

Three Challenges for Education Leaders

Douglas B. Reeves

Although the demand for 21st century skills has spawned a good deal of enthusiasm, the reality of curriculum in K–12 education remains firmly rooted in the traditions of past centuries. Curriculum practices are firmly rooted in the 20th century, and assessment practices barely depart from the 16th century, when the Ming dynasty originated the multiple-choice test in China.

The deployment of technology and the public embrace of 21st century skills (one of the best frameworks comes from the [Partnership for 21st Century Skills](#)) are inadequate substitutes for a genuine commitment to 21st century learning. This article considers three essential challenges for education leaders who are grappling with the challenges of fostering 21st century skills: the assessment gap, the teaching gap, and the leadership gap.

Challenge 1: The Assessment Gap

Reasonable people differ about the details of 21st century skills, but the common themes that emerge include communication, teamwork, creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving. Although I've never heard an education leader advocate lower standards for communication or diminishing teamwork, there is an enormous gap between rhetoric and reality.

Effective communication includes both written and oral skills and the use of technology to convey ideas, evidence, images, and emotions. Despite the evidence on the importance of communication, the use of evidence-based practices to assess communication skills is remarkably low (Kihara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009).

Moreover, despite the clarion calls for teamwork and collaboration, no state test—the barometer by which many teachers, administrators, and education systems are measured—assesses students in a team or collaborative environment. Our words say "teamwork," but our assessments scream, "Compete, don't cooperate, with your classmates."

Finally, although policymakers talk a good game about 21st century skills such as problem solving and creativity, assessments of student performance (and, by implication, teaching and leadership performance) remain overwhelmingly focused on content knowledge and basic literacy skills. Academic content and skills are necessary but in insufficient condition to meet the needs of the 21st century.

Challenge 2: The Teaching Gap

Robert Marzano (2009) recently issued a scathing indictment of schools claiming to use "Marzano strategies" that he neither supports nor endorses. In previous decades, one could substitute "Marzano" with "Hunter," "Dewey," or

"Socrates" (illustrious company indeed) to see the pattern of thoughtful ingenuity followed by oversimplification; mass production; and, often, disappointment. The cottage industry that claims to use "Marzano strategies" without being informed by Marzano's actual research is as superficial as the claim that "Socratic dialogue" is little more than asking questions of students.

Socrates did indeed ask questions, but these queries were sufficiently challenging that the result was a state-administered dose of hemlock for his efforts. Consider the contrast between Socrates' challenging pedagogical stance and the contemporary education ethic in which the student is the customer, demanding immediate gratification. Teachers fear delivering honest and challenging feedback, and with each stroke of candor, teachers and school leaders risk negative evaluations that, through social networking tools, become an instantaneous combination of indictment and presumed truth—the hemlock of the 21st century.

Although the conventional wisdom is that teacher tenure is the root of all education evil, the other extreme is equally pernicious. In a world where "customer satisfaction" is the coin of the realm, the teachers who are most highly rewarded will not be those who tell the truth about student performance, but rather those who tell the customers what they want to hear. "Your 9th grader can't read? No problem—it's a societal issue, and we'll deliver a diploma without the inconvenience of work, remediation, or confrontation."

Compare the survivability of the teachers and administrators who spout such banal proclamations to those who say, "These kids face significant challenges, but we nevertheless require them to achieve our standards. They can succeed on the basketball court and in the internationally competitive world of electronic games, and they must do the same in our classrooms." Which approach is most rewarded in your school—great challenges and high expectations, or patronizing praise of inadequate performance?

Challenge 3: The Leadership Gap

No teacher wakes up in the morning thinking, "How can I mess up kids today?" Inadequate teaching practices—inconsistent curriculum; infrequent feedback; toxic grading systems; and resistance to 21st century skills like critical thinking, collaboration, and communication—are a direct result of leadership failures. Leaders who bring in an inspirational speaker to talk about 21st century skills but who evaluate teachers with centuries-old assessments should not point the finger at unions, teachers, or colleges of education. This is a failure of leadership, not a failure of teachers.

If we aspire to have 21st century teaching and learning, then we must demand 21st century leaders. Specifically, if we require critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and creativity, then leaders must assess now—today, this very hour—the instances in which you can observe these characteristics in classrooms.

Just visit 10 classrooms right now and count the instances in which you observe these skills. Then do the same next week, and the week after that, and the week after that. If 8 of those 10 classrooms show evidence of isolation rather than collaboration, recitation rather than problem solving, regurgitation rather than creativity, and memorization rather than critical analysis, then don't blame the teachers. That condition stems from leaders who will spend \$100,000 and 100 hours to attend a conference about 21st century learning, but who will not devote a 50-cent cup of coffee and five minutes to engage a teacher in a challenging conversation about effective classroom practice.

From Blame to Responsibility

Blame is a remarkably popular but ineffective strategy for change. School systems blame colleges, who, in turn, blame school systems. Administrators blame teachers, who, in turn, blame administrators for impossible workloads and inadequate working conditions. High schools blame middle schools, who blame elementary schools, who blame early childhood education, who blame parents, who, I suppose, can blame prenatal care. Where does it stop?

If we aspire to seize the opportunities 21st century learning presents, then we must first make the shift from blame to responsibility. When our students confront difficulty and failure, we expect them to respect our feedback, change their learning strategies, and try again. That is the essence of the resilience, self-discipline, and work ethic that are essential for successful students in every century. Therefore, education professionals must embrace feedback, seize personal responsibility, and model the changes required to close the gaps in assessment, teaching, and leadership.

References

Kiuhara, S. A., Graham, S., & Hawken, L. S. (2009, February). Teaching writing to high school students: A national survey. *Journal of educational psychology, 101*(1), 136–160.

Marzano, R. J. (2009, September). Setting the record straight on high-yield strategies. *Phi Delta Kappan, 91*(6), 30–37.

Douglas B. Reeves is founder of the Leadership and Learning Center in Salem, Mass. He has also authored six ASCD books, including [Leading Change in Your School: How to Conquer Myths, Build Commitment, and Get Results](#).