



Talking About 21st Century Skills

The concept of “21st century skills” is a term that has gained currency among many education reformers over the past few years. In general, when education reformers talk about “21st century skills” and related concepts, they are referring to the essential skills that children need to succeed as citizens and workers in the 21st century. These include such diverse competencies as civic literacy, global awareness, critical thinking and problem-solving, technology literacy, team-building, and a host of other skills not always associated with traditional education curricula and goals.

Although this concept is a critical one, FrameWorks research shows it is not necessarily understood or supported by the public. Therefore, it’s important that it be communicated in a particular way that increases public understanding and support for education policies that advance development of these skills. There are three cognitive traps that currently get in the way of such understanding and support:

- 1) a narrow definition of 21st century skills causes the public to think solely about computers in the classroom and not the full range of skills necessary for thriving in the 21st century.
- 2) invoking the term “21st century skills” on its own leads the public to fear that “the basics” will be overlooked, which then leads to an “either/or” discussion of what’s valuable, instead of a more nuanced understanding of how content and skills can and should be braided together.
- 3) talking about 21st century skills in the context of America’s global competitiveness leads Americans away from a productive conversation about education and toward a diffuse discussion of the American economy and its place within a global society.

Cognitive Trap: Computers in the Classroom

In numerous interviews that FrameWorks conducted during its research, informants defined “21st century skills” as computers in the classroom. This is, of course, a much more limited definition than the one meant by education reform advocates. It also suggests that a widespread understanding of the term cannot be assumed. In other words, just using the phrase “21st century skills” without explanation will lead people to think “computers” — as in hardware and software — and not the host of foundational competencies across content mastery and skill development that experts intend. This mismatch between expert and public thinking must be skillfully bridged in order to build public understanding and support.

Cognitive Trap: Just the Basics

FrameWorks research also demonstrates that the public is highly concerned that reform proposals have the potential to ignore or minimize the importance of the “basics,” i.e., reading, basic arithmetic and writing. The problem with the education system, most people believed, was that in spite of changes or “reforms” to the school system, children seem to be learning less and less, finishing their education without acquiring “the three R’s.” The reasoning underlying this “back to the basics” mantra is that schools must not be teaching the basics anymore, and further, that what they are currently teaching has entirely replaced the mastery of basic educational skills. This reasoning reflects a way of thinking about education and educational resources in which there is only so much education to go around, and that any innovation like 21st century skills must be “purchased” at the expense of a basic skill.

Cognitive Trap: Global Competition

The news media are filled with stories about the specter of America falling behind in its global competitiveness. FrameWorks’ research found that discussions of global competition, in the context of education, set off a negative discourse about the United States in the world: how the Chinese are beating us, how our jobs are going overseas, etc. While any of these conversations may be true, they do not advance concern for, or engagement with, the education system and reform. They move people from the domain of education to domains like workforce, military security and international relations. In this way, they break a cardinal framing rule: Keep people focused on the issue at hand, and don’t allow them to become distracted.

Also, “competitiveness” is what FrameWorks calls a “Level 1 value,” meaning a big idea that tells people what’s at stake. In this case, “competitiveness” works against two other Level 1 values — Cooperation and Interdependence — that are more aligned with a way of thinking about the rest of the world that is respectful of the increasingly multinational and global context in which we live.

Reframing the Discussion

There are several effective ways to reframe a discussion of 21st century skills to overcome these problems. The value of Future Preparation can be infused with the notion that we need to update our ideas about what people will need to learn and do in the 21st century. That means paying attention to the kinds of skills that reformers are trying to highlight. These skills must be built into the new structure of education as we go about remodeling our system to make it work for the future. Using the term “Basics Plus,” or the idea that we need to expand on the basics in order to meet future challenges, is an effective way of signaling to the public that the basics are not being discarded, but rather enhanced. Expanding the concept in this way will help overcome the automatic association of 21st century skills with computers alone, and help assuage people’s concerns that the basics are being overlooked.

Using the simplifying model of education reform as remodeling can be used to explain why we need to bring new parts of the education system into the updating process. When

you remodel, you look at new needs you have identified and try to figure out how to include those in the structure. One of the primary reasons to remodel is to update. One generally remodels when the current structure is out of sync with current requirements, needs and functions. In other words, what students need now is different from what they needed before; the logical step is to update the system so that it can fully meet the new circumstances.

Sample Questions and Answers

Q: Our district is instituting a new program whereby every child receives a laptop computer. What do you think of this effort?

False Start:

Every child will need to master a set of skills related to technology if he or she expects to succeed in the 21st century workforce. That said, there are many different kinds of technology and technology applications that can boost student achievement. But it is important to articulate a vision of technology use that fulfills these goals. Using these technologies for drill and practice programs might be useful, but is unlikely to transform education. If our goal is really to provide students with a different kind of education, structured to prepare them for a technology-laden world, the most relevant uses of technology are as tools and communication channels.

Analysis:

- Misses an opportunity at the top to talk about why technology matters to society.
- Focuses on individual student achievement, which takes the issue out of the public realm.
- Stays focused on computers, as opposed to a larger conversation about how technology relates to a larger set of skills to be mastered by students.
- Defines success narrowly, that it is only about employment.
- Talks about what is unlikely to “transform” education, which leads many to think that reform efforts are pie-in-the-sky idealism.

Reframed Response:

As we prepare our population for the future, we need to think carefully about what constitutes a solid education, including rich and rigorous content and the full mastery of a wide range of skills for applying that content to real-world situations in work and civic life. Mastery of technology is one aspect of a 21st century education, and an important learning tool if utilized properly. But it would be a mistake to think of a laptop as a solution in and of itself; the computer is only as useful as the curriculum enables it to be. Surely, the remodeling of our education system will involve the use of technology, but only insofar as it facilitates the deep learning that will ensure a bright future for our community.

Analysis:

- Invokes the value of Future Preparation, that we are discussing an issue of collective importance.

- Describes 21st century skills without using the term.
- Makes it clear that the computer is a tool and not a guarantor of a quality education.
- Uses the remodeling metaphor to indicate that the educational system is in the thick of change.
- Reminds the public that the reason for educating our population is our common future.

Q: What are the advantages of students acquiring “21st century skills?” Aren’t we just replacing the basics that are core to a quality education with a set of meaningless skills that will ultimately fail our young people?

False Start:

The problem isn’t that children are not learning their basics — their reading, writing and arithmetic. Indeed, student performance on the basics has steadily increased since 1973. But today, 21st century skills are a requisite of a successful life. We have pushed aside the 20th century social contract, under which possessing a great understanding of core subjects guaranteed ascent on the economic ladder. Now, the 21st century social contract states that, in addition to deep content knowledge, all citizens need a broad range of skills to be productive and prosperous. These include communication skills, thinking and problem-solving skills, creativity, interpersonal and collaborative skills, global awareness, and financial and civic literacy.

Analysis:

- Restates a problematic frame (“students aren’t learning their basics”).
- Uses the term “21st century skills” without defining it, meaning people are likely to think that this is about technology, or computers in the classroom.
- Focuses on individual success and not a prosperous society or future.

Reframed Response:

We are living in times of tremendous change, and that requires us as a nation to ensure that our future leaders and contributors are prepared for the challenges that inevitably lay ahead. It used to be that only a small percentage of students needed to master the basics — reading, writing and arithmetic — but now all students must gain mastery not just of those foundational skills, but also of a set of competencies that will enable them to adapt to an ever-changing work and civic environment: analytical and problem-solving skills, communications skills, interpersonal and collaborative skills, global awareness, and financial, technological and civic literacy. The education system must be remodeled to accommodate this much-higher learning bar.

Analysis:

- Uses Future Preparation to remind people of the larger context and societal reason for education.
- Re-directs the conversation away from the “either/or” dynamic of content vs. skills.

- Describes, rather than labels, 21st century skills.
- Ends with the remodeling metaphor as a way of saying that the system needs to change because the world is changing.