

# Twenty-first Century Skills? It Depends What You Mean...

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By Alfie Kohn

*About a year ago, I was invited to write a chapter for an education anthology on the subject of “21st-century skills.” I replied as follows: “To be perfectly honest, I’m never sure what’s meant by the phrase ‘21st century’ when it’s used as a modifier for ‘skills,’ ‘standards,’ or ‘schooling.’ The stuff that interests me, such as student-centered learning, critical thinking, understanding ideas from the inside out, compassion, collaboration, democracy, authentic assessment, and so on, are fairly timeless, which means that attaching the name of the current time period to them seems more a marketing ploy than a meaningful modifier.”*

*That was the end of this particular exchange – and of the publisher’s interest in having me contribute to the book. But the phrase in question has been bandied about so often during the last year or so that I find myself pondering the more complicated ways it’s come to be used. To be precise, there seem to be three distinct but occasionally overlapping usages.*

*First, it continues to be wielded as an empty catchphrase.*

*Just about anything one likes can be presented as a component of “21st-century” schooling. It’s like “new and improved” except that here we’re selling books and conferences instead of dessert toppings and floor waxes. The appropriate response to this use, I believe, is either to roll your eyes or to point out that this particular emperor is parading around in his birthday suit.*

*Second, to invoke the current century is sometimes meant to suggest an economic justification (and direction) for schooling rather than a focus on what kids need. Notice how often terms like “competitiveness” and “global economy” tend to accompany “21st century skills.” The appropriate response here is alarm and active resistance, for reasons I tried to explain in [this article](#).*

*For awhile, I got the sense that these were the two dominant connotations of the phrase, so I made fun of both of them in a [satirical essay](#) and thought that was the end of that. But now it turns out there’s a third use, which is more substantive than the first and more encouraging than the second. A fair number of educators are using “21st-century skills” to refer to relatively sophisticated intellectual activity – the sort that includes critical thinking, creativity, and learning about ideas “in a context and for a purpose” (as I like to say). Notice that this instructional agenda has two separate implications: It favors higher-order skills as opposed to low-level skills, and it emphasizes the importance of skills – ways of learning and thinking – as opposed to facts.*

*Of course, the need to bring about both of these shifts, and particularly the latter, was defended quite ably by a number of pre-21st-century thinkers, including John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead. In his 1941 book *Escape From Freedom*, meanwhile, the psychoanalyst and social critic Erich Fromm wrote: “The pathetic superstition prevails that by knowing more and more facts one arrives at knowledge of reality.*

*Hundreds of scattered and unrelated facts are dumped into the heads of students; their time and energy are taken up by learning more and more facts so that there is little left for thinking. To be sure, thinking without a knowledge of facts remains empty and fictitious; but 'information' alone can be just as much of an obstacle to thinking as the lack of it."*

*We're certainly better off if this venerable sentiment is warmed over for the modern age than if it's ignored. But wouldn't you know it – this third meaning of "21st-century," the only one that's actually kind of progressive, is the one that's come under a withering and apparently coordinated attack from the "core knowledge" contingent. To be fair, when they point out that there is nothing particularly new about this argument, that dressing it up with the "new and improved" label is silly and self-serving, they are absolutely right – and I wish that label would go away. (What approach to pedagogy do you support in the 21st century that wasn't just as relevant in the 20th?) But when they argue against the position by claiming that the main problem with schools is that not enough time is spent getting kids to memorize facts, or by caricaturing the opposing position – as if progressive educators believe that learning how to learn means that knowledge doesn't matter – then we should take them on. (See, for example, [this excerpt](#) from *The Schools Our Children Deserve*.)*

*This controversy has implications for assessment, too, of course. If the twenty-firsters are saying that standardized tests are no longer particularly useful, I'm willing just to nod rather than pointing out that they never were. But beware of accepting another dichotomy that's been offered to us (for example, in an op-ed by E.D. Hirsch last spring): giving kids standardized tests that just measure test-taking skills or giving them a bunch-o'-facts curriculum with matching tests to make sure enough of those facts have been stuffed into short-term memory. Put me down for "none of the above,"*

*please.*

*Apart from the unfortunate label and general faddishness of the whole 21st-century thing – the first bandwagon educators are hopping on in the new century involves references to the century itself – we should make sure that the second use of the term doesn't leach into the third. This approach to education is worth endorsing only if we are very clear that the reason for helping kids to think deeply and critically, to evaluate and apply knowledge, is because these capacities will enrich their lives and contribute to the common good in a democratic society. Not because it will outfit them with skills that will be useful to the corporations where they may eventually work, thereby allowing one company – or country – to triumph over another.*

*In other words, apart from the means by which we educate (facts or skills, basic or advanced), we have to think about the ends. Even if there really were something new about 21st-century schooling, fostering “competitiveness in a global economy” is a wretched rationale for providing it. And that will continue to be true even when the next century rolls around.*

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