

More than just the sum of its parts- the Critical Skills Program

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These days, it's not uncommon for teachers to have more than a passing familiarity with problem-based, project-based, experiential, and cooperative learning strategies. Each has its own set of disciples, its own video tape series and instructional manuals, and its own set of gurus willing to present in service training on the subject. Now, a group of educators in New England have come together to combine the best that educational research had to offer in order to create an instructional model that would turn standard curriculum into engaging, meaningful, rigorous problems to solve. By requiring students to demonstrate not just the content but also the skills and dispositions required to be a productive member of our society, students will reach new levels of achievement.

Methodologies

This **Critical Skills Model** is a comprehensive model that creatively and effectively integrates four powerful teaching methodologies:

- Collaborative Learning
- Experiential Learning
- Problem-Based Learning
- Standards-Driven Learning

Working together these methodologies provide teachers and students the means to simultaneously and intentionally:

- build and sustain a strong, supportive classroom learning community
- target the curriculum in ways that provide both a depth of understanding and meaningful learning
- develop the critical skills and fundamental dispositions
- meet or exceed the demands of district and state frameworks and standards

Solving the Challenge

The primary vehicle for this learning is the **challenge**- a carefully crafted problem to solve which connects the curriculum to its real-world application. Challenges can be highly complex or quite simple, may take minutes or weeks to complete, and are driven by the state, local or national subject area curricula as well as by the formative assessment gained via ongoing student reflection. Elementary students may grapple with the problem of selecting the largest apple to present to the principal following a field trip, secondary students might be seeking alternative energy transportation options for the district or creating a new grammar text using only a small set of short stories and newspaper articles. The exact challenges are as diverse as the teachers who create them and the students for whom they are created, but all share three components:

1. Students engage in solving the problem.
2. They exhibit their learning,
3. And they debrief their learning.

During this process, they are accessing, demonstrating, and being assessed on both content knowledge and process skills such as:

- Problem Solving
- Decision Making
- Communication
- Organization
- Critical Thinking
- Creative Thinking
- Collaboration
- Leadership

In Your Classroom

So what would this look like in your classroom? Students in a Critical Skills Classroom :

- frequently work as learning teams
- actively solve meaningful problems
- make public presentations and exhibitions of their learning
- systematically reflect on what they are doing and learning
- focus on standards of quality for their work
- take shared responsibility and ownership of their learning and for the classroom community

At the same time, teachers in a Critical Skills Classroom:

- model, guide, coach and support the learning process
- design learning activities that are carefully connected and built on one another
- incorporate targeted learning standards to guide the classroom culture, curriculum, and assessment

Teachers who use the CSP find that they are able to move their students to more rigorous work, that their students are able to problem solve more easily, and that there is a marked decrease in the number of discipline referrals in their classrooms. They find new clarity in their instructional practices and are more intentional in their assessments. In short, the Critical Skills Model combines the best of the research, the best of our students, and the best of ourselves.

Reference

Critical Skills Program Level I Coaching Kit, 4th ed. (Antioch University New England, 2007).

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