

Founders4Schools

Award Winning Charity Improving Youth Employability

Engaging your young people in career encounters opens up myriad possibilities for learning and development. One of the best contexts for this is in focussing on the development of skills. This article aims to look at one of the transferable skills for work showcased in [Skills 4.0](#). This is the first in a series of articles where we will be reflecting on the educational experiences and careers of Founders4Schools volunteer leaders, and asking the how these skills come to life, and provide structure in their working lives. In this first article we have asked Perdita Stevens Professor of Mathematics of Software Engineering at University of Edinburgh to reflect on the communications skills she gained in her study of modern languages, and how this has helped her.

Skills 4.0 Putting Skills in Context

“Skills for the future: meta-skills To ensure we thrive as individuals, businesses and on an economic and a societal level, we all need to develop new skills. These skills are not just to help us cope in this environment of ongoing change. They are skills to excel; to collaborate and empathise with others and to create our own futures.”

We are going to start this series by looking at social intelligence; communication skills.

Social Intelligence - Connect with the world [Communicating]

“Communication is a basic human skill that has been at the heart of our education system for generations. Often, however, with over-emphasis on one way communication, resulting in employers being dissatisfied with the level of communication skills that their employees are able to demonstrate (CBI, 2016). This need for effective communication in a range of media is likely to increase in the future.”

Receiving information	Understanding and mentally processing verbal or written communication.
Listening	The ability to actively understand information provided by the speaker, and display interest in the topic discussed
Giving information	Giving written or verbal communication in a way that can be best understood by those receiving the communication.

Storytelling

The ability to tell stories that persuade, motivate and/or inspire as well as bringing the sharing of knowledge to life through examples and illustrations.

How languages have helped my career -Perdita Stevens Professor of Mathematics of Software Engineering at University of Edinburgh

"You wouldn't particularly expect languages to have helped my career - well, any of my careers. I started off doing research in pure mathematics; then I worked as a software developer for a British company; then I became a university researcher in computer science, and am now a professor at the University of Edinburgh. All the same, they have - I've often had cause to be glad to have spent a little time at school working on languages, and wish I could have fitted in more.

First of all, about what my language background is. I'm a native English speaker with no other languages in my family background. I studied French at school from the ages of 11-16, and German for just one year somewhere in the middle. Later, I took German conversation classes while I was at university - to be honest, the main reason I did that was that I was sharing a house with the woman who was arranging them and it sounded like fun, but I was also aware that some of the research literature in my subject was in German, and hadn't been translated, and that my German was not good enough to read it yet.

Later, I took evening classes for a while in Italian, and later in Portuguese, and studied various other languages using self-study material like the Colloquial X books and more recently Duolingo; I used to have the habit of learning just a little of the language of any country I visited, and for a while could ask for "two beers please" in more than 10 languages!

I find learning languages an interesting challenge, but how has it helped? I should say up front that I've never had a job where it was *essential* to speak a language other than English. Unlike many of my colleagues at university, I've never lived outside the UK. The main difference it's made to me, personally, is in reducing the stressfulness of travelling to non-English-speaking countries in Europe. Although you'll often hear "everyone speaks English", it only takes one person you want to communicate with to not speak English to make you really wish you spoke some of the local language.

Beyond that I do occasionally find it helpful to read research papers that are not in English. Just last week, for example, I used a number theory survey paper in French. I probably could have found the information without being able to read French, but it was much faster, once I had found out that an important researcher on the subject I was interested in was French, to be able to go straight to his old paper for the information I wanted.

More prosaically, while automatic translation is enormously better than I could have imagined a couple of decades ago (thanks largely to the work of people in the field of machine learning, some of whom work in the same building as me!) it's still not that great. When picking somewhere to visit, using a website about public transport, or choosing a hotel, it's still often useful to be able to read information in its original language.

I think an important observation is that *any* amount of knowledge of a language is potentially useful. More fluency is better, but even if all you have is a really basic knowledge, it's a lot better than nothing. And the more you learn, the easier it is to learn more. This is partly because of the relatedness of languages (once you know how to ask for "two beers please" in ten Indo-European languages, the next five variants of the phrase are not likely to surprise you much.)

So that's my summary: to be a software developer for a British company, or to be a professor in a British university, you might not *have* to learn modern foreign languages, but if you do, it certainly helps."

Points to reflect upon... how are these skills exemplified in the example above?

Receiving information	
Listening	
Giving information	
Storytelling	