

WANTED: Eight Critical Skills You Need To Succeed

... Your children will need them!

... Your business needs them!

... Schools SHOULD teach them!

by

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Introduction

This is a book about Critical Skills. Its purpose is to describe in understandable and easily remembered terms what they are, why they are important, how they are determined, how they are taught, how they are learned, how they are measured, and how they are used. They will be examined from the different perspectives of teachers, students, parents, employers, and individuals wanting to help themselves get ahead in the corporate world.

The organization of this book recognizes the differences among these different audiences, and focuses on each of their perspectives.

- The first eleven chapters focus on the development and description of the Critical Skills – these chapters should be of interest to all audiences.
- The remaining chapters of the book focus on the different perspectives of the readers of this book, as the chapter titles indicate. For example, individuals who want to get ahead in the corporate world and are “career-minded” will benefit

from Chapter Sixteen; businesses and employers will benefit from Chapter Twelve; students will benefit from Chapters Fifteen, Twenty, and Twenty-One.

The term Critical Skills includes those skills that are common to nearly every profession. An individual needs them in order to succeed in a career, as well as to be a productive citizen. They are presented as a collection – not as individual skills. While it is clear that any of them may be taught and learned independently from the others, they all may be learned together. In the real world, they all are applied together – as a team.

The purpose of this book is not to convince the reader that these skills are necessary to ensure the successful future of each individual, and consequently to ensure the future socio-economic health of our country. For more than a generation, we have been suffering from the decline of these skills, and their necessity is self-evident.

It is too late to simply talk about the Critical Skills.

It is time for action.

The event that triggered my interest in Critical Skills was the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*. According to the report: “While we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of

mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.”

This was a wake-up call for me, and although I did not have a background as an educator, I decided to devote time and effort toward helping secondary schools address the problem of inadequate education. Eventually I left the corporate world entirely to devote all my time to the process.

What I found almost immediately was startling – and disturbing. For the most part, secondary school educators were either in a state of denial that any such problem existed, or dismissed my concerns as those of an interested and outspoken parent. Students were simply clueless – concerned more about their scores on the required standardized tests for college admission.

However, I could see that everyone recognized the importance of Critical Skills. All I needed to do was to look into their eyes: high school students, MBA students, individuals seeking career counseling, and teachers. For example, when a high school student team was meeting with their principal to conduct a debrief after completing a project, the principal asked the students, “Did you learn anything from this?” The team captain paused, seemed to reflect for a moment, and then said, “Well, I can’t pinpoint specifically what we learned from doing this project, but it was the best learning experience I have ever had. The whole process made me think!”

These students and others – students and teachers - with whom I met or worked with during the course of teaching the Critical Skills all seemed to know that “something” was important – but everyone had different ideas of what the skills were and how they could master or teach them.

My corporate consulting projects were focused on the development of Critical Skills for businesses, as well as executive recruiting, organizational development, and career counseling. These projects and counseling sessions required me to investigate the skills in depth.

The efforts led first to the development of presentations to the nation’s top MBA business school students, then into research to discover exactly what the Critical Skills are, then to publishing magazine and journal articles about the skills, then to creating (with the help of Northwestern University) a video, and finally to developing programs that assisted teachers at the high school level in work-based learning programs, as well as integration of the skills into the academic curriculum at the high school level nationwide. The video, created in 1987, can be viewed at: <http://criticalskillsblog.com/the-movie/>

In order to determine ways in which Critical Skills could be taught, I first convinced two local high schools to try an experimental program called field studies, with teams of students focusing on practicing the skills while serving their community. The program

was a huge success. Student teams later worked on a wide variety of field study projects for several local area businesses as well as local government, and focused on diverse and important issues. A detailed description of the field study process is presented in depth in the blog at <http://fieldstudiesblog.com/home/>

The most memorable of these projects was conducted for the local high school. A team of six students created a service learning internship program and community service partnership with approximately forty local area organizations. The students created job descriptions at each of the organizations, and connected each of the student tasks to the appropriate skill/competency to be learned. The students then implemented and managed the program at the school. It thrived for the next twenty years. This field study is presented in depth in the blog, <http://highschoolservicelearning.com/>

In 1992 when the US Department of Labor published *Learning a Living: A Blueprint for High Performance--A SCANS Report for America 2000*, I was amazed at the similarities between the SCANS Foundation Skills and Competencies, and the Critical Skills that I had identified. Essentially they were the same.

What was important at the time was not that the federal government had invested in determining the kinds of skills and competencies that were necessary for the next century, but that I had already created programs and projects that were actually teaching the skills

and competencies. What the federal government was recommending was already being done.

So I gathered the field study reports that the students had conducted over a period of two years and shipped them off to the SCANS Commission in Washington, DC as a demonstration of how students could actually do productive things while learning the kinds of skills and competencies the federal government was promoting.

In 1993, the US Department of Labor published *Teaching the SCANS Competencies*, a document that explained the SCANS foundation skills and competencies in detail, and highlighted a few organizations that had demonstrated the ability to create programs to actually teach those skills and competencies. Our local efforts were among those featured in a two-page spread (pp 58-59).

As a follow up action to the SCANS report, Congress passed the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994. This act created a framework for the development of school-to-work systems in the states that called for the integration of school-based learning with the real-world context of work. The act provided seven years of implementation grants to states through the National School-to-Work Office.

I immediately became a national school-to-work technical assistant provider and created a work-based learning system called Coop2000[®] which was designed to enable schools to

manage work-based learning systems of all kinds. The system enabled teachers to create detailed work-based learning position descriptions, and connected the tasks required of students to the SCANS foundation skills and competencies. This made sense, because if a student was engaged in any sort of work-based learning program where he/she would perform tasks, those tasks should be connected to the kinds of skills that the program was intended to teach.

The system also created authentic assessment documents, in which students would be assessed on their performance of assigned tasks based on a school-approved rubric.

We created an additional management system called IS2000 (Instructional Strategies 2000), which enabled teachers in all areas of the traditional academic curriculum to create learning agreements for students. These learning agreements contained the tasks that were required for students to perform in order to demonstrate their proficiency in mastering academic content standards. When creating the learning agreements, teachers were forced to connect each of the tasks to the appropriate academic content standard.

As with the Coop2000[®] work-based learning program, IS2000 created authentic assessment documents for each learning agreement, from which student performance against the tasks and the academic content standards could be measured.

Each of these systems appeared to be working fine until two events occurred: 1) Congress (for political reasons) defunded the School-to-Work program, and 2) Congress

passed the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Those two events essentially killed not only the promising school-to-work initiative, but also the academic content standards efforts. Schools began to focus on standardized test scores as a measurement of student learning.

Experience with the No Child Left Behind Act confirmed that the educational system was focused more on achieving results on standardized testing than on teaching students the Critical Skills--including critical thinking skills.

The emergence, however, of the Common Core Standards initiative has given hope to students for the future. Implementing the Common Core Standards will be a massive challenge – gaining acceptance from states, training or hiring teachers who have the ability to teach to the Common Core, revising the curriculum, and a major revision in assessment systems that will (hopefully) be able to measure the level of student mastery of the Common Core Standards.

The Common Core Standards focus principally on critical thinking skills and the need to integrate these skills into the curriculum at all levels.

Critical thinking skills are part of the overall Critical Skills – a very important part.

Recent surveys point out the importance of teaching critical thinking skills:

- A Gallup Poll in 2013 indicates that 80% of people feel critical thinking skills should be taught;

- The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) 2013 survey of business and non-profit leaders found that 93% believe "a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than an undergraduate major."

However self-evident the need for critical thinking skills might appear, it has come under fire from several fronts. While in the beginning, forty-four states adopted the Common Core Standards, politics has reared its ugly head and more than a dozen states have thus far dropped out for a variety of reasons:

- While the purpose of the Common Core is to integrate critical thinking with content, some states claim that the standards are not stringent enough. Others (like Texas) reject critical thinking skills;
- Critical thinking is difficult to teach – the curriculum needs to be rewritten, and teachers are simply not trained to teach in this manner;
- Critical thinking skills are difficult to test – assessment methods are challenged; currently the College Board is wrestling with this problem.

Critical thinking skills are at the forefront of the current education debate, but they are only a part of the overall mix of Critical Skills – albeit an important part. We will examine them later in this book.

Harkening back to the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, I feel strongly that we are even more at risk now than we were then – we live in *A Nation Still at Risk*.

- It is harder to sort out fact from fiction;
- It is harder to deal with a world that has many illusions;
- It is harder to compete in a more competitive job market;
- It is harder to get ahead;
- It is hard to keep up with rapidly changing technology; and
- It is getting harder for our country to have a skilled and intelligent population to maintain our democratic way of life.