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Beyond the School Walls: School-to-Work Transition Programs and the Merging of Classrooms and Community

Janet Swenson

*(Some portions of this essay originally appeared as an editorial invited to accompany one written by Secretary of Labor Robert Reich in the May 29, 1994 issue of **The Flint Journal**.)*

The Promise of School-to-Work Transition Programs

In the spring of 1994, I stood in the Department of Labor auditorium waiting for the bus that would carry the Manufacturing Technology Partnership (MTP) students and me to the School-to-Work Transition Bill Signing Ceremony on the lawn of the White House. I looked with pride at the students who had spent the last two weeks doing little other than reading, writing, researching, practicing, talking and listening to talk about the impending construction of the desk they had designed and the ceremony for which it would be used and in which they would play a part. They had written letters, faxes and reports, made numerous phone calls, created, shared and revised bid specifications and blue print drawings, determined and rehearsed the essential information to share in the impending Washington interviews, and given pre-departure interviews to Flint area newspapers, radio and television stations.

The feverish pitch that had begun two weeks prior to the ceremony had picked up momentum the previous day when the students had been interviewed by *Good Morning, America*, CNN, local wire services, radio stations, and network affili-

ates as they gathered on the front lawn of the White House to build the desk on which President Clinton would sign the STW Transition Bill into law. Today, I straightened their ties and shirts and made small talk, trying to keep them calm as my own heart fluttered wildly. An hour later, President Clinton introduced us to the crowd of legislators, educators and representatives of business and industry then signed the bill on the desk the Flint area students had conceived, planned, designed, justified, ordered, shipped, and assembled specifically for this event. Hours later, as we leaned against the facade of Washington's Hard Rock Cafe, it was difficult to find words to talk about the experience we had just had; we laughed a lot, we hugged each other, and we knew we had just experienced something together that would change each of us—permanently.

Changing Practice

It is not surprising that many educators, beleaguered by criticisms from the governor and special interest groups, would simply like to shut their classroom doors and do those things that experience and education have taught them will

be successful practices with students. The Washington experience confirmed for me a growing realization that for the sake of our students we must reach out to the broader community and not retreat to the confines of our own classrooms. It is that broader community that students will need to be prepared to live and work in, not the sheltered, cloistered hothouse environment we can control within our classrooms; certainly they need a safe environment to develop new skills and knowledge, but, just as importantly, they need to test those skills and knowledge in the environment in which they will ultimately work and live—the world beyond the school walls. I realize, however, that this is not a belief I share with everyone in either the academic or the broader community.

Preparing today's students in the same way that former students were prepared will not re-create the myth known as "yesterday."

Many argue that the best education we can offer our students is one that is modeled on what their selective retention and recall have distilled from their own school experience. They suggest that if educators prescribe a program of study in which students are kept quiet in tidy rows for longer periods of time and assigned more homework, the academic problems that plague America today will dissipate. They argue that returning with renewed vigor to past practices will prepare students for tomorrow.

The fallacy of this argument is that neither the students, the workplace, the technology, nor the society that existed even a decade ago exists today. Preparing today's students in the same way that former students were prepared will not re-create the myth known as "yesterday." Educating students with outdated methodologies and materials is simply unfair and unethical and will inevitably result in a generation of children unprepared to take their places in the participatory economy and democracy in which they live.

Although the college classrooms to which we send our students are just beginning to change, the workplaces have changed dramatically in the last decade. Today's students must not only be prepared for current career demands, but, because of the rapid rate of change in our society, they must be prepared to adapt to workplaces that are yet to be developed. They need to be able to use language to become lifelong learners. This will require a level of literacy this country has never before achieved, and the greatest obstacle to that level of literacy for *all* children is the student alienation and lack of engagement that result from an irrelevant, or seemingly irrelevant, program of study.

Years ago, John Dewey suggested that experience *is* education for students; that parents and teachers who exploit the academic nature of natural and planned experiences for students will have more excited learners than those who do not. Since we have steadily increasing numbers of students in classrooms today who are unwilling to "buy into" education unless teachers can prove the study is relevant to their lives and base the learning on the students' own experiences, STW programs offer a promising new direction.

What Constitutes a Quality School-to-Work Transition Program?

Albert Einstein warned educators that, "Overemphasis on the competitive system and premature specialization on the grounds of immediate usefulness kill the spirit upon which all cultural life depends, specialized knowledge included." Many educators who are concerned about STW programs worry that they will be solely skills-oriented and encourage students to focus on and train for a single vocation too early. The legislation, however, which was based largely on the recommendations of the Secretary's (of Labor) Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report and prior Carl Perkins legislation, supports the notion that there are fundamental skills that all students need to develop and that a worksite program of study, besides introducing students to a particular trade or vocational community, can also serve as a vehicle for an aca-

demically-integrated, project- and inquiry-based system of education.

The twenty-seven skills the SCANS report outlines include such language-intensive competencies as creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, knowing how to learn, acquiring and evaluating information, organizing and maintaining information, and interpreting and communicating information. The premise is that in STW programs, students can use the worksite as the subject matter for the development of these functional and foundational skills. The legislation, if enacted in the spirit in which it was intended, is likely to help drive interdisciplinary study and writing across the curriculum to become the more broadly aimed and inclusive, "studying, learning, creating, evaluating, deciding, communicating, and adapting in the post-school world."

During those three years, I came to understand the wisdom and facility of dissolving the school walls and melding the school, business and broader communities.

An Invitation to Imagine

For three years, I worked as a language arts consultant to the teachers and students in traditional vocational and innovative school-to-work transition programs at GASC Technology Center in Flint, Michigan, a facility that serves the students of Genesee County. During those three years, I came to understand the wisdom and facility of dissolving the school walls and melding the school, business and broader communities. One of the initial steps of that process is learning to begin conversations across communities—encouraging dialogues between academic and vocational educators, between language arts and other disciplinary teachers, across levels of instruction, including conversations with the college and university communities, and in learning to consider representatives of business, industry and other

community groups as partners in the educational process.

...literacy is not only possible, but inevitable when students are engaged in scholarship that is intimately related to questions of personal interest and concern.

As part of my work with GASC, I was invited to imagine a new STW program that would help students develop the skills and knowledge necessary to work in those businesses that constitute what is broadly described as "financial services." What follows is an invitation to readers to begin dialogues with those from our own and other communities about how language studies can be infused into school-to-work transition programs such as the one outlined. I offer the following abbreviated version of the plan for a "Financial Literacy Academy," originally written in December, 1993, as one side of a conversation, written from an English educator's position, about the ways in which STW programs have the ability to enable students to work accurately and collegially in work settings, about the ways in which students can maintain humanistic values in the marketplace, and about the ways in which language studies are a natural fit with a change of community. In that spirit, I invite the reader to begin internal and external conversations about the ways in which the practice of teaching students "English" can, and perhaps must, change in order to adequately prepare students for the post-school world.

The Financial Literacy Academy (FLA)

The Financial Literacy Academy is broadly based on the philosophies of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Both scholars suggest that literacy is not only possible, but *inevitable* when students are engaged in scholarship that is intimately related to questions of personal interest and concern. Furthermore, they suggest that at the very foundation of every scholarly activity should be the practice of becoming a citizen in a democ-

racy. Among the skills needed for participatory citizenship are the desire and ability to use language productively: to read widely and critically, to listen attentively and critically, to speak coherently and wisely, to write persuasively in a form that suits the occasion, to publish that writing, and to be willing and able to accept and apply constructive criticism to each of these language processes. In addition to these language skills, students should master a variety of interpersonal characteristics; they should develop, among other attributes, ethical behavior (honesty, integrity, loyalty, etc.), altruism, initiative, self-discipline, and not only the tolerance for, but the delight in diversity. The plan for the Financial Literacy Academy is unabashedly nationalistic, but it seeks to prepare students for participation in a nation that is inclusionary rather than exclusionary.

The FLA curriculum would seek to address the concerns of a variety of communities and documents that deal with educational reform efforts, including the Presidents' Council (representing fifteen public universities in this state), the SCANS Commission, the State of Michigan Core Curriculum, the "Best Practices" of numerous disciplines as defined by the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Writing Project, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the Center for the Study of Reading, the National Council for the Social Studies, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde 1993), Ted Sizer's "essential schools" (1985) and the concerns of representatives from the financial business community.

E.D. Hirsch, in a very controversial text, *Cultural Literacy* (1987), suggests that there are common elements of culture to which all students should be exposed in order to maintain a common and distinct American culture. Many educators would argue that a *common* culture has never existed because what is commonly thought of as American culture under-represents minority groups within the United States. Furthermore, many educators would argue that students need more than a superficial exposure (knowing that "To be or not to be" comes from Shakespeare's

Hamlet) to a common culture if the exposure is to have any lasting consequence.

The educational community and the public at large have generally engaged in behaviors based on the assumption that students who are in an educational institution for a particular number of years will "pick up" the nuances of behaviors that will allow them successful entry into the work world.

The primary focus of the first year of the FLA curriculum would be the study of culture, however not the culture that Hirsch defines, but rather the culture of the particular group of students and the business community they are interested in perhaps one day joining. The pedagogical approach would be dialogic (see Stock, forthcoming). Although this curricular topic may, at first glance, seem only tangentially related to the study of finance and banking, it is a core competency. Many of the public's concerns with students' educational outcomes—the failure to speak and write using Standard Edited English; the failure to engage in public social customs such as decorum, small talk, and choice of "suitable" attire; the failure to fully engage in reading as a way of growing—are, at least in part, the result of the system's failure to make such cultural behaviors an explicit topic of study for students. The educational community and the public at large have generally engaged in behaviors based on the assumption that students who are in an educational institution for a particular number of years will "pick up" the nuances of behaviors that will allow them successful entry into the work world. Some students see those behaviors and that world as seeming so alien from their own that they feel disenfranchised and have no desire to fully engage in the activities or goals of the business culture(s). These students need to first determine and examine their own culture—the one they bring to the classroom and will bring, unless they choose to modify it, to the work

setting. Only after they are fully cognizant of the cultural choices they have made and are making will they be prepared to discern and thoughtfully consider alternative choices.

The dialogic methodology will require teachers to help students frame first broad then more specific questions for inquiry. Initially, students will need to determine what constitutes "culture;" it is likely that they will think of such things as modes of speaking, literature, works of art, ways of using such resources as money and time, and the like. After students have been actively engaged in research designed to answer the question, "What is the distinct culture of students in this school/district/county/state?", students will tackle the more exacting work of determining the culture(s) of other groups—the culture of individual institutions generally thought to comprise the financial business community—and the way in which those cultures fit or don't fit into the broader local culture in which they reside. This research can be done through ethnographic, on-site observation and record-keeping, surveys, interviews, and through careful observation and analysis of the way in which these groups are represented in local media. Those familiar with the *Foxfire* series of books published by rural students under the tutelage of Elliot Wigginton will see the opportunity for FLA students to publish in order to communicate their findings about the culture in which they reside and in which they may one day choose to work.

One can easily envision students who have already researched and defined their own culture becoming more engaged and curious researchers of the broad culture...

One can easily envision students who have already researched and defined their own culture becoming more engaged and curious researchers of the broad culture of financial institutions and the more specific cultures of individual banks, investment firms, and insurance agencies and even more specific departments within those

businesses. Students who have investigated concrete behaviors and choices centered around such topics as clothing, language choices and uses of personal resources (time and money in particular) in their own adolescent culture and subsequently in particular departments and places of business are bound to see more readily the potential clash between their own preparation and decisions and those of the community they might choose to one day join. The question of accommodation then becomes an explicit topic of study.

Using their first- and second-hand research on adolescent culture, the culture of financial institutions and the culture of the broader community as a vehicle for skill and knowledge development, students engaged in this hypothetical curriculum could be expected to master such outcomes as the following:

1. Given sufficient resources, students could master a variety of computer software programs, including but not limited to WordPerfect, Lotus, Pagemaker, and presentation software in the process of acquiring, evaluating, organizing, maintaining, interpreting and communicating information gathered in firsthand research of local cultures.
2. Given sufficient resources, students could master the ability to participate in electronic conferences and electronic mail in order to continue conversations about local culture in the evening by examining how the groups being studied are being represented in local newspapers and televised news accounts.
3. Students could master the ability to create, conduct, and analyze surveys (including the sub-skills of statistics and probability).
4. Students could master the ability to plan for, arrange, conduct, transcribe, and analyze interviews (including the sub-skills of telephone etiquette and discourse analysis).
5. Students could be able to define the unique characteristics of the culture of students, financial institutions and the broader community in which they reside. As a component of this research, students could be expected to understand and participate in local government.

6. Students could master the ability to "read against the grain," that is, for instance, to keep a double entry notebook to record agreements and disagreements with the authors of fiction and non-fiction, print and non-print materials which purport to represent the cultures of adolescents, urban (or suburban or rural) areas, workplaces, financial institutions, etc. (for example, students would read/view such divergent materials as *Roger and Me*, *There Are No Children Here*, and *The Carnegie Report on Adolescent Culture* and analyze whether their findings on their immediate culture corroborate or dispute the representations of others).
7. Students could become conscious of their metacognitive strategies; they could engage in "think alouds," reflective journal entries, and peer writing response groups.
8. Students could be asked to discern, in writing, the unique features of various departments within financial institutions, comparing and contrasting the unique facets of individuals who choose to pursue careers in those departments.
9. Students could make public presentations to other class members, community groups who are interested in the program and research, financial institution employees, and other students (includes the sub-skills of public speaking and use of the media).
10. Students could apply what they have learned about the culture of the students to one or more problems that plague that sub-culture (substance abuse, teen pregnancy, adolescent violence, etc.) and devise a method of addressing that problem using what they have learned about the culture (This may become the community service project—see #11). It would involve the synthesis and application of what they have learned and would require creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, reasoning and visualization).
11. Students could engage in the planning, preparation, implementation and analysis of a community service project. Students could be encouraged to consider teaching a younger

group of students a portion of what their reading and research have taught them.

12. Students could be asked to discuss explicitly the similarities and differences in the manner in which they, other students, employees in financial institutions and the community at large allocate time, money, materials, people and other assets.
13. Students could maintain state-mandated portfolios as places to exhibit their growth and competencies.
14. Students could master the skills of lifetime learning: the ability to use language productively, to gather information from a variety of sources, to evaluate that information, and to have confidence in their ability to find answers to their own and others' questions.
15. Students could be able to define the accommodations they would have to make to fit into the existing culture of financial institutions and similarly the accommodations financial institutions could make to enhance the fit between new adolescent employees and the work culture.

To successfully gain and remain gainfully employed, students need to be aware of the sometimes subtle culture of the workplace. For years in American education, we have assumed that students who sit neatly in rows, who learn to read textbooks from beginning to end, who respond to teacher and textbook questions, and dutifully fulfill the requirements of the course and teacher for thirteen years are prepared to become contributing members of the workforce. Because topics like workplace dress or decorum are infrequently studied, and strategies like problem solving and decision making are infrequently used, students naively enter the workforce unprepared to make appropriate accommodations to the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, responsibilities and skills inherent in that work setting.

Maintaining student motivation and meaningful engagement with the curriculum continue to be the greatest challenges to effective education. Ira Shor suggests that:

Subjectivity is a synonym for motivation. Material that is of subjective concern is by definition important to those studying it. By

turning to subjectivity, the situated course will not only connect experience with critical thought, but will also demonstrate that intellectual work has a tangible purpose in our lives, in discourse connected to student habits of communication. Further, only a situated pedagogy can bring critical study to bear on the concrete circumstances of living, the immediate conditions of life that critical learning may help recreate. (24)

An Entire Village

In STW meetings in Genesee County, UAW Region 1-C Director Ruben Burks and Gerald Butler, personnel director at GM's Flint Metal Fabricating Plant, often cite Beecher School Superintendent Ira Rutherford, who constantly reminds those of us in the county of the African proverb, "It takes an entire village to raise a child." By dissolving the school walls, we have the opportunity to form a "focused village" of students, teachers, parents, mentors, employers, employees, union representatives, college representatives, and representatives of broader community interests into a focused village whose central intent is the successful "raising" of the students in the community.

Developing school-to-work transition programs that forever sever the artificial, unproductive boundaries between students, schools and the broader community are a step in the right direction.

The last decade has been a difficult, degenerate period in American schools and society. Career politicians have engaged in educational budget cuts and raised official alarms and accusations about the "mediocrity" of both teachers and students. The push to return to the old and familiar pedagogical methods and materials have been pronounced. Developing school-to-work transition programs that forever sever the artificial,

unproductive boundaries between students, schools and the broader community are a step in the right direction. In a culture that is coming to fully realize that lifelong learning and the incumbent need for critical literacy are not simply laudable goals, but necessities, the formation of STW *paideias*, community- and workplace-based, inter-generational learning groups, may be the strategy that again catapults the United States into a role as indisputable leader in the preparation of students for participation in the world's finest economy and democracy. Quality school-to-work transition programs, while not a panacea for all that plagues American education, are a step in the right direction—toward the future.

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