

Life Skills for 21st Century Learners

Ie May Freeman, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor

Department of Teacher Education

School of Education

Azusa Pacific University

901 E Alosta Ave, Azusa, CA 91702, USA

Abstract

In order to prepare 21st century students to become life long learners, educators across America must implement differentiated lessons tailored to Common Core State Standards. These lessons should include skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication. In this article, the author provides practical ways of how skills such as problem solving, collaborating, imagination and interaction are needed for all students to become career and college ready.

Key Words: differentiated instruction, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication

Introduction

Half a century ago, it wasn't uncommon for students to enter the workforce and continue working in the same company until it was time to retire. Places such as Chrysler and Ford offered blue-collar workers job stability. One in every six working Americans during this era was employed directly or indirectly by the automobile industry, and Detroit was its epicenter (Sugrue, 2015). Fast-forward to 2015 and you will find that this is not the case. Today's students are more likely to switch careers and hold multiple jobs during their lifetime. They will face an evolving workplace influenced both by technology and the global marketplace (Werrell, 2014). Werrell (2014) believes that in order to meet these challenges, students will need to acquire advanced knowledge and skills. It is for these reasons that educators play an important role in fostering life long skills to prepare students for the real world.

Methods: Fostering Skills for College, Career and Beyond

For many years, reading, writing and arithmetic guided the educational program within public schools. These basic skills are no longer enough for students to become proficient in college and beyond. Today these main subjects are taken along with foreign language, arts, geography, science, and social studies (Werrell, 2014). Learning electives like Spanish helps students broaden their knowledge and apply what they have learned in the job market. However, this is not enough. With the implementation of Common Core, the primary focus is career and college readiness. Educators across America are helping students prepare by supplementing these content areas with the 4 C's. This form of differentiated instruction consists of 1) communication; 2) critical thinking; 3) creativity; and 4) collaboration. These skills are needed for lifelong learning.

Building Communication Skills

Students today need to be able to communicate effectively in the work place. This important skill is critical in the expanding service economy- estimated to be 81% of jobs by 2014- where relationships with customers and fellow employees are of vital importance (National Education Association, 2015). Employers such as Starbucks are looking for applicants who can effectively connect with irate customers and fellow baristas. According to National Education Association (2015) linguistically and culturally effective listening and empathy are important communication skills for every person in the service sector. Sewell (2015) believes that students must be able to persuade and negotiate in the workplace. This means that students need to be able to motivate the customer to buy products from companies such as Apple.

Articulating one's thought is necessary to stay productive in the workplace and to increase revenue in a company. It is therefore imperative that educators emphasize, promote and demonstrate active communication in the classroom.

Building a strong foundation in communication is encouraged at Vina Danks Middle School in Ontario, California. Students are able to Skype with middle school students and their teacher from China. In collaboration with Pitzer College in Claremont, California, the college hosted 10 seventh grade students for a day. Pitzer College provided all technological equipment and space for the Skype interview. The partnership with Pitzer College enabled middle school students to utilize active listening and questioning skills. During the interview students exchanged valuable information about current trends in education and cultural lifestyles. Vina Danks students asked questions about what it is like to be a student and teacher in China. They listened to their Chinese cohorts and exchanged meaningful conversations. They paid attention to nonverbal signals or body language of their cohorts in China. Robinson et. al. (2015) believes that developing the ability to understand and use nonverbal communication can help one to connect with others, express what they mean and build better relationships. It is for these reasons that students who develop the art of communication will be better prepared to enter the workforce (National Education Association, 2015). This is one form of differentiated instruction.

Fostering Critical Thinking

Without question, critical thinking is an indispensable skill needed by all students: English Language Learner (ELL), at-risk, special needs and the gifted and talented. According to University of Oregon Professor David Conley (2008), he finds that "habits of mind" such as analysis, interpretation, precision, accuracy, problem solving, and reasoning are more important than content knowledge when it comes to determining success in college and beyond. Today's students must be able to make practical decisions such as choosing a right place to live based on employment. They must be able to come up with solutions to global problems such as drug trafficking. In the workplace, they must be able to better serve customers at Rite Aid. They should be able to develop better products such as a smartphone. National Education Association (2015) asserts that students must continuously improve themselves in an ever-changing global economy.

How can educators foster critical thinking for lifelong learning? In the classrooms educators need to teach students how to make judgments and decisions on certain arguments and beliefs. Teachers can demonstrate how to analyze documents and critically evaluate them. An example of this is to have students read about a document written by Francis Bellamy, a Christian minister. In 1892 Bellamy wrote the Pledge of Allegiance that is recited at the beginning of each school day across America. As students read the document they interpret and form opinions about the meaning of "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Learners communicate their own judgments in a Socratic Seminar. This activity teaches students how to evaluate and defend their views on documents such as the Pledge of Allegiance. Critical thinking along with communication is interconnected.

Problem solving also plays an important role in the critical thinking process. Educators should provide activities or projects that enable students to solve problems that are not recognizable to them. Students need to be able to approach problem solving by asking poignant questions which can ultimately lead to a correct answer. Providing projects that require critical thinking is found at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Eastvale, California. Ninth through twelfth grade engineering and architecture students learn to critically think of how to use Arduino boards to put together working circuits. In small groups they carefully planned, evaluated, reasoned and tested their circuits in class. Critical thinking took place because educators at Eleanor Roosevelt High School encouraged students to use their intelligence and knowledge to eventually reach a clear objective and rationale. Teachers facilitated and let students figure out how to create circuits on their own instead of giving them known answers.

Encouraging Creativity

Creativity, once looked upon as secondary in the teaching curriculum is now highly valued as a form of differentiated instruction. According to the National Education Association (2015), having innovative capacity and a creative spirit are fast becoming requirements for personal and professional success. Sir Kenneth Robinson (2011) believes that creativity is as important in education as literacy and we should treat it with the same status. The 21st century student needs to be able to brainstorm new ideas for creation. He or she needs to be able to apply these ideas and be receptive to accepting new ones. Students today must be able to demonstrate originality. More importantly, they must implement their creative thoughts without reservations. Learners must also understand that there are certain limits, failures and newfound successes when innovation occurs.

National Education Association (2015) asserts that students who leave school with creativity will be better prepared for the workforce and challenges of the world. It is therefore imperative that educators consistently model and encourage creativity in the classroom.

Creativity is most certainly demonstrated at Roosevelt High School. Here engineering students utilize their imaginative minds to create robots out of simple materials like aluminum cans, glue and wires. This time consuming task has led to frustration as seen in the eyes of students. After much trial and error, colorful working robots come into fruition. Creativity is therefore permitting students to make mistakes along the way and realizing that these mistakes need not be repeated in the future. Educators who help students unleash their creative potential are training them to prepare for what they will encounter as they enter the real world.

Promoting Collaboration

In addition to creativity, 21st century students need to have an important skill called collaboration. Collaboration is essential to achieving meaningful and effective results within a group setting. When students work in teams, a wealth of knowledge is shared. Pertinent information from groups can generate creativity and activate new products. National Education Association (2015) considers collaboration a key ingredient to student success in today's global and technological society. To prepare students to live in a world where collaboration is increasingly present, teachers need to demonstrate what it is like to work respectfully in diverse group settings. Promoting tolerance and embracing diversity are a few ways to model this to students. The reality is that today's students are going to have to interact with people from different genders and gender identities. According to the U.S. Census projections, same-sex marriage is legal in 37 states plus the District of Columbia (Crouch, 2015). Students might have classmates whose parents comprise of two males or two females. Learners today are more than likely to come into contact with different religions. They might be seated next to a classmate who is Muslim or Mormon. These two belief systems are considered the fastest-growing religions in America today (Crouch, 2015). Students in class might also hear different languages spoken in the classroom such as Spanish. Pergory and Boyle (2013) assert that in the United States today Spanish accounts for the primary language spoken at home. Learners can be placed with mentally and/or physically challenged classmates in a mainstream instead of a specialized classroom. It is for these reasons that young scholars must realize that there will be classmates who do not look, think or act like they do.

When diverse students are placed together in collaborative situations, it sometimes does not come easily. A divergent group of opinions may lead to disagreements and/or fights. Disrespect for one another because of one's belief system can ensue. To avoid any friction or problems that might occur during collaboration, educators today need to teach students how to be flexible, open and willing to accept new ideas. More importantly, it is imperative teachers model how to compromise in order to achieve a shared goal. Ultimately the goal of collaboration is to make sure that each student provides equal input and appreciate contributions made by each teammate. Educators today can empower students to collaborate in all grade levels and subject areas. In sum, we can glean from Helen Keller's words, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

Final Perspectives on 21st Century Students

When students are able to examine the earth beyond their own existing community, recognize diverse viewpoints other than their own, communicate effectively with others and take part in creating better circumstances around the world they become globally competent. Educators who provide meaningful and purposeful differentiated lessons aligned to Common Core's 4 Cs are grooming students to become better equipped in the global workplace. 21st century students will graduate with necessary skills needed to successfully compete globally and maintain a stable career for life.

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