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Q&A: Gerald Bracey **Author and researcher** ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 “What is Ready?” cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21st century.

Gerald Bracey is an independent researcher, author, and professor of education at George Mason University and Arizona State University. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including *What You Need To Know About the War Against America's Public Schools*.

Editor: What is “ready”? What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

Bracey: Aside from the ability to read, write, communicate orally and do fundamental operations, I don't think there are any specific skills that all students need. Life is far too uncertain to know. I took math through calculus. I haven't taken a derivative or found an integral since 1961. Algebra, though, has served me well. Had I become an English major, I probably would never have used that.

Those interested in college will need to be apprised of college demands and plan accordingly. My view is that no matter what you plan to do in the future you should learn everything you can about everything you can simply because you can't know what the future will bring. Americans don't like this kind of thinking. They want assurances. Tough. There aren't any. If I had opted for mathematical psychology rather than developmental calculus, integrals would have been integral to my life. Ditto in reverse, French. I took French because first, that's what college-track high school students did and second because people at the college said I'd need it to get into graduate school. No way could I read Fraise or Piaget in the original. But I did start to travel abroad, something quite unanticipated itself, and it came in handy in Laos, Lebanon and, of course, in France where I lived for a while in a time and place where few spoke English.

Most jobs for the next decade will require a high school diploma and short-term on-the-job training. The latter is the responsibility of industry and business, not school. Next week, I will be visited by a carpet cleaner, a pest control expert, and an electrician. I imagine that school-delivered knowledge would play a big role only in this last. While the other two require some knowledge of chemistry, it is not what chemistry courses deliver nor is the knowledge extensive enough to require a full-year course.

What schools should strive to prepare is an independent learner and a person who can have a rich intellectual, social, emotional and communal life *after* work. The American worker has always been at or near the top in productivity. It's after they leave their jobs they too much settle into arid and empty behaviors.

Most jobs that are not routine require both tacit and contextual knowledge. For the latter, you have to look at a problem situation and try and figure out what the problem is and most of the information about that is provided by the problem itself—the context. Tacit knowledge is learned through experience and engagement in work—in becoming “an old hand” at something vs. a

“greenhorn.” Schools can in no way deliver either of these types of knowledge and yet they seem incredibly important. They can only be transferred through social ties and shared practice.

Editor: How well are schools preparing today’s students for tomorrow’s workplace challenges?

Bracey: I keep hearing that for 90 percent of today’s kindergartners, the technologies of their future jobs haven’t been invented yet. This strikes me partly as futurist crap — how can anyone know something like this — but partly plausible nevertheless.

In any case, schools cannot prepare students for jobs that require only a high school diploma until we find some way of repealing Hodgkinson’s law, a law I invented and named for Bud Hodgkinson. Bud says one of the great pleasures of being a demographer is knowing with complete certainty that people who are alive today and alive 10 years later are exactly ten years older. Employers do not like to hire people with high school diplomas until they’re about 26. Thus, we need some way of graduating people 18 years after birth who are 26.

People in the service sector need “soft skills” such as on-time attendance, interpersonal skills, attitude, work ethic, appearance, ability to work in teams, communications skills, etc. One of our largest industries is the hospitality industry which requires a display of social and aesthetic skills. One study of luxury hotels found that workers there needed both observational and active listening skills in order to create experiences that the customer perceives as authentically caring.

And speaking of caring, the caring services industry is large and growing. It requires people to have skills at suppressing emotions they really feel and expressing emotions they might or might not feel. One of the knocks on the medical field is its impersonality. I had an MRI a week ago and the people in charge there have obviously been doing workshops in how to look caring. Caring by home health care aides requires even more such skills. Don’t think schools can do much about this.

Editor: Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6½ hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently? Also, what can and should be done to ensure that programs teaching “readiness” skills are replicable across districts, states, and the nation?

Bracey: You can’t ensure readiness. I frankly don’t think school should spend much time orienting itself to the demands of the workforce. Let the capitalists do that (and by the way, how come no one ever talks about the skills needed to be good capitalists? Looks to me that’s a much neglected field). I’m a traditional liberal arts advocate. Give the kids experience in literature, math, science, painting, music, sports and, all the while remembering that there are no guarantees, the rest will take care of itself.