

A Century of Skills Movements

By Diane Ravitch | *American Educator* | Spring 2010

I am a historian of education and have written often 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 20th century. In brief, what I've found is that 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.

What these train riders don't seem to realize is that there is nothing new in the proposals of the 21st-century-skills movement. The same ideas were iterated and reiterated by pedagogues throughout the 20th 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, while 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 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 was a prescription for locking the South's African American population into menial roles for the foreseeable future. As Jones acknowledged in his report, the parents of black children wanted them to have an academic education, but he thought he knew better. His clarion call was sounded with extremely poor timing—just 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 education 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 the 21st-century-skills movement 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: all were integral parts 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.

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 alleged real interests and needs of young people.

The early 1990s brought 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 U.S. 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 knowledge and skills.

When the SCANS recommendations appeared in 1991, I was an assistant secretary at the U.S. 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.”

Each of these initiatives had an impact. 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.

One of the problems with skills-driven approaches to learning is that there are so many things we need to know that cannot be learned through hands-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 other people, 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.

Diane Ravitch is a research professor of education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. She was the assistant secretary of education under President George H. W. Bush. Her latest book is The Death and life of the Great American School System: How testing and Choice are Undermining Education.

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