

Using 21st Century Skills in the Classroom

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An important piece of 21st Century Skills is critical thinking, which is important because it requires students to think at a higher level. It teaches them how to think for themselves. The Critical Thinking Community states “the quality of everything we do is determined by the quality of our thinking.” As educators, this is what we should strive to teach students. Critical thinking is tied closely with active learning. The Critical Thinking Community offers suggestions for methods that promote active learning in the classroom. A few important tactics I have used in my classroom and will continue to use include elaborating on what has been said, giving examples to support information, making connections between related concepts, and rewording information. I am constantly using these tactics with most lessons. Specifically, I will use these tactics during the first week of social studies when we explore different types of governments. It will be important to use these tactics since this lesson is an introduction to the class and sets the tone.

Effective communication is also important skill for students. According to Kurtus’ School for Champions, there is a “need for people to communicate effectively.” As a language arts teacher, I remind my students that in order to get the jobs they want, they need to be able to communicate. I do a unit on communication in which we discuss speaking skills. We talk about speaking skills that go into giving a successful speech or presentation. We read about different approaches, strategies, and elements of good speeches. We view some of history’s most powerful speeches as well. At the end of the unit, students give speeches and presentations based on the research papers students did in the previous unit.

Technical reading and writing skills are important as well, and often overlooked. Jukes and McCain say that “people with technical reasoning skills understand more than just how something works – they can apply their understanding to real world situations” (p.151). According to the Society for Technical Communication, “technical communicators serve as a bridge between those who create ideas and those who use them. They convey technical and scientific information precisely, accurately, and clearly.” To help students practice this skill, we do demonstration speeches in language class. Before actually giving the speech students must first write an outline explaining each detail of the demonstration, assuming the audience has no knowledge at all about the topic. This is a fun way to get kids into the mindset of a technical writer! Kids enjoy the freedom to choose a topic they are interested in demonstrating and writing about.

Jukes and McCain say that “people with technical reasoning skills understand more than just how something works – they can apply their understanding to real world situations” (p.151). Students use applied technical reasoning skills “to promote science, mathematics and technology education using renewable energy as the vehicle to capture student interest” (NREL). Unfortunately, I don’t feel that I really use this area in my classroom. There just doesn’t seem to be room in my curriculum areas of social studies and language. The areas that I cover don’t require using the math and more technical

reasoning skills. I think this is more of the math and science areas. However, there are ways I could work them in. Students design 3D models of government buildings such as the US capitol, the Supreme Court building, and the White House. I could ask to students to build their models to scale on a smaller level, integrating with the math classes. Another idea I could try was to have students look at currency at the time of the Civil War and have them work out how much the average cost of living was for a small family. I think there are ways to work in technical reasoning skills.

“The ability to manage and work with information is quickly becoming a survival skill” (Jukes and McCain, p. 153). As technology and times change and evolve, students need to learn to think for themselves and be able to know what to do with all the information surrounding them. Information fluency skills are “the skills to access, analyze, authenticate, and apply the information into useful personal knowledge,” as stated on the class website. My students use information fluency skills when they work on their social issues research projects. During an integrated unit with reading on social issues and problems, students choose a social issue to research. They spend a few weeks researching using the internet, books, magazines and other sources they choose. They work with the media specialist in the library at school to find sources. In their papers, not only do they have to include their research, but they must use what they found to write “call-to-action” sections of their papers in which they discuss possible ways they feel we could solve these problems or take steps towards improving the issues. This unit develops information fluency skills and helps prepare 8th graders for high school.

Students will need new personal skills for the future based on the changing technologies and developments with the internet and communications on the internet. Jukes and McCain predict that it is likely that many of today’s students will work as digital entrepreneurs. Our students we teach today will be using more technology than we can imagine today! In the “customer futures” section of the Institute of Global Futures website, it is stated that customers of the future will have “higher expectations of service, essential knowledge, the search for the best deal and they want it now!” In our unit on economics, students look at consumers choices and how to make choices about what to buy and why. They analyze how to be good consumers and create brochures about consumer advice. I hope to integrate a technology piece into this project and have students make projections about the future.

Last but not least, Jukes’ New Mind-set Skills should be an important factor in our classrooms today. We need to teach students to look at the information they have to make projections about the future. To be committed sardines, we need to be part of the minority, 15 or 20%, that are taking steps toward making changes in education to keep up with the changing times. His list of ways to become committed sardines includes understanding Digital Kids, “catching up to the new digital landscape”, and shifting the responsibility of leaning to the students. I feel that through the ideas and lessons I’ve discussed above, I’m taking steps towards becoming a “committed sardine.”