Chapter 19

Teaching and Learning 21st Century Skills for Life

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ABSTRACT

The acquisition of 21st century skills through teaching and learning has become one of the greatest challenges facing education delivery in recent times. In the light of that, this chapter examines 21st century skills and how students could acquire these skills to become well integrated in the current knowledge and global economy. Further, this chapter examines the need to prepare students to acquire 21st century skills and competencies, so that they become relevant and well equipped for the current job market. Digital literacy and its importance to students are also explored as part of the relevant 21st century skills. This could be done through comprehensive restructuring of many schools’ curriculum and modification of the way teachers teach and how students are assessed in educational institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of human civilization face some of the starkest challenges yet experience in the history of our species, in the threats to global ecosystems being charted by scientists’ (Chu, Reynolds, Tavares, Notari & Lee, 2017, p.8) and the inability of mankind to quickly address those challenges has raised global concerns about the nature of education being offered to our students. However, with continuous technological advancement, and the lack of effort to address challenges have brought various economic or social issues in many countries. For instance, many countries around the world continue to struggle with the management of their economies, the number of graduates who complete schools and cannot find jobs continues to rise and poverty and unemployment still poses a huge challenge to many nations around the world. As a result of these challenges, people continue to migrate from one country to the next in search of jobs, escape poverty or in search of a better life. Some studies have shown that some of

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the factors that have been contributing to the numerous challenges facing mankind today are due to the system of education being given to our students (see for example the works of Chu et al, 2017; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Vasill, Weiss & Powell, 2018).

In the last few decades of the “twentieth century, as the economies of several western countries began a process of radical change, policymakers, academics, and big businesses began to encourage research and debate on future educational needs” (Bourn, 2018, p. 64). According to Bourn, emphasis has been placed on subject-based learning with the main focus being on the development of knowledge. Further, the advancement of digital technology and new innovations through the acquisition of academic knowledge now seem inadequate for the current job market. The demand for the present knowledge economy and the job market also demands something more than just academic knowledge. For example, ‘the top skills demanded by U.S. Fortune 5001 companies were no longer reading and writing but problem-solving, teamwork and the development of emotional and interpersonal skills’ (Bourn, 2018, p. 64). It has however become evident that the 21st century skills that employers require from recent graduates include critical thinking and problem-solving skills which according to Bourn’s report are seen missing in our present day curriculum.

According to Trilling & Fadel (2009) the system of education, the nature of the curriculum being used in our schools, teaching methods adopted by teachers, the learning styles of children and the nature of examination questions are some of the contributing factors for the lack of 21st century skills and competencies among students. It is, however, argued that our education systems are not equipping the students with the basic skills needed for life while some of the teachers are not using the appropriate teaching techniques that will help equip the students with the 21st century skills they need for life. Many students graduate without acquiring the basic skills for life or are unable to gain employment due to the lack of skills that will make them functional in the job market. This has become a major concern to many nations and organizations. So, the OCR/Think Global (2016; 6) has asked the following questions; ‘how well are our young people prepared to live and work in such a world? Are education and training arrangements appropriate for young people’s future global needs?’

Another question that also remains unanswered is, are teachers adequately prepared to impart 21st century skills and competencies to students in our educational institutions? Or our schools’ curriculum does not permit teachers to incorporate 21st century skills and competencies into their teaching so that the students become equipped with the skills for life.

The answers to the above questions cannot be found in a single policy document but would need an integrated approach. It would be argued that maybe the schools’ curriculum may not permit teachers to incorporate 21st century skills into their teaching or because examining boards do not set questions that require students to learn 21st century skills could also be a contributing factor. Specifically, assessment questions do not demand 21st century skills, rather students are supposed to answer basic skills questions from the subjects they learn in school. Skills such as innovation, effective communication, digital literacy skills, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and problem-solving skills (Chu et al, 2017; Hewett, Pletcher & Zeng, 2018; Bourn, 2018) that are described as 21st century skills are not demonstrated in an examination. This has become a concern to many countries around the world to rethink about the nature of education being provided to young people. Thus, reshaping our educational system to integrate 21st century skills is critical for learners.

For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has pointed out that it is very necessary for nations to find better ways of improving their education systems so as to develop the skills of the present and future generation (OECD, 2018). Bourn (2018, p.69), observed