

The Learning Curve

Episode 14: Power Skills & The Hallmarks Core with Dr. Thomas Schrand

[00;00;00;11 - 00;00;14;10] **Demi Harte**

Welcome to The Learning Curve, a podcast presented by the Academic Commons.

[00;00;14;13 - 00;00;16;25] **Demi Harte**

Your host for today's episode are me, Demi.

[00;00;16;25 - 00;00;19;07] **Jacob Santos**

And myself, Jacob.

[00;00;19;09 - 00;00;25;27] **Demi Harte**

Our mission is to illuminate higher education, teaching and learning through the power of shared experiences and research informed practices.

[00;00;26;00 - 00;00;53;29] **Jacob Santos**

On this episode of The Learning Curve, we'll be discussing the Hallmarks Core and the eight power scales at its center with Thomas Strand, PhD. Stick around this episode to learn what it means to build a T shaped graduate through these eight power skills. We'll also explore how the Hallmarks Core is evolving for an AI driven future. Equipping students with human centered abilities machines can't replicate, and giving faculty new ways to cultivate critical thinking.

[00;00;54;01 - 00;01;21;26] **Jacob Santos**

Doctor strand has been teaching at the East Falls campus of Thomas Jefferson University for 31 years, starting when it was known as the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Sciences, then Philadelphia University, and today as Thomas Jefferson University. He is currently a professor of history with a PhD in Russian History from the University of Michigan. He has served in a leadership role in the general education curriculum here at Thomas Jefferson University for about 15 years.

[00;01;21;29 - 00;01;33;15] **Jacob Santos**

He led the faculty team that developed the current hallmarks core curriculum. It is his work on the hallmarks core and the development of the power skills that brings him to our show today. Welcome, Tom.

[00;01;33;18 - 00;01;37;26] **Thomas Schrand**

Thank you. I'm really excited to be here. Thanks for the opportunity.

[00;01;37;29 - 00;01;45;06] **Jacob Santos**

Yeah, I was hoping you could describe your teaching practice in three words.

[00;01;45;08 - 00;02;06;21] **Thomas Schrand**

A three words challenge. That's that's, that's a that's a tricky. But I guess the things I would say first would be, my practice is iterative. So there is a certain amount of trial and error, as there is in any human endeavor that, you know, involves, working with, with other humans. So, you know, our students are always changing.

[00;02;06;28 - 00;02;31;26] **Thomas Schrand**

I'm always changing. So, I'm always learning from what works and what doesn't work and and trying to trying to improve. I've been telling people recently that I've had this, interesting window in my teaching career where I've had two daughters who were college age, you know, for a period of about six years. So it was the first time in my life I really understood the students in my classes, really knew what the world was like.

[00;02;31;28 - 00;02;49;22] **Thomas Schrand**

You know, how they lived, what they're interested in, kind of, what their culture was like. So that's been, really helpful. And I didn't have it before my daughters of that age. And as they get older, I'll kind of lose that window into our students lives. But, it's been really helpful. So iterative, learner-centered.

[00;02;49;23 - 00;03;16;24] **Thomas Schrand**

Yeah. I'm really focusing on helping students learn versus just thinking about teaching students. So understanding cognitive psychology, understanding the research around pedagogy, and understanding

that students need to be actively engaged in order to build the neural pathways that create learning in their brains. And I guess the last thing I'd say is, is restless. I get bored fairly easily.

[00;03;16;26 - 00;03;40;19] **Thomas Schrand**

And, you know, I kind of have some sympathy for students who may not be that engaged in the subject teaching, because I do teach required courses. And, you know, it's not everybody's cup of tea when they find themselves in a class that I'm teaching if they're fulfilling a general education requirement. So, so I have some, I share a sense of we need to make this interesting.

[00;03;40;21 - 00;03;50;25] **Thomas Schrand**

We need to keep the pace, you know, steady and quick and, you know, let's let's make this engaging and fun.

[00;03;50;28 - 00;04;11;03] **Demi Harte**

Thank you for that. Those are those are great words. And I think it leads well into the context of the Hallmarks Core, which will dive into. And so for right now, could you just give us a brief overview of the Hallmarks Core and its role in shaping Jefferson education?

[00;04;11;06 - 00;04;36;07] **Thomas Schrand**

Yeah, I think we have a really unique general education program here. So the name for it is the Hallmarks Core. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania requires every bachelor's degree program to have 40 credit hours of general education. So the Hallmarks Core is just the the brand name that we give to our kind of special, organization of those required credits.

[00;04;36;09 - 00;05;03;03] **Thomas Schrand**

So it's it's been specifically tailored to our mission for professional education, Jefferson and East Falls campus before that. And it's various iterations. I've never had liberal arts majors. We don't have a philosophy department or a political science department. So when we teach general education courses, our faculty who are experts in those areas, are only teaching general education courses that need to be relevant to all of our professional students.

[00;05;03;05 - 00;05;26;09] **Thomas Schrand**

And we designed the curriculum to be relevant to the needs of pre-professional students. So we we don't have any incentive to put things in there that aren't directly useful and relevant to students who came to this university with a really sharp focus on a particular career future that they're going to pursue. So I think that makes it special.

[00;05;26;12 - 00;05;45;26] **Thomas Schrand**

It's a it's a four year curriculum. A lot of universities do their general education requirements in the first two years, and then students are just exclusively studying in their majors. So they don't have an opportunity in their later years to think broadly about the world that they're about to enter and how their profession will interact with that world.

[00;05;45;28 - 00;06;13;15] **Thomas Schrand**

So by, having a special opportunity to build a customized curriculum and to extend it across four years, we feel like we're really preparing our students. We sometimes talk about this is creating T-shaped graduates. So if you think about the letter T, there's the, the top part of it, which is horizontal. That's the breadth of learning that our students get and the Hallmarks Core, the general education curriculum.

[00;06;13;17 - 00;06;27;21] **Thomas Schrand**

And then the perpendicular part is the depth of learning that they get in their major. So they're getting a deep education in the professional field. But we're combining those two things. And we we're doing it across four years to to make them the best professionals that we can.

[00;06;27;24 - 00;06;53;12] **Jacob Santos**

I, love that analogy that I have a T-shaped graduate. The learning process of learning from the core. And when preparing for this episode, we were really drawn to those eight power skills that are kind of as they're called, I believe, on, your website that are the foundation of the Hallmarks Core. So could you explain kind of what inspired the development of these eight power skills as a foundation?

[00;06;53;19 - 00;06;56;23] **Jacob Santos**

And can you briefly explain what they are?

[00;06;56;25 - 00;07;24;10] **Thomas Schrand**

Sure. So this would go back to I think about 2012 goes back a little ways. And this was East Falls campus before the merger. We had, you know, a set of new leadership in the provost's office, and they were eager to take on a review and revision of our general education core curriculum. So they were very committed to this, and they invested a lot of resources in it, and they put a lot of leverage behind it.

[00;07;24;13 - 00;07;53;11] **Thomas Schrand**

So we had a process that lasted about 18 months of bringing together faculty from across the university, not just in general education, but each of the majors, each of the colleges on campus. The I guess the, impetus behind this, the inspiring idea was that general education shouldn't be restricted just to the core curriculum, that it should be a pursuit that engages all the faculty and all the, academic programs on campus.

[00;07;53;13 - 00;08;14;29] **Thomas Schrand**

So over those 18 months, we spent a lot of time thinking, what is general education? What are the core skills and competencies and knowledge domains that students need to have? And can we define those broadly enough that they can be pursued in the majors as well as in the general education core curriculum? So this is very collaborative, crowdsourced process.

[00;08;15;02 - 00;08;23;23] **Thomas Schrand**

And what we ended up with was this list of the eight skills, the power skills that are the foundation of the Hallmarks Core.

[00;08;23;26 - 00;08;30;28] **Demi Harte**

And could you, briefly explain each of them for our listeners here who are unaware?

[00;08;31;01 - 00;08;59;28] **Thomas Schrand**

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. So we have, there's eight of them. They have their kind of brand names, I guess you call them. So if you want the list, I can. I can read you the list. It's a rigorous inquiry, which is research skills, critical analysis, critical thinking skills, contextual communication, which I think is explains these are communication skills, global perspectives, understanding of the state of the world and our cultural insight.

[00;09;00;02 - 00;09;27;14] **Thomas Schrand**

Understanding the world's cultures and also our nations cultures. United States being so intercultural, collaborative creation which is working together with others to to achieve goals and to draw on the strengths of a team. Intellectual risk taking. Just thinking creatively. Not stopping with the first obvious answer. Exploring alternative solutions to a problem. The last one ones. Ethical reflection.

[00;09;27;17 - 00;09;52;13] **Thomas Schrand**

All eight of these came out of that process I described earlier. What we found out after we kind of distilled our learning goals down to these eight and made our final selection. We discovered a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education had recently written a book called The Global Achievement Gap, which was about how to prepare American students to prosper in a global economy in the 21st century.

[00;09;52;16 - 00;10;22;20] **Thomas Schrand**

The author, Tony Wagner, PhD, at Harvard. His book listed seven essential skills, which we hadn't consulted the book ahead of time. We we just discovered this overlap afterwards. His seven skills a line up perfectly with our eight. The only one that's missing from his list is ethical reflection, which kind of seems like a no brainer that we want our students to have a solid ethical core as they go into their professional work.

[00;10;22;22 - 00;10;46;07] **Demi Harte**

Yeah. Those are those are great. I, I'm a little curious about the critical analysis. I think because of everything that's going on now with technology and AI, and we want to encourage that critical thinking. How do, I guess, how can faculty support this kind of intellectual engagement with their students? And what does it look like when students are engaged in critical thinking?

[00;10;46;10 - 00;11;07;26] **Thomas Schrand**

Yeah, I mean, I think we see it all of our campus, and we're not just seeing it in general education or Hallmarks Core courses, but yeah, we want our students to be critical consumers of information and knowledge. We want them to look closely at the sources of their information and to ask the essential questions of, can I trust this?

[00;11;07;26 - 00;11;32;28] **Thomas Schrand**

Who? What is the source? Who's behind this source of information and making sure that they have done that kind of testing of their information before, just uncritically, you know, absorbing it or spouting it back to somebody. It's it's a really difficult skill. It's going to get harder and harder. And we need to practice it, you know, everywhere all the time.

[00;11;33;01 - 00;12;07;16] **Thomas Schrand**

And our educational undertakings. So in the Hallmarks Core, it looks like asking critical questions about your information. Who is the author. What do we know about them. What are their credentials? Where was this published and why do we trust the publication or the author or the source? And yeah, we could talk more about AI, which is something we're working on actively right now, but, yeah, it's it's a, it's a daunting task and it's getting harder.

[00;12;07;19 - 00;12;34;20] **Demi Harte**

And I think these, power skills are great for education, but not just education, but just life in general, you know, just critical analysis of different things in your in your personal life and ethical and, you know, collaboration. So I think these are really, really amazing skills to just have in general. So I wanted to ask, what feedback have you received from faculty about the effectiveness of these power skills.

[00;12;34;23 - 00;13;01;29] **Thomas Schrand**

Yeah. And thanks. Thanks for saying that about these skills. Because we, we do think we, we, we work with the conviction that what we're teaching students in the Hallmarks Core are the most durable skills that they'll take from their Jefferson education. I mean, we prepare, you know, extremely proficient professional, practitioners. But the the skills that you get as a, as a professional, as a practitioner, they're going to constantly evolve.

[00;13;01;29 - 00;13;24;27] **Thomas Schrand**

They're, you know, especially if they're involved technology at all. The, the life, the shelf life of your skills is pretty short. And you're going to constantly be engaged in this process of professional development and training yourself to keep up with your field. But we think the skills that we get in Hallmarks Core are much more durable, that they, you know, they are long lasting skills.

[00;13;24;27 - 00;13;47;14] **Thomas Schrand**

They're they're human skills. They provide kind of the human touch that you want to have in addition to your professional expertise. So for our students, I just feel like we have a curriculum. First of all, it's based on small classes. 25, 30 students is as large as we get in the Hallmarks Core. So we're not lecturing to a hall of 200 students.

[00;13;47;16 - 00;14;25;16] **Thomas Schrand**

You're in a room. A faculty member knows your name. You're working in small groups through fellow students, and you're having discussion every day, give and take, you know, intellectual inquiry. So I think at the end of four years of this, and it is four years of this experience, this kind of intensive, student centered, active learning environment, you end up as fairly confident, a fairly well-spoken, and someone who can think on their feet, someone has some confidence in what what they're saying and their ability to grapple with challenging and nuanced questions.

[00;14;25;18 - 00;14;58;26] **Thomas Schrand**

So, you know, I have heard from our departments of our colleges that for example, architects or the graduates of our architecture program, local architecture firms that they've come to expect that graduates from Jefferson just have a little more worldliness, a little more polish, because our general education requirements are a little broader just for historical reasons. The way our curriculum has evolved that, our architecture students get a little more general education than competing schools so that they, they come in with professional skills.

[00;14;58;26 - 00;15;08;28] **Thomas Schrand**

Absolutely. But they also come in with a sense of context of how their professional practice interacts with the larger world. So that's that's where I see the value.

[00;15;09;05 - 00;15;31;06] **Jacob Santos**

I love that the intention about these skills being something that are durable, that can last beyond just their time here at Thomas Jefferson University. I am curious, in your own kind of personal experience as an educator, working with these core skills, and you mentioned you've mentioned quite a lot about learner centered practices and active learning in your classroom.

[00;15;31;06 - 00;15;46;25] **Jacob Santos**

And learner-centeredness was one of the words you chose to describe your teaching style. So what are some ways that you integrate these core skills in your classes? For that learner-centeredness, do you have any kind of examples of ways you it works them in?

[00;15;46;28 - 00;16;17;13] **Thomas Schrand**

Yeah. More and more, I try to build in reflective processes in my teaching practice and in the, in the classroom. So. I well, one of the things I've been experimenting with is device free classrooms. And that's becoming, increasingly common practice, at least in Hallmarks Core, I see faculty who are really committed to this and find that it produces, you know, much better results.

[00;16;17;16 - 00;16;44;13] **Thomas Schrand**

So I want students to be present in class. I want them to be taking notes, and I want them to be interacting. So we're going to work in small groups. I'm going to give them questions that ask them to apply course content to real world scenarios. And then I want to hear back from them and kind of have a little give and take a back and forth, on their answers to kind of probe them and push them a little further.

[00;16;44;15 - 00;17;07;22] **Thomas Schrand**

But, in terms of the reflective piece, I've tried to start to build in more of, asking students about takeaways like, you're in this class, we're learning a lot of things, but what's what's most important to you? What what are you learning in this class that you want to remember? And that reflective step is kind of easy to skip over and I'm I'm guilty of it in my life as a student.

[00;17;07;22 - 00;17;34;03] **Thomas Schrand**

And my life is professional is not taking time. Like at the end of a semester. What did I learn this semester? What did I try that worked? What did I try that didn't work? So, I want to build those moments, those opportunities in my classes for students. And I do this especially at the end of the semester, like, what are the three things from this course that you would want to tell a friend about or tell your family when you see the next time that you learned that you thought were important.

[00;17;34;05 - 00;17;56;05] **Thomas Schrand**

Because that's that's a simple question, but it really requires some reflective thinking, some evaluation, and just kind of going back and thinking about what what what did I learn? What what did this all add up

to? I just think it's an important moment. And it's it's one that's can be easy to skip for the students and for their, their instructor.

[00;17;56;08 - 00;18;03;03] **Thomas Schrand**

But I think it's I think it can have powerful impact.

[00;18;03;06 - 00;18;32;00] **Demi Harte**

Yeah, I agree with the powerful impact for sure. And so as we're shifting a little bit, I know I was brought up. So let's let's tackle that. So how do you envision the Hallmarks Core, the power skills especially evolving to meet future educational societal needs especially as related to General Joint. Oh geez. Generative AI.

[00;18;32;02 - 00;18;58;25] **Thomas Schrand**

Yeah yeah. The AI revolution, I guess you could call it, is just hitting us like a tidal wave. It's happening so rapidly and it kind of emerged so rapidly like this leveling up of the ability of AI to kind of do cognitive work that we normally ask students to do with their own brains. So it's this is a question we're actually in an organized way, trying to answer over this academic year.

[00;18;58;28 - 00;19;25;25] **Thomas Schrand**

Last spring, I and my colleague Mario Talenti, who's the kind of curriculum director for the Hallmarks Core, the two of us work as a leadership team for this general education curriculum. We applied to, an institute being run by the American Association of Colleges and Universities. So it's on AI and higher education, and they're just inviting teams of five from different campuses to go through this, online.

[00;19;25;25 - 00;19;54;16] **Thomas Schrand**

It's a remote institute, but it's a it's a nine month process for defining a project around AI in, at your university and developing an action plan for it. So our project, our proposal was how do we incorporate AI is a literacy that might be integrated into general education? Where where does it fit into our learning goals? What is our responsibility for teaching students about AI or how to use AI?

[00;19;54;19 - 00;20;19;25] **Thomas Schrand**

And I think for us specifically, there's a second question, which is which parts of our curriculum or which parts of the student experience do we need to wall off from machine learning? Like where can we protect the students ability to develop these skills independently without assistance from, machine learning? And I don't know what the answers to those questions are going to be yet.

[00;20;19;25 - 00;20;48;02] **Thomas Schrand**

I'm trying to keep an open mind working with our team, and we're going to work with our faculty. You know, the larger faculty about this, and this will happen in parallel with a broader university dialog this year about AI in the curriculum. But yeah, we've got to figure out what's our role, what's the role of the majors, because a lot of the application of AI skills will be in a professional context rather than a general education context.

[00;20;48;04 - 00;21;22;19] **Thomas Schrand**

So we do think there are some independent skills we have to really protect and make sure that they don't get undermined by the cognitive shortcuts that AI makes possible. So yeah, we have some faculty who are going back to Blue Books. We got people are thinking about going back to oral exams just to create that space, hold space for human skills and, and, giving students the opportunity to develop them independently of the machines.

[00;21;22;21 - 00;21;47;12] **Jacob Santos**

It's obviously an ongoing debate that we're going to be having in higher education for. I anticipate years down the road in finding the middle, middle ground and where is it? Where can I be use and where should learners try engaging with the material outside of AI and technology? And so you mentioned, instructors, you know, some instructors bringing in blue books and other things.

[00;21;47;15 - 00;22;24;19] **Jacob Santos**

And as we come to the close of our interview today, we've talked a lot today about these durable skills that the hallmarks core, it emphasizes in its classes and emphasized within specific, curriculum, classes in specific majors. So can you offer to listeners 1 or 2 pieces of advice on how they can really incorporate one or all of these, power skills in their individual classes, even if they don't have that, hallmarks core, experience in their learners.

[00;22;24;22 - 00;22;45;21] **Thomas Schrand**

Yeah. The great thing about these learning goals is that we did develop and develop them in collaboration with faculty from all of the different majors, at the East Falls Campus. So these aren't foreign or

extraneous to those programs and to what students are learning in those programs and the professions that they're preparing to practice. So I think it is happening.

[00;22;45;21 - 00;23;17;07] **Thomas Schrand**

I think we wouldn't have identified these skills if the faculty outside of the Homework's core didn't think they're important and weren't embedding them in their pedagogical practices. But, I mean, obviously, we want faculty in all of our programs to encourage students to think about their ethical responsibilities when they are engaging in the practice in their field. How are you affecting your community and what broader interests, who are the other stakeholders in the work that you're doing?

[00;23;17;10 - 00;23;43;24] **Thomas Schrand**

Everyone's learning to work collaboratively. You really can't escape that. So that's I think that's happening fairly naturally and in the various majors. But yeah, and understanding the world, understanding of different cultures and being able to navigate different cultures and just thinking critically, making sure that your practice is based on high quality information that's vetted, that's, research driven and credible.

[00;23;43;26 - 00;23;56;27] **Thomas Schrand**

So I think it's happening. I don't think we need to encourage people to do this, and we're happy to be doing this alongside of them and doing it in, in the broader context.

[00;23;56;29 - 00;24;08;03] **Demi Harte**

And on that note, that brings us to the end of our interview. Thank you so much, Tom, for taking time out of your day to be here with us and sharing your knowledge and expertise.

[00;24;08;05 - 00;24;11;28] **Thomas Schrand**

Oh, it's been my pleasure. Thank you very much for your interest.

[00;24;12;00 - 00;24;16;17] **Jacob Santos**

Thank you.

[00;24;16;19 - 00;24;42;16] **Leah Miller**

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[00;24;42;22 - 00;24;43;28] **Leah Miller**

Thanks for tuning in.