



Talking About Skills and Learning

A FRAMEWORKS MESSAGEMEMO FOR
THE CORE STORY OF EDUCATION PROJECT

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About FrameWorks Institute:

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies.

The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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Introduction

“Movements are engaged in ‘meaning-work’...the struggle over the production of ideas of meaning.... The failure of mass mobilization when structural conditions seem otherwise ripe may be accounted for by the absence of a resonant master frame.”

David Snow and Robert Benford¹

In 2011, a group of philanthropic leaders² came together to support communications research from the FrameWorks Institute designed to enumerate the elements of a core narrative that have the power to broaden the current public conversation about education reform in the United States. This project, which the FrameWorks Institute calls the *Core Story of Education Project*, builds on previous communications research conducted by the Institute between 2008 and 2010.

The idea of a “core story” refers to the development of an interrelated set of values, metaphors, and principles that, when woven together in messaging, prove effective in broadening the public conversation about education reform. The empirical testing of these elements and their narration as “story” assures that they are both memorable and powerful in inciting a deeper public appreciation for a broad array of effective education programs and policy reforms. That is, the primary benefit of a fully articulated core story is a unifying narrative framework that can structure a wide variety of expert communications – annual reports, press requests for information, speeches, working papers, reports, and other materials – that effectively engage diverse audiences in understanding a wide range of progressive policies. The other key variable in the effectiveness of the core story concept is the width of its adoption – the narrative gains power from the effectiveness of its individual elements and their coherence as story and, importantly, from its concerted push into the public sphere by those organizations that help shape social discourse on a given issue. Using this tool, organizations can coalesce around a common communications platform that has been shown to “lift all boats,” rather than pitting like-minded groups against each other in a struggle for scarce policy attention and resources. The FrameWorks Institute has developed core stories for such diverse issues as climate change and early child development, providing a unifying message platform that brings in a “big tent” of issue advocates.

In 2012, the Core Story of Education Project set out to enumerate and fill in aspects of an evolving core story that began taking shape in 2008, but that in many key respects remained “unframed,” untranslated, and lacking the larger narrative coherence necessary to harness the power of story. Following the initial two-year project, there were a host of questions that remained to be addressed in building this core story of education. These questions included:

- What are skills?
- How are they acquired?
- How are they best assessed?
- When and where does learning happen?
- What are the outcomes of learning, how do they happen, and why do they matter?
- How do we know whether the outcomes have happened or not?
- How are educational resources distributed, and what are the social consequences of disparities in this distribution?
- How do we improve learning and the educational structures in which it takes place?

This MessageMemo represents the first in a series of interpretive reports to emerge from the Core Story of Education Project. It is based upon findings from the following research methods as they comprise Strategic Frame Analysis^{TM3}:

- A meta analysis of 105 one-on-one cultural models interviews conducted by the FrameWorks Institute on the following specific topics: education and education reform; digital media and learning; executive function; and teaching.
- Ten cultural models interviews with informants in Portland, Oregon and Boston, Massachusetts, exploring public understandings of skills and learning.
- Ten expert interviews on the topics of skills and learning.
- A comprehensive media content analysis of 570 articles in print and broadcast media over 12 months in 2011.
- A national on-line survey experiment with 3,200 participants, testing values and their effects on a wide variety of educational policy issues.

The first purpose of these research phases was to identify the perceptual obstacles that prevent education reformers from engaging the public in meaningful discussions about improving skills development through educational reforms large and small. In so doing, we address in this MessageMemo the underlying thinking that results in a patterned and somewhat uniform narrative about skills development. Second, we hoped to develop new reframes that could interrupt the largely ineffective dominant meta-narrative and begin replacing it with ways of thinking that result in more productive consideration of policy and programmatic options. In this MessageMemo, we offer our optimism with respect to the power of values to do some of the heavy lifting that will be required in making this narrative shift. As we fill in missing parts of the Core Story of Education, we also re-examine metaphors and values tested in earlier phases of our work on education. To avoid redundancy and provide more detail on these tools, we refer communicators to research and interpretive products posted on our website.⁴ As of this writing, we believe that previous recommendations provide a strong framework from which to pivot to a specific discussion of skills and learning. This MessageMemo is organized as follows:

1. We first **Chart the Landscape** of public thinking by describing dominant patterns of thinking that are chronically accessible to Americans in reasoning about skills and learning and their communications implications.
2. Second, we identify the **Gaps in Understanding** between experts and the public that bring into relief the specific locations where translation is needed if expert knowledge is to become accessible to ordinary people, and to advance public understanding and reasoning about skills and learning.
3. We then provide an outline of **Redirections**, research-based recommendations that represent promising routes for improving public understanding of these important areas of the Core Story of Education.
4. We end with a cautionary tale of the **Traps in Public Thinking** that must be avoided if reframing is to succeed.

“So a good process for making your ideas stickier is:

- (1) Identify the central message – find the core.*
- (2) Figure out what is counter-intuitive about the message – why isn’t it happening naturally?*
- (3) Communicate your message in a way that breaks your audience’s guessing machines.*
- (4) Once their guessing machines have failed, help them refine their machines.”*

Chip Heath and Dan Heath, Made to Stick. 2007. New York: Random House.

I. Charting the Landscape: How Americans Think About Skills and Learning

When wading into the public discourse about skills and learning, it is important to remember that cultural models more generally associated with education will be used to “think” these more specific topics. This use of more general ways of understanding to make sense of more specific domains is particularly vital on the issue of education, where FrameWorks research has uncovered a host of foundational models lurking to “eat” messages about more specific educational issues. We begin with a brief summary of the most relevant of these foundational educational models, and follow by laying out the more specific patterns of understanding related to skills and learning.⁵

- **The Consumerism Cultural Model.** According to this implicit assumption, education is understood as a commodity that individuals need to acquire in order to be successful. The fact that some people can afford more or better varieties of education, and others cannot, is therefore seen as a natural part of the way that education (and the world more generally) works. Reasoning along these lines, it is hard for people to consider education’s societal benefits and to see education as an

engine that drives the prosperity of the nation. Relatedly, the consequences of failure are individualized and rationalized as bad choices. And, since education is viewed as a limited commodity – there is only so much to go around – any closing of achievement “gaps” can only be attained by taking from some people in order to give to others, in what is understood as a “zero-sum” game.

- **The Basics Cultural Model.** Americans share a powerful assumption that education is built in a linear and hierarchical way in which the “basics” – often defined in terms of the 3Rs – are necessary to all subsequent learning. By extension, if learning does not happen, the solution is not new pedagogical tools but rather “a return” to the basics. In this way, the thrust of education reform is backwards – to make up for perceived deficiencies in the foundation of learning. People reason that, if new skills are indeed required, they can only be “added” after these more fundamental skills have been attained. This effectively places the basics in a competitive role with all “non-basic” skills and pedagogical practices, which are viewed as electives or frills.
- **The Naturalism Cultural Model.** Reasoning from this model, children are assumed to be passive recipients of developmental content – akin to “sponges” that absorb what is around them or containers that must be “filled” with the content. Much of this is assumed to happen within the Family Bubble, but even in the classroom the student is viewed as a passive recipient of learning, not as an active participant. Closely related is the idea of the teacher as a “caring person,” committed to supplying content and intuitively able to activate students’ inherent desire to learn. Such a teacher is a “natural,” more a caring individual than a trained professional.
- **The Effort Cultural Model.** School learning is assumed to be “hard” – if it’s not hard, it’s not learning. Notions of passion and student interest, frequently included in descriptions of learner-centered approaches, are dissonant with the American model in which the effectiveness of school learning is defined by its duress.
- **The Compartmentalization Cultural Model.** Americans approach education with a deeply implicit assumption that specific skills develop in particular locales. Book learning, or in-class learning, is thought to be factual content that is absorbed and mastered in a hierarchical manner, beginning with the basics. This process yields the most fundamental and widely discussed types of skills. Out-of-class learning is thought to be more about hands-on experiences that are perceived to develop less cognitive, more “social” skills. The fact that there is a stark division between these learning locales and an uncertainty over how these skills are interrelated and who has responsibility for encouraging them, poses major challenges to the conceptual integration of skills.

Looking more specifically at the skills and learning quadrants of the core story of education, we find that these domains are dominated by a set of strong cultural models that overpower competing messages, fill in questions left unanswered with simple and familiar explanations, and crowd out more promising but underdeveloped ways of thinking. Some of these cultural models occur in other parts of the education core story, affecting the way people think about teachers and testing or disparities, for example. As such, once activated in the domain of skills and learning, these ways of thinking may “spill over” into the way that people understand various other domains that the core story seeks to address, effectively having the power to blow up and contaminate the narrative. It is therefore important for the larger reframing effort to document these patterns of thinking and the cues by which they are activated. Most prominent in this landscape are the following “easy to think” default patterns.

- A. The public has little exposure to, much less practice with, connecting micro-processes of education – such as skills acquisition – with macro or structural educational issues.*

In a comprehensive review of media coverage about learning, skills, and assessment, FrameWorks researchers found a negative correlation between articles that include discussions of skills and learning and processes that occur in the classroom with those that include discussions of the structure of the education system. In this way, media accounts of learning and skills are largely de-contextualized and distinct from the policy environments in which they occur. This resonates strongly with the public’s documented tendency to think of the learning process only in terms of the character and willpower of individual students, teachers, and parents.⁶ The separation of the micro-processes of learning from more structural issues in the education system makes it difficult for the public to understand how policies can impact learning processes. If solutions exist, people reason, they must be oriented toward fixing the “tangible triad” of educational actors (parents, teachers, and students) by motivating them and holding them accountable for educational outcomes.

- B. Skills and learning are portrayed as the mastery of content, not as an outcome in a transparent process.*

In FrameWorks research on early child development, we frequently talk about the “black box” of child development.⁷ That is, people know that children develop, but they have an anemic understanding of *how* development happens. In the media, there appears to be an analogous situation with regard to learning. The media spends time talking about the actual or desired content of learning, but there is far less attention paid to *how* children learn. The implications of such coverage are similar to those for early child development – policies that are informed by the most recent science of learning will be very difficult for the public to grasp. Indeed, the cultural models interviews we conducted bear this out. People spoke about

a general set of internal factors – “confidence,” “drive,” “talents” – that move quickly from basic skills to more specialized ones without addressing the intervening events and complexity. One result of the “black-boxing” of process is that many important features of skill development are often taken for granted, assumed to be nearly automatic.

C. Teachers aid in the acquisition of some skills and are peripheral to others.

The public considers caring teachers to be central agents in children’s learning and skills acquisition, but only relative to a specific set of important academic skills. This is a teacher-centric model, with teachers as conduits of knowledge handed down from above. Yet, at the same time, teachers are not currently seen as central agents in teaching social, communication, and emotional skills. The teacher’s domain – the classroom – is set apart from those places where these skills are learned: the home, the larger school environment, the playing field, and elsewhere. The communications challenge relative to teachers as agents of learning and skill acquisition is at least two-fold: to emphasize the constructive role teachers can play regarding a broader set of important skills; and to reconfigure teachers’ role as guides, mentors, and coaches within a more student-centric learning environment. Moreover, when this Conduit Model of teaching is combined with ideas of assessment, the media discourse defines assessment as a way to hold teachers accountable and assess their job performance in “passing off the content,” not as a way to gauge and improve learning.

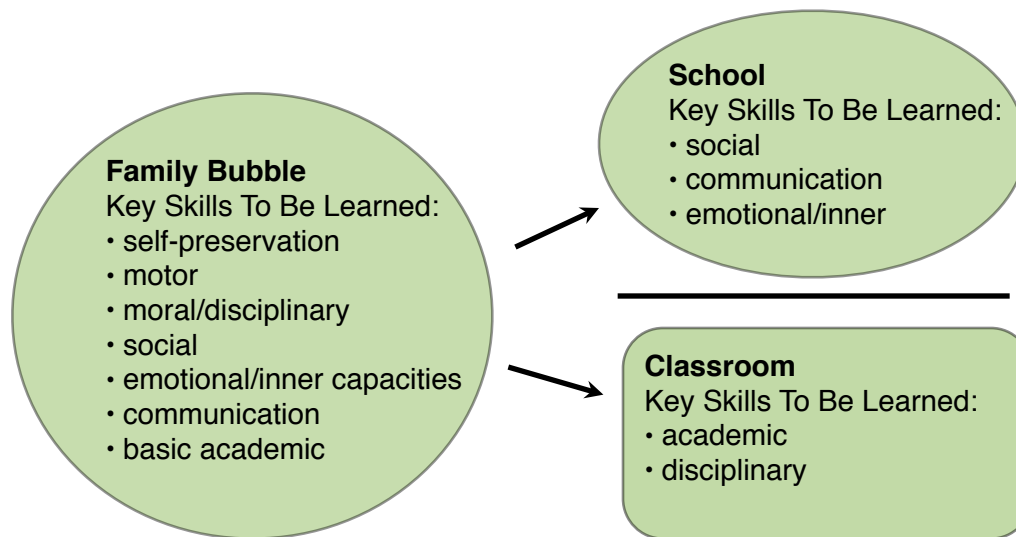
D. When skills are perceived as learned in the classroom, they become narrowly defined, and the process of acquisition is seen either as one of osmosis or individual discipline.

Despite the fact that Americans are capable of thinking broadly about skills – readily offering social, emotional, and communications skills as important to development – the classroom is narrowly viewed as a place where “academic” skills are learned. Cultural models interviews show how this definitional divide between academic and so-called “life” skills allows people to fall back upon many of the most pernicious tropes about education: learning is perceived to happen as a result of individual motivation and effort; it happens in a hierarchically structured situation in which the teacher fills the student with facts; the facts that count most are “the basics” (or the 3Rs); it must be hard to constitute learning; and the caring teacher engages the student’s will to learn regardless of resources, curriculum, or professional training. In this way, the social-emotional aspects of learning are hijacked by the all-consuming idea of individual motivation or willpower. Because the process is largely invisible by which social and emotional factors intertwine in the process of learning, and because what is learned is now reduced to facts, Americans’ understanding of skills and how they are acquired is highly reductionist. Simple images of the student behind the desk and the teacher at the front of the room are sufficient to trigger this “little picture” thinking. There is a persistent yet recessive understanding that classrooms are places where children should be

learning more complex skills of problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity. But the public does not think these skills are currently being well developed in scholastic contexts, and lacks a coherent model for thinking about how they might be. Given this cognitive hole, the public's thinking doubles back to the basics as the most foundational skills and fails to fully appreciate and concretize these more elusive and ill-defined skills.

E. Out-of-class learning is thought of as comprising different skills and perhaps different methods of evaluation.

In contrast to in-class learning, out-of-class learning or “real-world learning” occurs largely through “having experiences;” is a more “hands-on” experiential process; and results in a wide range of skills and attributes, ranging from “social skills” to “knowing right from wrong” to making good decisions. The important thing about this distinction is that it separates cognitive skills from interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and considers only cognitive skills to be relevant in classroom-based learning contexts. In addition, this model severely limits people's ability to think about how cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills are related to each other, making it difficult for them to see how all three skill domains are important components of *all* learning.⁸ Interestingly, FrameWorks' more recent cultural models interviews show further distinctions between in-class and in-school skills. The non-classroom school environment of the hallway, cafeteria, playground, and after-school program is considered the most important non-home context for most children. It is in this environment, people believe that social, communication, emotional, and other key “life skills” are learned and honed in the organic give-and-take of daily peer interactions. In public thinking about children, “school” serves as the most readily cognized stand-in for “society” in general, even as people can speak to other social environments, like the mall, the playing field, and so forth. FrameWorks' researchers believe this distinction offers some interesting opportunities for bridging the skills gap between experts and the public.



II. Gaps in Understanding: Where the Story Breaks Down

Below we summarize the expert account of skills and learning that emerged from our expert interviews and participant observation sessions. We then compare the dominant public tropes to the expert account, focusing on four key gaps in understanding.

The Expert Story of Skills, Knowledge, and Learning

How do we know learning has happened?

- Application: when knowledge and skill have been gained that allow a person to complete a task or operation
- Fluency: when there is deep mastery of skills and knowledge within a given domain
- Transfer: when skills and knowledge can be applied to novel problems and circumstances
- Leverage: when you can build more complex skills and knowledge

What are key skills and knowledge?

- Cognitive: creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, the basics
- Interpersonal: communication and collaboration
- Intrapersonal: emotional management and persistence
- BUT — you can't do one without the other

How are skills and knowledge learned?

- There are universal as well as individualized ways that learning happens
- One of the universals is that the more ways students are exposed to material and the more ways in which they are able to apply skills and knowledge, the better
- Individual differences matter in respect to current levels of mastery, which correspond to different approaches to effective learning
- More complex skills get built on and out of more simple skills.
- Learning starts early

What are the conditions required to develop skills and knowledge?

- Opportunity to and support in directly applying skills
- Appropriate feedback
- Tasks with appropriate challenge
- Focus on both formal and informal settings
- Learner-centered environments

How can skills and knowledge be improved?

- Start with desired outcomes and work back into skills and knowledge necessary to perform and achieve these outcomes
- An evidence-based approach to reform: use what we know from science about the way learning happens to reform education
 - Incorporate the science of learning into the way that teachers are trained and students are assessed
 - Build direct application opportunities into curriculum

#1: The Relational Gap

For experts, cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills are important and functionally intertwined. For ordinary Americans, these skills develop in separate domains and are distinct in their applications. This comfortable cognitive partitioning allows people to have their cake and eat it too – to value social and emotional skills, but not to crowd out the basics in the classroom curriculum.

#2: The Process Gap

For experts, learning is a process of interaction, both between a student and her environment and among various disciplines and phases of development. For most people, however, learning is seen as occurring along a linear continuum, with basic content (successful mastery of facts in core subjects like the 3Rs) as a foundational prerequisite to all successive learning. This, then, creates a dynamic in which reform efforts must essentially “move backward” to address the foundational failures of the system instead of innovating instruction.

#3: The Consequences Gap

For experts, it is assumed that student failures portend negative consequences for the society as a whole. For the public, failure is individualized and, while regrettable, holds few consequences beyond the affected individual and his family. Because the public does not often think in terms of the future workforce or the skills required to contribute to it, the shared consequences of failing to meet these standards are largely invisible. The sketchiness of the phrase “21st-century skills” contributes to this inability to connect the dots and aggregate the consequences to the societal level. Further, the Consumer Model is inherently individual – bad choices lead to bad outcomes, so individuals should learn from their mistakes and subsequently make better choices.

#4: The Accountability Gap

For experts, better learning and skills development require pedagogical improvements that are *science based*: our country needs to invest in better curricula and teacher training in order to implement what we now know about *how* children learn. For most people, accountability has come to reside in teachers and in measuring their ability to transmit knowledge to students using their innate caring efforts to engage the student’s willpower and effort. When schools fail, teachers are one of only three concrete sources of the problem, with parents and the students themselves as close runner-ups.

These gaps, among other challenges, represent key impasses in translating expert knowledge and garnering support for progressive reforms that address skills and learning. The gaps therefore become the targets for communications tools emerging from the Core Story of Education Project – for example, metaphor development will be particularly important in addressing what we describe above as the “Process Gap.” At this point in the research

trajectory, having completed a large quantitative experiment to assess the impact of values on multiple domains of the Core Story, we are able to recommend a strategy that begins to address some of these gaps.

III. Redirections: Framing Elements as Guideposts

“Understanding means attempting to extract indices such that old stories can be related to new ones.”

Roger C. Schank, Tell Me a Story. 1990. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

FrameWorks research has unearthed a number of important places where people “toggle” between two or more ways of thinking about skills and learning. As some of these ways of making sense of information allow for greater openness than others in thinking about public policy solutions, these toggle points are key sites where strategic communications can work to reframe issues. Communications tools that work at these intersection points have the power to pull one of a set of available ways of thinking to the forefront, simultaneously pushing other less productive orientations to the perceptual background. On the issue of skills and learning, these toggle points include:

- a. Individual success or **Functional society**
- b. Classroom learning vs. **Real-world learning**
- c. Skills as both inborn/inherent and skills as **acquired**
- d. Skills as defined narrowly in a hierarchical fashion and built on the basics, or **encompassing social, emotional, and cognitive skills and constructed synergistically**

To support an effective redirection toward the latter propositions, we offer the following framing elements and strategies.

- a. *Use the value of Progress to reinforce latent understandings of the relationship of skills to America’s future viability.*

In a survey experiment that tested seven values against a control to determine how well they served to elevate support for skills policies as well as programs related to other domains of the Core Story, one value emerged as a clear winner. The results of this experiment, based on a sample of 3,200 informants statistically representing the population of U.S. registered voters, saw the value of *Progress* outperform the other values in terms of moving informants to be more supportive of incorporating skills-based learning into education.⁹

The *Progress* value was articulated in the experiment like this:

Our Nation's Progress Depends on Improving Learning

As we set out to improve learning, our most important goal should be to move our country forward. To do this, we must make sure that our children's learning is not outdated and that we are advancing. This means identifying and teaching our children the skills that they and our country will need to take the next step towards improvement. If we fail to act with this goal in mind, our country will be stuck with old ways of learning that are unsuited for the needs of tomorrow.

By improving learning we can move our country forward.

This value is similar to the value of *Future Preparation* tested in previous FrameWorks experiments,¹⁰ but *Progress* is more oriented toward moving forward and making improvements from our current state than focused on future needs. In other words, *Progress* is linear and relational rather than temporal and absolute. We suspect that it is these features that led it to outperform *Future Preparation* on the issue of skills.

Note that the *Workforce/Global Competition* value also performed strongly, though not as strongly as *Progress*. This is surprising, on some level, as this value proved the worst of all those tested in past research in its ability to lift support for education reform and more specifically, higher education.¹¹ However, in the iteration of the value tested in the most recent experiment, a strong dose of *Workforce* is thought to have leavened the impact of the *Competition* value. In this respect, the *Workforce/Global Competition* value approximates the *Progress* and *Future Preparation* ideas: “We must make sure that our children’s learning prepares them to compete with workers in other countries. This means identifying and teaching our children the skills that would allow them to perform as well as children from other countries. If we fail to act with this goal in mind, other countries will pass us by.” We reconcile these conflicting findings with the hypothesis that it is the strong connection between workforce and skills that results in this more favorable outcome. Thus, we recommend linking *Progress* and *Future Preparation* to *Workforce*, but leaving out the strong dose of *Global Competition* that usually attends this frame; FrameWorks research strongly suggests that the *Global Competition* value will depress support for other parts of the Core Story of Education agenda. Additionally, by eliminating the “competition” argument, one is better situated to argue for “cooperation” skills like teamwork and goals that are precluded in the *Global Competition* value.

- b. *Use a functional approach to skills by focusing on specific skills that our country will need children to acquire in order to function fully in the real world of tomorrow.*

By evoking “real world skills,” the quick default to the narrow set of skills associated with classroom learning is avoided. The sooner in a communiqué that these real-world skills can be enumerated and defined, the better. That is, simply saying “21st-century skills” is insufficient to bring to mind a robust and concrete familiarity with the skills that experts attribute to this term. When introducing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, examples should be provided, and these skills should always be connected to the processes through which they are learned. While untested in this precise context, we suspect that the idea of “can’t do one without the other” will help concretize the interrelated nature of social, emotional, and cognitive skills as it did on the issue of early child development where it has proven effective in explaining social, emotional, and cognitive elements of early child development.¹² This idea explains to the public how cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills are functionally interlinked, and why learning involves all three. This explanation can counter the public’s propensity to privilege cognitive skills and to see skills as compartmentalized and unrelated. Here is an execution of this idea:

Paying attention to young children’s emotional and social needs as well as to their mastery of literacy and cognitive skills has the maximum impact on child development. Because the brain is a highly integrated organ and its multiple functions operate in a richly coordinated fashion, you cannot focus on developing just one part of the child without paying equal attention to the other capacities – basically, you can’t do one without the other.¹³

We also find alignment between the problem we encounter here – lack of specificity in how “other” skills outside those narrowly defined as academic – and a metaphor tested in FrameWorks’ early child development research, *Air Traffic Control*. The *Air Traffic Control* metaphor, which compares executive function skills to those required of an air traffic controller, has proven an effective device to translate the science of executive function. Note that it implicitly draws its power from an understanding of “real world skills.” Moreover, with executive function’s focus on intertwined skills and functional co-recruitment, we feel that this metaphor has great potential to help translate the relationship among the three skill domains mentioned above. Here is an execution of the metaphor, mapped on to skills and learning:

Children’s ability to focus and pay attention is like Air Traffic Control at a busy airport. Some planes have to land and others have to take off at the same time, but there’s only so much room on the ground and in the air. The mechanism that acts as Air Traffic Control is called executive function. It regulates the flow of information and the focus on tasks, creates mental priorities and avoids collisions, and keeps the system

flexible and on time. In children, this mechanism needs to be actively geared up as early as possible.¹⁴ And, because it creates the space for all the skills that will come on-line afterward, it must be specifically acquired and honed over time, so that it can support the system of learning.

- c. *Use a tone of pragmatism to overcome skepticism about the ability of the education system to improve and to avoid suspicions about lack of accountability.*

While *Pragmatism* did not provide the power that other values did in pushing understanding of skills and learning, nevertheless it remains an important aspect of the reframe, in FrameWorks' opinion. First, it is a necessary antidote to the determinism inherent in the way that Americans think about the education system. Second, it connects to a need to get reform into the real-world experiences of ordinary people, and out of the perceived domain of unaccountable bureaucrats and wildly unrealistic reformers. We suggest that *Pragmatism* be incorporated into the reframing strategy in the following ways.

- Use the simplifying model of *Remodeling* to stand in for reform. Discussion of the need for new skills implies reform to the education system. The *Remodeling* simplifying model gives the public concrete ideas of what reform means, what it entails, how it works, and what it will look like. FrameWorks has found that concretizing these aspects of reform helps avoid public skepticism about the feasibility of making improvements to learning and education systems:

When you remodel a house, you do more than just repaint it: you make substantial changes, keeping the previous shape of the house, but updating old parts, and making the house more modern and efficient. Like a general contractor, we have to remodel our educational system so that it enables our society to thrive in today's world. Right now, our educational system is an old house that doesn't do a good job of educating our children or providing society with the skills that America needs. The bad news is that remodeling creates temporary dust, noise, and inconvenience, but the good news is that when you remodel you don't have to start from scratch – you strengthen what's working and fix what's not. If we approach educational reform as remodeling, not demolishing, we will more successful in giving our children what they need.¹⁵

- If scientists or experts deliver the message, use an explanatory style and bring the abstract down to earth. In other research on science-based topics,¹⁶ FrameWorks has found that Americans want their scientists to be more Ben Franklin-friendly than

Albert Einstein-smart. That is, they want to know more about how things work and less about the abstract nature of the science. Those explaining skills and learning need to adopt a simple, explanatory tone and to use metaphors (preferably tested) to help Americans understand what skills are, how they relate to one another, and, most important, how they are best acquired. Note that when tested as a value – a kind of “Science Says” assertion about the need to adhere to the findings of learning researchers in reforming skills acquisition and learning – this idea had little productive effect. This suggests that scientists will have to work harder to build a basic understanding to which their authority can connect. Additionally, the more that can be done to bring ordinary Americans into the discussion – to model their understanding and articulation of a broader range of skills – the sooner the public will feel comfortable expressing its more latent understanding of the importance of social and emotional, interpersonal and intrapersonal, skills.

IV. Traps: Current Framing Practices that Undermine the Story¹⁷

“Paranoids are not paranoids because they’re paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves...deliberatively into paranoid situations.”

Thomas Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow. 1973. New York: Viking Press.

In addition to the recommendations presented above, our research points to a set of features of public understandings that constitute traps for communicators – highly available ways of thinking that, once cued, have perceptual effects that are detrimental to the goals of the core story and the progressive education reforms that it seeks to forward.

1. The Unspecified Process Trap

Assuming that Americans can relate skills to learning is a potent trap; in fact, they have little in the way of a process into which to fit skills development. In a review of practices within the field of prominent education reformers, FrameWorks researchers found that most discussions of learning focus on building basic skills in traditional content areas, and fail to explain how learning happens.¹⁸ By focusing on outcomes and leaving the process unspecified, communicators invite the public to fill in the process based on their existing knowledge.

2. The Isolated Skills Trap

Related to the Unspecified Process Trap is the common practice of breaking down skills into discrete micro operations. This is a necessary exercise in the science of learning, but

unproductive as a communications practice. When skills are decontextualized from their uses and related skills, a functional perspective on the purpose of skills and their interrelationship is lost. This obscures arguments about the need for skills and the importance of their intertwined nature for pedagogical reforms. Simultaneously, this reinforces the Compartmentalized Model in which discrete things belong in discrete places and are trained up using discrete approaches to learning. Communicators should clearly establish functional ends for, *and* interrelationships among, skills.

3. *The Transformative Tone Trap*

Regarding education reform, experts have a tendency to speak enthusiastically about the size of reforms needed to achieve sustainable structural transformation. Ironically, instead of inspiring ordinary Americans, this has the opposite effect: it activates their models of determinism and depresses engagement and agency. Moreover, when FrameWorks researchers asked ordinary Americans to imagine how they might implement this transformative change, they went back to the basics. By contrast, if a step-by-step process is presented, in which phases of “remodeling” are visible and assessed, the public will accord reformers far more extensive curricular and structural changes.

4. *The Back to the Future Trap*

Advocates often try to connect their policy recommendations to what “resonates” with the public. While this can prove effective, it can also backfire. Talking extensively about the basics or introducing it at the top of a communiqué is certain to backfire. As long as the skills that matter equal the basics, Americans will continue to “go backward” to achieve progress in learning. Americans reason that failures in education are due to the fact that we have moved away from a pedagogical focus on these basic skills in favor of “new” skills, which are seen as peripheral “add-ons.”¹⁹ When faced with facts about lagging educational outcomes, people turn to a rosy and nostalgic perspective of the “good old days” and think that a movement “back to the basics” is the best way to improve education.²⁰

The “Basics” is a pervasive script and is problematic, of course, because it defines only a narrow set of skills as foundational. This feeds into “zero-sum” thinking about skills (more innovation = less basics) and structures direct resistance to innovative approaches to education.²¹ Given the public’s assumption about what constitutes foundational skills, people will likely reject calls for new kinds of skill development as “hype” and be driven to the idea of “getting back to the basics” as the solution to educational problems. This orients all educational reforms to an anachronistic nostalgic gaze to the past, rather than to future challenges.

The *Progress* value is important in avoiding this default. It sets up a linear progression that is future-directed and opens the door for a conversation about the skills necessary to take our country in this direction. Effective communications should focus on asserting the need to update our existing system in order to prepare children to contribute to the world in which they will be living. This strategy must stress that 21st-century skills will be adding to the traditional curriculum, not subtracting from it (what we have elsewhere called a “basics + frame”²²). Communications can be framed around the idea that children need a full package of skills, including basic skills *and* innovative skills; academic skills *and* interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Such messages must stress that learning and skill development are not “zero-sum” games; innovative skills need not crowd out “the basics.”²³ To the degree possible, innovative skills should be aligned with, or nested in, goals that comport with people’s perceptions of the basics – for instance, new thinking about how to advance mathematical reasoning.

This MessageMemo is part of an iterative process of developing a fully articulated and coherent Core Story of Education. Here we have focused on the research to date that informs our articulation of those aspects of the story that focus on skills and learning. As FrameWorks continues to probe additional aspects of the narrative, we will revisit these questions as well and bring them into alignment with the fully developed story in such a way that communicators can be confident that it “lifts all boats,” from assessment to disparities. In the meantime, the accompanying graphic shows the framing elements developed thus far to fill in the blanks in public thinking and redirect public choices to better models for education reform.

¹ Snow, D. A., & Benford, R. D. (1992). Master frames and cycles of protest, in A. D. Morris and C. M. Mueller, Eds., *Frontiers in social movement theory*. New Haven, CT and London, UK: Yale University Press.

² This group currently comprises the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Ford Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, NoVo Foundation and Raikes Foundation.

³ See <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/sfa.html>.

⁴ See www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html

⁵ See Bales, S. N. (2010). *Framing education reform: A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

⁶ Kendall-Taylor, N., & Chart, H. (2008). *Reform what? Individualist thinking in education: American cultural models of schooling: A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

⁷ For access to FrameWorks’ large body of research on early child development, visit <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ecd.html>

⁸ Kendall-Taylor, N., et al. (2010). “Faster and fancier books”: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of digital media and learning. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_dml/dmlmapthegaps.pdf

⁹⁹ The difference of roughly three percentage points between *Progress* and the control condition was statistically significant at the $p < .06$ level.

¹⁰ See Manuel, T. (2009). Preparing America for the 21st century: Values that work in promoting education reform efforts. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

¹¹ See Simon, A. F., & Davey, L. F. (2010). College bound: The effects of values frames on attitudes toward higher education reform. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

¹²¹² See Gilliam, F. D., Jr. (2007). Telling the science story: An explanation of frame effects on public understanding and support for early child development. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

¹³ FrameWorks Institute. (2009). Framing early child development message brief. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/ECD/ecd_message_brief_2009.pdf

¹⁴ Kendall-Taylor, N. et al. (2009). Caught between osmosis and environments. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/oceansclimate.html>, for example.

¹⁷ FrameWorks’ research on education has uncovered other key traps that those messaging about skills and learning should be careful to avoid. These traps are described in Bales, S. N. (2009). The proper attitude: Challenges in framing higher education reform: A FrameWorks MessageMemo. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

¹⁸ Arvizu, S., et al. (2012). The stories we are telling: How digital media and learning is communicated by education reformers. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gilliam, F. (2011). Get in where you fit in: The role of teachers’ unions in public conversations about education reform: A FrameWorks Message Memo. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

²¹ Bales, S. N. (2010), op. cit.

²² Bales, S. N. (2009). The proper attitude: Challenges in framing higher education reform: A FrameWorks MessageMemo. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

²³ Bales, S. N. (2010), op cit.

An Emerging Core Story of Education

What is at stake and why should I care?

Future Preparation/Workforce

Common Good

Progress

Who is involved and how does it work?

Orchestra

Scaffolding

When and where does it happen?

What threatens the outcomes?

How do we know whether the outcomes have happened or not?

What are the outcomes, how do they happen and why do they matter?

Air Traffic Control

Can't Do One...

How do we improve ed and learning?

Remodeling

Fairness Across Places