In the Classroom 65

Using the ESIL Lens to Determine
What is Essential and Relevant

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Stan Skrabut: Well, Happy Easter. Thanks for taking time to join me listening to this podcast. I know you could be doing other things, probably are doing other things, but you're still hanging out with me. I really appreciate it. I also know there's countless other podcasts out there and I'm just happy to be part of your mix. Thank you ever so much. How are you doing with this COVID-19 self-isolation? How's it working out for you? I'd love to hear your adventures with this. I look at as a positive experience. I know watching the news, there's a lot of doom and gloom on how the impact is and I know it, there's a huge impact. I really do feel sorry for the folks that are negatively impacted by this COVID-19.

I think in terms of higher education, a lot of positive things can come out of this. We're building assets that can support all the modalities of instruction that we have from face-to-face, hybrid online, and also, even this remote learning, so I see a lot of positive things coming out of this. Also, I see this as an opportunity to grow our levels of digital literacy. For me, I'm trying to find the silver lining on this but I know some other folks are struggling with this. If there's anything that I can research to help make your life easier, let me know, I'd be happy to do that, happy to dive in on a topic that is real meaningful to you.

Today's topic I think is going to be meaningful to you as well. Today, we're going to be talking about ESIL Lens, so E-S-I-L Lens. This is a framework that will help you decide how important content is to your course or program. ESIL stands for Existence, Supported, Independent and Lifetime. I first heard about this ESIL Lens while attending a conference, SUNY Online Summit. It was back in February 2020. Dr. Maria Andersen gave a session called Facing the Future of Technology and Learning. I thought it was quite a fascinating session. She talked about how we have transformed as a world in terms of the amount of information that is put out to us.

This particular session, I have also included in the show notes, so you can actually watch her session, it was quite good. As I said, her focus was on the changing of instruction, but also the bloat of information. We have so much information related to our disciplines. How do we decide what students are to learn? They can't learn everything, so how do we decide this? She presented on this ESIL Lens. This ESIL Lens is a way to filter what content is essential and relevant. Those are the things to focus on.

Now, Dr. Andersen is a principal consultant at Edge of Learning, and the CEO and Co-founder of Coursetune. Coursetune is an ed-tech company that builds curriculum design, management, visualization, and collaborative software. She has worked both

in and out of higher ed. She brings a lot of knowledge to this conversation. Let's talk a moment about why do we need an ESIL Lens? For each course, discipline, program, we need a way to sift through the volumes of information available to determine what is relevant and essential for our students.

There's new information is being put forth every day, volumes of information. It's impossible to share everything and have students know everything. It's just impossible. I mean, you look at here we are as educators and there are so many different strategies for teaching. Do you know them all? No, probably not. Are you aware of a lot of them? Possibly, but yet, there's only a small number of these strategies or concepts that you're actually putting into practice. Right?

What are essential and relevant? We work our way down from there. One of the big questions is, do students have to know everything in the discipline when they can readily find information with a Google search? I think back to my days at the Air Force Academy prep school where they issued us this really expensive calculator. Now, we're pretty lucky because the classes before us got issued a slide rule. We were feeling kind of special. Now, in our classes, we had to learn how to set up different formulas, we learned different concepts for algebra, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, most of it I've forgotten.

Had I stayed in that particular discipline, moved on to work in the sciences for the Air Force, then that information would still be relevant, I would still be using it. It would've been a lifetime skill that I would've picked up. But right now, it's more in the existence, the fact that I know these concepts are out there is useful to me. Having this sense of awareness is still valuable to me to this day. The nice thing about it is, in their instruction, really, they wanted you to be able to set up the formulas correctly so you can punch them right into your calculator and solve them. That at a certain point, we shifted from being able to solve the problems by hand to be unable to use a calculator to solve the problem, and so there was a shift on how to do this.

This knowledge of how to plug a formula into a calculator correctly, that is actually more valuable to me than all the formulas I had to memorize, because I can look up the formulas now. Having that awareness of which formulas to look up, I can certainly look them up. And so this happens to be an example that's dealing with mathematics, but we also have the sciences. For somebody who is going to be a biologist, they have to approach their discipline much differently than somebody who is going to be a history major yet needs a science. What is relevant for each of those classes and essential?

What is going to be lifetime knowledge and what is just existence type-knowledge? That is why we need this ESIL Lens, right? To be able to filter for our particular courses and disciplines, and programs. I'm going to even throw in students because one group of students is different than another group of students, if it's their major versus if it's not their major, what is essential and relevant? As I mentioned, this ESIL Lens has four levels; existence, supported, independent and lifetime.

For every discipline that we have, the sciences, the math, the humanities, for each one of them, how knowledge and skill is categorized will be different. Somebody who

is pursuing and nursing degree will have to know how to do things at a different level than somebody who is pursuing an education degree, for example. For one discipline, you may be developing a lifetime skill, for another discipline, this is simply the fact that they know this exists is good enough.

The first of the four levels is called existence. Does the learner know it exists? Can they do a search for it to find it later if they need to? There's a lot of things you're not even aware of. Every day, as I'm scouring the internet for one reason or another, I come upon something, it's like, "Wow, I didn't even know that existed," and then I do a deep dive into it. It's absolutely fascinating. Prior to that, I didn't even know existed, but yet in some discipline, folks are absolutely aware of it.

When you're pulling the information together, and it could be from a textbook, it could be articles that you're finding, you have to determine, is it just good enough that students know that this idea or concept, or skill exists? This information would not show up in an assessment and you probably just show it briefly in a class, either show it or briefly explain it, something to that nature, that you're just creating a sense of awareness of this particular topic or skill.

Here I am, as an instructional technologist, I'm often confronted by faculty who exclaimed that they don't even know the right questions to ask. I may show them something and they're like, "Wow, I didn't even know that existed. I wouldn't even know to go look for that." I think it's my role. One of my roles is to create this sense of awareness on different technologies that are available for the classroom and different instructional concepts and ideas just to create awareness. I do this through newsletters, I do this just posting blog posts, may be part of conversations that I introduce these concepts.

It's to do nothing more than just get it into the radar. This is a possibility that exists. Faculty will come back to me later saying, "Wow, in that workshop, you talked about this, I want to know more." That's great, it opens the conversation. In terms of content that you're presenting in your class, questions you have to ask, when you go back and look at your assessments, does that particular question really need to be there? Where does it fit? Is it existence? If it's existence, really, do you need to have it show up in an exam? Do your students have to memorize everything?

Which leads us to supported. Now, supported is that the learner can be able to do a task or has knowledge of a task, but it may require some support with notes or tutorials, or peers, something like this. You can put these things on low stake assessment. This is something that you may have them do a homework assignment around,

or small projects or groups assignment, something like that, or an open notes quiz, that you definitely want them to know this information, but it's okay if it's supported.

Once again, as an instructional technologists, using a learning management system, for example, I want faculty to be able to copy their course from one term to another. I don't expect them to memorize the process, but I do expect them to be aware enough to know, "Oh, we have a new term and I need to copy my course. Where are

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the instructions for that and I'll be able to do it?" That they can walk through the process, that I give them enough information that they're going to be successful if they have some type of job aide to walk them through the process.

As I think back to my time in the Air Force, there was a lot of tasks that we had airmen do that we wanted them to be able to do it and it had enough awareness that if they had a checklist in front of them, they could do it successfully. That was important. This idea of supported, they can do it but they may not do it quickly and they may need a lot of supports in order to be able to do it successfully. Or this is a task that they may only see once a year or once a term. It's not something that it's essential that they memorize. That's supported.

The next one is independent. And as I think about my Air Force days, this, we would say be able to do unsupervised. That they know it so well that they can go off and do it and they don't need supervision to ensure they do it with accuracy, that they will do it with accuracy. A lot of these, in my particular career field, had to do it under a sense of stress and speed, because I worked in security forces, so responding to an alarm, they certainly have a checklist that they need to follow to make sure that everything is done correctly in that alarm. In some cases they're not going to be using the checklist at that particular moment. They have to do it from all the training that they had. They can just do it unsupervised and immediate without support.

As far as independent, the way that Dr. Anderson explains it, can they learn or do it independently without assistance and maintain the skill until the next expected refreshed. In terms of education, these may be tasks that are carried over from one course to another. For example, in the sciences, how to write a lab report. This is a skill that they'll learn early on in their academic career and they will be doing it over and over throughout their full academic career or learning how to write an essay. From that essay, they will build upon that but they use that as a starting point.

Naturally, these type of things would show up on a more high stakes assessment. Whether it's more detailed assignment or a quiz, or an exam that these things would show up there, and they're just more important that you want them to be able to do this successfully over and over, and over again. Most of these tasks, when I'm dealing with faculty, and I think back to this learning management system, is I certainly want faculty to be able to add content to a learning management system, create discussions, build quizzes, manage your grade book without me having to help them every step of the way.

That I want them to be able to do it unsupervised and let them just go create their courses, and nothing gives me greater joy than when that happens. That is definitely in this independent. There's some things from a learning management system they don't have to know. They may have some awareness that there's some background tools that are available to them and if they're more curious, I can help them out. The fact that they are aware of these, that's a good thing. There's other tasks that only happen once a term. Certainly, they have job aides. But really when it comes down to every day working in an online course, there's a lot of tasks that I expect faculty to be able to do without my assistance. Once they have been trained, once they've learned how to do these tasks, being able to do that. I see that as the independent.

For this lifetime, for lifetime, this is stuff that I want them to carry for the rest of their life. Can the learners do it independently without outside help and maintain the skill for lifetime success? These are skills that will show up in every single class, for every single discipline through their entire academic career. For example, in the education field, being able to develop a lesson plan. They're going to learn how to do a basic lesson plan in some of their first courses, but they are going to be building lesson plans throughout their whole education career and they're going to tailor them around the content they're learning at that particular time.

Certainly, these skills, if you were to assess it, this would be in a final exam, it could show up in a dissertation or a thesis, something of that nature. In my example as an instructional technologist working with faculty using a learning management system, a lifetime skill that I would like faculty to have is the ability to transfer their knowledge of using a learning management system from one learning management system platform to another or to a similar concept. When I first got to the college that I'm working at, we transferred from ANGEL to Blackboard and it was rather rough, that it was rather radical.

Now as we're looking at the future, we may change learning management systems again. I'm hoping that it will not be as, because they already have a concept of what is possible and what is available in a learning management system, and they would be able to carry those concepts over. Understanding that you can create quizzes and discussions, and post content, and have a grade book, and manage that, are concepts that they're going to be able to carry a cross. They just may not know specifically how to do it, but they know it exists, they've had experience with it, they know how to do these things. I believe the learning curve is going to be much shorter.

How do we put this whole ESIL Lens into action? First of all, it comes to determine what do you consider lifetime knowledge and skills, and what are skills that fit in these other levels? What are existence type skills and knowledge? What are supported skills and knowledge? What are independent skills and knowledge? When you build your learning outcomes and your objectives, whether it's for the program or for a course, I would recommend that you also tie them together with these ESIL Lens. Identify which ones are lifetime and independent, and supported, and existent. This will help you guide you when you build your assessments.

And when you build good objectives, this guides your development of your assessments. You figure out what needs to show up on a quiz or exam, and how is it going to be applied.

One of the things that Dr. Anderson talked about was that a lot of the things that we're asking students to know and be able to do have not necessarily kept up with the change in technology. Thinking about how does technology play a part in how this ESIL lens is being applied? Do students have to calculate a formula by hand or can technology take a part? How has technology transformed a discipline? Are we doing things because we've always done them that way? Shouldn't we update our curriculum to be relevant to this century?

For example, that we have a keyboarding course, knowing how to type on a keyboard and do that, I guess, is an essential skill. Shouldn't we also be teaching how to do voice typing or doing transcribing, automated transcribing for writing essays, as an example. We have students write essays all the time, but perhaps if we taught them voice typing, we can get them to switch when they're writing essays where they focus on the writing part and then switch to the editing part. Because if you do both at the same time, you're not going to have work that is as alive and authentic as when you split your brain. When you focus on the writing process and then the editing process, so just an example.

Anyways, I found this ESIL lens to be absolutely fascinating. I think it's an important tool that you should definitely consider when you're working on your assessments and learning objectives, and deciding what content to put into your course, which naturally is all based on the objective. I hope you found this as interesting as I have. With that, here's a plug for my book.