The
Something
Other

Personal Competencies for
Learning and Life

by
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The *Something Other*

Personal Competencies for Learning and Life

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Life is a series of collisions with the future; it is not the sum of what we have been, but what we yearn to be.

Jose Ortega y Gasset

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Jeffrey's Story

Students' mastery of specific knowledge and skills is one purpose of schooling. However, schools can also intentionally build four personal competencies—cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social/emotional—necessary *for* the mastery of knowledge and skills. Learning habits take form as these personal competencies are exercised in school. The same personal competencies are also crucial for the purposeful navigation of life's challenges and the pursuit of personal interests and ambitions.

Jeffrey's story (below) is a brief vignette of the interplay of personal competencies in one event in one student's school life. Personal competencies, of course, do not arise fully formed from a single event; however, Jeffrey's story illustrates the power of the teachable moment and the way personal competencies accrue over time through many experiences. The question for schools is whether personal competencies are intentionally nurtured through the school's culture, curriculum, and programs.

Jeffrey is a junior in high school, thumbing through the pages of his American history textbook while his teacher, Ms. Johnson, fires up a slide presentation on the Gettysburg Address. Jeffrey slid through the first semester of the course, finding no great interest in history but managing to complete enough work at a passable level of performance to cling to a grade of C. The Gettysburg Address is not likely to arouse his passion for learning. Midway through her outline of the events leading up to Lincoln's oration, Ms. Johnson stops talking and casts a steady gaze in Jeffrey's direction. Sensing he is the object of her attention, Jeffrey closes his book and sits up straight in his chair.

"Jeffrey, your brother served in the army in the Middle East, didn't he?" Ms. Johnson asks.

"Yes," Jeffrey replies, wondering what she is leading up to.

"I'll bet he came home with some stories."

Parents seek for their children *something other* than what they usually expect them to acquire through the regular school program, and they turn to extracurricular activities and out-of-school experiences to find it. Teachers know that each student brings to a learning task a *something other*—certain attributes that affect how the student responds to the challenge. In this paper, the *something other* is the constellation of four personal competencies—cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social/emotional—and the learning habits that flow from them.

"Some, but he doesn't talk much about the gory stuff." Jeffrey notices that the classroom is especially quiet. Even the usual shuffling of feet and back-row whispers are gone.

"Probably not," Ms. Johnson says, "the memories no doubt carry with them some heavy emotions. Imagine the emotions that President Lincoln felt on that chilly November day in 1863. His secretary, John Hay, said that Lincoln's face had a ghastly color and that he was sad, mournful, almost haggard. And why wouldn't he be sad? Just four months earlier, on the grounds where he spoke in Pennsylvania, a northern state and not much distance from the nation's capital, 7,000 men lost their lives, and another 30,000 were wounded."

"I wonder if Lincoln thought it was worth it," Jeffrey says.

"That's what I'd like you to find out. Do some research. We will take some time on Thursday for you to tell the class what you discover. Did Lincoln think Gettysburg was worth it? Did he think the war was worth it?"

Later that day, Jeffrey stopped by the school library, something he had rarely done before. He described his research project to the librarian, and the librarian suggested a few good books. Jeffrey checked out two books on the Civil War and a biography of Abraham Lincoln to take home with him. That night he skimmed the books, read a couple chapters, and searched the Internet to find out more about the war and about President Lincoln. He compiled a set of notes. He organized the notes under four headings: Why Lincoln Thought the War Was Worth It; What Lincoln Thought the War Would Accomplish; When Lincoln Was Discouraged; and What Lincoln Meant in the Gettysburg Address. From his notes, Jeffrey wrote a narrative of his conclusions. Jeffrey's curiosity grew. He knew a little about his brother's war experience and wanted to know more.

Jeffrey shared the draft of his report with his brother, and they talked about war. Jeffrey remembered the letters his brother had written him from the Middle East. Jeffrey realized that he already knew a little about war from those letters, and he was learning more now in his talk with his brother. Jeffrey's mother looked on as the two brothers talked, and Jeffrey knew she was pleased to see them sharing their thoughts and feelings in this way. She offered her own thoughts on what it is like to be the mother of a soldier who goes off to war. Jeffrey remembered from his research that Lincoln's own son had joined the Union Army. Lincoln's wife, he realized, must have experienced something very similar to what Jeffrey's mother had just described.

Jeffrey revised his draft to include his conclusions from his talk with his brother. The next two days in class, he took careful

Cognitive Competency
reservoir of previously acquired knowledge which **facilitates new** learning

notes, and each evening he studied his notes and prepared a list of key facts he wanted to remember. He put the facts on note cards, with a question on the reverse side, and drilled himself until he was sure he had mastered the details about Lincoln, the war, and the Gettysburg Address. He revised his report as he gained new insights. On Thursday, Jeffrey read his report to the class and showed some slides of Lincoln and of the Gettysburg battlefield. He then led the class in a discussion of the main points in his report. His classmates were very engaged and shared their own ideas. Ms. Johnson said that Jeffrey had made a fine contribution to everyone's understanding of Lincoln and the Gettysburg address. Jeffrey never looked at history the same way again.

On the Friday following Jeffrey's presentation to the class, he aced Ms. Johnson's test on the Civil War, and Ms. Johnson gleefully entered into her grade book that Jeffrey had mastered four standards-aligned objectives. He had acquired new knowledge. In small but meaningful ways, Jeffrey's personal competencies were also enhanced, and he was now able to tackle new learning challenges as never before.

Mastery, Competency, and Their Pursuit

Joy. A great big thumbs up, "Wooo Hooo," glad-all-over, round-of-applause, take-a-bow feeling—or at least an inwardly smiling, self-satisfied, happy-hearted glow. Good for me! Challenge met, problem solved, mastery attained, victory won.

Are we describing Jeffrey on Friday night, or Ms. Johnson? Both, in fact, and you can call that a great week for teaching and learning. Every week is not so exhilarating, for teacher or for student, and a fair amount of school learning is a long, slow slog, interspersed with confusion and frustration, again for the teacher as well as the student. What keeps a student's nose to the grindstone? How does a teacher stoke the student's fire?

Ms. Johnson relied upon her relational suasion, her knowledge of Jeffrey and his family, and a blended learning assignment that aroused Jeffrey's desire to engage and persist in a learning task. Jeffrey sought out help from the librarian, enlisted his brother and mother in his work, and orchestrated a presentation and discussion with his classmates. He employed several learning strategies to complete his assignment, and he mastered specific knowledge that Ms. Johnson assessed with criteria in her test. Jeffrey also drew from what he knew about war, his brother, and Lincoln to acquire new understanding. Jeffrey exercised his personal competencies, and in doing so, he also fortified them.

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you think of the way Ms. Johnson engaged Jeffrey?
2. Cognitive competency. How did Jeffrey access what he already knew to understand what he was learning?
3. Metacognitive competency. How did Jeffrey apply learning strategies to direct his learning?
4. Motivational competency. What about this assignment enhanced Jeffrey's motivation to engage with it and to persist?
5. Social/emotional competency. In what ways did Jeffrey engage other people in this project?
6. Learning habits. How did Jeffrey exhibit a pattern of behavior in tackling Ms. Johnson's assignment that might be employed in future learning?

Jeffrey drew upon much more than a little knowledge about the topic of his assignment. He drew upon 12 years of schooling. We can be sure that he learned to read and write through his elementary school teachers' systematic instruction, not only from their facile manipulation of teachable moments. The point is that good teaching requires well-planned and organized instruction, opportunities for practice and feedback, and frequent assessment of mastery as well as sensitivity to each student's idiosyncrasies.

Success in learning requires four *personal competencies* that come into play for every student with every learning challenge. The elements of a Personal Competency Framework, as proposed here, are:

1. **Personal Competencies**:
   Cognitive Competency—prior knowledge which facilitates new learning

   Metacognitive Competency—self-regulation of learning and use of learning strategies

   Motivational Competency—engagement and persistence in pursuit of learning goals

   Social/Emotional Competency—sense of self-worth, regard for others, and emotional understanding and management to set positive goals and make responsible decisions

2. **Learning Habits**: the conversion of individual competencies into coordinated patterns of behavior activated when confronting new learning tasks

3. **Mastery**: meeting criteria for specific objectives related to knowledge and skills

4. **Competency Enhancement**: the intentional development of students' personal competencies within the contexts of the school community, school, and classroom

5. **Competency Reinforcement**: the strengthening and modification of personal competencies and patterns of behavior that result from both the process of pursuing mastery and mastery itself

6. **Contexts**: the environments within which personal competencies are intentionally developed: school community (families, students, school personnel), school (curriculum, programs, and school culture), and classroom (instruction and classroom culture)

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among the components of the Personal Competency Framework.

Metacognitive Competency

self-regulation of learning and use of learning **strategies**

Figure 1. A Personal Competency Framework
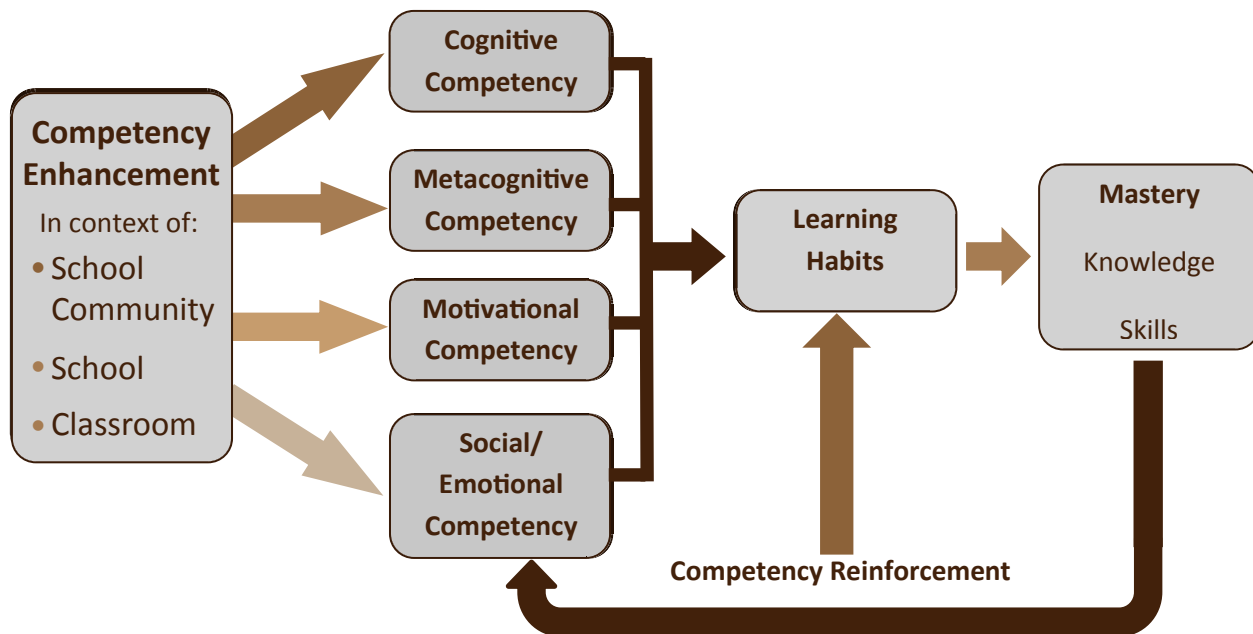
The personal competencies are interrelated and evolve organically as the student employs them, but they are also intentionally enhanced as the school includes their development in its curriculum, programs, and instruction. They are reinforced and refined as the student enlists them in pursuing mastery of knowledge and skill. They are expressed in patterns of behavior that a student engages in learning.

We might suspect that Ms. Johnson is well-versed in the importance of personal competencies because they are explicitly included in the school's mission statement, valued by her peers, evidenced in the school culture, and structured into the curriculum. Through training and her own ingenuity, Ms. Johnson is expert in educating her students' parents in their role in building the competencies at home, and she is adept at planning instruction toward mastery of clear objectives. She is obviously skillful in personalizing learning for each student, responding to the teachable moment, and stretching her students' interests. No doubt Ms. Johnson's school has intentionally included personal competencies in the design of its primary contexts—the school community, the school, and the classroom.

The pattern of behavior that Jeffrey exhibited in completing his assignment is one that he could now activate when taking on other learning challenges, in history and in his other classes. This pattern of behavior takes on a life of its own, and Jeffrey may find a certain satisfaction when engaged in it. He comes to realize that, with practice, his ability to achieve mastery grows, and he gains confidence as a learner. He also finds satisfaction in mastery itself, the sense of accomplishment, the realization that

Motivational Competency
engagement and persistence
in **pursuit** of learning goals

he has changed in a positive way because he now knows and can do things he did not know and could not do before. He is more likely to persist in the long, slow slog that is sometimes necessary when learning is difficult.

The *Something Other*

Social/Emotional Competency

sense of **self-worth**, regard for others, and emotional understanding and management to set **positive** goals and make responsible decisions

The Hay Group (2003), a consulting firm that has pioneered work on identifying competencies in business personnel, defines competency as "an underlying characteristic of a person which enables them to deliver superior performance in a given job, role, or situation" (p. 2). The Hay Group notes that knowledge and skill are the tip of the iceberg, and competencies are the larger mass that lies under the surface. A skill is a specific ability, such as computer programming, which obviously requires its own mass of knowledge about programming language. In school, the student's role is that of learner. We typically assess students' performance based on their mastery of knowledge and skills, thereby seeing only the tip of the iceberg. Because we teach to what we assess, competencies—the deeper, personal propellants of learning—are shortchanged.

Parents understand the big block of ice that lies below the surface. There is plenty more that parents want for their children than what is contained in most curriculum guides; they just aren't sure what to call it. Yes, they want their kids to learn to read, but they also want them to love to read and to derive satisfaction from it. Of course they want them to do their homework, but they want them to desire to learn independently, to better themselves through learning, to chase their curiosities, and to discipline themselves to seek mastery and understanding. They want them to think for themselves with the ability to make sound judgments.

Parents hope their children will grow in their self-respect and learn to appreciate and respect others, and they simply want them to be responsible. Determination and perseverance will serve them well in life, as will compassion and honesty. Parents want their kids to have friends, to be good friends, and to navigate social situations. Life isn't always a bowl of cherries, so children need to understand disappointment and grief and how to manage setbacks. Parents want their kids to find the joy in doing something well, something they love to do. All of these parental wishes for what their children will gain in school touch upon aspects of the curriculum, but they point to something more. Something hard to name. *Something other*.

Schools divide their programs into curricular and extracurricular (sometimes called co-curricular) branches in order to erect a wall between what is perceived as the serious, academic work and

the less important nonacademic activities. This is an interesting division. The academic side includes physical education but not the football team, music theory but not band, and speech class but not the debate team. Parents encourage their children to participate in the extracurricular activities because they expect them to acquire the *something other* in them. Surely the football coach and band director instill a sense of responsibility, discipline, and devotion to a cause; they also boost self-worth and a feeling of doing something well and loving to do it. Are these attributes not cultivated on the academic side of the great divide? Doesn't memorizing a speech or absorbing the football playbook count as cognitive exercise?

The extracurricular activities are given the status of privileges, which must mean the curricular activities are not privileges. After all, eligibility to participate in English literature does not depend upon performance on the athletic field. Extracurricular activities are also exclusionary; no matter how much a child needs to learn discipline and responsibility, and no matter how much he may love the sport, if he can't make baskets, he can't be on the basketball team. Where, then, does this child get the *something other* his parents want for him?

Perhaps parents turn to out-of-school activities such as church groups, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H, and Boys & Girls Club to instill in their children the *something other*. Of course, the family bears responsibility for children's personal development and bolsters the values, attitudes, and behaviors that the *something other* entails. As the youngsters become old enough, part-time jobs bring in a little money and also, parents hope, teach something about hard work, persistence, and getting along with other people. But if the *something other* contributes to learning, where does it show up in the school?

To say that parents want the *something other* does not mean that they don't also want their young ones to succeed with their academic learning. It also doesn't mean that they expect the *something other* to be an extra. They want it all. Dorothy Rich (1992) called the *something other* MegaSkills® and the "other side of the report card," which makes the point that the skills are essential to the school's mission and the child's development but also relegates them to their own side of the report card.

It's time to give this *something other* a name and to quit thinking of it as an extra, an add-on, or anything relegated to an inferior position in the scope of a school's mission. It is neither noncognitive nor nonacademic, and it is acquired on both sides of the artificial divide—curricular and extracurricular offerings of the school—as well as outside the school. It is instilled and taught by teachers as well as coaches and parents. We will call the *something other* "personal competencies."

Learning Habits
the conversion of individual competencies into coordinated **patterns** of behavior activated when confronting new learning tasks

Mastery
meeting criteria for specific objectives related to **knowledge** and **skills**

"I want my child to be happy, healthy, and prepared to succeed in whatever path she takes in life," is how most parents would state their goals for schooling (and their own parenting), and many parents would add moral or religious values. Of course, parents don't expect the school to do it all. Ideally, the family and the school are partners in this undertaking. More ideal yet, they are part of a school community that extends to all the students, their families, teachers, other school staff, and volunteers and rests upon shared values and a shared understanding of the roles and goals of schooling.

The *Something Other* in American Education

Personal competencies have been called by many names, but they have always been part of American education and what American families sought for their children, in school and out. Different competencies have been emphasized at different times, but they have always had a place in our schools, sometimes centrally and other times at the periphery. For much of our nation's history, the *something other* was described in the vocabulary of moral instruction and character development.

Through the early history of the United States, at least until after the Civil War, children's education was determined, and often primarily provided, by the family. For most families, school was intended to equip the child with the basic skills (three R's of reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic), a familiarity with the teachings of the Bible, and moral instruction. The Sunday School, originating in England in the eighteenth century and brought to America by Methodists and other religious groups, gave children, especially in rural areas, a day of learning and moral instruction each week when their other days were occupied with chores on the farm or in the shop (Jeynes, 2007).

The common school movement that arose prior to the Civil War and found its full expression in the decades after the war placed children of various religious and ethnic backgrounds under the same school roof, sought a shared understanding of what it meant to be an American, and injected a public responsibility for children's education that ameliorated the wide variation in educational aspirations evidenced in family-directed paths for learning. The common school philosophy asserted a focus on developing a moral and responsible citizenry, and Christian values and the Bible remained at the core of how this was to be achieved (Fraser, 2001).

America's own McGuffey Reader, a series of grammar school primers and readers created by Pennsylvanian William McGuffey, sold more than 100 million copies in the nineteenth century

and joined the Bible as a basic text in American schools. The McGuffey Reader taught children to read while also conveying lessons of morality and character, responsibility, and hard work.

The twentieth century witnessed the growth of youth organizations purposed to provide youngsters with competencies not acquired in school, as well as values and behaviors conducive to a successful and moral life. Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCA, YWCA, church youth groups, and other youth development programs enlisted youngsters by the millions.

By the mid-twentieth century, the public school system was well established from kindergarten through high school, with locally elected school boards managing their schools within the statutory and regulatory bounds set by the states. Instruction in the Bible, school prayer, and codes of ethics for teachers and students were not uncommon. At mid-century, "schools were expected to reflect the best values of their communities" (Smith, 1989, p. 34).

Academic attainment by American youth, as tracked in various tests, flat-lined in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the growing concern over this development caused many educators to advocate a sharper focus on "academics" as opposed to the *something other*. We now realize that this was an artificial bifurcation, but for some time personal competencies were given short shrift. Greater diversity of student backgrounds and legal challenges to what was perceived as an intrusion of religion in public schools resulted in the curtailing of school prayer, instruction in the Bible, and codes of ethics, carry-overs from the common school days.

Advocates of personal competencies fought back, largely through the character education movement. The decade of the 1980s "witnessed the return of the school's role in developing character" (Krajewski & Bailey, 1999, p. 33). John Goodlad (1984), in surveying the state of American education, called for a broadening of the goals of public education to include interpersonal understandings, citizenship, and moral and ethical character. Thomas Lickona (1993) asserted that character education was being restored as a central goal in schools. The United States Department of Education, in 1995, established the Partnerships in Character Education Program to provide grants to districts implementing character education (USDE, 2014).

James Q. Wilson's book *The Moral Sense* (1993) established a philosophical basis for encouraging and enhancing what Wilson saw as human beings' innate propensity for prosocial sentiments such as sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty. Wilson asserted that these sentiments are evident early in life and reinforced through human evolution because they serve the interests of the individual and the species. These natural,

Contexts

the **environments** within which personal competencies are **intentionally** developed: school community (families, students, school personnel), school (curriculum, programs, and school culture), and classroom (instruction and classroom culture)

Competency Enhancement

the **intentional** development of students' **personal** competencies within the contexts of the school community, school, and classroom

Competency Reinforcement

the strengthening and **modification** of personal competencies and **patterns** of behavior that result from both the process of pursuing mastery and mastery itself

prosocial sentiments may be encouraged and nurtured by the child's environment, or they may be tamped down, buried, and overshadowed by more negative impulses that are also common to human nature. Families, communities, and schools are the essential environments in which positive sentiments are bolstered and revealed in behavior.

As efforts to ensure that character was given its due in schools, programmatic solutions were commonly recommended, including character education curricula. The infusion approach (Lickona, 1991; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999) took a different but complementary tack. Advocates of an infusion approach called for a deliberate restatement of the mission of the school to include the modeling and reinforcement of ethical behavior and integration of content with a clear moral position into the curriculum. Teachers, coaches, and other personnel were expected to not shrink from distinguishing right from wrong and good behavior from bad behavior and to guide students in discerning and acting upon these distinctions.

Much of what we call personal competencies has been subsumed within the goals of character development. Kristin Fink and Karen Geller (2013), advocating for the integration of common core standards with character education, include in their description of such an integration goals that might fit within a personal competencies framework: depth of knowledge; literacy, learning, and inquiry skills; social-emotional skills; perseverance; and a mastery orientation (performance character).

Of course, character education hasn't been the only vehicle for integrating personal competencies into the mainstream of schooling. Social and emotional learning and new research on student motivation (see especially the work on growth mindset) entered the stage in the early 2000s. The proponents of cultural literacy and a core curriculum continue to make the case for cognitive competency—what a student knows matters, especially in tackling new learning. A student's metacognitive competency—the ability to appraise and manage one's own learning—takes on special importance in the age of the Internet.

The personal competencies of students are now touted as essential contributors to academic learning as well as worthy attributes in their own right. They are crucial to personalized learning, an approach to education that emphasizes student self-direction in learning. Alongside personalized learning's use of technology to achieve its aims, however, must be an intentional devotion to the strengthening of personal competencies.

The time seems right for personal competencies to find their place in our education system as the *something other* that propels learning and equips the child for all of life's opportunities. That is what parents want.

Conclusions

The *something other* is hard to name, and its many aspects are even harder to categorize and define. Yet we know that the student brings to the learning enterprise a mass of attributes, attitudes, and patterns of behavior that lie below the surface. For convenience, we have called the *something other* a constellation of "personal competencies"—cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social/emotional. These four categories are artificial contrivances to aid our understanding of a great complex of influences on learning. They overlap and are interrelated. By attempting to sort them, define them, and place them in an orderly relationship to one another, we may better understand how to enhance each student's learning and their successful navigation of life's challenges and opportunities.

Personalized learning's promise of improving education for each student by modifying the pace and place of learning and giving the student greater choice and self-direction will be realized if it also leverages the teacher's relational suasion and addresses the student's four personal competencies. The personal competencies are all involved in the learning process and, thus, bear strongly upon the outcomes. The personal competencies are both means for learning and goals in their own right. They are malleable, evolving over time, and subject to instruction and example. By including the enhancement of personal competencies in the design of the school community, the school, and the classroom, the competencies are intentionally strengthened for all students.

Jeffrey's Story depicts a week in the life of one student, in one class, with one teacher. Jeffrey enlisted the four personal competencies in the story, and the competencies were themselves strengthened in the process. We might imagine how Jeffrey's life as a learner would be changed if the school culture, all the teachers in all his classes, and his parents were attuned to the importance of personal competencies.

As we consider how Jeffrey's motivation to learn elevated, how he connected new knowledge with things he already knew, how he employed strategies to complete his assignment, and how he engaged other people in the process, we see a pattern of behavior that takes on a life of its own. Jeffrey is forming strong learning habits that will serve him well when he faces the next learning challenge.

Jeffrey's learning habits will make him a more successful learner. We might hope that these patterns of behavior become rewarding in their own right, that Jeffrey relishes learning, and that in its pursuit he enters something like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of *flow*, complete absorption and pleasure

Questions for Reflection

1. What common elements do you see in the various historical approaches to the *something other*?
2. Which of the historical approaches have most relevance today? Why?
3. How can personal competencies be integrated into the school's goals for students?

in the activity of learning. We want the best for Jeffrey and for all of our students. As Martin Seligman (2011) attests, personal competencies—the intrinsic motivation of mastery and its pursuit, and the wherewithal to direct one's life toward self-chosen aspirations and larger purposes—enable one to *flourish*. Personal competencies, the *something other*, are a powerful force.

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