

21st Century Learning

Thursday, 23 May 2013

Hmm interesting, is 21st Century learning really progressive education incognito?

I keep hearing/reading about all these wonderful ideas about teaching and learning for the 21st century. I believe these wonderful ideas are essentially a reform and an answer to the current pedagogy, one which is failing to produce and answer the calls of a fast and ever changing world. This new pedagogy includes skills that are named 21st century skills and include: communication, citizenship, character, collaboration and teamwork, creativity and imagination, and critical thinking and problem solving (Fullan, 2013). In order to build on these skills the curriculum needs to be redesigned and teachers need to take different approaches or focuses. What I have been wondering is where did all these ideas come from? Have they been thought of before? Who is the major theorist behind the 21st century pedagogical reform? These critical reflections lead me to discover that perhaps 21st century learning may be progressive education incognito.

There is a board known as the Progressive Education Association (PEA) and has been around since 1919 (Little, 2013). Back in 1919, during a meeting in Washington D.C., PEA adopted their founding tenets and principles of what progressive education should be (figure 1).

Founding Principles

- Freedom to develop naturally.
- Interest the motive of all work
- The teacher as a guide, not a task-master
- Scientific study of pupil development
- Greater attention to all that affects the child's physical development
- Cooperation between school and home to meet the needs of child-life
- The progressive school as a leader in educational movements

Figure 1. The founding principles and tenets of the PEA, adopted from Little (2013).

Unfortunately, PEA was rendered out of favour in the American system due to conservative politics in the 50s, and of course the latter half of the 20th century was then dominated by knowledge transmission, direct instruction, and standardized testing (Little, 2013). As educators realized standardized testing was not significantly increasing graduation rates, coupled with the notion that America was losing position as a world economic and intellectual leader, the system had to be changed. This change is known as the 21st century education or 21st century learning and is a world-wide phenomenon (Little, 2013), but is it really just progressive education rearing its head, newly transformed?

In 1986, a new group succeeded the PEA, called the Network of Progressive Educators (NPE). The NPE also held an annual conference in 1987 where they

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published an updated version of the principles and tenets for progressive education (figure 2).

Principles of Progressive Education

- Curriculum Tailored to Individual Learning Styles, Developmental Needs, and Intellectual Interests
- The Student as an Active Partner in Learning
- Arts, Sciences, and Humanities Equally Valued in an Interdisciplinary Curriculum
- Learning Through Direct Experience and Primary Material
- A Focus on Multi-Cultural and Global Perspectives
- The School as a Model of Democracy
- The School as a Humane Environment
- Commitment to the Community Beyond School
- Commitment to a Healthy Body through Sports and Outdoor Play

Figure 2. The founding principles and tenets of NPE, adapted from Little (2013).

After looking at this more updated figure it appears as though there are some similarities between 21st century learning and progressive education. These include: problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration, individualization, and globalization. Here is a school that has been using progressive education for over 40 years, see the similarities for yourself.



One of the differences, however, appears to be the use of technology. Well it is apparent that 100 years ago technologies were not as ubiquitous or advanced as today. However, progressive education views science as paramount for a democratic society (little, 2013), and is it not true that technologies incorporate all types of science? I certainly think that technologies are paramount for a democratic society, just think of electronic polling stations.

I do not doubt for a second that 21st century learning will bring exceptional value to education, human beings, and the systems of the future. All I wanted to accomplish was to better understand the history of 21st century learning. It appears as though progressive education and 21st century educational practice expose prominent similarities. The ideas of the 21st century learning have been around for at least a century, only the lens and context has changed.

Fullan, M. (2013). *Stratosphere: integrating technology, pedagogy, and change knowledge*. Pearson Canada Inc.

Little, T. (2013). 21st century learning and progressive education: an intersection. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 9(1), 84—96.

Posted by [Peter G from Brock](#) at [00:51](#)

4 comments:

**Kristin Doering** 23 May 2013 at 17:21

Peter,

What an interesting post! I really appreciate the comparison between progressive and 21st century education. I always enjoy reading about where ideas stem from. You're right - there are definitely some similarities, as you have pointed out. The you-tube video you presented is a great example of progressive education, where students find purpose and meaning in their learning because learning is tailored to their strengths, needs, and preferences. Your post is very representative of what we talked about in class the other day. 21st century learning is all about real-world applications, problem solving, interdisciplinary studies, critical thinking and collaboration to name a few. Students need to be able to take these skills forward with them as lifelong learners. Technology may be a new tool in the 21st century, but some of the same skills are in effect today as they were during the progressive era. However, as Fullan has stated in Stratosphere, and as Marc mentioned in his most recent post, we as educators must be careful to not use technology as a crutch for learning (and we must pass this notion on to our students). There are still many downfalls of using technology when talking about learning such as technical problems, using technology for learning in the same pedagogical fashion as before, the digital divide, etc. Rather, technology should be used as a tool to support, enrich, and enhance the learning experience.

[Reply](#)**M Skarzi** 27 May 2013 at 14:42

Hi Peter,

Great final post!! I also think that you did a great job in comparing the centuries of learning styles, and you definitely filled me in on some of the history. I think that it's safe to say that as long as computers have existed, people have been awaiting the day for it's full integration into our lives. It almost seems as if many people want this, however the education system fights it. In their defense, it is difficult and nearly impossible to stay on top of things... I can barely get my phone through a 3 year contract without it being completely out of date. To expect the education system to invest millions only to find the same results is almost laughable. Regardless, provided that we understand the necessity for it, and are not merely turning a blind eye, I think we are alright.

Little bit of a rant, but either way, great post!

[Reply](#)**Nancy Orschel** 31 May 2013 at 10:59

Hi Peter

I enjoyed your historical perspective of the comparison of progressive education and 21st century education. I agree with you that there is similarities between these two concepts. I always like to look back to see where the future will take us. I do believe that we don't have to reinvent the wheel. It is like we say in class we need to keep what works from the old story to bring them forward to our new story. I agree with you that the integration of technology is important to include in the 21st century classroom but I believe things like arts and science go beyond technology and requires us as educators to find a variety of ways to engage our students. After reading your post I reflected on Maria Montessori vision for education which has been around for many years, She also allowed students to direct their own learning and was very progressive in her ideas of education. Great post Peter


[Reply](#)**curriculum/assessment for 21st Century** 3 June 2013 at 11:01

Excellent historical perspective. It's not entirely right I don't think. Hattie's work on teacher as activator versus facilitator takes the 21st Century in a slightly different

direction. Lots of scaffolding and even lots of the traditional need to be embedded into the personalization of the future. None of us is an island. An insightful post Peter.

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