

Career Success Demands Strong 21st Century Literacy Skills

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If schools are going to help students seeking to become career ready, they will need to implement literacy programs that reflect the demands of the workplace. Students need to possess strong thinking, problem-solving, and literacy skills. Simply creating the career- and college-ready standards and assessments and introducing them to schools, parents, and communities will not be enough.

The issue is fairly simple and straightforward. Students graduating without the necessary literacy and academic skills will be unable to hold the productive jobs that are open now and that will be available in the future. According to statistics maintained by the Association for Manufacturing Excellence, there are well over 100,000 manufacturing jobs open right now for those who have the academic skills to be trainable for this kind of work. If the skills gap proliferates, the economy itself will fail to prosper (OECD, 2010).

The manufacturing industry itself has changed dramatically. Today's manufacturing employee needs to learn how to operate sophisticated equipment, and how to adapt from what they are doing to solve problems as they occur. About three million new manufacturing jobs will open up in the next five years, and today's students will need to graduate with the necessary academic ability to qualify them as ready hires.

To achieve this goal, the emphasis needs to be placed on creating a system that prepares *all* students to graduate with the intellectual abilities that will serve them in the future. Students would then be attending college without the need for remedial classes, and students would likewise be entering community college with the academic ability to improve their skills and learn how to do more advanced work.

Specifically, all students will need the ability to read with understanding, to analyze written information, to comprehend complex text, to write clearly, and to present information and analysis in rhetorically compelling formats with adequate supporting facts and references. In the recent past it was assumed that these skills were accomplished while students progressed from grade to grade. Unfortunately this has not always been the case. The current graduation rate in the United States is far too low to support an expanding economy. And implementing the call for change has taken thirty years (Nation at Risk, 1983).

By the dawn of the 21st Century the idea of the three R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic) was being matched with the 4 C's (collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity) (Kay and Greenhill, 2013). The 3 R's and 4 C's together define what is being called the *21st Century skills*. All students will need these to take advantage of opportunities in the future. Now a new set of standards, the Common Core State Standards, which require all students to achieve high academic requirements, is being adopted by the majority of states.

Having a vision, though, does not make reality.

But how can this transformation take place? What should teachers do? How should schools help make this happen?

A Constellation of Changes

The answer will not be found in looking to change one or two elements of what make up a school. Rather, a constellation of changes will need to sweep through the entire system, with specific steps that are different in each school and district:

- **First**, the entire curriculum needs to be changed. Currently the curriculum in most state school systems is based on making adequate yearly progress. This is the wrong orientation. The right orientation is a literacy program that has an academic emphasis, just like the college-oriented part of the standards, but is rich in examples and problems that are career oriented. Shifting this perspective will not be accomplished quickly or even within two or three years. Teachers will need access to hundreds of hours for professional development. Unfortunately, the current approach to professional development deals mostly with orienting teachers and school leaders to the new assessments and presenting the standards to teachers and principals.
- **Second**, teachers and principals will need to learn more about what students who are career-oriented will need, such as academic instruction that is focused on developing abilities that are directly transportable to the workplace. For example, aside from learning mathematics, future engineers now must also be able to do things like write a clear narrative project report or an argumentative document warning of a bridge in disrepair. Teachers and principals will need help in building such examples.
- **Third**, this change will need to be systemic. Helping students to become “ready” will require a new starting point. We need to be thinking beyond the middle and high school classroom. Early childhood is as much a factor in improving graduation rates as any other part of the system. The reality is that many disadvantaged children (more than 20% of our students) start school with fewer vocabulary words. This gap in vocabulary knowledge is directly related to reading comprehension and academic achievement. It is often observed that with each passing year students who started behind fall further behind and that by the time students are entering high school their reading skills and other academic skills are years behind their middle class peers.
- **Fourth**, the responsibility for driving students to meet the new English Language Arts and Mathematics standards will not be the sole responsibility of teachers in those disciplines. *All* teachers will need help in developing demanding reading and writing activities that are part of social studies, science, and other subjects. Teachers will need time to learn how to integrate these lessons—and to change what needs to be changed as more time passes.

An example of this change was recently noted during a visit by the Secretary of Education to a school in New York where he saw the application of mathematics, including Pythagorean Theorem by career-ready students. This visit of the Secretary triggered the recollection of a site-visitor (for the Blue Ribbon program) of seeing a tenth grade mathematics class where the Pythagorean Theorem was being presented. Most of the students had their heads down on the desk. Later that same afternoon, the observer saw the wood shop instructor demonstrate how to measure a piece of wood to fit across a right-angle to form a triangle. He managed to explain the process of adding the square of two numbers and then finding the square root in one take. The wood was measured and the cuts were made and the triangle was formed. These were the same students who had their heads down that morning in mathematics class. What would have happened if the mathematics teacher understood that his students could learn and would learn if the academic skill was linked to an application?
- **Fifth**, research on how to integrate academic work with career oriented examples needs to be developed. Some of the research should look at long-term outcomes, while other research reports on what has been tried, how it has worked, and what aspects of instruction should be modified.
- **Sixth**, teacher education programs need to reflect the new model of instruction. Social studies teachers do not have to become reading teachers, but they do

have to have a greater understanding of reading and writing and how it can fit in and help students learn in their courses. Similarly, reading and writing teachers do not need to become content specialists but they do need a familiarity with the type of analytic work taught in the content course. All teachers will need to acquire a wider responsibility to assign writing assignments to their students.

- **Seventh**, schools will need to have and use reading and literacy coaches to help all teachers integrate content with process.

Range of Abilities to Impart

In addition, the reading program needs to emphasize the wide range of abilities teachers will need to teach to students. This will include:

- a. greater emphasis on comprehension using increasingly complex text.
- b. greater emphasis on writing, with every student writing every week (which means teachers will need more time with each student).
- c. greater emphasis on supporting in writing and in oral communications opinions and answers with evidence, and directly relating this skill to the workplace.
- d. greater emphasis on vocabulary development to help reading and communication skills; including modeling and instruction in interpreting, explaining, and applying domain specific vocabulary when responding and discussing the reading material, new learning, or subject matter.
- e. an emphasis on how to read for understanding increasingly complex nonfiction in the content areas.

Some authorities are recommending that teachers and school leaders will need 50 hours of professional development for each area of change. In 2009 IRA estimated that a comprehensive shift to emphasize the teaching of literacy skills to all children would take in excess of 250 hours a year.

In summary, as the nation moves forward with implementing the career- and college-ready standards we can easily predict that too little will be done to help the career oriented student. We are seeing the beginnings of that divide today. The curriculum is still rich in college-oriented examples, while the implementation phase of the standards movement is being rushed to meet a political time-table for change. To help students become career-ready will take time that must be used to make the changes outlined here.

The opportunity to make a difference is exciting. Literacy programs will be a central part of that process by providing each student with the academic tools they need to be successful. But this is not a change that will happen in one class or during one grade. The changes in literacy orientation and education needs to be a school system wide effort that starts early in a child's life and continues through the twelfth grade.

We know that success will not happen on its own; the question is: Will we support the expansion of literacy programs that will support this opportunity?

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