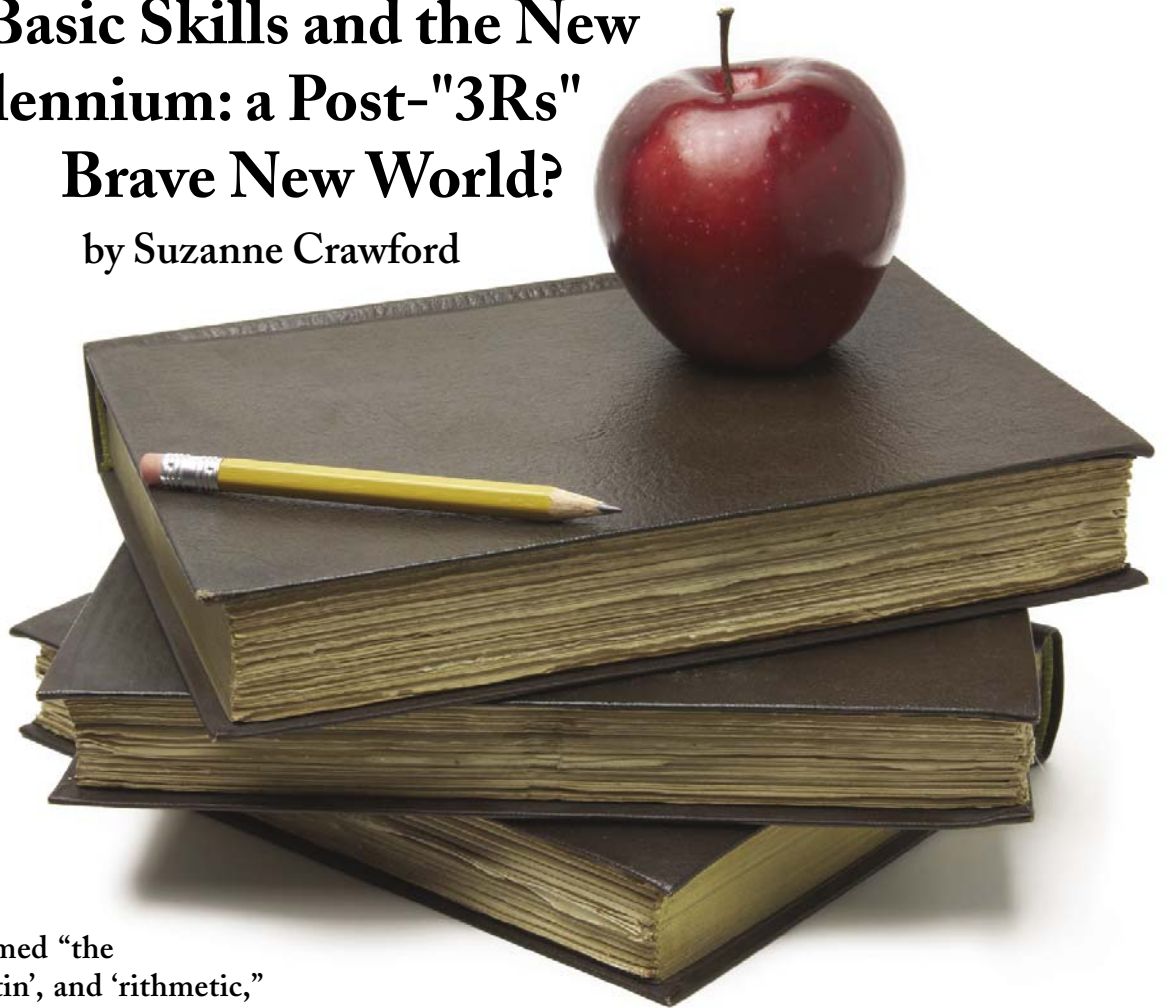


Basic Skills and the New Millennium: a Post-"3Rs" Brave New World?

by Suzanne Crawford



Once humorously termed “the three ‘Rs’—readin’, ‘ritin’, and ‘rithmetic,” basic skills have always been, well, the essential core of public education, or at least of modern literacy. However, for what seems like generations, complaints have been rampant that “Johnny can’t read,” “Susie can’t spell, much less write,” and oh-so-many others cannot perform even basic arithmetic computations. The California Community Colleges have long been charged with the task of addressing basic skills shortcomings. Even before the federal No Child Left Behind Act and the California High School Exit Examination placed increased emphasis on measuring skills acquisition, community colleges faced the reality of under-prepared students, assisting them in achieving access to four-year colleges and universities as well as in gaining greater employability through vocational training.

The raising of English and math requirements for an associate degree, scheduled to go into effect for students entering community colleges fall semester 2009, shines a new spotlight on basic skills. As Academic Senate President Ian Walton has noted, along with the change in degree requirements approved in September 2006, the Board of Governors “also supported a massive injection of funds and activity into the Basic Skills Initiative targeted toward improving performance in our basic skills courses.” In the January 2007 version of the governor’s budget this surge in funding included a “\$33.1 million redirection of surplus Basic Skills overcap incentive funding to support additional Matriculation and support services for community college students” with “\$19.1 million [...] specifically dedicated

to additional counseling and tutoring services for those students most at risk of failing to complete a meaningful education program.”

Due to such influx of money, the term “Basic Skills” has become the latest buzzword around a number of campuses. Yet what are new-millennium, twenty-first-century basic skills? How have the essential skills needed to function as a capable member of society changed? What basic skills are prized by today’s employers?

The skills needed to function in society or desired by potential employers naturally shift over time. A little more than a hundred years ago, in addition to what are now considered fundamental literacy skills (which while helpful then, may not have been exactly essential), most adults needed such other “basic” skills as, perhaps, plowing a field and making candles. Five hundred years ago basic skills would not have included any of the “3 Rs” for most people, but they would have included building a fire and weaving cloth.

The emphasis on literacy in our society—including reading, writing and numerical literacy or numeracy—emerged more seriously in the 19th Century, growing with the post-industrial society and its developing middle class. By the 20th Century, public schooling and, therefore, basic skills instruction were common in most industrialized nations. Indeed, Hugh Mackay, a psychologist and social researcher from Australia, in the article, “The Post-reading Generation,” offered an observation in late 2004: “Universal literacy was a 20th-Century goal [...] With the advent of compulsory education, everyone was expected to learn to read and write because, at the time, those skills were the passport to a better life.”

However, Mackay goes on to direly predict, “But we’ve moved on. That doesn’t mean literacy will die out, but it does mean a growing minority of people who don’t need to read and write will lose the skill.”

Most of us in education read such a prediction with anywhere from trepidation to fervent denial, even abject horror, for such an idea is heretical by our standards. Rather, the drummers whose idealistic beat we march to and resonate with sound more like Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations and Nobel Peace Prize honoree:

Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty, and a building block of development, an essential complement to investments in roads, dams, clinics and factories. Literacy is a platform for democratization, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. Especially for girls and women, it is an agent of family health and nutrition. For everyone, everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right [...] Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential.

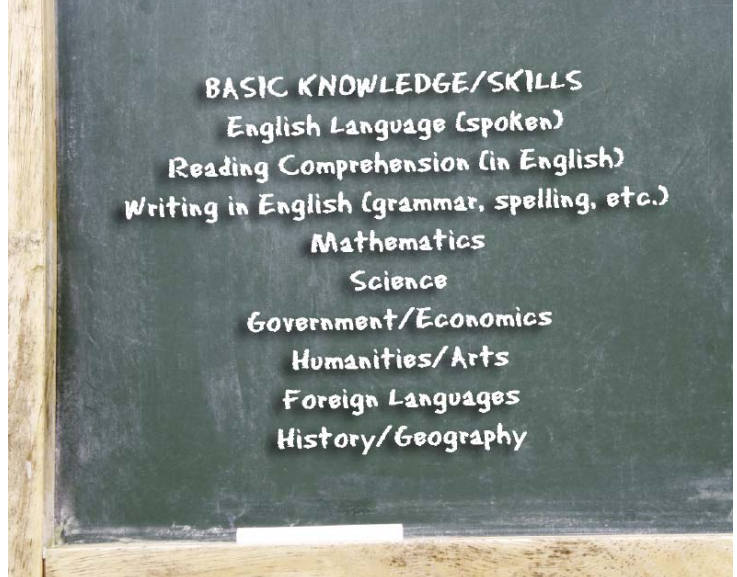
Certainly a core belief in education has always had unquestioned, true-believer status for me. From the wisdom of Confucius — “No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance.” — to the admonition of Ray Bradbury — “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.” — the essentialness of literacy and all it brings to a society I have accepted with fervor. Naturally, this includes math, or numeracy, and writing as well. For, of course, “[n]eglect of mathematics works injury to all knowledge” (Roger Bacon) and “[t]he purpose of a writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself” (Albert Camus) are irrefutable concepts, as ingrained as brushing my teeth, as natural as breathing.

Nevertheless, one might wonder whether times have changed so completely that Annan’s compelling words apply today primarily, even exclusively, to developing countries, those still going through their own industrialization, and not so strongly to our own society.

If so, Mackay’s claims are not so far-fetched, returning us to the question, is literacy (including writing and numeracy), at least in the traditional sense, becoming anachronistic today?

Mackay proposes more unsettling heresy:

Of course, most children will achieve some level of literacy [...]. But why would it be a tragedy if high-order literacy became a skill acquired and nurtured by some, and not others? [...] Will we continue to fight what may be a rearguard action to defend universal literacy as a central goal of our education system, or are we bold enough to see what’s actually happening to our culture? If we are becoming, once again, an oral culture, shouldn’t that be acknowledged? Why shouldn’t some pupils be able to submit their work orally - recorded or live - rather than in writing, if that’s the way they can best present their ideas? Why is it “better” to write things down? It seems inevitable that the magic of the written word will fade. It will remain a primary communication skill for many, but it will have to earn its place in a more media-diverse educational and vocational culture in the future. It’s time to start planning for that now.



Source: “Are They Really Ready To Work? Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce.” Partnership for 21st Century Skills. 2004. 19 Jan. 2007. www.21stcenturyskills.org.

While I am not ready to concede the inevitable demise or even diminishment of the written word, certainly new forms of basic skills have sprouted among us. Like previous generations, today’s youth may appear to be lagging behind in traditional skills; however, in others they possess knowledge that readily elevates them to the level of mentor or even teacher. If you don’t have time to read your new cell phone’s user manual, for example, just ask someone under twenty-five what that strange icon means or what the shortcut is to checking your voice mail. Competency in the use of electronic devices is indeed a new basic skill, along with fundamental computer literacy.

Another fast growing new skill area, about which some have lamented deficiencies, includes, apparently, “media literacy”: “When people talk to me about the digital divide, I think of it not so much about who has access to what technology as about who knows how to create and express themselves in the new language of the screen. If students aren’t taught the language of sound and images, shouldn’t they be considered as illiterate as if they left college without being able to read and write?” (George Lucas). While this particular concern could be dismissed as unique to film industry natives, in this case a producer, the warnings of someone more often associated with education, Ernest Boyer, former President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and former U.S. Commissioner of Education, cannot be as readily discounted: “It is no longer enough simply to read and write. Students must also become literate in the understanding of visual images. Our children must learn how to spot a stereotype, isolate a social cliché, and distinguish facts from propaganda, analysis from banter, and important news from coverage.”

Obviously, opinions abound about what basic skills are needed in our society. Certainly, employers form one group whose views are worth noting. What employers want and expect in the way of basic skills can be found in a 2006 publication “Are They

Really Ready To Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce." This report offers the findings of a study conducted by several agencies: the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management. Over 400 surveyed employers rated the "workforce readiness" and skill level of newly graduated workers—whether from high school, two-year colleges, or four-year universities—and articulated skills those employers most esteemed for such entrants.

Employers ranked several parameters, including whether the skill level of recent graduates entering the workforce was "excellent," "adequate," or "deficient," as well as which basic and applied skills were "very important," "important," or "not important." Skills learned in school are designated Basic Knowledge/Skills while those skills enabling new entrants to use school-acquired knowledge to perform successfully at work appear under Applied Skills. (See sidebar) Finally, employers weighed in on the shape of skills to come—what changes they foresaw through 2011.

In sum, and probably to no one's surprise, the study maintains that "far too many young people are inadequately prepared to be successful in the workplace." Yet the inadequacies extend far beyond what are usually thought of as basic skills. In fact, the survey's executive summary states that in the estimation of employers "applied skills on all educational levels trump basic knowledge and skills. [Furthermore, . . .] while the 'three Rs' are still fundamental to any new workforce entrant's ability to do the job, employers emphasize that applied skills like Teamwork/Collaboration and Critical Thinking are 'very important' to success at work."

Nevertheless, traditional basic skills were still highly desired by employers of community college graduates, with large number of employers rating the following as "very important": Reading Comprehension, 71.6 percent; English Language and Writing in English, 70.6 and 64.9, respectively; Mathematics, 44 percent.

In addition to distinguishing the degree of importance of the skills themselves, the surveyed employers also ranked entrants' possession of such skills from excellent to deficient. Of the ten applied skills valued by employers, only graduates from four-year colleges had an excellence list longer than a deficiency list. High school graduates were deemed deficient in all ten skills, and for community college graduates, "one 'very important' applied skill—Information Technology Application—appears on the Excellence List while seven skills appear on the Deficiency List," including Writing in English and Written Communications. Also rated as deficient

in the applied skills area for two-year college graduates was Leadership.

As to the millennium shift, it is revealing which skills employers ranked as most important. The three most important applied skills needed by entrants, according to those employers, include Professionalism/Work Ethic, Teamwork/Collaboration, and Oral Communications.

Looking ahead to the future, one basic skill expected to transition to very important status during the next five years is Knowledge of Foreign Languages (according to 63.3 percent of the employer respondents). Moreover, for applied skills, the area worthy of note, with concurrence among 70 percent of the respondents as to its increasingly important status, is Creativity/Innovation, defined as the ability to "demonstrate originality, inventiveness in work, [and] communicate new ideas to others [as well as to] integrate knowledge across disciplines"—skills rarely measured by standardized tests. Finally, an emerging "content" field valued by some 75 percent of employers is termed Making Appropriate Choices Concerning Health and Wellness, an "applied skill" most likely reflective of our society's growing health care crisis, and especially for those employers, the escalating prices of that health care.

Basic skills—what they consist of as well as how to teach them—are likely to remain a prime focus for community colleges as the efforts launched by the Basic Skills Initiative, and bolstered by substantial funding, gain traction. The initiative reflects the cooperation of several entities—California Community Colleges Chief Instructional Officers (CIOs), Chief Student Services Officers (CSSOs), and the Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges (ASCCC)—united in a joint proposal to further study "how people learn and [...] identify those teaching methodologies and support structures that promote the learning process in basic skills courses" (ASCCC's "California Community Colleges Basic Skills Initiative: A Call to Action, May 2006").

Meanwhile, the new millennium appears to be heralding both the advent of new skills and the demise of others, perhaps even those suggested by Mackay.

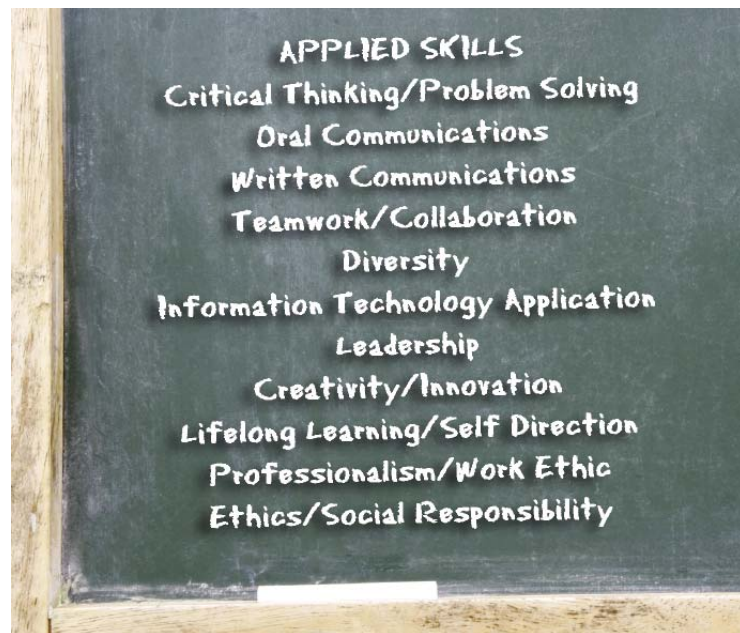
A librarian friend of mine who works in the children's section recently lamented to me that her young patrons cannot determine the time by using the library's analog wall clock. It seems with

the ubiquitous availability of digital time devices, the ability to tell time from an analog device is apparently rapidly going, if not the way of the dinosaurs, at least that of telling time from sundials.

Will such soon be true of readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic as well? Um . . . time will tell, or will it? Yeah, maybe, but will anyone still be able to read that writing (or dial) on the wall? ■



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Source: "Are They Really Ready To Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce." Partnership for 21st Century Skills. 2004. 19 Jan. 2007. www.21stcenturyskills.org.