xello

5 Ways to Give Students the 21st-Century Skills They Need to Succeed

To create successful futures, students need to be equipped with the necessary 21st century skills. Might sound cliche, but it's vital.

It takes a lot more than good grades to succeed in today's fast-paced, hyper-digital world. Employers are increasingly valuing skills like critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration—often just as much (or more) than academic knowledge and specialized training.

Experts warn that to thrive in a competitive job market, today's entrepreneur or employee needs "real world" or 21st-century skills, which include emotional intelligence and the ability to communicate impeccably.

Unfortunately, many students are not living up to these expectations. According to a survey from the Association of American College and Universities, less than a third of employers believe new college graduates are prepared for the world of work.

National mandates, like ESSA, and state-specific college and career readiness standards, have the right idea to help district leaders make students future ready. But they don't offer guidance on how educators should introduce these newly-required 21st-century skills in a way that will ensure they'll have a long-lasting effect. The question becomes how to make it fit into an already jam-packed school year.

A well-rounded, 360-degree education that balances academics with real-world skills will empower students to build the confidence and capabilities they need to be productive members of the workforce and society at large.

Students Are Asking for Real-World Skills a.k.a. 21st Century Skills

The clock is ticking to find a solution. Students are becoming increasingly discouraged with what they perceive is a disconnect between what they learn in school and "real life."

- **Students want an education that connects to the real world.** Many kids are more

engaged in learning when they can see how and where they'll apply it. A report for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that half of a group of high school dropouts surveyed blamed uninteresting classes as a major factor for their decision to discontinue school. Four out of five said they wished they had more opportunity to do real-world learning.

- **Many students feel under-prepared and lack persistence.** According to a 2016 YouthTruth survey of 55,000 high school students, only half reported feeling that their high schools have prepared them with the knowledge and skills they need for college. Many students struggle to transition from blindly following lessons in high school to being asked to think critically in college because they haven't built this skill.

- Students need tools to successfully manage change. When students are encouraged to build skills like problem-solving, planning, and communication, they are better prepared to navigate change. Change management is one of the single hardest things for anyone to tackle. The more experience they have making healthy transitions, the more resilient and confidently they can do it.

So how can you ensure students are building the skills they'll need for lifelong success, in a way that doesn't overburden already time-strapped educators?

Here are five things to consider to get started.

1. Use Modern Technology

The smart way to combat 21st-century challenge is to use a 21st-century solution. Since technology is practically woven into the DNA of Generation Z, an online future readiness program is almost a no-brainer.

The right online career planning software responds to users' desire to click, swipe, tap, and post. It'll offer interactive lessons and features like personality/aptitude quizzes that inspire students to reflect on their interests and skills, set goals, and make a plan for the future.

In Xello, more than 500 age-appropriate, grade-specific lessons are embedded right into the program for students in grades K-12. They present students with real-world situations to help them learn new skills in an interactive way to prepare them to tackle real-world problems. Lessons are self-paced and can be done as part of a class or done outside of classroom time.

Not all future readiness programs are created equal. Look for solutions that offer personalized experiences so students can get custom choices based on the strengths and interests they input. You'll also want to prioritize intuitive, user-friendly software with modern design principles that look and feel like apps students already love to use. It's important to take the time to assess the right program for your district.

2. Build a Solid Foundation by Starting Early

Building skills is a process that takes time and practice. Much like forming good habits,

the earlier you start in life, the more likely it will stick. "Research shows children can 'habituate' effective processes and tendencies into their mental repertoire. These include inclinations to take responsible risks, to persist, to manage impulsivity or thinking 'outside the box,'" according to a University of Cambridge Report on habit forming and learning in young children.

A study by Brown University found that those habits can take root as early as age 9. With that in mind, the earlier educators introduce 21st-century concepts, the better.

Self-regulatory skills like self-assessment, collaboration, and self-reflection can be incorporated into just about any subject in the current curriculum. Educators can work to help students build the skills required for life-long learning and inquiry, including flexibility, planning, and problem-solving.

An online future readiness program with age-appropriate lessons helps take the guesswork out of instilling these skills in elementary school students. When framed in a grade-appropriate way, even young students can:

- Begin understanding their skills and interests

- Learn to collaborate and communicate with their peers

- Build critical thinking and productivity skills

- Make the connection between interests and career pathways

- Experiences that can go a long way to encourage curiosity and build a generally positive attitude towards learning.

3. Weave Real-World Skills into Every Subject

A "careers" class or in-person meetings with a guidance counselor shouldn't be the only time and place students think about the soft-skills they'll need for their future. There are opportunities for 21st-century skills to be incorporated into many subjects. At first blush, this may seem like more work for educators, but if it's done right (and often), it can blend in naturally, enhance learning, and boost engagement and achievement.

When you look at the skills that are so critical to building real-life ability, most can be woven into other subjects. Ideas include:

- **Science:** Biology class is ripe for weaving in critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration (with a lab partner).

- **English:** Younger students, like Susannah Young's 2nd Grade class, can begin the writing process by explaining their ideas to a partner, responding to questions, and challenging each other to explore their thoughts before picking up the pencil.

- **Social sciences:** Students can identify 21st-century skills like perseverance, self-regulation, communication, and social skills in historical figures.

- **Phys. Ed:** Offer leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork opportunities through sport and physical games and activities.

Approaching 21st-century skills in an integrated way instead of something "extra" that must be added to a select number of subjects is key to success. By taking a whole-school approach to skill-building it becomes a shared responsibility and students benefit from consistency and continuity.

4. Encourage a Collaborative Learning Environment

Today's workplaces are hives of collaboration and communication. Set students' expectations for the real world by encouraging them to apply what they've learned in other situations and through group-based learning.

Collaborative learning helps reinforce and solidify many core 21st-century skills employers look for, including creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and interpersonal relationship building. Students can test some of the key capabilities they may have learned through independent work in real life role-play scenarios or project-based learning to see how the concepts come to life. They can also test drive new concepts in this way.

Studies have demonstrated the value of collaboration alone as an employable skill, and one that helps foster other professional skills in demand today.

Classroom simulations, explorations and curriculum that present "real world" concerns, such as career backup plans, job interviews, career demand, lifestyle costs and work/ life balance will help students understand some of the factors underlying every career choice.

5. Make Learning Real-World Relevant

Many students fail to give much thought to their futures until they reach their final years of high school. Then there's often confusion and panic as they rush to explore the options available to them.

Educators can help students avoid the mad scramble by giving them concrete examples of how certain skills and concepts will be applied in the "real" world. We've often heard students complain that they'll never "use" trigonometry or chemistry in real life, so what's the point? It is becoming increasingly incumbent on teachers to share with them "the point."

Particularly with respect to soft skills, which are often less identifiable, it's important to reference career profiles that point out when and how communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical-thinking skills are important to excel in careers and in life as an adult. In Xello, students have the option to explore careers and fields of study based on their self-identified strengths and preferences. Each career is tagged with specific skills that are required so students can get a full picture.

Consider bringing in professionals in different fields or connecting students to open roles in the community so they can better understand what skills are used day-to-day in a

variety of careers. Reviewing job descriptions, volunteer postings, or internship roles and highlighting the types of skills employers are looking for is a useful exercise to make the school-career connection.

Conclusion

As society has evolved, so must curricula. Teaching 21st-century skills is imperative to help students understand themselves, each other, and learn how to think creatively and critically no matter what field of study or work they plan to pursue. With the right tools, such as a high-quality online future readiness program, educators will feel equipped to start integrating real-world skills into the curriculum early and make school-to-life connections. The result? Students will feel empowered to enter post-secondary studies and the world of work prepared and confident that they're ready for anything.

ABOUT HEATHER

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