About the Real-World Learning Toolkit

Connection to the MyWays Student Success Framework. NGLC’s MyWays project team spent three years exploring the broader, deeper competencies required for a complex future. One of the most striking conclusions of this work was that it’s difficult, if not impossible, to help learners develop these competencies without going outside the classroom walls. Learners need the complex, authentic, and inter-connected environment of real-world learning as well as the relationships with adults and development of social capital that environment brings.

Learning and design principles. The MyWays tools are designed with the following principles in mind: students at the center; equity in access and design (addressing barriers for historically marginalized learners); learning mindset; learner-driven, personalized pathways; and high expectations with commensurate supports.

What’s included in the toolkit and where does this document fit? The Real-World Learning Toolkit enables educators, school designers/redesigners, and their community partners to make the case for offering their students the benefits of real-world learning; assess their current state and assets; set the cornerstones for real-world learning design; and make plans for further design and piloting in their schools or districts. The tools are designed to be flexible — they can be used in a variety of ways, either individually or in combination.

Additional support is available. For help introducing real-world learning or other changes focused on your learner and educator needs, please contact Next Generation Learning Challenges to learn about our services and events.
Introduction

What needs does this tool address and how can I use it?

In addition to engaging with the other components of the MyWays Real-World Learning Toolkit — the Key Elements of Real-World Learning, 5 Zones of the Wider Learning Ecosystem, and Social Capital tools — our work with innovators in the MyWays Community of Practice suggests that educators and learning designers should ensure that all core partners are adequately prepared for this transformative kind of learning.

Many of the attributes of real world learning (RWL) are very different from the kind of teaching and learning that happens in more traditional schools. RWL is more student driven, hands on, and competency based. It is often personalized and sometimes service oriented as well. Learners, educators, and Wider Learning Ecosystem partners will likely need assistance as they shift their mindsets and think about learning in new ways.

Even innovative learning that takes place within the classroom walls cannot completely prepare students for learning outside of them in the “whitewater” environment of organizations that are busy creating products, serving people, producing authentic research on global issues, etc. At the same time, most educators who are used to managing their students’ learning environments (even if they enable significant learner agency) will find that understanding and evaluating real-world learning is something new and perhaps difficult to link to the learning that is taking place in their classes. Community partners, committed to partnering with educators to help prepare learners for their work and life after graduation, may offer exciting, authentic opportunities for those learners. However, they may not have experience with how to structure learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate.

It is therefore vital for designers of RWL to consider readiness and the kinds of preparation needed to create powerful and successful RWL experiences.

What’s Included

This tool provides three sets of questions to help designers of RWL experiences increase their chances of success by gauging the readiness of those involved and refining their designs and action planning to address the needs of the various participants:

- Learners
- Educators
- Wider Learning Ecosystem partners

Educators and school leaders are encouraged to use the following self-assessment to determine how much and what kind of preparation they and their partners would need to design RWL experiences. Discussing these questions may also help design teams prioritize or refine the learning designs and potential solutions for their school or district.
Preparing learners:

Can your learners self-direct? Do they possess the agency they will need to act independently in their RWL experience?

If your current learning model enables self-direction in ways that lend themselves to RWL, you could ramp up the scope for self-direction in one or two projects prior to participation in the RWL pilot. If, however, you are using the RWL initiative to launch learner agency at your school, plan on building an explicit introduction to the elements of self-direction, as well as support and gradual release for self-directed behavior, into the initial stages of your RWL experience.

Do your learners have basic “workplace skills” that employers, community partners, and higher education institutions will expect of them in a RWL experience?

Although partners do not expect high school interns to come with the same set of workplace skills they expect from new employees, certain “basics” are a given —showing up to work on time every day, asking for help when needed, completing tasks, and communicating effectively and responsibly. They are also looking for learners who are self-starters, have a strong work ethic, and a desire to learn and grow from their RWL experience. Asking learners who have already participated in a number of RWL placements or projects to share their lessons learned can be an effective way to get the message across to less experienced students.

Do your learners know the cultural, social, and other expectations of the organization or community with which they will be engaging?

Learners venturing out to do projects, internships, or service should be equipped with background information about the community with which they will be working, such as key cultural and social contexts and expectations for language, dress, and ways of relating to others. They should also be knowledgeable about relevant equity issues and have opportunities to consider their own implicit biases.
Readiness & Preparation for RWL Self-assessment

Do your learners have experience engaging with mentors and/or advisors, especially adult mentors of the kind they will be interacting with in a RWL experience?

Your learners may have had the benefit of strong ties with adults in your school, but they may be less comfortable or skilled when it comes to forging relationships with internship mentors, college professors, or leaders of community organizations. They may also need support to understand the need to build social capital — how adults can serve not only as role models but also provide “bridging” capital to help learners make connections, build a professional network, and find resources related to career paths and goals.

Preparing educators:

Do educators at your school wish they had more time in class to help students develop success skills? Do they want to provide more opportunities for learners to apply what they are learning, but don’t have the resources or time to fit them in?

One way to generate enthusiasm for a new RWL initiative is to tie it to learning needs that have already been identified by classroom educators. Rather than seeing the new initiative as taking away learning time or adding new responsibilities to their shoulders, classroom educators are more likely to embrace the new initiative if it supports them to achieve goals they already have for their learners.

To what extent do educators define their role as “guiding student learning” rather than “imparting knowledge”?

If a school’s or district’s learning model already supports the role of teachers as guides and mentors within the classroom walls, introducing RWL will not require as significant a mindset shift. If this is a new role for educators, one helpful approach is to ask educators to draw on personal experiences in sports or other activities and the roles coaches played in helping them plan, set goals, and develop skills. Another way is to compare the RWL experience to the delegation that occurs in the workplace. In RWL the educators need to delegate to both the community partners working with their learners and to the learners themselves.

How might educators use their own social capital to identify and build partnerships?

Providing educators with an introduction to social capital can support your RWL initiative in at least two major ways. First, it will help educators understand how to guide learners in developing this important personal life resource. Second, educators can use their own personal and professional networks to identify and build a range of community partnerships. RWL innovators at Da Vinci X, a college bridge program in Los Angeles, CA, for example, have found that friends and family members who are involved with local businesses and community organizations can greatly expand the number of learner opportunities for RWL.
Readiness & Preparation for RWL Self-assessment

Do any of your educators have the interest/background to take on specific roles to support real-world learning?

School models that have fully integrated the learning opportunities from across the Wider Learning Ecosystem sometimes incorporate specialized roles to support this type of learning. Big Picture Learning schools, for instance, employ specialists in identifying leaving-to-learn opportunities and in overseeing partner mentors and coaches. Educators with experience in competency-based learning and performance assessment can draw on these skills to vet and manage badged and micro-credentialed learning opportunities that may be of interest to learners.

How much leadership support is there in your school for educators who are willing to engage in the innovation and risk-taking that designing RWL requires?

For many educators, RWL requires venturing out of traditional practice and taking risks to design new kinds of learning. School leaders are instrumental in promoting innovation, not only by providing resources, time to design and collaborate, and professional learning opportunities, but also by creating a culture where it is “safe to try.”

Preparing partners:

Are potential community partners aware of the benefits of working with you on a real-world learning experience for your learners?

RWL offers more than an opportunity to demonstrate social responsibility and give back to the community. Employers who offer high school internships establish brand awareness early, increase opportunities to build Human Resources, and support efforts to remain competitive in their marketplace. Businesses and nonprofits can gain new ideas and cultivate future college interns. Engaging with community and neighborhood organizations can also encourage students to stay in or return to work in the community as adults, contributing to the local talent pool and economy.

Are you approaching local organizations in ways likely to grow long-term partnerships?

Most partnerships between schools and community organizations, community colleges, and businesses take time to develop. Schools in the NGLC community, like the Workshop School, recommend engaging in stages. Schools and partners can start by enlisting outside experts or organizations to provide input to program planning or curriculum development, give feedback on major student projects or exhibitions, or bid for the chance to have a team of students work on an upcoming project. As community partners and educators gain experience working together, they can move toward true partnerships built on a shared commitment to learners’ success.
Do your partner organizations understand what’s needed to create a valuable learning experience for your students?

Community colleges and local universities understand learning, but may need support in providing the academic and other learning supports high school students need. Community organizations, particularly in the youth development or human services fields, may understand the developmental needs of learners, but they may require the guidance of educators around academic competencies, age-appropriate learning, and expectations. Employers can offer authentic learning environments and evaluation of work products, but they may need help establishing learning processes, such as scaffolding and providing feedback, to ensure the students are learning and progressing.

Do your partnerships provide opportunities to promote equity, identity development, and social justice?

Equitable access and supports for success are critical design elements of RWL to discuss with partners from the beginning. Cultivating community connections and targeting work of significance to the neighborhoods and racial/ethnic groups of your community can provide significant growth experiences for learners, as well as opportunities for development of social capital.

Here are additional resources to support your design of real-world learning:

- **Leaving to Learn**. Authors Elliott Washor and Charles Mojkowski describe the essential conditions for productive learning that today’s adolescents require, with a focus on learning experiences outside of school.

- **5 Essentials in Building Social Capital**, Report 4 of the NGLC MyWays Student Success Series, summarizes the role of relationships in providing opportunities and supporting young people to achieve their goals, key benefits of real-world learning.

- “**Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities**” from the National Society for Experiential Education lists and explains essential elements for designing authentic, high-quality experiential learning.

- “**Principles of Experiential Education Practice**” from the Association for Experiential Education emphasizes the roles of educators and learners in experiential contexts.
• **Linked Learning** is an approach to education that exposes high school students to college and career opportunities by integrating academics, career-technical education, and work-based learning organized around industry-sector themes.

• **LiFT** is a personalized platform that gives learners and educators a space to co-create learner-centered, real-world projects and track progress toward goals learners are passionate about.

• “**Real-World Learning at The Workshop School**” describes authentic projects and provides suggestions on ways to engage the Wider Learning Ecosystem in student learning.

• “**It Takes a Village: Community Partnerships for Real-World Learning,**” **Part 1** and **Part 2**, describes how three schools and districts partner with local businesses, higher education, and the wider community to provide real-world learning opportunities to their students.

• **Generation Schools Network** work to create a learning ecosystem in partnership with business so that students have multiple opportunities to understand the industries in their community, the jobs they bring, and the pathways to prepare for those careers.

• “**Keeping It Real: Building Bridges Between Employers and Schools,**” a blog post from the American Youth Policy Forum, shares insights on the pivotal role that close collaborations between employers and schools plays in supporting college and career success.

• **LRNG**, the impact arm of Southern New Hampshire University, uses an urban ecosystem approach to work with local government, employers, the public library systems, community colleges, or other local partners to open the door to new learner opportunities and help close workforce gaps.

• “**Sharing the Load: How You can Work Together With Local Business and Community Leaders**” from KnowledgeWorks offers four recommendations from experts for identifying and engaging with community champions.