

Life-Ready is Future-Proof

by engage2learn



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Abstract

Focusing on building Life Ready skills in today's learners ensures the 16,000 or so hours learners invest in school is well-spent, college or career readiness is guaranteed, and that they leave high school confident to take on the future as it unfolds for each of them as individuals. No longer are jobs centered around solitary, repetitive tasks, but instead call for collaboration, multiple methods of communication, and innovation. e2L has curated 7 Life Ready Skills from the research on this topics. It is one thing to know what these skills are and to understand that they are important to the future of every learner attending schools today; it is an entirely different thing to create a system prepared to provide the experience required.

A widely accepted, common goal of K-12 education is to prepare learners for their future beyond the classroom walls. However, defining what the future entails is difficult and varies from one generation to the next. For example, during the Industrial Revolution, the future would have most likely meant filling a standardized role of working in a factory or a coal mine. In the 21st century, however, the future might involve a job as a highly skilled spacecraft technician or leading a team of software engineers in developing a new product. How do we prepare learners for the reality of an unpredictable future? We equip them with timeless skills - not just for a specific type of job, but for life. Tony Wagner aptly calls these survival skills. Dan Pink suggests that abilities we once thought frivolous “increasingly will determine who flourishes and who flounders” in the new economy (Pink, 2006). Many thought leaders argue persuasively for a similar set of ethical, creative, social, and entrepreneurial skills as a foundation for individual success and societal viability (Kettler, 2016). At engage2learn (e2L), we have dubbed them Life Ready Skills. Synonyms for these skills include soft skills, employability skills, future-ready skills, or 21st-century skills. Focusing on building Life Ready skills in today's learners ensures the 16,000 or so hours learners invest in school is well-spent, college or career readiness is guaranteed, and that they leave high school confident to take on the future as it unfolds for each of them as individuals.

The development of life ready skills is critical for learners to secure and thrive in a 21st-century career. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, it has become increasingly difficult for employers to find job applicants with strong soft skills that are essential to succeeding in the workplace (Davidson, 2016). No longer are jobs centered around solitary, repetitive tasks, but instead call for collaboration, multiple methods of communication, and innovation. In a world of modern technology, many of the basic skills learned by rote memorization in the past are now retrieved through a quick Google search. However, soft skills require years of practice to develop and master. Giving our learners the tools and the opportunities, embedded in the context of their everyday learning experience, to hone these skills before they launch out into the real world, will prove invaluable to their success as adults. According to the NACE Job Outlook 2018, these Life Ready skills remained at the top of the list of skills in demand by employers (NACE, 2018). Health and human services make up a number of the fastest growing jobs projected by the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, and those are jobs in which soft skills are essential to providing the highest quality of care and service (BLS, 2018).

What are the Life Ready skills? There are seven e2L Life Ready skills backed by research from various thought leaders such as Dan Pink, Tony Wagner, Carol Dweck, and studies on employability skills that every learner should be proficient in before high school graduation, and continue to build upon as adults: Autonomy, Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking, Growth Mindset, and Professional Ethics.

Autonomy

The importance of autonomy is backed by research from Howard Gardner, Tony Wagner, Carol Dweck, and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). Autonomy is the learner's ability to choose learning tasks, decide which tools and resources to utilize during the learning process, set goals and commit to reaching them independently while reflecting throughout the process. According to recent research, autonomy is the secret to being happy at work, and it benefits both employees and employers by boosting morale, reducing management costs, and improving efficiency and productivity (DeMers, 2017). Teaching learners to be autonomous will provide them with a more significant opportunity to find meaningful work and be valued as an employee.

Collaboration

Tony Wagner considers collaboration one of the seven survival skills. SCANS, National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), and the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) also provide support for collaboration as a necessary skill. Collaborative learning activities tap the social power of learning better than competitive and individualistic approaches. The ability to work in a team is in the top three most highly sought-after skills in an employee (Berger, 2016), so we must provide learners the opportunities to learn and practice collaboration. In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni says, "Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive edge, both because it is so powerful and so rare," (2002). To make learners employable and ready to face the future of working with coworkers and diverse individuals, teaching them to do so in the classroom is vital to their success as adults.

Communication

Communication is also proven by research from Tony Wagner, SCANS, NACE, and P21. Communication involves being able to articulate thoughts and ideas both verbally and in writing, to listen effectively to decipher meaning, and to fully engage ideas by constructing meaning and remembering information. Learners must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media to become proficient in this skill. Communication plays a vital role in the future of all learners. "Communication skills are essential for the successful future career of a student. In today's competitive world, communication skills in business are the most sought-after quality of an educated person," according to Kamal Joshi (2015). Engaging learners in effective communication on a daily basis will prepare them to properly utilize the various forms of communication expected of them in their work and life experiences.

Creativity

Creativity is endorsed by multiple thought leaders including Dan Pink, Howard Gardner, Tony Wagner, SCANS, and P21. In his TED Talk "Do Schools Kill Creativity," Sir Ken Robinson states that education has stifled creativity and explains the importance of fostering it in learners to better prepare them for the future. He emphasizes the need for children to be both creative and adaptable in a world where a college degree is no longer the determining factor in marketability and success (Robinson, 2006). The skills once valued in the workforce are changing over time. Originality is becoming more and more desired by both employers and consumers. In an ever-changing world, today's learners will have both more opportunity and more necessity to generate original thoughts and ideas.

Critical Thinking

Howard Gardner, Tony Wagner, SCANS, NACE, P21 all provide support for critical thinking as an important skill for learners to master. Educators have a responsibility to develop critical thinking skills within students. In a recent article, The Balance listed critical thinking as one of the top five employability skills (Doyle, 2018). The workplace contains constant challenges and the need for solving complex problems. Critical thinking helps learners view problems and concepts from different perspectives, which will help them tremendously in a diverse, global work environment.

Growth Mindset

Carol Dweck is known as one of the leading researchers on the concept of a growth mindset and has several written works about its importance. Dan Pink and Tony Wagner also provide support for a growth mindset in today's learners. With a growth mindset, people do not feel limited by their natural abilities, but instead, believe that those abilities can be developed further through dedication and a strong work ethic. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment. Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* defines growth mindset as one in which “students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it,” (Morehead, 2016). Once learners realize that they are in control of their mindset and their learning, they can adjust their efforts to achieve their desired goals and reach their full potential.

Professional Ethics

The need for professional ethics is corroborated by Howard Gardner, SCANS, and NACE. The ideal culture of the classroom is one of mutual respect and collaboration. Students are actively engaged and participate in a manner that is positive and productive. The teacher cultivates an environment that fosters integrity, authenticity, accountability. Professionalism is listed as one of the key skills for improving employability (AACA, 2018). Teaching learners this skill of exhibiting integrity and authenticity in interactions with others, honoring commitments to team tasks and norms, practicing punctuality, and working to meet deadlines will set them up to be an exemplary, sought-after employee.

Life-Ready Skill	Dan Pink A whole new mind:	Howard Gardner Five Minds for the Future	Tony Wagner The Global Achievement Gap	Carol Dweck Mindset	SCANS	NACE	P21
Autonomy		X	X	X	X		
Collaboration			X		X	X	X
Communication	X		X		X	X	X
Creativity		X	X		X		X
Critical Thinking		X	X		X	X	X
Growth Mindset	X		X				
Professional Ethics		X		X	X	X	

Regarding the future of work, 62% of graduates express the desire to be an entrepreneur (EIG, 2016). Interestingly, the capacities defining what it means to be an entrepreneur almost directly correlate to

the seven above-described e2L Life Ready skills. As stated in a recent blog post:

When we broaden our perspective on what it means to be entrepreneurial, we find significant rationale for wanting and hoping for young people to develop those capacities. What are the entrepreneurial skills? One such breakdown identified 10 traits that all successful entrepreneurs share (Smale, 2015):

- Full of Determination
- Not Afraid to Take Risks
- High Level of Confidence
- Craves Learning
- Understands Failure is Part of the Game
- Passionate About His/Her Business
- Highly Adaptable
- Good Understanding of Money Management
- Expert at Networking,
- Ability to Sell and Promote

Now applying these skills/qualities with a broader brush, it is easy to see that they would be absolutely beneficial, regardless of whether or not the individual actually owned the business. These skills would be highly advantageous, regardless of the college or career choice a student might make. No teacher in a classroom today would say that they wouldn't be thrilled if their students exhibited these skills while in school. There's not an employer in the world that wouldn't highly appreciate and seek to retain an employee who exhibits these traits. These skills can be applied to so many areas of life, but it can't be assumed that everyone has them naturally. Even if a person exhibits some or even all of these skills, without the right experiences, the skills won't be fully developed (Everett, 2017).

It is one thing to know what these skills are and to understand that they are important to the future of every learner attending schools today; it is an entirely different thing to create a system prepared to provide the experience required. Moving from a system designed to support students during the Industrial Revolution to a system designed to provide the necessary skills for students in the Digital Age requires thinking in different ways about how to design the learning experience for students that optimizes opportunities to engage in those skills while developing specific content knowledge. A locally designed learning framework helps clarify the vision for the ideal learner experience based on the characteristics, skills, and traits that a local community desires for students in their public schools. This framework provides the clarity of methods that guide the professional educator to design the most meaningful and relevant learning opportunity possible. For the system to ensure this framework truly modernizes the learner experience, it must become the One Thing and not just one more thing. All aspects of the system should be aligned to support the desired learner experience, and any program or initiative that does not add to this singular focus should be strategically abandoned. This myopic, intentionally aligned system can provide the foundation for transformation. As long as the teachers, coaches, and leaders are supported through the change process with high-quality training and job-embedded, individualized coaching, learners will reap the rewards of an exceptional learning experience and develop those critical Life Ready skills.

A quote widely attributed to Albert Einstein states, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Subjecting all learners to the same standardized test doesn't accurately measure overall intelligence or achievement, but rather-at best-how accomplished a learner is at test-taking and proficiency in a defined set of basic content standards. The standardized test doesn't allow for individual expression of talent or ability to perform the Life Ready skills that will contribute to the learner's success after graduation. Again, this is a national situation in which all indicators point to the need for students to develop these

critical Life Ready skills; however, currently, our only measure of the quality of learners' experience is how they perform on these very narrow assessments of achievement. As a result, and because the consequences of students not doing well on these assessments can be significant, the system is reticent to commit to developing a more meaningful experience, driven purely out of fear. Federal regulations expect public school districts to assess 95% of students or they are at risk of losing funding. New York department of education spokesperson Jonathan Burman clarifies that expectation by saying, "The U.S. Department of Education has made clear that when a district fails to ensure that students participate in required state assessments, the state education agency is expected to consider imposing sanctions on that district, including—in the most egregious cases—withholding programmatic funds" (Bakeman, 2015).

To meet the expectations of a truly life-ready citizenry, a change in paradigm and a shift in the narrative, followed by a fundamental redesign of assessment practices is required. Designing assessments locally that focus on the growth of these skills, not the mastery since no one ever truly masters them, could redirect the focus and professional development of the system to provide this type of experience better. If we can provide these rich, well-designed, meaningful learning opportunities every day in the context of relevant content, experiences where students have multiple opportunities to engage in these skills in the safety of the schoolhouse, our future leaders, designers, engineers, poets, directors, artists, will be more than adequately prepared to thrive in the single thing we can guarantee them...an unpredictable future. According to a Gallup report for NWEA, only one in 10 teachers believe that the formal and informal assessments used in school measure Life Ready skills very well. The same report indicates that only 19% of parents believe standardized tests measure whether their learners have the skills to succeed in life outside of school and work (Gallup/ NWEA, 2018). If parents and teachers agree that a standardized test does not accurately measure the development of these essential Life Ready skills, maybe it's time to look at other options for testing growth and achievement in the skills that truly matter.

Resources

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