

**Painting the Portrait of a Successful Graduate:
The Educator's Role in Teaching Essential Skills**

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Abstract:

A growing trend in the United States is equipping students with more than technical skills when they enter the workforce. Employers often relate that employees may possess technical skills, but do not exhibit essential skills that every worker needs to be successful in the workplace and contribute to organizational progress.

At the same time, lecturers and teachers of technical skills report that students do not enter their classroom with the needed fundamental skills – basic mathematic, language skills – needed to excel in the classroom, let alone in the workplace.

So, who bears the responsibility of teaching/incorporating fundamental learning and essential workplace skills? Everyone!

This paper will explore the **portrait of a successful graduate**, no matter the technical program, and how educators and others can create curriculum that enhances and builds on prior classes and prior learning.

This paper will include:

- The characteristics, knowledge and skills each successful graduate should possess.
- How lecturers and teachers can/should incorporate lessons that teach valuable attributes in class.
- Examples of teaching methods that increase students' essential workplace skills.

The goal of this paper is to provide readers:

- A better understanding of the essential skills of success.
- Definitive ways to incorporate different methods into their teaching to create desired outcomes.
- A clearer vision of the role of technical training and educators in modeling problem based/work-based learning and how to assess these skills.

Author Biography:

Christine Gardner, a resident of the United States, has more than 10 years' experience teaching adult students and working with educators, state agencies, regulators and government officials on policies and procedures that have a positive impact on students and their learning outcomes.

She graduated from The Ohio State University and earned a Master's Degree in Business Administration from Franklin University, both in Columbus, Ohio, USA.

She has conducted numerous workshops on communication skills, marketing skills and teamwork and is the Executive Director of the non-profit Ohio Association for Career and Technical Education, where she leads advocacy, professional and leadership development and communication efforts.

Introduction

The role of the educator in preparing students for today's job market is changing. The focus has traditionally been teaching technical skills, including science, technology, engineering and math, and skills associated with workforce programs leading to employment. While technical skills/knowledge are important, there are other essential key abilities and attributes that receive less attention, but are critical to personal and career satisfaction. Often referred to as "soft skills", professional competencies are as important as technical skills and knowledge to a student's success as a future employee. Many new graduates do not have strong professional skills, such as critical thinking, judgement, leadership, and teamwork - the skills employers are actually looking for in their employees. (<http://theconversation.com/lack-of-workers-with-soft-skills-demands-a-shift-in-teaching-73433>).

Based on feedback from employers, it appears there is a disconnect between what is taught in the classroom and what employers need from their employees, and it is important for educators to include teaching professional competencies in addition to technical skills in the classroom.

Employers share that employees may possess technical skills, but do not exhibit essential skills that every worker needs to be successful and positively contribute to the organizations for which they work. Employees do not get fired from their job because of lack of skills or training; many times, it comes down to issues that have nothing to do with their technical skills, which is why teaching professional competencies for student professional success is so important.

Employees are terminated for many reasons, but the top seven reasons according to INC include:

- blundering on social media,
- having a negative attitude,
- acting as a lone wolf (not working well in a team),
- being late,
- disobeying the boss,
- giving the minimum effort, and
- using inappropriate behavior and making inappropriate comments.

(<https://www.inc.com/john-white/here-are-the-top-7-reasons-people-get-fired-are-you-guilty-of-any-of-them.html>).

At the same time, lecturers and teachers of technical skills observe that students do not enter their classroom with the fundamental skills – basic mathematic, language skills – needed to excel in the classroom, let alone in the workplace. Educators and other school personnel need to create curriculum that enhances and builds on prior classes and prior learning, but also focuses on essential professional skills needed to succeed in the workplace. Like a good painting or piece of art, it takes time and energy to mold and create a successful graduate. By using different mediums, educators will be able to create the portrait of a successful graduate and students will succeed in their chosen careers.

Professional Competencies

One reason it is so difficult to teach the professional characteristics, knowledge and skills each successful graduate should possess is because “success” is an abstract concept. Much like art appreciation is up to an individual, so is success.

Ohio Means Jobs, the state of Ohio, USA, effort to match employees with available jobs and provide incentives to educators to train students for those jobs, created an OhioMeansJobs- Job Readiness Seal with professional pillars that form a fundamental skillset and are deemed necessary for all high school graduates. Focusing on several different fields and looking at the needs of employers, Ohio Means Jobs experts came up with a list of key professional skills. This list includes input from business and industry owners and is based on their experience (<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/New-Skills-for-Youth/SuccessBound/OhioMeansJobs-Readiness-Seal>).

Achieving the Job Readiness Seal means the graduate would be able to show competency in the following areas to be ready for the working world:

- **Drug Free** - The student commits to being drug free.
- **Reliability** - The student has integrity and responsibility in professional settings.
- **Work Ethic** - The student has effective work habits, personal accountability and a determination to succeed.
- **Punctuality** - The student arrives to commitments on time and ready to contribute.
- **Discipline** - The student abides by guidelines, demonstrates self-control and stays on task.
- **Teamwork/Collaboration** - The student builds collaborative relationships with others and can work as part of a team.
- **Professionalism** - The student demonstrates honesty. He or she dresses and acts appropriately and responsibly. He or she learns from mistakes.
- **Learning Agility** - The student desires to continuously learn new information and skills.
- **Critical Thinking/Problem-Solving** - The student exercises strong decision-making skills, analyzes issues effectively and thinks creatively to overcome problems.
- **Leadership** - The student leverages the strengths of others to achieve common goals. He or she coaches and motivates peers and can prioritize and delegate work.

- **Creativity/Innovation** - The student is original and inventive. He or she communicates new ideas to others, drawing on knowledge from different fields to find solutions.
- **Oral and Written Communications** - The student articulates thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms.
- **Digital Technology** - The student has an understanding of emerging technology and leverages technology to solve problems, complete tasks and accomplish goals.
- **Global/Intercultural Fluency** - The student values, respects and learns from diverse groups of people.
- **Career Management** - The student is a self-advocate. He or she articulates strengths, knowledge and experiences relevant to success in a job or postsecondary education.

There are ways to incorporate different methods into teaching to create desired professional and essential skill outcomes and increase employability based on the list above.

Teaching Professional Competencies

Just like an artist chooses his/her own medium and their talent shines through their work, a teacher should let his/her own personality and style show through their teaching and choose methods that fit their personal style. Finding a way to teach these fundamental job readiness characteristics becomes even more crucial as unemployment in the United States decreases. The U.S. unemployment rate as of May 2018 is 3.8% (<https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>). Unemployment is at an all-time low in the United States, which means a more competitive job market. With low unemployment, potential candidates can be picky about their job selection, but while obtaining the job may be easier, growing and progressing within the organization will require employees equipped with leadership potential. This makes teaching soft skills and professional competencies even more important to make sure students are competitive applicants and stand out from the crowd.

Based on the Job Readiness Seal competencies, there are ways to incorporate teaching these essential skills in the classroom:

Drug-Free: Educators need to inform their students on the statistics and negative consequences of not being drug-free. Almost every employer conducts a drug screening before they will hire someone, and if a potential employee fails the drug test they are automatically out of the running. In 2017, 4.2% of employees failed a drug test.

<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/employment-law/pages/positive-drug-test-rates-climb.aspx>).

Smoking, though not an illegal drug, is also seen as a problem for employers because of loss of productivity among their smoking employees versus non-smoking employees. According to a study on the Effect of Smoking on Productivity Loss,

“Current smokers missed more days of work and experienced more unproductive time at work compared with former smokers and nonsmokers. The average annual cost for lost productivity for nonsmokers was 2,623 dollars/year compared with 3246 dollars/year for former smokers and 4430 dollars/year for current smokers. More than half the costs were due to unproductive time at work”

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17033509>).

By just sharing this information, students know these statistics, and they can decide for themselves to lead a drug-free life.

Reliability, Work Ethic, and Punctuality: The first step is for educators to model the desired behavior – be reliable, have a strong work ethic, and start your classes on time. If students see their educators behaving a certain way, they will follow suit. Are there consequences in your classroom for being late to class, or turning work in late? Set aside time to address problems with work ethic or reliability with your students, and stress the importance of these attributes in the working world.

Teamwork and Collaboration: In almost every field of work, students will be working within a team, or with their supervisor, or alongside someone else at some point. Group projects in school are a great way to facilitate teamwork and collaboration. Have students pick their own role within the team, and settle disputes as a team instead of coming to the instructor if a problem arises. Offer to help coach them through any issues, but ultimately, make it up to them to find a solution.

Learning Agility: Learning agility and the desire to learn new skills and constantly improve is not always an innate skill. Students look up to the educator as the expert, so stress the importance of constantly learning, and how the field for which they are training is constantly changing. Teachers should be excited to learn something new all the time and share this enthusiasm. This attitude will instill that same value in students.

Critical Thinking/Problem-Solving: Don't always make decisions for students. Let them come up with new projects and lead their own learning. Create lesson plans that don't have black and white answers; the "gray" areas are where critical thinking and problem solving skills will flourish.

Leadership: Create a leadership program within the classroom with a new class leader every week. They will be a resource for other students, set up stations and prep the room for the day, and be the person to solve any small issues that might arise (unless they are big problems that need escalated to a teacher, of course).

Creativity/Innovation: New models of teaching, such as problem based and project based assignments promote creativity and innovation. Educators can present students with a challenge or ask them to choose a project based on something they are familiar with or passionate about. The scope of the challenge can be simple or complex, the point is to allow students the creative freedom to explore and test solutions.

Strong Oral and Written Communications: Have students give presentations, as a group and on their own. Make sure they are still getting essential writing skills within their career-tech program. Being able to effectively communicate is a top skill every worker needs.

Digital Technology: Technology is getting more advanced, and students need to stay up on trends. Instructors may find students actually know more about technology. Employ the latest technology in the classroom. Make sure students have opportunities to explore the latest technologies, and make their work more efficient.

Global/Intercultural Fluency: Understanding others' cultures is an essential skill in the global economy. Students need the opportunity to work with people outside of all cultures to understand and empathize with others. Create opportunities for students to explore other cultures, even if your budget does not allow travel.

Career Management: Put students in charge of their career. Give them resources on how to create a resume, job interviewing tips, and offer to give mock interviews to students so you can help them improve on any skills. Help students come up with a career projection plan by sharing the many different opportunities in the field you are teaching. What are their short term and long-term goals? How does that relate to the progression in the career field? Where do they see themselves at the peak of their career, and what are the steps to getting there?

Measure Progress

Portraits are not created overnight; they take planning, time, thought, and energy. Educators should use milestone markers to measure student success in these professional areas, and help keep students on track with their goals. Ask students who they look up to and who they see as successful, and help them paint their own picture of success around that. Identify what employers in your given field want in their employees and share it with students.

Instructors should also collaborate with other teachers and instructors to be sure themes are carried on and emphasized. Become a lifelong resource to students, as they may become a contributor in the future.

The Ohio Means Jobs Job Readiness Seal and competency list is a good starting point, but each field will have variations, and it is important to remember that students have chosen their desired educational path for personal reasons. Technical skills are fundamental, while the critical reasoning, emotional intelligence, and other professional skills are what will make students stand out in their field. Give students opportunities to take on leadership roles, provide peer feedback, and take online assessments to discover their strengths.

Conclusion

Student - and ultimately employee - success starts with incorporating professional competencies in the classroom. Students cannot get by with just technical knowledge and skills, but need to learn and apply professional competencies.

Even though the picture of success is different for everyone, it is crucial that educators prepare graduates with technical skills as well as essential professional competencies that will make them a masterpiece and a star employee.