

Mind the Gap: Identifying Learning Needs

ability to take
action, to do what
we need to do



SKILL

The ability to execute the technical elements of a task. Can be the application of knowledge.



KNOWLEDGE

The theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. Can also be information.



CAPACITY

The time and resources to do something. Can also be emotional and physical capacity.



WILL

Desire, intrinsic motivation, passion, or commitment. Usually has an emotional tone.



CULTURAL COMPETENCE

The ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own; the skill to navigate cross-cultural differences.



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The ability to be aware of, manage, and express one's emotions; the ability to recognize, empathize with, and manage other people's emotions



Mind the Gap: They Key to Working with Adult Learners

By Elena Aguilar, first published on EdWeek Teacher, March 2018

Whether we're teaching little people, or adults, I think we're all trying to figure out the same thing: How do we get other people to do *something*, stop doing something, or do something different? How do we get kids to write their names at the top of their paper or clean up after themselves or explain their mathematical reasoning? How do we get teachers to try new instructional strategies or stop talking so much or notice their students' strengths?

We who work in human development seek to expand someone's *ability* to do something.

The question then is *how*. *How* do we expand someone's ability? How do we get people to do something? The answer to this "how" lies in our analysis of the problem, in how we think about why they aren't doing what we think they should do. I'm going to re-share a tool for analysis that can transform your thinking about how to help another person change, learn, or grow (I originally shared this concept here some years ago – and it's worth reading in addition to this blog). Your thinking directs your action, so with different thoughts, you'll do different things, and see different results.

When a Teacher Seems Resistant

Let's consider an example. Say you're coaching a teacher around increasing student engagement, and you've described a number of strategies that she could use to get students excited about a topic, get into the lesson, make meaning of the material, and connect it to past and future learning. You've offered her copies of your favorite texts that describe how to do a think-pair-share, organize a fishbowl discussion or a Socratic seminar, and so on. And she's not doing any of them. She says, "I tried that fishbowl thing, and it didn't work," and now she seems unwilling to try anything else.

If you're like many of us, you'll start thinking she's resistant. After all, she's not *doing anything different*, right? But you might also be confused because she said she wanted to work on this—she asked for your coaching in this area. So what's going on?

Here's where this thinking tool comes in. This tool, which I've named Mind the Gap, directs us to pay attention to the gap between current reality and desired ability. If the teacher truly does want to work on the area that you're working on, then this tool helps us think about why she's not making that growth. This framework proposes that we can parse into six groups the things interfering with our ability to do something. This helps us get clear on what needs to be learned and offers insight into entry points to start that learning.



So the teacher who isn't taking up your suggestions might have a skill gap—her classroom management skills might be too rudimentary for her to facilitate a fishbowl discussion and so when she tried it the kids didn't get enough scaffolding and clear direction about behavior and it got chaotic. She may have a knowledge gap that's playing a role in her inability to facilitate a Socratic seminar—those are hard to do if you've only read about them and never seen one. She may have a capacity gap—perhaps she's a first year teacher who is working on so many areas of her practice that she is just stretched too thin to take on this learning right now. Perhaps she has an emotional intelligence gap—the sound of 30 students talking animatedly to each other makes her feel anxious or she's just afraid of what would happen if she tried a Socratic seminar and it didn't go well. Maybe she has a cultural competency gap and she's afraid that “this group” of students (who are not from her cultural background) would get out of control if she invited them to do a chalk talk activity out of their seats.

Yes, there is such thing as a will gap but I truly believe they are very rare. It's far more common for us to have skill gaps that show up as will gaps—because most of us are embarrassed about saying we don't know how to do something, so we demonstrate a lack of willingness.

How to Use This Tool

There is a lot to say and explain about how to use this tool—in fact, I'm developing an entire online course about how to understand and use it. But what's perhaps most useful to know about this tool is that it offers you a way to think that allows you to find many more options for action—that allows you to explore which gaps someone might have, and how you might be able to help them close it. If you suspect that a teacher is not trying a fishbowl because she doesn't have the foundational management skills, then start there and work your way up to the fishbowl. If you suspect that she's not trying pair-shares because she feels anxious about losing control of the class, address that anxiety.

Mind the Gap reminds us that when we see that someone is unable to do something that they want to do (or perhaps that we think they need to do) if we look at them as a learner, as someone who requires a set of things (skill, knowledge, capacity, will, emotional intelligence and cultural competence) in order to have an ability, then we can see opportunities for helping them grow. We remember that they are learners. We take the stance of guiding learning—rather than fighting resistance.

Related Tip: It's really helpful to surface your suspicions with your client or coachee about their gaps and get them to think about themselves as learners. Don't jump to conclusions about their gaps and whenever possible, get them to be active learners who participate in charting their own courses for growth.

A Short Origin Story for This Tool

Many years ago, I heard about this concept of “the gaps.” I was introduced to the idea of will, skill, knowledge, capacity, and emotional intelligence gaps. I have never been able to trace where this idea came from—otherwise, I would give credit where credit is due. I took this idea, made a basic graphic, and started sharing the concept with all who were interested. I helped coaches and leaders understand how we could use this idea, how to engage with it, and how to use it with others.

After many years of using it and many conversations about it, I reformatted the graphic (now as a pyramid) and added one gap: the cultural competency gap. I’d often wrapped cultural competency into a skill and knowledge domain (it is a skill and knowledge set) but I also felt that by wrapping it in, its importance was diluted. And many of the gaps I see in teacher and leader practice are related to cultural competence. So in my 2017 revision of this tool, I decided to make it its own foundational gap.

Mind the Gap: Getting Started

From EdWeek Teacher Blogs, By Elena Aguilar, October 21, 2013

http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/coaching_teachers

Albert Einstein once said that if he had an hour to save the world he would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem and five minutes finding the solution. This suggestion gets to the heart of coaching in proposing a ratio of thinking to acting in response to what we perceive as a problem. It's a reminder to slow down and deeply analyze a situation before offering a way to remedy it.

I often feel that 90% of coaching is invisible and inaudible to an observer; the art of coaching is the thought process that takes place in the mind in of a coach. The more complex those thought processes are, the more likely it is that what the coach says and does will be transformational.

As my coaching has developed, I've learned to watch and listen to my own thinking while I'm working with a client. What I've observed is that my mind uses a series of analytical frameworks through which I explore what I'm hearing. These analytical frameworks give me insight and perspective that I might not otherwise see if I was just looking through my default frameworks (we all have these). Therefore, they direct me to respond in a way that might open up solutions.

Mind the Gap

One of the frameworks that I rely on is what I call the "Mind the Gap" Framework. This rests on the assumption that in order to successfully accomplish a task, we need five things:

- The skills to do it—the technical skills of teaching
- The knowledge about content, pedagogy, child development and so on
- The will—the desire, passion, motivation
- The capacity—the mental, emotional, or physical ability to do something—includes the time to do something, and,
- The emotional intelligence—the ability to be aware of, manage and express one's emotions and to be aware of and manage other people's emotions.

So when I hear a teacher describing something he's struggling with, I think, *Is there a skill gap here? A knowledge gap? A will gap? Where is the gap?* Usually, if not always, there's a gap somewhere. This framework reminds me to "mind"—to pay attention to, surface, and identify the gap.

Often there are multiple gaps—a skill gap can create a will gap: it's hard to want to do something that you don't know how to do. There might also be a fragment of a knowledge gap tangled up, and my job as a coach is to pull apart this complex puzzle and figure out exactly what those gaps are, and how big they are, and then how to help the client close the gaps.



Exercise Gap-Diagnosis Caution

One thing I've learned when using this framework is that sometimes what I perceive as a *will gap* is really a *skill gap*. I find this more common in working with teachers or administrators who have been in their field for some time and may have some embarrassment about the fact that they haven't acquired some new skill (say, creating Excel spreadsheets), and so it manifests as what sounds like a will gap: "I don't want to do that; we can share this data in the way we always have."

Or what I think is a *skill gap* is actually a gap in emotional intelligence. I might hear requests for help in developing a particular kind of lesson (for example, group work or cooperative learning), and the teacher might ask for endless kinds of support ("I've never done that, can you model it? I will need to get piles of supplies for that, I think I need to observe someone else teaching that first..."). When I dig around, what I find is that underneath what might look like skill gaps, there are feelings of anxiety about losing control of the class. If I don't also coach to close those gaps, then I might not get anywhere just coaching the skill gaps.

I've learned to be cautious about jumping to gap-diagnosis and to think through an inquiry lens: could this be a capacity gap? What *is* the capacity needed to successfully fulfill this task? How can I assess this teacher's capacity? What else might I need to ask or know before I determine that this is a capacity gap? Asking myself all of these questions leads me to a place from which I can act and speak that often gets to the heart of the matter faster.

Using this Framework

I also share this framework with clients. This can sound like, "I think what I'm hearing is that you have some skill gaps, which is great, because skill gaps are easy to close—they're just skills. With my coaching support, you can acquire new skills, right?" People are often relieved when you can contain their struggles into a domain from which there are next steps. You can also say something like, "I hear that you have some knowledge gaps. Does that sound accurate? Let's get around to closing those, ok?"

Here's a glance at what happens after an accurate diagnosis: at this point in the conversation, the next step is to list out what we both see as those knowledge or skill gaps. We identify the task the teacher is trying to accomplish (cooperative learning, for example) and then list out the skills she'll need to master in order to effectively do this. This is just the beginning of what the coaching will look like—but these actions emerge from a deep analysis of what's going on for the client.

By the way, I've found that knowledge and skill gaps are the easiest to close, whereas capacity and emotional intelligence are harder, and will gaps are very hard to close—but true will gaps are fairly rare. Remember that these gaps are all intertwined and making movement in closing one will affect the others.

I always carry around copies of this framework, printed out in these pretty colors (the colors help our brains remember this information) and I offer these sheets to people I'm coaching. This helps them understand what they may be experiencing as overwhelming (How will I ever gain control of my class!) and see their dilemmas in a manageable way.

Finally, I use this framework when I'm coaching myself (which I do quite often). When I recognize that I'm struggling with something or someone, I ask myself, *Elena, do you have a skill gap in working with this client? Or is it a will gap? Where's the gap?* There's always a gap—perhaps I don't know enough yet about the client or his context or I don't know enough about the decision he needs to make. Maybe I don't know how he learns best or what style of coaching will be most effective with him or maybe I'm feeling some mixed emotions about coaching her. Perhaps I'm emotionally triggered by something she says, or I'm stretched too thin and just don't have the capacity to coach this person. When I can accurately identify the gap, I can figure out how to take effective action.

The concept that we have skill, will, knowledge, capacity, and emotional intelligence gaps is just one analytical tool for figuring out what's going on with someone. I didn't develop it—and I don't know who did (it's referenced in a number of books and used in many workshops I've attended), but it's a very useful one. However, it's not the only one I use. There are several additional frameworks for analysis that my brain runs through when I'm coaching. I'll describe these in upcoming posts. For now, let me leave you with an appreciation of how complicated coaching is! This is, however, why I love this field—it's so complex and exciting.

Mind the Gap

Whether when looking at your own abilities or those of others, remember to “mind” or pay attention to the space between a *desired* ability and *current* ability. This framework proposes that we can parse into six groups the things interfering with our ability to do something. This helps us get clear on what we need to learn and offers insight into entry points to start that learning. Mind the Gap graphically depicts this concept, and The Gaps Defined offers a description of each gap and an example in a school context.

The Gaps Defined

Gap	Description	Examples
Skill	The ability to execute the technical elements of a task. Can be the application of knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frontloading vocabulary • Using discussion structures • Getting the whole class quiet • Breaking down the steps to solving complex equations • Identifying a doable learning target for a lesson
Knowledge	The theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. Can also be information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding polynomials • Knowing discussion strategies • Knowing students' names • Knowing how to redirect behavior • Knowing grade-level standards
Capacity	The time and resources to do something. Can also be emotional and physical capacity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having time to call students' parents (may know how, may want to call, may have the skills to call, but may not have the time) • Having books to differentiate learning (may understand the need to differentiate, may know how, may want to, but may not have the material resources) • Having the emotional wherewithal to manage an irate parent • Having the physical energy to attend evening and weekend school functions



Mind the Gap

The Gaps Defined

Gap	Description	Examples
Will	Desire, intrinsic motivation, passion, or commitment. Usually has an emotional tone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loving the work • Wanting to serve a community • Feeling a calling to interrupt educational inequities • Holding a commitment to helping kids learn
Cultural Competence	The ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own; the skill to navigate cross-cultural differences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing assets in students who come from different cultural backgrounds • Understanding that eye contact has different meanings in different cultures • Validating students' background through selection of curriculum • Appreciating the contributions of students from different cultures
Emotional Intelligence	The ability to be aware of, manage, and express one's emotions; the ability to recognize, empathize with, and manage other people's emotions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of feeling anxious when an administrator enters the class • Ability to draw boundaries around requests for help from colleagues • Ability to manage one's irritation with a perpetually difficult student • Ability to connect with a difficult student • Ability to calm a distraught student

