

Chapter 1

Ancient Thinking and Modern Challenges: Socratic Education in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter was fourfold: 1) to offer an overview of current thinking on the 21st Century skills educational agenda - its intentions and goals for the future, along with the eventual teaching and learning challenges; 2) to present an historical analysis and several working definitions of critical thinking – an educational objective within the 21st Century skills movement; 3) a brief, yet important description of the life of Socrates as a person and as a teacher- with specific emphasis on the use of his method, and 4) the history and influence the Socratic method has had on critical thinking and its hopeful entry into mainstream 21st Century educational discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape at the secondary school level reflects a growing concern for today's youth to be reflective, critical thinkers. The 21st century student, according to Hoffman (2004), must be able to creatively solve problems, assimilate knowledge and synthesize information. Schoberl (2004) pointed out that research in learning theory identified a growing need for teaching pedagogies that emphasized deep understanding, intellectual exploration, and the application of knowledge and discovery.

Cookson (2009) wrote that there should be the marrying of the western intellectual tradition,

namely the Socratic influence, with the present intellectual demands of the 21st century. Larson (2004) remarked that instructors should employ the Socratic Method in the hope of better understanding the way students today acquire knowledge. This chapter per the author wishes to advance the position that an ancient technique known to us as the Socratic Method, can be an instructional tool that offers assistance in the development of critical thinking skills for students and, consequently hold a rightful place in 21st century pedagogy and education.

This chapter will first offer an intellectual overview of the movement toward 21st century skills education. It then offers an historical look

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at the development of critical thinking, highlighting major thinkers' ideas on the topic. The chapter will then present a detailed description of the person, Socrates. After a brief biographical introduction of the philosopher, the chapter uncovers the historical development of the Socratic Method, tracing its origins in the classical world and ultimately to the educational experiences in the United States. There is then a discussion on a distinctive practice within the Socratic Method known as the elenchus. In clearly explicating the Socratic Method, this chapter per the author argues that if educators fully understand the classic sense of this method, along with the nature and role of the elenchus, there can be a more enriching use of the Socratic Method in today's classrooms and an appreciation for the role the ancient world has on today's educational initiatives.

BACKGROUND

Daniel Bell's assessment in the 1970's of a post-industrial environment that would require a *knowledge society* and Peter Drucker's assertion that a post-capitalist world would need to produce *knowledge workers*, ushered in the 21st Century Skills movement (Hargreaves, 2010). Dede (2010) argued that the 20th century is different from the 21st century in relation to "skills people now need for work, citizenship, and self-actualization" (p. 51). Zao (2009) wrote that based on the revolution that is currently occurring globally and digitally, it is vital that schools re-assess what should be taught. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the content that should be taught not only consists of the core subjects, but also 21st century themes such as global mindfulness, problem-solving, communication and critical thinking (Zao, 2009).

Basset (2004) posited that schools of the 21st century should focus on four pillars of content: proficiency, fluency, multicultural literacy and performance. Students should be proficient in

reading and writing, mathematics, the empirical method of attaining knowledge and the uses of technology (Basset, 2004). Second, students would be fluent in various communications, able to lead in teams, and be able to make ethical decisions (Basset, 2004). Third, students must be able to converse well in their native language and have knowledge of its history, culture and geography (Basset, 2004). They must also meet the same standards of at least one other place or culture. Lastly, students must be able to perform in the fine arts, practical arts and athletics (Basset, 2004).

While the need for critical thinking and other 21st century skills looms over the educational horizon, some share a dim view of what many schools are currently doing. Basset (2004) argued that there will need to be school leaders who will challenge the discrepancy between the educational objectives for the 21st century and the seemingly 18th century school system that exists today. Schools deeply committed to 21st century education will take heed to a 2003 report entitled *Building a Nation of Learners* where the authors argue that today's employers require workers to be problem solvers, able to work in a team, can readily adapt, and effectively communicate (Basset, 2010). Indeed, as the report claimed:

To better prepare for the challenges of the high-performing jobs and the innovations of the future, all sectors of society must work together to build a nation of learners equipped with the key skills needed to succeed, including those that transcend specific job categories. (Building a Nation of Learners, 2003, p. 9)

Furthermore, Dede (2010) wrote that high-stakes testing impedes 21st century teaching and learning in today's classrooms. School leaders and educators must search for other ways to assess students besides the standardized-testing approach (Salpeter, 2003). Richardson (2010) remarked that although schools function in the 21st century, they still are "decidedly 20th (or even

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