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Got Languages? Powerful Skills for the 21st Century

Lynne McClendon

SCOLT Executive Director

The theme for the 46th conference reflects the growing recognition of the value of language acquisition as a tool for 21st century citizens. Being able in another language to communicate information, know-how, and expertise—all rooted in content knowledge and application—elevates the level at which a person is capable of interacting. America's future, from many reports, is increasingly going to need precisely this type of interaction from its citizens to keep our country competitive and in a leadership role. However, the educational system has yet to embrace a comprehensive plan for ensuring students have access to quality articulated long-sequenced programs of language study. At least one program on the national landscape, the *Partnership for the 21st Century Skills*, has included foreign language study in its attempt to reexamine the educational direction for the United States.

The *Partnership for 21st Century Skills* (P21) was founded in 2002 through a collaboration of the U.S. Department of Education and several organizations: AOL Time Warner Foundation, Apple Computer, Inc., Cable in the Classroom, Cisco Systems, Inc., Dell Computer Corporation, Microsoft Corporation, National Education Association, and SAP. This organization's mission was to build collaborative partnerships among education, business, community, and government leaders. These partners sought to develop a snapshot of the sort of education a person living and working in the 21st century would need to be self-sustaining and a productive member of society. The snapshot would provide direction for redesigning educational systems to support those needs.

The Partnership went directly to the educational and business communities to take the pulse of the nation from the standpoint of what employers saw the workforce needing in knowledge and skills to continue, improve, and grow business and industry of the United States. Through surveys and other research approaches, various themes emerged, and they helped formulate the P21 Framework, which is outlined in the following pages.

The Partnership has endured some criticism that its focus seems to highlight skills rather than a mastery of core academic subjects, but with any emerging document, the scope and multiple components of such an undertaking may seem skewed. The educational focus for years has been on basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills and content knowledge. While today these basic

educational building blocks are and will be still needed, learners also need an array of other skills. The work of the P21 has sought to identify other skills, and hence, such research has given rise to the notion that core academic subjects are somehow less important, which is not the case. The Framework and other 21st Century documents view all the components as fully interconnected for 21st century teaching and learning.

What follows are excerpts from two documents published by the *Partnership for 21st Century Skills*, and they are reprinted here by permission from this organization. The first excerpt is taken from *The MILE Guide: Milestones for Improving Learning and Education* (2009), and it shows an overview of the core subjects, skills, and themes. The overview is provided to give readers some insight into the nature of this educational framework. Readers are invited to view all the documents and the organizational history at <<http://www.p21.org/>>. It is important to understand that the P21 does not prescribe one way to “get on board” but allows states to show how their plan supports the P21 principles. Readers may view various state approaches outlined at the P21 Web site.

The second excerpt is taken from *Are They Really Ready for Work?*, which is a longer document produced by the joint efforts of The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management (2006). The focus of the surveys taken in 2006 was directed at obtaining a corporate perspective on the readiness of new entrants into the U.S. workforce.

Respondents rated skills based using a Likert scale from *Not Important* to *Important* to *Very Important*. The readiness level was assessed using a similar scale labeled *Deficient*, *Adequate*, and *Excellent*. Finally, employers were asked to rate the increase or the decrease in importance of these same skills and the importance of emerging content areas over the next five years. The final rating was selected for inclusion in this article because one of the important emerging content areas addresses foreign languages. To be fair, this extensive report covers many aspects of workforce readiness of which foreign language does receive some recognition.

P21 Framework Overview and 21st Century Student Outcomes

The P21 has developed a unified, collective vision for 21st century learning that will strengthen American education. The Partnership created the *Framework for 21st Century Learning*, which describes the knowledge, skills, and expertise students must master to succeed in work and life. The *Framework* presents a vision for 21st century student outcomes, a blending of content knowledge, specific skills, expertise and literacies, and the support systems that are needed to produce these outcomes.

Core Subjects and 21st Century Themes

Mastery of core academic subjects is the base upon which all 21st century learning occurs. Core subjects include English, reading or language arts, foreign languages, arts, mathematics, economics, science, geography, history, government, and civics. Schools must support students in developing deep mastery of core academic subjects while integrating 21st century interdisciplinary themes into these academic subject areas. These themes include Global Awareness, Financial, Economic, Business and Entrepreneurial Literacy, Civic Literacy, Health Literacy, and Environmental Literacy.

Next, learning and innovation skills are what separate students who are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments in the 21st century and those who are not. This set of skills includes Creativity and Innovation, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, and Communication and Collaboration skills. Additionally, people in the 21st century live in a technology and media-driven environment, marked by access to an abundance of information, rapid changes in technology tools, and the ability to collaborate and make individual contributions on an unprecedented scale. To be effective in the 21st century, citizens and workers must be able to exhibit a range of functional and critical thinking skills related to information, media, and technology. These skills can be categorized as Information Literacy, Media Literacy, and ICT (Information, Communications and Technology) Literacy.

In addition to the aforementioned skills, today's life and work environments require far more than thinking skills and content knowledge. The ability to navigate the complex life and work environments in the globally competitive information age requires students to pay rigorous attention to developing adequate life and career skills. To do so, students must have high degrees of flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, and social and cross-cultural skills as well as being productive and accountable in the workplace. Moreover, they should have strong leadership skills and act responsibly.

21st Century Support Systems

Developing a comprehensive framework for 21st century learning requires more than identifying specific skills, content knowledge, expertise and literacies. An innovative support system must be created to help students master the multi-dimensional abilities required of them in the 21st century. The Partnership has identified five critical support systems that ensure student mastery of 21st century skills. I will provide a brief description of these support systems, the first of which are 21st Century Standards. These standards should reflect an integration of academic content knowledge and 21st century skills that are both observable and measurable as well as communicate the larger picture that informs teaching and learning to allow for deep mastery. The second, Assessments of 21st Century Skills, talks about a greater variety of assessments both formative and summative.

Also, portfolios and capstone projects should be added, as appropriate, to capture and measure student output to inform the learner of understanding, application, and progress as well as weaknesses for improvement and feedback for instructional implementation.

21st Century Curriculum and Instruction was identified as the third support system that has 21st century skills embedded in the academic content as a cohesive, interrelated unit. Additionally, instructional practices include more student-centered activities, authentic application of knowledge and understanding, differentiated instruction, and student-input into the lesson design. Next, teachers should have access to professional development opportunities regardless of time and place, including job-embedded activities. The nature of the 21st Century Professional Development should help teachers integrate content knowledge and skills in their own instructional and assessment practices. Finally, 21st Century Learning Environments are called for. Appropriate physical space and access to technology are important supports that help students master both core content and skills.

Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of Increasing Importance.

This section discusses findings from the surveys given to gauge employers' perspectives on the basic knowledge and applied skills of new entrants to the 21st Century workforce in the United States. Specific to foreign language study, it was noted that only 11% of employer respondents consider foreign language as *Very Important* for current job performance for high school or college graduates. Yet, when asked to project the changing importance of all 20 basic knowledge areas and applied skills over the next five years, nearly two-thirds (63%) report that knowledge of a *Foreign Language* is a basic skill that will "increase in importance" ranking it higher than any other basic skill queried. Related topics that appear in a separate question about emerging content areas support the growing importance of *Foreign Languages*. When asked to select which emerging content areas will be *most critical* in the near future, roughly half of the employer respondents selected *Use of Non-English Languages as a Tool for Understanding Other Nations, Markets, and Cultures* (49%), and *Demonstrate Understanding of Global Markets and the Economic and Cultural Impacts of Globalization* (53%). In follow-up interviews, several individuals emphasized the importance of knowing foreign languages and understanding other cultures and their relevance in global work environments. Randy Steinhoff of Quest Diagnostics stated,

We have employees in Mexico, Belgium, and the UK, and we conduct business in several international markets directly or through joint ventures. Foreign languages are important in a global economy. In the past, we had not paid enough attention to this. Now, knowledge of foreign languages is in our leadership profile. We're asking people what languages they speak.

Annette Byrd of GlaxoSmithKline adds to Steinhoff and points out the advantages of knowing a foreign language, stating that

We are a global company with many people working on global teams and traveling to other countries. If they speak another language when on a global team or attend a meeting in another country, they are so much further ahead of their colleagues who have no foreign language skills.

Byrd also noted that in many GlaxoSmithKline facilities in other countries, the employees speak English because it is a required language in schools. In contrast, the United States Department of Education indicates that fewer than 8% of U.S. undergraduates take a foreign language class in a given year, and fewer than 2% study abroad. Most colleges do not require much study of foreign languages, nor are foreign languages emphasized in U.S. elementary and secondary schools, unlike schools in other industrialized nations (Haurwitz, 2006).

Conclusion

Whether our own states or our own districts and institutions are officially part of P21, we can support such an integration of content knowledge and the skill of learning to use a world language to communicate, to collaborate, and to be productive. Technology allows language learners access to opportunities beyond their own doors, and as language educators, we must continually employ best technological practices in instructional and assessment habits. Beyond ensuring that classroom instruction is in line with P21 goals, world languages practitioners must share this approach with students, parents, administration, community, and elected officials to help them understand the vital role that world languages study has in the educational life of P-16 students. For further information about P21, readers are encouraged to visit the Web site < <http://www.p21.org> >.

Notes:

1. The Partnership views all the components as fully interconnected in the process of 21st century teaching and learning.

References

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