Education Week Teacher

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**Teaching Tomorrow's Skills to Today's Students**

**By Heather Wolpert-Gawron** "Why do we have to do this?" Many teachers have been hearing this question more frequently in recent years. Students detect a deepening divide between "real life" and "school life," and they have a point. As teachers, we should commit ourselves to linking instruction directly to the skills students will need in higher education and the workplace.

As I wrote my recent book, [***Tween Crayons and Curfews: Tips for Middle School Teachers***](http://www.eyeoneducation.com/bookstore/productdetails.cfm?sku=7180-5&title=%27tween-crayons-and-curfews), I researched skills that stakeholders in higher education and business claim they need to see in their future candidates. As a result, I developed a list of 13 skills that today's students should master. The book shares strategies for helping students develop these skills.

Not long ago, I chiseled the list down to a manageable "top five" by asking fellow teachers which skills they believed were most important. Here are the skills teachers identified—along with a couple of strategies for addressing each:

**Collaboration**

• First, don't assume that students know how to build consensus. It's something many adults don't even know how to do. Guide students through pitching their ideas to the group one at a time. Give them language to use when they don’t agree with one another. Model for them how to praise and critique. Then model the hardest thing of all: moving on.

• Shift your classroom environment to disturb the hierarchy that students tend to develop. Students will need to be able to work with diverse colleagues in the future. In middle school, that can be a challenge—in any one small group, a student's best friend, greatest enemy, first love, most recent love, and future love may be gathered together. Stirring the pot can help: Change seat assignments and/or table groupings often. Surprise kids by rotating who sits at the head of a group of desks shoved together. Spring it on them that it's time to look at the room from a different vantage, and you'll find that their internal perspective can change too.

**Communication**

• Give students the words they will need in the future to talk to their bosses and co-workers. Talk to them about audience. You can scaffold students' development of communication skills by providing them with sentence stems that can help them to speak with maturity. It may feel awkward at first, but it's vital if you’re going to expect them to be able to communicate.

• Familiarize students with scenarios that will require them to communicate effectively. Show them the structure to use in a professional e-mail. Have them role-play leaving a voice-mail message or shaking hands professionally.

• Spend time involving students in developing the rules of discourse for your classroom. Ask them to help create norms for communication—then to hold one another to those norms. In my classroom, we develop norms for talking to each other, commenting on a blog, behaving during video conferences, etc. Not surprisingly, the norms for each situation are similar, leading students to deduce that manners and professionalism are universal.

**Problem Solving**

• Don't answer students' questions. As I note in my book, "Not every silence requires an immediate answer to end. It is the silence that allows for thought. Taking that a step further, by not answering the question, you have allowed possibilities to exist in student problem solving." Be the guide who helps students to find the answers, instead of being the go-to person who has all the answers. Move your own responses from "This means … " to "What if … ?"

**Questioning**

• The best way to prepare students to be able to answer the bigger questions in life is to train them to ask their own questions. Help them get to the heart of their inquiry and then celebrate questions that prove their comprehension.

• Have students develop their own assessments. Teach them how to ask high-level questions that can help assess content knowledge. Talk about the different formats of questions (closed choice, rank order, open choice, etc.), then ask them to design questions that test each other's knowledge of the subject they are studying. Teach your students to ask deep questions and you'll be able to assess their depth of content knowledge.

**Independent Learning**

• For teachers, independent learning is about letting go. It's about permitting students to experience their own "eureka" moments. It's also about making their brains sweat a little. For example, instead of writing my notes, comments, and questions on student essays, I meet with students individually and have them take notes using a template. We meet and talk. They identify and note the most important feedback, and we both sign off on what needs to be done. Students also set their own deadlines for revision, signing contracts that commit them to specific timelines.

• Google Advanced Search can be a great tool for independent learning. But, even as you "loosen the reins," guide your students in using this tool effectively. Show them how to hone their searches using the file type and usage rights features. It is the first step in releasing them to be responsible and safe in their own hunt for knowledge.

Of course, as you address the "top five" skills, you can easily weave in ways to help students develop other key competencies for tomorrow's workplace:

• **Decision-making:** Learn how to weigh options. Learn how to defend your selection.

• **Understanding bias:** Recognize agendas.

• **Leadership:** Develop the skills it takes to be a leader (not a ruler).

• **Compromise:** Find contentment even when giving something up or finding middle ground.

• **Summarize:** Be prepared to "get to the point" when necessary.

• **Sharing the air:** Learn when to be quiet so you can learn from others.

• **Persuasion:** Develop the ability to be convincing in conversation and writing.

• **Goal Setting:** Identify your goals and how to move toward them.

If you begin the year with all of these skills in mind, the content of your lessons will be more engaging, and ultimately, more applicable to life beyond school.