



Cultural Literacy in Retreat



The pedagogical pendulum swings back and forth, but at the end of the day, in designing a curriculum, you still have to choose some texts over others.

(Image from photobucket.com)

Anybody who has sat in on curriculum meetings and projects in the humanities has experienced those awkward moments when it comes down to selecting certain

contents and materials as essential and required. Traditionalists in the room want to identify core texts, events, figures, and ideas, and on various grounds of historical influence, civic inheritance, and aesthetic virtue they stick with a generally Eurocentric tradition.

Progressivists want to enlarge the canon and contexts, to give representation to other cultures and identities, and explode the reigning “normativities,” and they resist a core knowledge of any kind being set down as official.

By now it’s an old and tired antagonism, an unresolved one. Progressives have largely triumphed in the policy sphere, but traditionalists have managed more or less to retain their focus in individual classrooms. The result is satisfying to neither side. Students leave high school and college with a few progressive attitudes firmly in place (diversity, etc.) and a smattering of canonical learning.

There doesn’t seem to be any way out of the impasse, however, which I think partly explains the rise of the “skills” movement in education circles. What the skills emphasis does is neutralize the culture-wars conflicts inherent in any knowledge selections in a curriculum. It speaks about abstract cognitive abilities such as “critical thinking,” “higher-order thinking skills,” and “problem solving.” No disturbing questions about representation of female authors on a syllabus or about Thomas Jefferson’s racial attitudes. Instead, the skills approach promises to empower students to handle those questions better later on — not here in the classroom, but after they have graduated from the skills curriculum.

The leader today is Partnership for 21st-Century Skills, whose Web site (<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org>) lays out the philosophy. They have the business community firmly behind them — its board includes people from Ford, Microsoft, Oracle, Hewlett Packard, Sun, Dell, Cisco, Apple, and Intel — and politicians have lined up to endorse the vision. For instance, a press release by the Partnership praises Senators John Kerry, John Rockefeller, and Olympia

About This Blog

Posts on Brainstorm present the views of their authors. They do not represent the position of the editors, nor does posting here imply any endorsement by *The Chronicle*.



The Conversation

The Chronicle's new online opinion venue features discussion about higher education, ideas, and academic life.

[Read more »](#)

Archives

Select Month

Snowe for pushing the 21st Century Skill Incentive Fund Act, which will provide “matching federal funds to states that pair strong core courses with 21st-century skills such as creativity, innovation, critical thinking and financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy.” (Did you know that creativity is a 21st-century skill?)

In contrast to the enthusiasm of the skills proponents, a growing number of educators are pushing back. Here are several statements to take heed of:

Andrew J. Rotherham: “But while it is exciting to think we live in times so revolutionary that they demand entirely new skills, that assumption and others threaten to establish a false choice between teaching facts and teaching how to approach them — and to make the 21st-century skills movement another fad leading to little change in American education.”

Dan Willingham: “Clarion calls for more attention to 21st-century skills brings to mind a familiar pattern in the history of education: pendulum swings between an emphasis on process (analysis, critical thinking, cooperative learning) which fosters concern that students lack knowledge and generates a back-to-basics movement that emphasizes content, which fosters concern that student are merely parroting facts with no idea of how to use their knowledge, and so on. In calmer moments, everyone agrees that students must have both content knowledge and practice in using it, but one or the other tends to get lost as the emphasis sweeps to the other extreme.”

E.D. Hirsch: “There are many reasons for the difficulty of transferring critical thinking and other 21st-century skills from one domain to another, but here’s a decisive reason. A central feature of such skills is the drawing of inferences, a skill that has been mastered by all who speak a language. Every time we understand what someone says we are making inferences. The inference-making skill is observable even in six-month-old infants, as Alison Gopnik and her colleagues explain in *The Scientist in the Crib*.

“But inference-making is not purely formal process. When the skill fails it’s usually because information is lacking. Inference-making can be described as supplying missing premises from one’s own prior knowledge in order to complete a kind of syllogism. The purely transferable elements of thinking skills turn out to be minor elements that are easily acquired. What really counts is relevant knowledge about the problem at hand. In the scientific literature the key term is ‘domain-specific knowledge.’ Being a problem solver in one domain does not automatically make you skilled in another.”

Jay Mathews: “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?

“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, work-force 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.)”

And Diane Ravitch: “There is nothing new in the proposals of the 21st-century skills movement. The same ideas were iterated and reiterated by pedagogues across 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, 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.”

These are important voices, of course, but in their insistence upon content knowledge they throw people back upon the difficult questions of cultural literacy. That’s a place where politicians and business leaders don’t wish to tread, which means that however old the skills movement happens to be, notwithstanding its 21st-century sheen, it has a new weapon in hand, namely, the fear of choosing certain books, events, etc. over others.

[Return to Top ↑](#)

[Bookmark the permalink.](#)

3 Foods Surgeons Are Now Calling "Death Foods"

3 Foods Surgeons Are Now Calling “Death Foods” And how They Devastate Your “Good” Bacteria

Learn More

Sponsored by 3 Harmful Foods

Report ad

Comments for this thread are now closed. ×

0 Comments

The Chronicle of Higher Education

dsaitta




▼

Recommend

Share

Sort by Oldest ▼

This discussion has been closed.

 Subscribe  Add Disqus to your siteAdd DisqusAdd  Privacy

Constant Fatigue Is A Warning Sign – See The Simple Fix

One of America’s top surgeons reveals how to fix your fatigue from home in one simple step

Learn More

Sponsored by Gundry MD

Report ad

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

Copyright © 2017 The Chronicle of Higher Education