

# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills and its Applicability to Social Studies

## ABSTRACT

Students' learning should be connected to life after school. They need to acquire skills that enhance analytic reasoning and complex problem solving. This is divergent from the content/knowledge-based traditional academic skill. 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills are competencies students need to possess to be able to prepare for workforce, lifetime learning and key into global economy. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills are Knowledge (need to consider the significance and applicability of what is taught), Skills (need to develop the '4Cs'-creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration for absorbing knowledge and work performance) and Character (need to teach character traits such as performance-related traits-adaptability, persistence, resilience as well as moral-related traits-integrity, justice, empathy, ethics). Social Studies as a multidisciplinary discipline has knowledge, skill and character development as its core objectives with flexible curriculum that is easily receptive to integration of new ideas and emerging areas of knowledge. It is important to make learning of social studies life relevant and equip students with practical skills necessary to make them thrive in a world where change is a constant phenomenon. This paper therefore examined 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and its relevance to Social Studies. It stressed the significance of adequate preparation of students for jobs by merging knowledge with skills to ensure competence, effective and pragmatic utilisation of social technologies (social software and communication capabilities) so that they can compete favourably with their counterparts in other disciplines in employment market. The paper concluded that there is need for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills to be integrated into the teaching and learning of Social Studies to make it relevant to the current digital society, to make skill development job oriented and to help students develop capability to process and use information effectively.

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, Social studies, Digital literacy, Life-long learning, Digital society.

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning have gone beyond knowledge impartation for the singular aim of pouring what has been learnt down by students through 'regurgitation of facts' in this world of technology. The change being experienced in educational trend in the world today is jettisoning traditional way of teaching and learning to give way for teaching and learning through technology. Determination of what learners need to succeed and thrive in this dispensation of new knowledge, new normal and new skill should be the concern of teachers and other stakeholders in education. [1] observed that "in maximising classroom effectiveness at this digital age, the curriculum designers need to change the traditional curriculum, pedagogical strategy, test assessment and

incorporate instructional technology and organise schools in such a way that students are better as future leaders to be creative citizens and productive workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century global society and economy”.

Education is the pivot around which development revolves in all countries in the world. Nelson Mandela once said that ‘education is the most powerful weapon which can be used to change the world’. [2] reiterated that “if sound education is provided and made relevant to economic needs of the nation, such nation is set to attain economic growth and emancipation. What he claimed to be fundamental is focus on primary and secondary education for development of skills needed to drive the economy. Skills that drive economy are not only those traditional academic skills that are primarily content knowledge-based but also include those associated with deeper learning and based on mastery of skills that enhance analytic reasoning, complex problem solving and teamwork”. “Such skills according to [3] are also referred to as applied skills, soft skills, personal, interpersonal or learning-based skills such as life skills, people skills and social skills”.

## **21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS: MEANING AND IMPORTANCE**

Change in society and economy has been found to promote identification and implementation of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and its inclusion into education and workplaces. 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills are skills students need to succeed in chosen career in this internet age. An abridged definition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills was given by [4] as a formula thus:  $K + S = C$  which indicates: Knowledge + Skills = Competence. [5] defined “21<sup>st</sup> Century as fluencies broken down into various skills. They are competencies required to build an intellectually, socially, culturally and digitally apt student. Such competencies were identified as creativity and innovation; communication and collaboration; research and information fluency; critical thinking, problem solving and decision making; digital citizenship and technology operations and concepts”. [6] described “21<sup>st</sup> Century skills as ‘set of knowledge, skills, behaviour and dispositions that can be developed and applied across the curriculum to help students become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens”. The authors added that they are skills needed to promote global citizenship and sustainable development which forms one of the targets of Sustainable Development Goals. These targets emphasise

skills required to comprehensively prepare children, youths and adults for 21<sup>st</sup> Century citizenship and life.

In another definition, [7] viewed “21<sup>st</sup> Century skills as the knowledge, life skills, career skills, habits and traits that are critically important to students’ success in today’s world particularly as students move on to college, the workforce and adult life. They are abilities and learning dispositions that have been identified as requirement for successes in the society”. They are skills students need to develop to enhance their success in the world of technology. However, [3] and [8] categorised 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills into three main groups in this table:

<b>Learning and Innovation (The 4C’s)</b>	<b>Digital Literacy</b>	<b>Career and Life</b>
Critical thinking and problem solving	Information literacy	Flexibility and adaptability
Creativity and innovation	Media literacy	Initiative and self-direction
Communication	ICT literacy	Social and cross-cultural interaction
Collaboration		Productivity and accountability
		Leadership and responsibility

Table 1: Fadel (2012) Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (P21 skills)

From the skills that form components of the three categories identified by [3], [9] who also considered “significance of integrating 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into education recommended twelve (12) separate abilities namely: Critical thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication, Information literacy, Media literacy, Technology, Flexibility, Leadership, Initiative, Productivity and Social Skills”. “21<sup>st</sup> century skills are indispensable tools that ensure workforce is skilled for 21<sup>st</sup> Century success, ensure students are skilled, ready to work and contribute to society, help schools prepare students for success in learning, work and life, allow a shift from quantitative system of formal education to acquisition of skills which people can nurture over lifetime” [8]. “They also provide a framework for successful learning in the classroom, ensure students can thrive in a world where change is constant and learning never stops and develop a workforce with enhanced skills to ensure competitiveness in a global economy” [10]. With 21<sup>st</sup> century skills students are encouraged to have more

meaningful interaction with peers in the classroom and assisted to use internet regularly and effectively to become digital citizens.

## **THE NEED FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS**

Education has been observed to be characterized by accumulation of knowledge content through rote learning. This 21<sup>st</sup> Century also referred to as information age or knowledge economy demands that learners be well equipped with skills for learning, for work (to be employable) and for successful life. There have been reports of unemployability of many of the Nigerian graduates in the dailies. [11] reported that the current minister of communications and digital economy, Isa Pantami said Nigerian graduates are unemployable and are too dependent on government jobs. Minister Pantami emphasised that there are many job opportunities in engineering, ICT, oil and gas. He gave the example of technical graduates who are engaged in administrative work while foreigners are employed to do the technical job which are supposed to be done by the graduates. From this submission, it can be inferred that such graduates lack skills and abilities which the job and employer demand. There are countries where job mobility rate is high among the youths. For instance, [12] submitted that “young workers in North America are now likely to change jobs at a much higher rate than previously as much as once every 4.4 years on average. With this employment mobility according to Meister comes a demand for different skills that enable people to be flexible and adaptable in different roles or in different career fields”. [13] averred that “employment mobility comes with a demand for diverse skills that enable people to be flexible and adaptable in different roles and different career fields”. [13] identified “transferable job skills as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication. These skills are not only needed for job to job transition but form basic requirement for employment”.

Thriving of informational society necessitates that learners begin to use internet efficiently to become digital citizens in the world where nothing is guaranteed and anything can change at any time. For instance, with the emergence of COVID-19, many people lost their jobs whereas it marked the beginning of huge money making digital/online business for some. Robot is taking over manual work in offices in some

foreign countries; the use of Automated Teller Machine (ATM) has reduced the workload of cashiers in banks, social media platforms has amplified online businesses, mobile banking has reduced the task of carrying huge sum of money for transactions among others. All these changes came as a result of colossal technological developments. [9] opined that the only consistency from year to year is change and that is why teachers are incorporating the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Assessment into their career readiness courses.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES AND ITS FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM**

At inception, definitions of Social Studies centered around man. For instance, it was defined as a problem-approach discipline through which man studies and learns about problems of survival in his environment. Social Studies is “an attempt to foster in young learners a better understanding of man’s interactions with his physical and social environments”. As a young student in her first year in secondary school in the 70s, this writer learnt an unforgettable definition of social studies from her teacher who described it as the study of how man lives, what he does and how his life is affected by things, people and habits around him.

Social Studies is dynamic in nature. Its dynamism began with the change that has reflected in its definition. [14] described “social studies as ‘the study of dynamic interactions people have with themselves and elements of their environments’”. [15] viewed “it as a study of problems of ‘human’ survival in an environment and how to find solutions to them”. “In this dispensation, Social Studies is observed to mean a multi-disciplinary approach of studying people and their interaction with the dynamic environments. Social Studies is also described as a subject that is concerned with the totality of the realities of ‘peoples’ existence” [16]. This suggests the flexible nature of its curriculum that makes it amenable and easily receptive to integration of new ideas and emerging areas of knowledge. Suffice to infer that Social Studies content can change based on life experiences which policy makers and other stakeholders deem essential and significant to be included in its content to make it relevant in the changing world in this digital age.

At the Mombassa Conference of African Social Studies Educators in 1968, the kind of learning outcomes desired for learners through the teaching of social studies especially in terms of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes were clearly spelt out:

- Knowledge: to understand the evolving social and physical environment and acquire relevant body of knowledge pre-requisite to personal knowledge for positive contribution to betterment of mankind.
- Skills: to learn and acquire certain basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, skills of hand and head, observation, analysis and inference which are essential to form sound social, economic and political judgement.
- Values/Attitudes: “to develop positive attitudes of togetherness, comradeship and cooperation and inculcation of appropriate values of honesty, integrity, hard work, fairness and justice” [16].

One question which teachers should ask is ‘when or what exactly do we teach to ensure achievement of these objectives? The curriculum is filled with contents. Teachers’ concern is to cover the contents within the stipulated time on the time table round the school year. Most of the contemporary methods that enhance development of skills in learners such as field trip, project/activity among others require fund, time, instructional materials among others to teach them effectively. The Nigerian factor of inadequate funding of education with its resultant effect of lack of motivation, non-provision of instructional materials to aid teaching and learning, incessant strike, irregular payment of salaries inter alia is not helping education. In support of this, [8] submitted that there is little in terms of teacher expertise in combining knowledge and skills in a coherent ensemble with guiding materials and assessments.

[8] suggested that 21<sup>st</sup> Century needs should be adapted by schools. This implies revisiting each dimension of the objectives and how they interact thus:

Knowledge: need to rethink the significance and applicability of what is taught and to strike a far better balance between the conceptual and the practical.

Skills: need to develop higher-order skills (21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills) such as the ‘4Cs’ (Creativity, Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration) and others for absorbing knowledge as well as for work performance.

Character: behaviours, attitudes and values needed to face an increasingly challenging world; that is, teaching character traits such as performance –

related traits (adaptability, persistence, resilience) moral-related traits (integrity, justice, empathy, ethics).

**Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Social Studies and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

Social Studies	21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills
<b>Knowledge:</b> To understand the evolving social and physical environment and acquire relevant body of knowledge for positive contribution to betterment of mankind.	<b>Knowledge:</b> Need to rethink the significance and applicability of what is taught and to strike a far better balance between the conceptual and the practical.
<b>Skills:</b> To learn and acquire basic skills of speaking, reading and writing, critical thinking, observation, analysis and inference (problem solving) which are essential to form sound social, economic and political judgement	<b>Skills:</b> Need to develop higher-order skills (21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills) such as the '4Cs' (Creativity, Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration) and others for absorbing knowledge as well as for work performance.
<b>Values:</b> Inculcation of appropriate values of honesty, integrity, humility, equality, justice and respect for human dignity	<b>Character:</b> Need to develop behaviours, attitudes and values needed to face an increasingly challenging world; that is, teaching character traits such as performance-related traits (adaptability, persistence, resilience)
<b>Attitudes:</b> To develop positive attitudes of compassion, kindness, diligence, commitment, confidence and cooperation	moral-related traits (integrity, justice, empathy, ethics). Fadel (2012)

A critical look at the objectives shows that the emphasis of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that slightly differentiate them from Social Studies are the areas teachers have to work on. The emerging areas are applicability of what is learnt, development of creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills as well as teaching performance-related traits such as adaptability, persistence and resilience. [17] clarified “what is new about 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills as critical thinking and problem solving, life and career skills, innovation and creativity; information, media and technology skills”.

### **INTEGRATING 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS INTO SOCIAL STUDIES**

One of the functions of education is to develop the full potential of learners to be able to survive and be independent after school. What is being suggested is a review of the subject’s content to include skills that can make learners improve their capabilities to face life experiences and challenges. [18] envisioned this change and called for activities for making lessons development-oriented and close to life experiences in Social Studies stressing that children cannot be given knowledge but can only be

guided to discover and construct their own knowledge. [1] added that “for students to succeed in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they must master skills, knowledge, attitudes and intercultural communicative competence as a vital road map to meet the needs and challenges of the interconnected complicated changing world”. It is important that students acquire job-oriented skills which include computer skills, using Internet for educational and employment advantage, effective use of Word, Excel and Graphics, using social media for meaningful and purposeful engagements and so on.

“To make learning life relevant, students must be equipped with practical skills and knowledge and dispositions they can apply in various educational, career and civic contexts throughout their lives” [19]. In Social Studies, teachers must be able to teach these skills and how they can be applied to real life situations. Target of teachers should be development of student’s capability to process and use information effectively as against development of ability to store knowledge content and recall facts for examination purpose. It involves movement from ‘closed’ or low-order questions (that require simple yes/no, true/false, agree/disagree responses) to ‘open’ or high-order questions that allows student to demonstrate application of knowledge acquired with skill developed to show proficiency in an efficient manner. [6] in their suggestion on how skills development can influence formal education system averred that there must be a shift from teachers focusing on content delivery to skills development. This suggestion does not appear practicable for the reason that skill development must be built on the foundation of content-based knowledge. Content delivery and skill development must go together to have desired result. For instance, student’s development of critical thinking skill is indispensable for formation of sound social, economic and political judgement. Social technologies such as social software (social networking, blogs etc and communication capabilities (eg web conferencing) promote network relationships among users. This also includes use of computers and information technology. Social networking enable students to share interests, ideas, activities, innovations and real life connections. 21<sup>st</sup> century education according to [4] maintained that includes knowledge of traditional core subjects and that students in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools should be able to apply their knowledge to understanding and solving real-world problems using 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. [8] hoped that “schools, universities and

training programmes will become more responsive to the workforce and societal needs of today and students will increasingly focus on growing and applying essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and knowledge to real problems and issues, not just learning textbook facts and formulae. He explained further that this will raise levels of creativity and innovation and provide better skills, better jobs, better societies and ultimately, better lives”.

In the face of massive unemployment, to be certified in an area of specialisation or career seems inadequate to get a good job. It is observed that hiring managers of industries and companies look for skills that increase creativity through introduction of innovative ideas that promote productivity. **Computer skills that are transferable from local to global level are job skills that make people successful in any employment.** [14] reiterated that “the change required includes developing learners’ ability and skills to respond in informed and responsible manner to the challenges emanating from the multi-faceted human interactions within an expanding local, national, regional and global environment”.

Students’ learning should be connected to life after school. Hence they must be adequately prepared for jobs so that they can compete favourably with their counterparts in other disciplines **in employment market.** Students form the centre of school organisation. **While stressing skill development, values such as honesty, integrity, humility, equality, justice and respect for human dignity as well as positive attitudes of compassion, kindness, diligence, commitment, confidence and cooperation must not be discarded as they form part of the 21st C skills.** Therefore, efforts must be made to ensure they develop into resourceful and self-directed students by focusing on preparing them for future to be able to cope with real life situations and solve problems. [20] declared that 21<sup>st</sup> century learning means that students master content, the 4Cs, demonstrate digital literacy and civic responsibility. In this context, to meet the emerging educational needs of this generation, it is important to merge knowledge with skills to ensure competence, consistent, efficient and wise utilisation of social technologies and make learning life-long and skills future oriented.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper examined 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and its applicability to social studies. Integrating the skills into Social Studies to ensure that students are prepared for life-long learning, jobs and technologies that may evolve as a result of change in future. It is necessary for students to be equipped with practical skills (critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication and collaboration as well as information, media and technology skills) and knowledge while teachers must be able to teach these skills and how they can be applied to real life situations. Teaching of performance-related traits through which students can develop adaptability, persistence and resilience skills must also not be ignored. To achieve this, content delivery must be merged with the skill development. The target of teachers should be to help students develop capability to process and use information effectively as against development of ability to store knowledge content and recall facts for examination purpose.

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