced content. This debate has largely been framed as an *either/or* proposition. In my view, portraying this debate as one between two mutually exclusive sides does the debate a disservice, and reports that finding common ground between the two sides is proving a challenge I find discouraging.

Debate is a powerful weapon in the battle to uncover truth. But if its participant's aim is to stake out irreconcilable positions, this will not help the 50,000,000 children in our schools. Consensus must be the outcome of this debate for their sakes.

The newly-minted 21st century skills have variously been listed as: computer literacy, analytical skills, problem-solving, communications abilities, collaborative skills, critical thinking and creativity. It is worth noting that, with the exception of the last few decades, when the curriculum became much more focused on memorization and test taking, and less on a well-rounded classroom approach, the only 21st century skill that has not been part of the great western tradition of learning for at least two thousand years is computer literacy. So it seems apparent from the outset that the dichotomy in the current argument is mostly a false one.

A good beginning in looking at what Professor Linda Darling-Hammond calls the *curriculum wars*, is to remember that there are two kinds of pedagogy that are necessary for a child to succeed in this brave new century; they are called *didactic* and *maientic*; loosely interpreted as pushing facts and pulling opinions.

All teaching is difficult; but pushing facts is less difficult since it is more prescriptive, familiar and measurable. However, just because teaching children to think critically, solve problems, communicate and collaborate in forming opinions is not easy is no reason not to try. After all, the new *smart* economy needs these skills, and we know that children already possess these nascent skills, not to mention the fact that their emotional need for safety isn't best served by teaching to the tests.

Ever since the 1960s and 1970s when computers replaced teachers as test graders, educators began taking the easy, or perhaps cheaper, route. The only problem then as now was that technology could only distinguish between ovals filled in with a pencil and ones left blank; inevitably questions and answers had to be posed as multiple choices. So we changed the way we taught; not for sound best practice reasons, but

because of technological limitations and a desire to reduce costs. We allowed computer technology to shape education, rather than using technology to help shape teaching.

Children do not come into this world knowing the periodic table or chemical symbols; neither can they intuit historical, geographic or scientific facts. The objective, provable and testable facts pertaining to their world are not burned into their brains at birth. This means they must learn and memorize; and that's why didactic teaching has a big place in the curriculum. But didactic teaching/learning is only the *push* part of what should be the holistic classroom experience. The other is maieutic or *pull* learning, which in large part is about those much-discussed 21st century skills that in fact have been around for millennia.

All teachers have been trained in best practices when it comes to the “stand and deliver” method of pushing facts; as is only right and proper. Our children must know a lot of facts as part of their state testing and the SAT/ACT. Most teachers, however, have not been exposed to the best practices of teaching rhetoric, Socratic inquiry, problem definition and solution, or creative and original thinking. This is because didactic teaching is a matter of law; but maieutic teaching is equally vital.

Due to the unintended consequences of allowing technological limitations to drive our pedagogy, maieutic teaching has largely disappeared from the classroom, even though it is a necessity for developing children's intellectual skill and in reality is vital for survival.

As a framework for all of the so-called soft skills, team or collaborative learning is a great start. As Professors Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey of San Diego State University report, *“Collaborative learning transfers more responsibility to students, yet provides them with peer support. In any content area, students learn more and retain information longer when they work in productive groups.”* And this method of teaching/learning should extend across all content areas, that way students become proficient thinkers because, as Ken Kay of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills correctly points out *“skills and content support one another and therefore transcend this debate.”*

This is unfamiliar territory to most students and teachers because these soft skills deal with ambiguity not certitude. They are the subjective ideas with no right or wrong answer. Which political party, car, house or spouse is best for me? What career should I pursue? What is my place in society? Who am I? Who are you? What is my purpose in life? What do I want to accomplish? In what way can I help humanity? Why is science or history or literature important? These are the humanities: what it means to be human in other words. These are the big ideas, and their greatest value is that they provide an individual with a context, and therefore their own unique reason – born out of self-conviction - for learning the small ideas; a feat no teacher can accomplish.

As Socrates taught us, a group with a skilled leader is the best setting to wrestle with subjective ideas and form opinions; intellectual midwifery as he called it. Not only does it hone the arts of persuasion, listening, leadership, social conduct, tolerance of other

opinions and ambiguity, but most especially the softest skill of all: being able to hold another's opinion in one's mind without necessarily agreeing with it. A skill, Aristotle said "made us human." This is still true today; what has changed, however, is the way children access information.

Conclusion

I hope I have argued convincingly that framing the argument as hard facts *plus* soft skills, rather than hard facts *versus* soft skills will avoid an unnecessary schism amongst the leaders, teachers, researchers and commentators who shape our schools. We should welcome and add to the current curriculum the skills that have been in our intellectual tradition for millennia, and have been sorely missed. Thankfully supplementing memorization with high order thinking, and adding discovery to learning are both back in vogue. Universities, colleges, businesses and all other employers will welcome the appearance at their doors of candidates who can do a lot more than take tests really, really well.

Alex Terego teaches courses on critical thinking and collaborative learning. He has already spoken at the Florida ASCD and the Michigan Association of School Administrators and will be speaking on these topics also at the National Catholic Educators conference and National Staff Development Council annual meeting this summer. For samples of his courseware contact him at alex@alexterege.com.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Alex