REFLECTIONS

Instructor Journaling to Navigate the 21st Century Skills

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Based on a presentation for the Teachers' Journey's 2022 conference, this article shares my experience preparing to teach 21st Century Skills. I define these skills before discussing how they benefit EFL students and how reflective journaling is a tool that supports my own learning process. Using reflection journals through this process, I share what I have learned so that others might deepen their understanding of the skills and how these skills could be applied to their own practice and professional development. Hopefully, readers will be able to consider how their experience fits within the 21st century skills, consider how to teach them, reflect on their own practice in relation to these skills, and contemplate journaling as a tool for a challenge.

Keywords: 21st century skills, reflection journals

21st Century Skills

Created by the Partnership for 21st Century Learning, the 21st Century Skills are composed of the following: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, information literacy, media literacy, technology literacy, flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity, and social skills (Kivunja, 2015). Rapid changes in technology, the effects of globalization, and shifts in employment prompted the need to develop learners' capacity for these skills (Van Laar et al., 2020). As EFL educators, we aim primarily to provide learners with opportunities to increase their language proficiency. However, students should gain more than that, particularly skills that prepare them for the workforce in an ever-changing world. Today's students will likely become workers who will work at multiple jobs and will need the ability to gain new skills for those jobs (Van Laar et al., 2020).

At a conference in Singapore in 2019, I learned about four of these skills: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. From the spring of 2020, I used these skills, in addition to media literacy, in some of my classes. For instance, when students were doing research papers and group projects, reminding them of these skills seemed to help them work together to decide topics and find reliable sources. In the spring of 2022, I discovered there were more skills and decided to examine them in the context of my own practice to feel more confident and have more awareness when teaching them in the fall of 2022

Reflective Journaling

Many students feel unprepared for their future careers because classes don't teach practical skills that can be applied to their upcoming work life. As a teacher, I feel uncertain about how to best teach students a wider breadth of practical skills outside of language learning. Since I had resolved to create five activities in the form of worksheets, I decided to journal about my understanding of the skills before and after I had created these activities. The worksheets

would be used over the course of one semester, and I expected to dedicate 30 minutes of a 100-minute lesson to the activity for a small class of first-year English students in an advanced presentation class. The 21st Century Skills activities were implemented in Lessons 1, 6, 9, 17, and 22.

Below is a list of my journal entry titles.

Journal Entry 1: Before planning Lesson 1: 21st Century Skills Review of Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration & Communication

Journal Entry 2: After planning Lesson 1: 21st Century Skills Review of Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration & Communication

Journal Entry 3: Before planning Lesson 6: Introduction of 21st Century Skills Information Literacy, Media Literacy, & Technology Literacy

Journal Entry 4: After planning Lesson 6: Introduction of 21st Century Skills Information Literacy, Media Literacy, & Technology Literacy

Journal Entry 5: Before Planning Lesson 9: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Flexibility & Leadership

Journal Entry 6: After Planning Lesson 9: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Flexibility & Leadership

Journal Entry 7: Before Planning Lesson 17: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Initiative, Productivity, & Social Skills

Journal Entry 8: Before Planning Lesson 17: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Initiative, Productivity, & Social Skills

Journal Entry 9: After Planning Lesson 22: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Review of the Skills

Journal Entry 10: After Planning Lesson 22: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Review of the Skills

I used the same prompts for Journal Entries 1 to 8. (See Appendices A and B for a sample of the entries for the Leadership skill for Journal Entries 5 and 6. Appendix C is the worksheet which contains the Leadership skill.)

Before Researching the Skills
- How do I understand and practice the skills in the classroom before creating the activity?
- How do I understand and practice the skills outside the classroom before creating the activity?

After Researching the Skills
- How do I understand and practice the skills in the classroom after creating the activity?
- How do I understand and practice the skills outside the classroom after creating the activity? / What are ways that I could more actively use the skills and/or develop them?

After creating the worksheets and completing the journaling process about them, I used the following prompts to guide Journal Entries 9 and 10.

Review of the Skills
- Which skill do I feel most confident in of my understanding and practice in the classroom before creating the activity? / Which skill do I feel least confident about in my understanding and practice inside the classroom before creating the activity?
- After creating the activity, has my confidence changed in my understanding and practice of the skill

outside the classroom that I was least confident in?

Analysis

The responses to the above prompts were used as data for analysis. Then I implemented Desjarlais and Smith's (2011) ten steps for evaluating the effectiveness of reflecting. The first steps are listed in the following questions:

> 1. Did you derive value from the process?
> 2. Were the insights gained of high quality?
> 3. Did the final assessment (Step 10) indicate the need for significant improvement?
> 4. Was stress minimized?
> 5. Were the insights generalizable to a larger set of situations? (p. 12)

My answers were all positive to the above questions and were incorporated into the reflection journals. However, the focus of the following sections will be on the latter five steps. Using the following Reflection Methodology steps by Desjarlais and Smith (2011), I analyzed the journal entries with Steps 6 to 9 in this section. Step 10 will be in the final section.

> Step 6: Organize a list of insights into common themes.
> Step 7: Identify key insights. Once the insights have been organized by common themes, the reflector identifies those which are most significant and meaningful.
> Step 8: Generalize key insights to a wider set of situations.
> Step 9: Determine whether there is a need for other processes.
> Step 10: Assess the quality of the reflection process." (Desjarlais & Smith, 2011, p. 6)

Step 6

I analyzed the "After Entries" as I felt they showed my progress with the journaling process. I highlighted quotes with the strongest and most direct message. Then I summarized each quote into one or two

thematic keywords (Table 1) and then delineated these according to responsibility (Table 2) and independence or interdependence (Table 3).

Table 1

Keywords from "After Entries" of the Journals

In the Classroom	Outside the Classroom
Active Challenge More Research Experimentation Peer Role Modeling Leadership Flexibility Practical Tips Holistic Manner	Academic Literature Increased Challenge Problem-Solving Creativity Increased Positivity Learning Opportunities Peer Feedback Leadership Flexibility Anticipation & Preparation Team Diversity Acceptance

Steps 7-9

Based on the themes determined in Step 6, further delineated according to responsibility in Table 2, I then explored how I could apply the 21st Century Skills inside and outside the classroom by expanding the following keywords into actionable tasks.

Table 2

In the Classroom: Instructor Responsibility/ Learner Responsibility

Instructor Responsibility	Learner Responsibility
More Research Practical Tips Manner Leadership Flexibility	Active Challenge Experimentation Peer Role Modeling Holistic

Table 3

Outside the Classroom: Independent Action/Interdependent Action

Independent Action	Interdependent Action
Academic Literature Increased Challenge Problem-Solving Creativity Anticipation & Preparation	Increased Positivity Learning Opportunities Peer Feedback Leadership Flexibility Team Diversity Acceptance

The following sections apply Steps 7 to 9 to the keywords in the above tables.

Instructor Responsibility

Using the journal entries' keywords, I determined ways I could practically use the 21st Century Skills. For both information and technology literacies, it was apparent that I should do more research into these literacies' methods to feel more confident and deepen my understanding of them. For technology literacy, ethics is an important area to research more thoroughly. There is a lot of material available online to do this, so it can be easily accomplished. Successfully finding articles that share tips for learners about initiative was beneficial. Meanwhile, role modeling a professional and respectful manner is an important way to help students to develop social skills. It is important for me to give students opportunities to be more autonomous as well as take responsibility for their actions. Additionally, an instructor must call attention to students' behavior which is unprofessional or disrespectful and emphasize that it would be inappropriate and unacceptable in professional settings. Teaching both leadership and flexibility skills as a set instead of individually may give more active practice to the learner because being a good leader will require flexibility. Journal analysis aided me in identifying the areas that I needed to enhance and to gain more confidence in teaching these skills.

Learner Responsibility

By journaling, I better understood the aims of the classroom activities and materials I needed to create to help the students to consider how they might use these skills in their learning and in their future employment. Making the students aware that the skills taught need to be actively used is necessary. For instance, with critical thinking, it is a way to problem-solve versus more passively analyzing a document. Also with media literacy, it is necessary for students to not only view themselves as consumers of information but also as creators. By asking the students to challenge themselves to be more creative and collaborate means thinking and acting with others differently. This can cause them to seek to understand other viewpoints. This is difficult. However, a classroom setting may be viewed as a lower-risk environment than the office to experiment with new challenges. Also with collaboration, working with other students in the classroom is an ideal venue to explore new ways of interacting with others. Highlighting that students can look to their classmates as potential role models in communication is helpful. It demonstrates having the ability to listen or share well as accessible and that being able to follow the guide of their peers is an ideal way to improve their communication skills. To boost productivity, excluding external factors outside of the task seems counterproductive. Even if an individual wants to increase their output at school, for instance, to receive higher grades, if they are in poor health due to diet or lack of sleep, their level of productivity will be diminished. Therefore, encouraging students to look more holistically at other factors, such as lifestyle, is a beneficial way for them to find ways to be more productive. Implementing journaling and analyzing the themes allowed me to create classroom activities that guided student discussions about the 21st Century Skills.

Independent Action

Examining the 21st Century Skills in relation to ways I could independently advance them gave me insight into my own professional development. For the three literacies, doing more research on academic literature to aid with practice is necessary. Also related to the three literacies, being willing to find and try new apps and other tools for teaching will increase my confidence. Approaching my own research using the problem-solving component of critical thinking will be useful, such as explicitly stating the problem or question the project is trying to solve. It is beneficial for me to continue finding media that helps with my creativity, such as professional websites, videos and journal articles. However, I want to slowly consume the media and frame it in the context of how it can inspire me and how I can apply it directly to my situation. To aid with initiative, while researching "Anticipating questions and preparing answers" is something I should think about more when I am doing anything related to purpose in activities. Am I doing something meaningful, or if I am required to do something outside of my control, can I find the purpose in it? If I can, then I think I can answer unexpected questions. Again, the steps set out by Desjarlais and Smith (2011) aided in enhancing my awareness of how I utilize these skills and, in turn, increased my confidence in sharing them with my students through the activities.

Interdependent Action

In regard to interdependent actions, I realized that I need to shift my mindset. For collaboration, I needed to view the benefits of it instead of the drawbacks as an individual who likes to work independently. Again, regarding collaboration, past experience has shown me that working with others allows for more knowledge acquisition and growth as an individual. For instance, brainstorming with coworkers has given me new insight into situations, provided me with support as I deal with challenges, and allowed me to gain more awareness of different viewpoints. Seeking more feedback from peers and responding positively to feedback will be changes I need to make as a way to practice flexibility. Framing leadership as leadership flexibility is a key takeaway for me. If I am in leadership again, I will try to work on cognitive, coping, learning and communication flexibility. In addition, instead of viewing leaders critically, I will frame their actions in light of the previously mentioned flexibility. In the research process about productivity, respecting and appreciating team diversity resonated with me. As I am less inclined to work with others, this point will make group work a more positive experience. To develop my social skills, I need to meet people more where they are at. Instead of framing interactions as how I would respond, I need to accept that those I am interacting with have different experiences and values and, in turn, different responses. Furthermore, instead of placing judgements on that, I should view it as an opportunity to learn more about other perspectives. Using Steps 7 to 9 allowed me to concretely identify the benefits of working with others and increase interpersonal skills.

Reflection Assessment

"Step 10: Assess the quality of the reflection process" uses questions by Desjarlais and Smith (2011) that are related to value, insight, assessment, stress, and relevance to a wider scope (p. 12). Using reflection journals was valuable as I could easily see what knowledge I already had and then gained after creating the activity as well as any areas for further improvement. For instance, I recognized that I needed to be more open to collaborating with my peers and accepting their feedback. This process also gave me more confidence. With more confidence, I have had less stress. In regard to my practice, I know in the future if I am uncertain about teaching something, I will journal through the process. In addition, it

helped me to identify my strengths and areas for improvement.

Classroom Implementation

Through the process of journaling, I was able to create activities which outlined the skills along with an activity about the contents. Over the semester, five classes started with 21st Century Skills. The activity began with an overview of the skills and then an activity. One of the five worksheets is Appendix C entitled "Lesson 9: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Flexibility & Leadership." The worksheets had an explanation of the skills under study and then an activity for students to reflect on the skills. Small group discussion questions were about how the students practiced the skills, such as "Would you describe yourself as flexible? Why or why not?" and "What are ways to be a more flexible thinker?" Throughout the semester, students participated in group and individual projects that required them to use thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, information literacy, media literacy, technology literacy, flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity, and social skills. Since there had been class time dedicated to examination and discussion around these themes, it was easy for the practice of the skills to be highlighted during activities. One group project for a hypothetical grant proposal required students to request funding for a service to benefit university students. Students needed to do research to see what current projects exist and then to present the benefits and resources anticipated from implementing the project. One group proposed having service animals. Since their university has two campuses, one in an urban area and another in a rural area, the group outlined different types of programs, with the urban campus having a room for cats and dogs that students could visit and the rural campus providing an area for small farm animals such as goats, sheep and chickens. These students also found a video of an office where staff could bring their pets to work, as well as an article about a school that had a small farm. The students presented the emotional, mental and health advantages of having service animals. This is one example of an activity which used 21st Century Skills such as collaboration, media literacy and creativity to guide their proposal. Journaling and processing the entries aided in my creation of the materials and provided me with more confidence in teaching and recognizing these skills. As an educator, by doing this project, I was also able to highlight the usage of the skills through the activities, for instance reminding them that they would need to be creative, collaborate, and use the various literacies as they completed the project. Furthermore, I emphasized that students may have to create proposals in the future.

Conclusion

Learning more about the 21st Century Skills as I journaled and made materials for my students helped me to process my own uncertainties and then feel stronger in my own abilities. Linking the activities about the skills with other projects the students participated in also helped me to express the value that having such skills could have not only in their studies, but also when they are in the workforce. As EFL educators, our situations are as unique as our learners. Nonetheless, in sharing my experience with 21st Century Skills and journaling, I hope that others will also be able to use some of this information to better develop their practice and, in turn, their students' potential.

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Appendix A

Journal Entry 5: Before Planning Lesson 9: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Flexibility

J5:1A How do I understand and practice the skills in the classroom before creating the activity?

Flexibility: I suppose every instructor needs to respond to the needs of their learners resulting in flexibility. I have adjusted lesson plans though that is more often done behind the scenes, however, I often change assignment due dates based on how students are doing with the preparation and that is something they are aware of. So, learners' situations impact the decisions about scheduling. I also try to get feedback about tasks such as the level of difficulty and if more time is needed, but that is more often done through observation than asking students. I should directly ask students more, so they understand that I am trying to practice flexibility.

J5:2A How do I understand and practice the skills outside the classroom before creating the activity?

Flexibility: When I do committee work, I am open to whatever the committee head requests. Also, when I am doing research about classroom activities, reading the students' opinions helps me to decide how future uses of the activities may change, as mentioned previously about reflection journals and videos. The downside is the students who shared their opinions are no longer my students, so my flexibility comes too late. It is someone's ability to adapt to change and understand differences in views that impact decisions. Additionally, when I am submitting articles and proposals and receive the reviewers' advice to make changes, I have to be flexible and craft output that meets the needs of their organization. Often at the beginning, I am not excited to make the changes but as I go through the revising process, I know their advice has improved my output.

Journal Entry 6: After Planning Lesson 9: Introduction of 21st Century Skills: Flexibility & Leadership

J6:1B How do I understand and practice the skills in the classroom after creating the activity?

Flexibility: For both flexibility and leadership, I will combine them because I found information about the term "leadership flexibility". It was really interesting to find the amount of material on leadership styles, but focusing on leadership flexibility is more important because it shows students the kind of leadership people most likely want and the kind of leaders that are best suited to changing the world. Many students appear to be uncomfortable being leaders, but I think having awareness about cognitive, coping, learning, and communication flexibility to follow could help them when they need to take on leadership roles.

J6:2B How do I understand and practice the skills outside the classroom after creating the activity? What are ways that I could more actively use the skills and/or develop them?

Flexibility: Again, before I created the activity, I felt that my flexibility was out of practice. I seek feedback too late or when I get feedback, I am not happy to receive advice about points to improve. So, I think seeking more feedback from peers and responding positively to feedback will be changes I need to make.

LESSON 9: INTRODUCTION OF 21st CENTURY SKILLS: FLEXIBILITY & LEADERSHIP

This is a presentation of the first 2 life and career 21st Century Skills.

Flexibility and Leadership
According to the *Ultimate guide to teaching, 21st century skills in secondary schools* (n.d.):

"Flexibility is someone's ability to adapt to change and understand differences in views that impact decisions.
Leadership involves someone's ability to influence and guide others towards a common goal"
(pp. 6-7).

Discussion
1. Would you describe yourself as flexible? Why or why not?
2. What are ways to be a more flexible thinker?
3. Would you describe yourself as a leader? Why or why not?
4. What are ways to develop leadership skills?

Leadership Flexibility

Combining the two skills, leadership flexibility has the following facets from *Leadership flexibility: The ultimate beginner's guide* (Applied Educational Systems, 2022):

"Leadership flexibility has multiple manifestations beyond behavioral flexibility, leadership flexibility also encompasses multiple, more specific, flexibilities:

A Cognitive flexibility
- Being aware that there are options and valid alternatives to virtually all situations;
- Having the will to act in a flexible manner;
- Having the competence to be flexible.

B Coping flexibility
- Being able to vary coping strategies in line with the requirements of the situation.

C Learning flexibility
- Being able to learn equally well from multiple sources, such as observation, personal relationships, theoretical frameworks, and practice.

D Communication flexibility
- Being able to adopt different communication strategies, depending on the needs of the situation."

Discussion

1. How would you rank the above points (A-D) as most important, important, somewhat important, and least important? Why?
2. Share about your experiences with flexible leaders or inflexible leaders.
3. When have you been a leader? Share your experience and do you think you were a flexible leader or inflexible leader?

About the Author

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