

Defining a 21st Century Education: Case Study of Development and Growth Course

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Abstract

In the last few years there are huge discussions regarding "21st Century Skills" but often it is difficult to identify the ways of which these skills can be improved. There are some ambiguous questions related to the preparation of the students for the new century, such as: the level of course difficulty, the teaching methods, the course objective and achievement of these objectives, the learning outcomes and the contribution to adopt in life and work in the 21st century. This paper covers all these problems and gives some practical solution basing on a concrete course such as the Development and Growth course, since this course is composed by both economic theories and concrete results in the social framework. One of the most important aims of this course is to teach students to think critically, being at the same time one of the main skills in 21st century, in analyzing materials explained in the class, evidences for a large gamma of countries and drawing attention to the changes in the social cellules.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Skills, Learning Outcomes, Development and Growth Course

Good thinking skills will not develop on their own, they must be taught! (Beyer, 1987)

In a world of accelerating change, intensifying complexity and increasing interdependence, critical thinking is now a requirement for economic and social survival! (Paul, 2002)

1. Introduction

According to the Report of the Center of Public Education in America, Defining a 21st century education, by Craig D. Jerald (2009), there are three kinds of learning which are becoming important from day to day for students to succeed in work and life:

- 1- **Traditional academic knowledge and skills.** *The belief that students will no longer need to learn the academic content traditionally taught in the school curriculum is false. Students will need strong math and English skills to succeed in work and life, for example. A strong academic foundation also is essential for success in postsecondary education and training, which itself is increasingly necessary for anyone who wants to earn a middle class wage.*
- 2- **Real world application, or "applied literacies."** *Students will need not just knowledge but also "literacy"—the ability to apply their learning to meet real-world challenges. That applies to all subjects, including English, math, science, and social studies.*
- 3- **Broader competencies.** *Students who develop an even broader set of competencies will be at an increasing advantage in work and life. Based on employer surveys and other evidence, the most important seem to be:*
 - a. *The ability solve new problems and think critically;*
 - b. *Strong interpersonal skills necessary for communication and collaboration;*
 - c. *Creativity and intellectual flexibility; and*
 - d. *Self sufficiency, including the ability to learn new things when necessary.*

The focus of this paper is the third point mentioned in this report, border competences, which is seen as one of the challenges nowadays and the days after. But what does the critical thinking mean and why it is important?

1.1 Critical Thinking

Most people agree about the importance of critical thinking during the lectures but not everyone agree in its' definition. Based on the definitions they use for the "critical thinking", the educators/teachers/professors are divided into two main groups. The first group represents the individuals who think that critical thinking must be learned during the lectures, the

students must be trained in a manner to improve this skill. The second group represents the individuals who think that they are not responsible for the students' critical thinking, but at *contraire*, they should focus on just giving knowledge which will help them to solve different problems in the future.

Teaching students to think critically about decisions and problems is a task that we should undertake as educators. Huit (1998) is one of the authors that based on the skills needed for the 21st century founded out that critical thinking was of great importance. According to Sutton and de Oliveira (1995), "critical thinking outcomes" are influenced by knowledge and experience but they are also influenced by an individual's critical thinking skill and critical thinking disposition. Meyers (1986) said that students must learn to think and reason critically to reach their fullest potential.

2. Pedagogical Issues of Development and Growth Course

Both, the traditional academic knowledge/skills and their application to the real world of course remain important issues to be absorbed and transmit to the students as learning tools and adding values to them. The third component which helps students to be competitive and prepared for the new century, boarder competences, can be defined as a defiant target to be reached and for this reason it is hard to be present to courses curriculums. Since this third dimension is found to be important, this paper set up the interaction of its' elements into Development and Growth course. In order to make a clear observation of principles in this course, four main issues take place.

2.1 *The level of course difficulty.*

This course cannot be range as a difficult one, but there are two main things students must take into account: firstly, the students should have to clearly understand the concepts and the relationship between dimensions and secondly, they should include personal willingness to change the world because if they want to be part of the influencing a part of their society they can become good critical thinkers.

2.1.1 *Course Description*

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to issues and problems related to economic development. Specifically, we discuss the characteristics of developing nations as well as alternative theories of economic growth. Next, we examine some of the dominant domestic problems faced by developing countries, such as poverty and inequality, low levels of human capital, urbanization, rural transformation as well as different policies to resolve them.

In this course, we study theories and policies of international economic development. Topics include: the structural changes accompanying development, theories of development, impediments to development, role of the international sector, role of the government, stabilization policy, and foreign aid and investment. Other socio-economic issues are discussed, such as: poverty, inequality and development, population growth and economic development, urbanization, rural-urban migration, human capital, agriculture transformation and rural development, environmental and development. As prerequisite course it is sufficient an introductory course in economics.

2.2 *The teaching methods*

The course syllabus is distributed at the beginning of the semester. Students are told about the weekly schedule and the topics covered during the semester. The evaluation system is explained in details and discussed with students if they have any recommendation or suggestion. The lecturers are organized in the following manner:

- a. Firstly, a quick presentation of the topic is given to the students.
- b. Then, some general question are being asked in order to lead the students to be part of a brainstorming and attract them to be interested in the answers given by other students, professor or during the lecture.
- c. At a third stage, theories and literature review regarding the topics take place.
- d. Next, concrete evidences of different group of countries (developed countries/developing countries, small countries/ large countries, countries of different continents/zones) are shown as de-facto and a summary analysis is concluded. Often case studies are given as additional information.
- e. In the fifth step, the data, findings and evidences are taken into consideration and are being discussed. This is the main and the most important component of the lecture because students are analyzing the Albanian situation by giving their experience, information or opinions related to the topic. The theories and the other

countries experience make their analysis to come into another dimension, generally different from the answers during the second step of the course.

Another important feature in this course is the students' presentation session. At the ends of the course module students have to present their researches done in one of the fields explain during the lectures. At the beginning of the semester a list of selected topics (specific issues) for the Albanian case are given to the students. They have to select their topic within two weeks and each week they are required to show their evolution and to achieve feedbacks from professor or course assistant. Presentations are organized in a form of mini-conference where guests are being invited and constructing discussion take place within a larger group of experts in order to support the students work or to give additional information to the topic. The representing form of these presentations helps students to pass from passive listeners to active speakers, critical thinkers and perceptive analysts.

2.3 *The course objective and achievement of these objectives.*

The goals of this course are for every student to:

- ❖ Describe the characteristics of and the special challenges facing developing nations.
- ❖ Explain alternative theories of economic growth and evaluate their ability to explain the growth experiences of less-developed countries.
- ❖ Discuss the domestic problems that developing nations face, assess the seriousness of these problems, and evaluate the effectiveness of various policies designed to deal with domestic issues.
- ❖ Appreciate the value of empirical evidence in expanding our knowledge within economics.
- ❖ Conduct independent research on the problems and policies of economic development.

2.4 *The learning outcomes.*

- ❖ Conduct independent research on the problems and policies of economic development.
- ❖ Application of economic models and theories in order to better understand the causes and consequences of economic growth at an international level.
- ❖ Knowledge of distributional consequences of economic growth (inequality, structural adjustments etc.).
- ❖ Knowledge of the implications of globalization on specific sectoral policies such as agricultural policy, energy policy.
- ❖ Knowledge of specific concepts such as fair and sustainable development

3. **Contributions of Development and Growth Course to New Century**

But what are the contributions of this course to adopt in life and work in the 21st century? This course tries to focus into two main elements; the first is the idea of training students with the critical thinking/improving their skills toward the adoption in the new century, and the second one, is the understanding of the sustainable development/the identification of obstacles regarding this issue and the application of appropriate solutions for problem disposition.

3.1 *Skills to be Learned during the Module*

To be successful, educators must go beyond teaching about these global issues to their students. During the lectures, students should be given practical skills that will enable them to continue learning after they leave university. The aim of the course must not be the focus of achieving a satisfied grade but even more, to have a sustainable livelihood, and to live sustainable lives. For that reason students must gain some skills which will help them, such as:

- Ability to think about systems (both natural and social sciences).
- The ability to think in time - to forecast, to think ahead, and to plan.
- The ability to think critically about value issues.
- The capacity to move from awareness to knowledge to action.
- The ability to work cooperatively with other people.
- The capacity to use these processes: knowing, inquiring, acting, judging, imagining, connecting, valuing, and choosing.

3.2 Becoming a Good Critical Thinker

Students are guide to raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely. During the lectures they have to gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively which will help them to come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions. Theories studied in the module help students to think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, and to draw carefully their own assumptions, implications, and practical consequences. They put aside their views and supportive ideas to these views and listen to the other colleagues, adding to their opinions additional values and aspects by concluding at the end effective solutions to complex problems.

Critical thinking was defined as thinking that is reasonable and reflective and focused on what to believe or do (Norris & Ennis, 1989). They classified the critical thinking skills into four categories which are the main pillars of the development and growth module too.

Table 1. Critical Thinking Skills

Skill	Description
Clarification	The attempt to appraise and understand the exact nature of the problem, issue or dilemma. This includes attempting to understand different points of view on an issue.
Assessing evidence	In order to establish a sound basis for inferences, the evidence used to support those inferences must be assessed. This involves judging the credibility of sources of information and judging the credibility of observations.
Making and judging inferences	Inductive and deductive inferences and value judgments are involved in making a decision about what to believe or do. Critical thinking involves the ability to judge the soundness of inferences and to make good inferences. Using evidence to support arguments is included in this category.
Using appropriate strategies and tactics	Critical thinking is not a matter of following steps or procedures but some strategies or heuristics can be useful in guiding thinking.

Source: Norris and Ennis, 1989

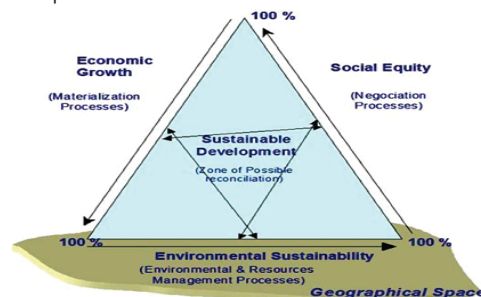
3.3 Understanding Sustainable Development

Public awareness done through education, trainings and other methods is essential for achieving development itself and sustainability of this development. Even if we often miss a clear definition of development and sustainability, we do realize the problematic issues such as: misuse of energy, lack of water conservation, increased pollution, environment degradation, lack of investments in human capital, abuse of property rights, etc.

As academicians and experts of the domain all admit, development must be without any doubt a continues process, otherwise sustainable. One of the original definitions of sustainable development was compiled by World Commission on Environment and Development, in 1987: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

In most of literatures regarding development, we can three main pillars of development: economy, society and environment. Parallel to the concept of development composed by these three dimensions, often we refer to the notion of "well-being". But what is the meaning of well-being? World Health Organisation Quality of Life is concerned with measuring physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and the environment. This is the main reason to think about an equilibrium between these three issues in order to reach a considerable development trend and to improve quality of life. The diagram below shows the correlation of these three elements.

Graph 1. Trinity of Sustainable Development



Source: Nijkamp Triangle Dourojeanni (1993)

The combination of Economic growth and Environmental sustainability leads to a “Viable” situation, the combination of Social equity and Environmental sustainability leads to a “Bearable” situation and the third relationship, which is the combination of Economic growth and Social equity leads to an “Equitable” situation. The relationship of the three dimensions at the same time leads to “Sustainability”.

The table below presents the detail issues comprised within each dimension. The noted issues by an “*” are the issues discussed during the lectures. Mostly we are dealing with the social issues and economic ones. The environmental dimension is partially considered given that the students engaging with the development and growth course are students from departments of economics, banking and finance and business administration. Another reason is the lack of information and application of the programs dealing with environmental issue in Albania.

Table 2. Three Dimensions of Sustainable Development

<i>Economic Dimension</i>	<i>Social Dimension</i>	<i>Environmental Dimension</i>
*Continuous improvement in economic well being Creation of new markets and opportunities for sales growth *Cost reduction through efficiency improvements *Greater economic equality Efficient use of renewable resources	*Protection of human rights *Protection of human health *Child mortality *Food security *Sharing of vital information	Renewal of energy Renewal of materials Renewable food resources Reduction of environmental footprint *Accountability and responsibility of environmental decision makers
*Protection of commercial rights *Green business opportunities *Sharing of commercial information Opportunities for reduced energy and raw material input *Fair and equal access to information and knowledge	*Respecting the view points of beneficiaries and victims of developmental activities *Accountability and responsibility of societal decision makers *Participatory approach in decision making *Increasing literacy levels and employment opportunities	*Environmental ethics

Students are founded to be very interested in both the economic improvement and also in the social aspects and one of the aims of this course is to explain to them that not just the positive economic growth matters, but the most important is to have positive and continues trends (to have a sustainable growth) and this growth to be “transferred” to the social aspects (to have a sustainable development).

4. Conclusions

Often we find ourselves face to face to the questing regarding the adherence in the European Union, if we have to be part of it or not. Mostly the Albanian people are pro EU; they want to be part of EU but being part of it means to reach some well-defined standards. When looking at the standards, we often see that some of them are related to the world changes, to the adoption to the new century.

The significance of the “21st Century Skills” and “21st Century Needs”, and the immediate exigency of these two core requirements were the two main pillars in the development and growth course curriculum. Leading students to improve their skills and helping them to feel a part of society which cares for the problem around them, and par consequences to try to give practical solutions is a really challenge. Notwithstanding these challenges we as educator have to face, we hope that the driven effects during this course are going to add value to human beings and perennial.

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