21st Century Skills Assessment

Challenge
There have been rapid changes in labour markets in developed countries, and the skill demands of many jobs and academic studies have changed accordingly. Work and academic environments are technology-rich, problems are frequently dynamic, and people work in teams to achieve their goals. The critical importance of developing 21st Century Skills (21cS) in young people is now widely recognized around the world.

- 21cS are increasingly understood to be as essential as literacy and numeracy
- 21cS are regarded as fundamental to employability and economic growth but also to personal, social, and environmental well-being
- 21cS are as relevant in developing economies as much as they are in developed economies—Brookings’ Global Compact on Learning (which will inform the revision of the Millennium Development Goals) recommends that, by 2025, all 17 year olds should be equipped with 21cS.

Alongside this recognition of the importance of 21cS, there is growing concern that education systems need to focus on developing these skills in their student body—even acclaimed systems, such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea have emphasized the importance of 21cS.

In addition to academic content, students should develop skills and traits such as teamwork, critical thinking, goal setting, problem solving, perseverance, creativity and communication. However, most assessments still focus on academic content.

Assessments serve an important function as they motivate students to learn, help teachers to refine their practice, and inspire education systems to improve. Therefore, if 21cS are important to our future, we must measure them.

Solution
In order to prepare students from an early age to meet global challenges, we recommend assessing skills such as Critical Thinking, Creativity, Communication, and Collaboration in the context of interdisciplinary themes such as financial literacy and environmental literacy as well as in core subject areas of mathematics and language arts. By developing assessments as rich simulated environments, students can show their performance in authentic and engaging situations.

By pairing assessment tasks with curriculum and instruction, teachers can incorporate 21cS in their classrooms. Computer-based scenario type assessments will be incorporated in Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), as well as in the new Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced assessments. Many of the elements of Critical Thinking and higher-order thinking skills such as the ability to evaluate and critique literature and use mathematical skills for reasoning and model building are included in the new CCSS as well.

By exploring new ways of assessing 21cS that link them to instruction aimed at deepening learning, we can prepare our students to be competitive in a global economy.