

The future matters in education, but not in the way you think

We are currently in a state of denial which could lead to economies such as the US, UK and Australia being overtaken in the coming decades. It is a strange state, historically, and it betrays the near complete dominance of progressive educational thought in a particular aspect of education.

We have returned to 1918, when John Franklin Bobbitt wrote:

“New duties lie before us. And these require new methods, new materials, new vision. The old education, except as it conferred the tools of knowledge, was mainly devoted to filling the memory with facts. The new age is more in need of facts than the old; and of more facts; and it must find more effective methods of teaching them. But there are now other functions. Education is now to develop a type of wisdom that can grow only out of participation in the living experiences of men, and never out of mere memorisation of verbal statements of facts. It must, therefore, train thought and judgment in connection with actual life-situations, a task distinctly different from the cloistral activities of the past. It is also to develop the good-will, the spirit of service, the social valuations, sympathies, and attitudes of mind necessary for effective group-action where specialisation has created endless interdependency ... Most of these are new tasks. In connection with each, much is now being done in all progressive school systems; but most of them yet are but partially developed. We have been developing knowledge, not function; the power to reproduce facts, rather than the powers to think and feel and will and act in vital relation to the world’s life. Now we must look to these latter things as well.”



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The current rhetoric around twenty-first century skills follows this logic almost completely: in the future, fact-knowing will be less important than application. We need to train students for jobs that don’t exist yet. Various statistics are quoted to show how traditional jobs will disappear and how the labour market will be much more unstable, requiring employees of the future to be flexible.

The obvious conclusion that should flow from this last point is that our education systems need to perform better. Whereas, in the past, students who missed out on an academic education could find work in manual, blue-collar jobs, these jobs are going to be fewer in number. Now is the time to ensure that every child learns to read and write more than just stories; learns mathematics to more than just a rudimentary level; learns the broad sweep of history and literature in order to draw inspiration and avoid past mistakes; and learns the fundamental principles of science and technology. Not only will this better equip our young people for a range of different careers, it will give them a cultural hinterland to draw on in their personal lives and to participate more fully in democracy.



But this is not what advocates of twenty-first century learning suggest at all. The goal of improving academic performance (often dismissed as the goal of improving test scores) is trivial and might even hinder progress. In much the same way that Bobbitt claimed that we need better methods for learning facts, before sidelining fact learning for other kinds of things, twenty-first century skills proponents will briefly mention the idea of learning foundational skills – perhaps giving a nod to a form of ‘literacy’ that also includes interpreting pictures and working with computers – before emphasising the need for students to learn critical thinking, collaborative and entrepreneurial skills, as well as creativity. They point out that this is what employers are asking for.

How may we develop such skills? It’s not obvious that we can. Collaboration is not a skill, it is a choice. It may depend upon skills of communication and there may be systems that enable collaboration but it is not something that can be trained and improved through practice. Similarly, critical thinking and creativity cannot be trained in an abstract way. Creativity of any economic or cultural worth depends on a thorough grounding in subject content.

Yet proponents of twenty-first century learning suggest that we can train students in these skills by initiating project-based or inquiry learning, seemingly without considering that this is a claim that needs some kind of supporting evidence. The Buck Institute for Education is influential in the movement promoting project-based learning (PBL). They claim:

“PBL builds success skills for college, career, and life. In the 21st

century workplace and in college, success requires more than basic knowledge and skills. In a project, students learn how to take initiative and responsibility, build their confidence, solve problems, work in teams, communicate ideas, and manage themselves more effectively.”

They also claim that projects lead to better understanding and retention of learning. This is highly contentious and the evidence to support it comes mainly from weakly controlled studies. It is worth noting that, whatever you think of John Hattie’s methodology, when he compared such studies with similar (or perhaps more rigorous) research on direct instruction or mastery learning, he found the latter were far more effective.

This all makes more sense after reading Jeanne Chall’s book on the last century of the education debate. Educationalists want the world to be a certain way. They see child-centred approaches such as inquiry learning as more democratic. They fit their ideals. All the stuff about the future is just a smoke-screen to gain support for really very old ideas; ideas that have failed to deliver many times since Bobbitt wrote his book in 1918.

It is interesting that this future-shock has played out quite differently to two previous ones. Both the 1950s Sputnik panic and the 1980s ‘A Nation at Risk’ report in the US prompted calls for a turn towards more teacher-centred (and thus effective) forms of instruction. Such a voice is almost completely missing in the current discussion about jobs of the future. Whatever is happening in real classrooms, child-centred rhetoric has won the wider debate. And this is why

we risk being overtaken economically by countries with better education systems. Unlike the 1950s and 1980s, there is an ever-shrinking reserve of unskilled work to absorb the uneducated, leading to ever-widening inequality.

Yes, employers are wont to call for employees with initiative, problem-solving ‘skills’ and so on but it is interesting that they are also still complaining about a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills. This is something that we really could tackle.

We know, for instance, that systematic synthetic phonics programmes (SSP) get a larger proportion of children reading than the alternatives and yet it is the alternatives that hold sway in the classroom, with teachers lacking the knowledge to properly implement SSP due to the complacency or ideological opposition of teacher education programmes. Rather than glossing over it as a trivial issue, we should be shocked at how many students currently fail to learn to read and we should do something about that. This would be a better starting point from which to prepare our students for the knowledge economy of the future than romantic claims about project work.

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