

A Rigorous Curriculum: Effective Written and Oral Communication

A previous E-Hint titled *A Rigorous Curriculum* offered the idea that post-NCLB changes will be more challenging in that they most likely will focus on Common Core Standards, a greater use of national tests, more emphasis on a school's total curriculum (not just math, reading and science) and assessment techniques that are much more sophisticated than the current AYP system. Academic rigor will be redefined in the context of what it means to be a fully competent high school graduate ready to meet the challenges of post secondary education and the real world of work and adulthood.

The previous E-Hint mentioned an article in *Educational Leadership* November 2001: *Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement*, (Volume 59, Number 3, Pages 56-61) by Strong, Silver, and Perini. The authors suggest educators should align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with both standards and students in mind so that standards serve teaching and learning — instead of the other way around. They also pose four questions rarely considered today:

- Are activities inquiry or project based, requiring students to form their own answers?
- Do students use the results of their answers to explore ways they can make a difference in the world around them?
- Do lessons contain elements from different disciplines, encouraging students to make connections with previous knowledge?
- Are students asked to examine their own emotions concerning dilemmas or to take a position on a controversial topic?

Also mentioned in the previous E-Hint were points Tony Wagner makes in his book, *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—and What We Can Do About It* (Basic Books, 2008). From interviews with leaders in business, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, and education, Wagner isolated seven aspects of a school curriculum those leaders consider essential: critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and leadership, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and curiosity and imagination.

In his book Wagner quotes Mike Summers of Dell who said, *"We are routinely surprised at the difficulty some young people have in communicating: verbal skills, written skills, presentation skills. They have difficulty being clear and concise; it's hard for them to create focus, energy, and passion around the points they want to make. If you're talking to an executive, the first thing you'll get asked if you haven't made it perfectly clear in the first 60 seconds of your presentation is, 'What do you want me to take away from this meeting?' They don't know how to answer that question."* Wagner goes on to say that Summers and other leaders from various companies were not complaining about poor grammar, punctuation, or spelling. While those elements are considered important, the most frequent complaints were about fuzzy thinking and young people not knowing how to write with a real voice.

The author of this E-Hint is the father of an executive who works for an international corporation, and his son oversees a department with more than 120 engineers located in North America and Europe. Father and son collaborated in the development of an instrument and process designed to both motivate and evaluate the effectiveness of the engineers in the department. The task was begun with job descriptions, which were broken into elements that could be considered independently in levels of employee effectiveness, such as "beginning engineer" or "senior engineer." The elements for "senior engineer" include: knowledge, application of knowledge, productivity, teamwork, problem solving/decision-making, work habits, communication, customer service, and continuous improvement/quality. There are descriptors of each element with corresponding interpretations, and though they overlap somewhat, one expectation seems to have an overriding importance: **communication**. Within that category alone can be found instructive ideas in terms of perceived workplace effectiveness, as shown in the following table.

DESCRIPTOR	INTERPRETATION
Ability to communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing	The ability to write complex ideas and procedures clearly in terms of word use, sentence structure, and helpful examples and analogies. Clear writing also involves the avoidance of unnecessary acronyms and jargon, and recognition of who the readers are educationally and professionally.
Ability to interpret and follow verbal and written instructions	The ability to achieve keen insight and good judgment, and that is the case when reviewing verbal and written instructions. Also the ability to think deeply into the meaning of what is being expressed, and to apply judgment to actions taken as a result.
Ability to effectively present information and respond to questions from groups of managers, clients, and customers	Public speaking is not a natural choice for many people and can be painful at times. To be an effective speaker/presenter, the employee should know the audience and the material, and have practiced so that he/she comes across knowledgeable. Speaking slowly, enunciating clearly, and being expressive in terms of the topic are also quality traits of a good presenter. Presentation slides should be easily understood, not cluttered or wordy, and properly ordered to allow good flow.
Ability to write reports (Procurement Specs, Test Requests, etc), business correspondence (TM, ECM, 4-Box, etc), and procedure manuals in a professional manner.	The ability to write complex ideas and procedures clearly in terms of word use, sentence structure, and helpful examples and analogies. Clear writing also involves the avoidance of unnecessary acronyms and jargon, and recognition of who the readers are educationally and professionally.
Ability to create various electronic documents within the project toolsets (SAP, PDMLink, PRIMES, etc) such as BOM, ECN, MP, etc., accurately and efficiently.	Advanced proficiency with software used in the company is demonstrated by the proper production of electronic documents and their use in achieving correct and accurate solutions.

Probably the most instructive aspect of this father/son project is the fact technical skills associated with mathematics and technology were – for the most part – considered to be a given. All 120 employees are graduates of good colleges and universities, and many completed some kind of post-graduate technical training, but company executives are often astounded at how poorly these people interact on a personal level, to say nothing of the more sophisticated aspects of verbal and written communication. Those who wish to be promoted into upper level engineering jobs or into the ranks of executive decision-makers are typically encouraged to seek a master’s degree in business administration. The theory is that those who participate in MBA programs will become immersed in case studies and scenarios that force them to work through situations requiring leadership and communication skills.

So, what does this have to do with public schools? While certainly not all our students will become engineers, there are those who believe that the mathematical and scientifically technical skills needed by most people can be taught in intense settings in which application and immersion are key features. The same theory holds true for those learning a foreign language, as much evidence exists that people who participate in relatively short-term, intense and immersive programs become proficient more quickly, especially if there is a follow-up experience in the culture itself. On the other hand, building communication skills is something that needs maturation and multiple experiences gained over time. In essence, it is associated with the process of becoming more fully human, with all the nuanced perceptions, emotions, and insights inherent to that condition.

Young people in schools, even in the earliest grades, should be given opportunities to interact, create, criticize, and become involved in projects that stimulate them in productive ways. It’s sad that at the beginning of the 21st Century we are forced to advocate something that was widely promoted in the beginning of the 20th Century, especially through the work of John Dewey in books such as *The School and Society* (1900), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), *Democracy and Education* (1916), and *Experience and Education* (1938). He believed that students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum, and all students should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning.

To accomplish Dewey’s goals, and those of today’s workplace and society in general, we need to create dynamic classrooms in which written and oral communication should be taught and learned vigorously, dynamically, and interactively. That kind of approach will take us far beyond the rigid and constrictive environment imposed by NCLB strategies.