

Four-Dimensional Curriculum for Adult ESL Learners and its assessment: Benefits and Challenges

International learners of English at ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses in community colleges in the US do not need just language instruction to integrate into American society; they also need employment-transferable skills, and a sense that they are valued members of a community. The literature on curriculum design and pedagogy supports the need for curricula that equip our future citizens with a range of skills that can be constructively applied to academic life, the workplace, and civic engagement activities (Education Commission of the States (ECS), 2017)¹.

Building competencies that enable collaboration within the community and workforce provides adult ESL learners with opportunities to take on new and fulfilling challenges, and ultimately enjoy accomplishments (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2012)². These competencies can also prepare these individuals for an uncertain work environment while at the same time teaching them civic responsibility – key points explicitly stated by the Center for Curriculum Redesign, UNESCO³ and European Commission⁴.

Fortunately, such curricula are already being designed and implemented; however, assessment standards that measure employment-transferable skills are still in their nascent stages. Thus, there is a clear need for such assessment standards.

In this article, which is based on a presentation I recently gave at British Council's New Directions Conference in Latin America, I describe a "four-dimensional curriculum" (4D) and accompanying assessment rubrics that I developed for my English for Business course; the rubrics assess knowledge, employable skills and growth mindset.

¹ J. Brennan. *Higher Education Civic Learning and Engagement: A Massachusetts case study*, https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Higher_Education_Civic_Learning_and_Engagement.pdf

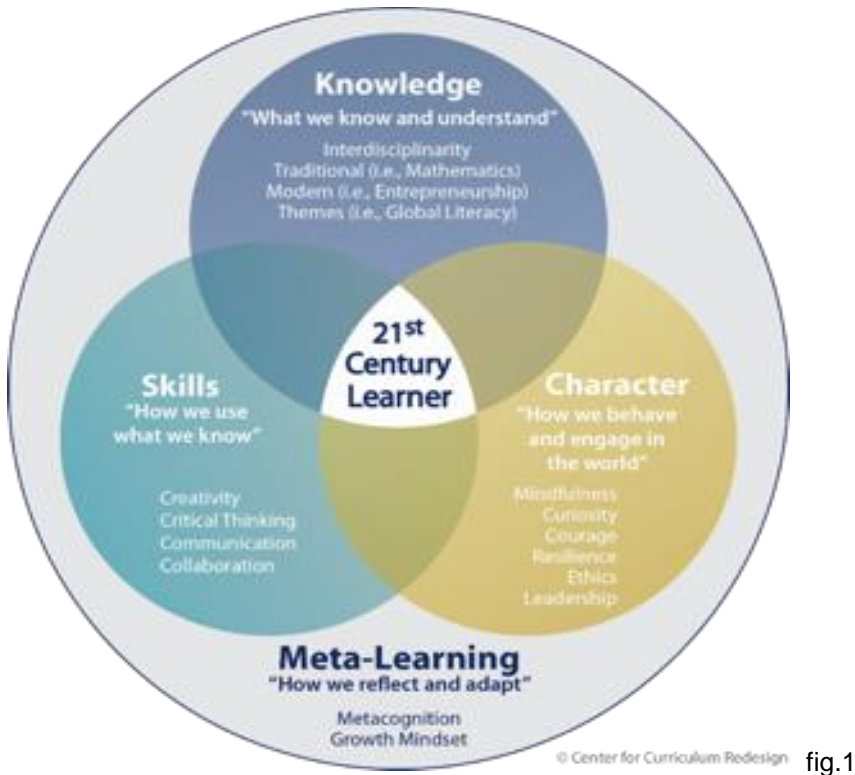
² Deborah J. Short & Beverly A. Boyson. *Helping Newcomer Students Succeed in Secondary Schools and Beyond*, 2012, <http://www.cal.org/resource-center/publications-products/helping-newcomer-students>

³ Education 2030: *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*, unesco.org

⁴ European Commission, [Developing Key competences for all throughout life](https://ec.europa.eu/education/developing-key-competences-for-all-throughout-life), 2017

What is a 4D Curriculum?

A 4D curriculum is a holistic, 21st Century curriculum that “incorporates and balances the various goals of education,” namely knowledge, skills, character, and meta-learning:⁵ Figure 1 below represents these 21st Century educational *dimensions*.



What steps can aid an instructor in designing an ESP course using the 4D theory of education?

How do I ensure that I, as the instructor, help my students develop not only knowledge, but also skills, character, and meta - cognition. Sharing my own experience of designing an ESP business course perhaps serves as the best way to illustrate how an instructor can design an ESP course using the 4D theory. I began the process by considering my students’ future, major-related courses, and contacting individuals who typically teach those courses to first-year students. Communicating with the professors helped me determine what language skills students would need in order to negotiate with and learn more about the subject matter.

Next, I conducted research on the most employable competencies in various fields. In this way, I was able to determine the learning tasks and experiences that would help my

⁵ Charles Fadel, *Four - Dimensional Education: The Competencies Learners need to succeed*, [Center for Curriculum Redesign](#), 2015

students develop these skills. According to the National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE), the most employable skills are as follows:

- Oral / Written Communication
- Technological Competency
- Critical Thinking / Problem Solving
- Work Ethic / Professionalism
- TeamWork / Collaboration
- Leadership / Career Management
- Global Fluency

It came as a surprise to me that only two of the seven competencies require subject knowledge (related to the dimension of knowledge) gained at tertiary education. The remaining five have to do with people-skills and character, and denote a strong work ethic and tolerance to differences.

In order to guide students toward acquiring knowledge and certain skills, and to help them develop their character, I designed the following learning activities

1. [Become an entrepreneur - Set up your business.](#)
2. [Etiquette of good team work](#)
3. [Service Learning Partnership](#)

These high-impact learning activities put the learners in the center so that *they* were the driving force, the protagonists and the decision makers in their learning and growth. They became entrepreneurs, learning how to research their target market, give a sales pitch, advertise their product, decide upon cost, and trying to beat their competitors. They turned into teachers, creating lesson plans with objectives and designing assessment tools; they became leaders among the ESL population, hosting a panel discussion, publishing their written work in the college paper, and actually starting their own businesses. The metamorphosis of these students was dramatic and impressive. They felt empowered and motivated through this holistic learning approach because learning simulated real life and was meaningful.

How can I assess skills and character?

When it came time to make rubrics to assess students' employable competencies, such as work ethic, leadership or global fluency, I was baffled. How do you evaluate someone's resilience or creativity, accountability or open-mindedness? You cannot objectively give a score out of 10 for collaboration or say you are 65% of a leader. The typical assessment methods - tests, presentations or even portfolios - mainly evaluate the final product rather than the process, and attempt to ascribe numbers or percentages to effort. Most important of all, they rarely allow students to cultivate a growth mindset and reflect on their progress.

In my case, however, was important for my students' motivation and essential for the validation of this pilot curriculum to have transparent assessment criteria. The answer came once again when I chose a learner-centered, holistic approach. In real life, we are never evaluated by one person, say by our employer. We are constantly evaluated, receiving feedback from our friends, our family, our colleagues and so on. A good friend's praise on our punctuality and diligence may open more doors than mere credentials. An angry stare from a colleague when we are late for a meeting may drive the message more effectively than a C for a group project we did at college. So, I decided that the assessment of a 4D curriculum needed to be as realistic and meaningful as its learning tasks. It also needed to reward the process and the effort as much as the final product. It had to be celebratory as well as fair.

For each *dimension* of the curriculum, I used a mix of types of assessment, including summative, formative and holistic, and I always incorporated meta-learning questions. One way of doing that was to create assessment tasks implementing the STARR approach, which is often used at job interviews (Universiteit Leiden, 2019)⁶. I asked students to reflect on:

S: What the situation was

T: What the task was

A: What actions they took, what they did

R: What the result was, what happened, and ...

R: What they learned (reflection).

[Here is an example](#) of such a task. Students used a class text as a springboard to relate to the readings' themes and reflect on their growth as learners. This [rubric](#) was used for peer assessment at the end of each project for reflection. Partners would evaluate, give feedback, and decide on an intervention plan for improvement. This is an [example of a rubric](#) that I created to assess knowledge, skills and character. It rewards students with a point system while translating the points into a trajectory system for progress. Finally, here is [an example of a celebratory Report](#) that rewards students for their character, knowledge, skills and growth mindset.

What are the challenges in the application of such a curriculum?

This learner-driven curriculum that attempts to bridge the classroom with the real world can be challenging for teachers who teach large classes or at institutions where there are no systems of support. However, the main challenge can be students who are reluctant to take risks or are intolerant of ambivalence in their learning. In this case, the teacher needs to build solidarity and empathy through non-judgemental, constructive

⁶ Universiteit Leiden. <https://careerzone.universiteitleiden.nl/en/develop-your-skills/application-skills/job/starr-method-def>, retrieved 7/19/2019

and collaborative discussion⁷, and create a safe learning environment where mistakes are regarded as steps towards success, not failure. The teacher should also be willing to yield power to students in decision-making, so that they feel valued members of a community.

About the author

Sotiria has worked in education and assessment for over 20 years, performing various roles from curriculum and assessment material design to teacher training in Europe and the UK. Currently, she is actively involved in designing content-based ESL courses; running a service learning partnership program for ESL students; co-heading the design of an online grammar flipped classroom; collaborating on the revision and alignment of program outcomes and course learning outcomes; and compiling data on the correlation between course learning competencies and test success rate. She is also a certified IELTS examiner and an OUP test material writer.

⁷ Mann, S. (2001) alternative perspectives on the student experience: Alienation and engagement, *Studies in Higher Education*, 26:1, 7-19