The problem with problems

Daniel Pink, January 27, 2009

A quick thought about the disconnect between how we prepare kids for work and how work actually operates:

In school, problems almost always are **clearly defined**, **confined to a single discipline**, and have **one right answer**.

But in the workplace, they're practically the opposite. Problems are usually **poorly defined**, **multi-disciplinary**, and have **several possible answers, none of them perfect**.

Are timed, standardized tests the way to ready youngsters for real-world problem-solving?

Business leaders seem to think otherwise. Look at the chart below, drawn from research done by the AASA and Americans for the Arts, about how employers and school superintendents *(who might have the hardest jobs in America –Ed.)* define "creativity." There's a fair bit of alignment — but employers seem more concerned with how employees can frame problems and whether they're comfortable with the absence of a "right" answer.

What does 'creativity' mean?

Everyone suggests creativity is key for a 21st-century workforce, but educators and executives differ on what specific creative skills are most important, according to a 2007 survey of 155 school superintendents and 89 employers.

Rank determined by percentage of respondents selecting skill. Respondents allowed to select only three skills.

	SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS	BUSINESS/EMPLOYERS
Problem identification or articulation	1	9
Ability to identify new patterns of behavior or new combination of actions	2	3
Integration of knowledge across different disciplines	3	2
Ability to originate new ideas	4	6
Comfort with notion of 'no right answer'	5	11
Fundamental curiosity	6	10
Originality and inventiveness in work	7	4
Problem solving	8	1
Ability to take risks	9(t)	8
Tolerance of ambiguity	9(t)	7
Ability to communicate new ideas to others	11	5