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19th Century Skills

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John Robert Wooden, the revered UCLA basketball coach, used to tell his players: “If you fail to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” According to the Diploma to Nowhere report last summer from the Strong American Schools project, more than one million of our high school graduates are in remedial courses at college every year. Evidently we failed to prepare them to meet higher education’s academic expectations.

The 21st Century Skills movement celebrates computer literacy as one remedy for this failing. Now, I love my Macintosh, and I have typeset the first seventy-seven issues of *The Concord Review* on the computer, but I still have to read and understand each essay, and to proofread eleven papers in each issue twice, line by line, and the computer is no help at all with that. The new Kindle (2) from Amazon is able to read books to you—great technology!—but it cannot tell you anything about what they mean.

In my view, the 19th (and prior) Century Skills of reading and writing are still a job for human beings, with little help from technology. Computers can check your grammar, and take a look at your spelling, but they can’t read for you and they can’t think for you, and they really cannot take the tasks of academic reading and writing off the shoulders of the students in our schools.

There appears to be a philosophical gap between those who, in their desire to make our schools more accountable, focus on the acquisition and testing of academic knowledge and skills in basic reading and math, on the one hand, and those who, from talking to business people, now argue that this is not enough. This latter group is now calling for 21st Century critical thinking, communication skills, collaborative problem solving, and global awareness.

Neither group gives much thought, in my view, to whether any of our high school students have read one complete nonfiction book or written one serious research paper before they are sent off to their college remedial courses.

Of course, reading history books and writing term papers can seem so 19th Century, but as long as higher education and good jobs require people to be able to read and understand quantities of nonfiction material, and to write fairly serious academic research papers, memos, legal opinions, status reports, legislation and the like, it might be a good idea to try to do a better job of preparing our students for those tasks.

The College Board’s writing test is a joke (there are lots of prep services helping students write their essays in advance), and the colleges themselves, through their admissions offices, are asking students for 500-word personal statements about their lives and their feelings. The NAEP writing test for 2011 (I was on the Steering Committee, but couldn’t influence anyone) asks students for two 25-minute responses to prompts, perhaps on the level of “What is your opinion of school uniforms?” These efforts could hardly do

more to convince high schools **not** to prepare students for actual academic writing tasks now or in their future.

The NAEP argument is that the college, business and military worlds want people who can “write on demand.” That is, sit down for 25 minutes and respond to some short shallow prompt, as this “skill” is to be tested. I was a division training manager for Polaroid, back in the day, and it is my understanding that even if a boss comes to an employee and asks on Friday for a report Monday, it is not due in 25 minutes, for a start, but also any such report will be based on lots of knowledge of the subject, coming from doing the job over a period of time and having had time to gather information and reflect on what should be in the report. An impromptu skit may be just what the Second City ordered, but it is no recipe for critical thinking or academic (or business/military) expository writing.

There are a number of problems with trying to persuade high schools to assign complete nonfiction books and serious research papers. Many teachers, if they graduated from teacher education programs, may not have read that many books and may not have been asked to do research papers themselves, so they have little idea how to coach students to do them. But even those teachers who know enough and would be willing to assign serious papers, have no time to assign, guide or assess them. While almost all high schools would say they want students to be able to do academic essays, they set aside no time for teachers to work on them. More time is available in most high schools for tackling practice on the football field and layup drills on the basketball court than for working on term papers in English and history classes.

The 21st Century Skills people and the Core Knowledge people could get together, and agree, perhaps, that students need more knowledge than can appear on multiple-choice tests, and that they need to be able to write more than 500 words about themselves. Standardized testing will not prepare students for college, even if it provides some accountability for basic reading and math skills. And mooning over technology and industry will not raise standards for academic reading and writing, nor will it prepare students to skip remedial work at the college level.

Having published 846 history research papers by high school students from 36 countries since 1987, and having received thousands more as submissions, I know that high school students will rise to the challenge of real preparation for further education. Many of our authors have even been inspired to do long serious (8,000-13,000-word) papers on their own as independent studies, much as high school basketball players and other athletes spend long hours practicing on their own, because they are aware of the high standards that are out there.

If students are willing to meet higher standards, as so many have told Achieve and the National Governors’ Association and the Great City Schools that they are, we should be willing to set them, if only to leave fewer of them condemned to remedial courses when they move on.

“Teach by Example”

Will Fitzhugh [founder]

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