

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning

### Focus: The Forgotten 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skill

by Douglas B. Reeves

“I knew he was a special boy-friend,” explained my mother, “because he gave me an extravagant gift for my high school graduation.” What was the hopelessly romantic present for this 1940 graduate? The ballpoint pen, recently invented by Ladislav Biro in 1935. It was a technological marvel, relieving students of the tedious burden of refilling the ink. Still researching, writing, and teaching in her 87th year, my mother was impressed more by the romance than the technology of the pen. Even as the new technology became widely used, not a single school system employed a “Director of Ballpoint Pens” because it was clear that its technology was the servant, not the master, of education.

This article posits that technology is the ballpoint pen of the 21st century and that focus, not technological manipulation, is the most important skill in the decades ahead. Technology can ease our burdens, allow us to make mistakes and make progress quickly and efficiently, and sometimes, though not always, improve teaching and learning. Educational leaders and policymakers must, however, distinguish between romance and utility. Breathless enthusiasm for 21st century technology can be as seductive as a beautiful writing instrument, but at the end of the day, our excitement must be tempered by the realization that the latest gadget is just the latest incarnation of a ballpoint pen. This reconsideration of the role of technology in education has important implications for teachers, school administrators, and policymakers.

#### Focus in the Classroom

Watch a student (let’s call him James, a young man who lives in my home) “do homework” on a computer and you are more likely to watch a mix of simultaneous conversations through instant messages, text messages on a cell phone, downloads of music and videos, receipt and sending of Facebook updates, and a review of multiple tweets. These students are only modeling the frenetic behavior of their multi-tasking parents who also ignore the evidence, and purchase the lie of the virtues of multi-tasking. In fact, these students and their parents are “switch-tasking”, losing efficiency and time, each time their attention is diverted. Thus the 20-minute homework assignment remains unfinished after two hours “working” on the computer. If the student (yes, James, I’m speaking directly to you) wanted to have more time with friends, then the better strategy would be focusing on homework for 20 minutes and then giving his friends 100 minutes of his undivided attention.

Perhaps one of the most important 21st century skills that teachers can impart is that of focus-devoted concentration to a task. Gallagher (2009) explodes the myth of multi-tasking and documents in meticulous detail the benefits of focus. She also concludes that focus has a price:

“When you focus, you’re spending limited cognitive currency that should be wisely invested, because the stakes are high...Your attentional system selects a certain chunk of what’s there, which

gets valuable cerebral real estate and, therefore, the chance to affect your behavior...*And the rest is consigned to the shadows or oblivion.*” (p. 28)

For students who are (and I choose my terms wisely) addicted to multiple stimuli, focus entails loss – the loss of immediate response to friends, the loss of uninterrupted connection to a social circle, and the loss of responsibility for completing the challenging task at hand. Thus teachers who choose to embrace the 21st century skill of focus have an enormous hurdle to overcome: helping students understand that the benefits of focus are worth the costs. Fortunately, the Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance (Ericsson et al., 2006) offers abundant evidence that these teachers are right. In every discipline and every culture, success is the result of sustained, effective, and focused practice. In synthesizing the research, Colvin (2008) wisely concludes that it is not mysterious talent that leads to success, but deliberate practice and effective coaching by teachers who keep us focused on the right task at the right level.

#### Focus in the Board Room

My fervent sermons to teenagers and teachers are incomplete and hypocritical if I fail to consider the damage done to focus by leaders and policymakers who are profligate in their embrace of technology. These leaders might extol the virtues of focus during the next executive meeting, just as soon as they finish responding to their e-mail on their device not so subtly concealed

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under the conference table. In fact, institutional fragmentation is a big part of the problem, with data warehouses substituting for data analysis, and technology initiatives, replacing learning initiatives. White (2009) and Reeves (in press) establish that proliferating initiatives are inversely related to gains in student achievement. When leaders have more initiatives than they can monitor, they doom their colleagues to the Law of Initiative Fatigue, in which each successive effort receives lower levels of time, resources, attention, and emotional energy.

If the focus of an educational system is student learning, as most mission statements claim, then leaders must compare the reality of their employment of technology with their stated intention. If they would not be impressed by a cabinet full of ballpoint pens, why would they consider a roomful of computers a success story? While they would intuitively understand the need to integrate ballpoint pens into every class, the application of technology remains idiosyncratic, embraced by some and rejected by others.

Finally, leaders must consider what their organizational chart says about their priorities. In the 1950s, when a school system had one computer that was primarily used for payroll, it perhaps made sense for the technology officer to report to the business office or to the superintendent. But in this century, when technology must serve instructional needs, why is it so rare to find an organization chart in which the technology office is subordinate to instructional leadership? When the divergence between technology and instruction starts in the boardroom, it is not difficult to understand why the dichotomy persists in the classroom.

### Luddites and Learning

Ned Ludd and his colleagues took their distaste for modern technology

to an extreme precisely 200 years ago, smashing textile machinery in the hopes of preserving the past. Despite my temptation to smash a few cell phones, the clarion call of this article is not for Luddites but for learning. Our students do not learn through superficial exposure to technology any more than they acquire writing skills through close proximity to ballpoint pens. Technology will change, but the need for focus will not, and it remains as important in this century as it was in the Lyceum.

Our failure to focus has a price. Why do pilots ignore safety warnings and policies that require a focus on safety and thus jeopardize the lives of their passengers? Why do train conductors send text messages while at the controls of a speeding train, ignoring the stopped car in front of them? Focus saves lives and a lack of focus is deadly. School leaders know intellectually the power of focus, but every year there is a proliferation of new initiatives without an organizational discipline of removing unnecessary and conflicting initiatives. In the hours before writing this paragraph, I heard a superintendent claim to be focused exclusively on six priorities. Within minutes of that claim, however, I was treated to his proposed new “scorecard” that included more than 100 initiatives, many of which were labels without meaningful explanations. His staff development catalog included more than 300 separate courses, some of which were more than a decade old and few of which were linked clearly to the six priorities.

The enthusiasm for 21st century skills is understandable, if a bit overstated. Lists of skills, like lists of academic standards, are impotent if they result in fragmentation rather than focus. It is intellectually inconsistent to advocate “critical thinking” while cramming more and more content into a limited

number of minutes in the school day. While we can improve the speed and storage capacity of computers, we cannot improve the speed and capacity of students by stacking three-ring binders filled with new expectations to the sky. In order for our students to reach their potential and meet the demands of this and future centuries, they must learn in an environment that offers the opportunity for deliberation and focus. That will only happen if teachers and educational leaders are willing to do the same.

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