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## Literature and the 21st century learner

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### Abstract

How do we prepare students for the 21st century, for “jobs and technologies” which, according to Crutcher, “don’t yet exist...in order to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet”? In light of this growing concern and urgency to equip our students with 21st century skills, where does the subject Literature, or that matter, the Humanities, fit in? Recent research on Literature education in Singapore has served to highlight the state of ambivalence of the Literature curriculum; suggest possibilities for its reconceptualisation, taking into consideration the contemporary Singaporean environment and the impact of globalisation; and consider the offering of alternative curricula. A 2007 research study conducted in Singapore secondary schools on the state of Literature as a subject highlighted, among other things, its low status and lack of desirability. This study serves as a basis for this paper, which explores the possible links between 21st century skills and the subject Literature. It questions how 21st century skills can be integrated into the teaching and learning of Literature in schools, and looks at the potential of the subject as a viable course of study. This paper focuses on current issues and dialogues relating to the subject Literature in Singapore where there are now only around 3000 students are studying the subject as compared to 16,970 in 1992 as reported in *The Straits Times* (2013). Making the study of Literature relevant and appealing to students may prevent it from dying a slow death.

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## 1. Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is upon us. The role of educational institutions to prepare students for the types of skills needed for them to live and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has never been more crucial and there is a strong sense of urgency to equip our students for “jobs and technologies that don’t yet exist...in order to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet” (Riley, as quoted in Crutcher, 2011). Educators everywhere are facing this challenge and the solution appears to be to work in partnerships with businesses and policymakers.

### 1.1. What are 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills?

In an effort to keep up with changes in a global economy, meet new skills demands and narrow the achievement gaps of students in schools, the United States looked towards aligning their public education system with these 21<sup>st</sup> century demands. Founded in 2002, the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (P21), an organization which “brings together the business community, education leaders and policymakers to define a powerful vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century education” (P21, 2013), formulated a framework for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning which describes the skills, knowledge and expertise students need to master in order to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition to Core Subjects, this framework also emphasizes Learning and Innovation Skills, Information, Media and Technology Skills and Life and Career Skills. 21<sup>st</sup> century themes of global awareness, financial, business, entrepreneurial, civic, health and environmental literacies are weaved into the learning of core subjects. A total of 19 states have joined the organization, committing to implementing the framework to prepare students for “college, career and citizenship” (P21 Press Release, 25 June, 2013).

A group of 250 researchers across 60 institutions worldwide started the Assessment & Teaching of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (ATC21S) project, a collaborative international research project sponsored by Cisco, Intel and Microsoft, and led by the University of Melbourne, which aims at “empowering students with the right skills to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace” (ATC21S, 2013). The challenge to transform education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century necessitates, according to these researchers, the inclusion of collaborative and digital literacy skills and new forms of assessment.

The skills that will form the basis for 21<sup>st</sup> century curricula emphasize communication, collaboration, problem-solving, citizenship, and digital fluency. 21<sup>st</sup> century skills have been internationally categorized into four broad categories: ways of thinking, ways of working, tools for working and skills for living in the world (*ibid.*). The team identified two major skills areas, collaborative problem-solving and ICT literacy, where assessment tasks were developed and trialed in selected countries. The project, which consists of five phases, aims to place their developed resources in these two 21<sup>st</sup> century skills areas in the public domain.

With 21<sup>st</sup> century skills being the main driving force behind economic, and ultimately education policies, the question then is where does Literature, or for that matter the Humanities, fit in?

## 2. Literature and the Humanities

The humanities, in general, include the study of languages, literature, history, philosophy, religion as well as visual and performing arts. It is “the study of our cultural pasts, the experiences and the ideas and the art works from those pasts” (Bassett, 2008, p. 10). Although, according to Bassett, the change in humanities education towards “becoming more inclusive...benefiting more from technology...more global in perspective” (p. 8), and the belief that “knowledge and understanding of history, literature, and art can enrich our lives” (p. 11) speaks well for humanities education, its future remains uncertain. One of the challenges is to help students to relate what they have learnt in the humanities to current issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and looking at them with new perspectives. This ability to “connect” what has been studied to current “social and technological issues” (p. 17) is what is needed to ensure the future of humanities education.

Donoghue (2010), however, maintains that no one cares whether the humanities can survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “Budgetary shortfalls” and “the absence of a job market” (p. 2) in America since the 1970s have affected all disciplines in the humanities. Current salaries for full professors in arts and humanities are on the average US\$100,000 less than those in law and business. According to Donoghue, a 2006 study on faculty hiring trends

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