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School IS Work: Work Task Learning in the Classroom

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The assumption that the time honored efforts of the home and school will continue to prepare young people to make career choices and assume work roles in the labor force needs to be reexamined in light of societal changes that impact on the work task learning process. Marshall (1988) has examined the similarities and differences that exist between work settings and classrooms. Hoyt (1987) has reported on the impact of technology on occupational change. Manzi (1987) has recommended different ways of using skills assessment at different stages of career development. Dannefer & Munson (1984) studied work task mastery in the home environment of 27 families. While we recognize changes in family structure and adult worklife prompted by the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society and more recently by the move to an informational one, we have been slow to accommodate change in the educative process particularly as it impacts on the ways young people learn how to work. The purpose of this article is to explore several elements of work task learning and the integration of these elements in the day-to-day activities of the elementary and secondary school classroom.

Hoyt (1990) in an address to the National Career Development Association emphasized the need to "put work back in the classroom" citing it as one of six challenges for the career development professional today. In the past learning how *to* work has been a primary

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function of the home and community and learning *about* work has been a function of the school largely through the efforts expended in vocational guidance and career education programs. School IS Work! The school is a workplace, the student is a learner, and the learner is a worker. It's as simple as that.

According to a definition by Hoyt (1977), "Work is conscious effort, other than that whose primary purpose is either coping or relaxation, aimed at providing benefits for oneself or for oneself and others" (p. 18). Work is usually accomplished within the confines of a position or job by carrying out one or more units of work performance that we can define as "work tasks." Schoolwork is the student's job and in the production of learning, the student as learner performs many different work tasks. These tasks, like jobs in the American labor market, involve working with data, people, and things. The subject matter *curriculum* can be divided into *units* which are developed in daily *lesson plans* that describe the *class activities*. As students engage in class activities, they become involved in a variety of work tasks that draw on different elements and aspects of work. In being able to capitalize on these many different work situations, the school is in a prime position to contribute to the individual's developing sense of work, work values, work habits, and work behaviors. School is work although we somehow distinguish it from the function of "real" work. The differentiation between schoolwork and work in the marketplace is obvious in the use of the cliché "the transition from school to work." That expression seems to emphasize the differences rather than the similarities between school and work.

Identifying Classroom Work Functions and Tasks

Fine and Heinz (1958) elaborated for the first time the theoretical base of the data-people-things (d-p-t) structure of worker functions. This structure has been utilized and refined over the years and the United States Department of Labor *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*, Fourth Edition (1977) has coded all job titles in the American economy relative to their level of complexity in working with the 24 d-p-t work functions. Many school subjects are data-oriented and provide work experiences in working with words, symbols, or numbers; others emphasize communication and interpersonal considerations that are people-oriented; some are things-oriented with activities that involve setting up equipment, manipulating objects, or operating machinery.

Work tasks in the school workplace range across all three work orientations and the 24 work functions they represent. Drawing a map, outlining a story, debating an issue, operating a machine, giving directions, following instructions, dissecting a frog, focusing a microscope, and planning a project are examples of classroom activities that engage different work functions and tasks. Such work tasks are necessary if learning is to occur. It is easy to understand how classroom work tasks can serve as an orientation to work and to the different ways of working using the 24 d-p-t work functions structure as an integral part of the teaching-learning process. They offer opportunities for young people to learn work roles and to examine their own preferences and worker traits in the performance of these work roles and tasks.

Steinaker & Bell (1979) emphasize the importance of experience in the learning process stressing the involvement of the total personality and all the human senses. Their experiential taxonomy consists of five basic categories: exposure, participation, identification, internalization, and dissemination. According to Steinaker & Bell, learning through these categories is a natural and logical progression. Since work task learning is a progressive and developmental process rooted in experience, an experiential emphasis seems more appropriate than the traditional and more common informational approach. Exposure, participation, and identification, the first three levels in the taxonomy, are essential in fostering work task awareness and relate closely to the four levels of the work task learning process as proposed by Munson & Manzi (1982).

Worker Characteristics and Classroom Opportunities

Every work task has requirements of the worker. The U.S. Department of Labor, Division of Occupational Analysis (1982) has identified specific categories of information which reflect worker attributes that contribute to successful job performance. These requirements can be expressed as worker characteristics or traits. Worker characteristics cover a number of important areas such as interests, aptitudes, work situations, personal characteristics, physical demands and environmental conditions, and reading, mathematical, and language development. School counselors are familiar with these worker characteristics and use a variety of techniques to provide students with information about them. Many school guidance programs use stand-

ardized tests—interest, aptitude, intelligence, personality, and/or self-assessment inventories to engage students in assessing their strengths and weaknesses, occupational priorities and aspirations. As helpful as these and other external sources of self and world of work information may be in generating student participation in occupational exploration and career decision-making, the activities are often too few and far between or too late to be of value in the progressive and developmental aspects of the work task learning process. On the other hand, teachers are in direct contact with students every day and are in a position to be of ongoing help in providing learning episodes that can contribute to the expansion of student work task knowledge and awareness.

The relationship of these worker characteristic areas to the school curriculum and to specific subject matter contents at both the elementary and secondary levels of the educative process can be readily recognized. Once teachers become familiar with the components of these areas, it is easy for them to identify and conduct learning exposures that expand student knowledge, intensify levels of awareness, and initiate self-assessment.

Interests

Although there are several prominent systems for classifying interests, one of the more comprehensive approaches has been developed by the Department of Labor. It has identified 12 worker interest areas that are further divided into 66 work groups. The *Guide for Occupational Exploration*, Second Edition (1984) details these 12 groups and their subgroups providing a helpful tool for teachers as they seek to connect their own subject matter to more specific work groups and tasks. The 12 major work group areas are artistic, scientific, plants and animals, protective, mechanical, industrial, business detail, selling, accommodating, humanitarian, leading-influencing, and physical performing.

Aptitudes

The United States Employment Service uses the General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB) in helping clients identify specific abilities required for certain jobs in the labor market. The GATB provides information in nine aptitude areas: intelligence (general learning ability), verbal, numerical, spatial, form perception, clerical perception, motor

coordination, finger dexterity, and manual dexterity. Two others are believed to be occupationally significant, eye-hand-foot coordination and color discrimination. Although they are not included in the GATB, they are described and the levels of ability detailed in *A Guide to Job Analysis* (1982). Many students never learn about some of these aptitudes, such as form or clerical perception, even though they may have had many classroom work task experiences involving these abilities. Their lack of knowledge about or familiarity with these aptitudes hinders or prevents their identification, assessment, and utilization of these unknown areas as they relate to their own career development and eventual career decision-making.

Work Situations

The degree to which a worker can adapt to a work situation can be a determining factor in the worker's success. The classroom as a workplace offers a wide variety of work situations such as attending to detail, collecting information, performing under stress, doing things in a hurry, finishing an unpleasant job, being interrupted, working closely with others, following precise directions, or working independently. Students can identify with these situations in a cognitive sense and they are able, retrospectively, to identify activities where they have experienced such situations. However, they are seldom made aware of work situations as they are experiencing them in the classroom. Young people need opportunities to reflect on and think about their responses to work situations as they impinge on or are a part of the work task in which they are engaged. This can be a necessary, and often vital, activity that can contribute to their work task understanding as well as their skill mastery. As part of their growing and progressive work task mastery, it is important that young people have opportunities to identify these work situations at the time of their participation in order that they can become increasingly aware of their own reactions, feelings and preferences.

Personal Characteristics

This element of a school work approach is based on three areas of employer concerns: (1) worker traits and behaviors; (2) basic work skills; and (3) work values and attitudes. These concerns were identified in a series of business-education breakfast seminars in the Rochester (NY) region. High on the list of problematic worker traits

and behaviors were absenteeism, tardiness, and doing just enough to get by. The work values and attitudes area was characterized by concerns associated with taking pride in one's work, responsibility, initiative, and respect for authority. The third area, basic work skills, identified a number of employer concerns that can be readily attributed to deficiencies in the educative process: basic math, reading, and oral communication skills; the ability to express simple ideas in writing; and work task attention span. While it is necessary to establish academic standards that identify the knowledge and skills students should be expected to attain in earning a high school diploma, it is becoming increasingly urgent to give attention to employer concerns regarding worker traits and behaviors and work values and attitudes. Teachers, always alert to the work habits and work behaviors of their students, feel comfortable relating these personal traits to their classroom endeavors and incorporating them as part of their class requirements or routines.

Physical Demands and Environmental Conditions

Subject matter classes vary a great deal in the physical requirements and capacities a worker must have to engage in the different classroom activities. Physical education classes and school sports, for example, require varying amounts of strength and may involve climbing, balancing, kneeling, or crawling. Other studies will involve such demands as reaching, handling, fingering, talking, and even tasting and smelling. While schools provide a warm and pleasant environment for the tasks of learning to occur, the potential exists in some curriculum areas to experience different environmental conditions, e.g. noise, smells, and hazards such as the proximity to moving parts or exposure to electrical shock. As in the other aspects of a work task approach, it is important that young people have opportunities to identify these physical requirements and capabilities as they experience them and to utilize their awareness of these factors to examine their importance in their own work performance and in their own work preferences and priorities.

Work Task Assessment

As students progress through the work task learning process in school, it is essential to involve students continuously in assessing

their own work task experiences. They can use their work experience to assess (1) their *interest* in the work task, (2) their *involvement* with the work task, (3) their *work task performance*, and (4) their own *work traits and characteristics*. This is an on-the-job type of evaluation that provides for further identification with the experience.

Work task assessment can be related to the Steinaker & Bell (1979) experiential taxonomy. Assuming that the students have been *exposed* to an experience (first level) and have *participated* in it (second level), task assessment can be an integral part of *identification* with the experience (the third level). In characterizing the identification level, Steinaker & Bell stated, "It is at this taxonomic level that the individual begins to relate overtly to experience, sees the organization and structure of the idea, gains a deeper insight into its value, and is able to express recognition of achievement" (p. 27).

Helping teachers to understand the role of work task assessment and its contribution to work task identification in experiential learning is important. Providing practical ideas for engaging students in the assessment activity can help teachers to feel more comfortable in initiating such activities and as they experience the process they will develop and expand their own procedures and techniques. Continuua, scaling, and rank order judgments are popular assessment devices since many teachers are familiar with these techniques and can relate them readily to their subject matter and instructional purposes. Any element of the school is work approach can utilize a simple like-dislike continuum.

Teachers can tailor the continuum to fit any element of the school is work approach adding as many dimensions of self-assessment as they wish. Involvement can utilize an assessment continuum that provides for two dimensional scaling: suitability (using like and dislike terminals) and attractiveness (using seek and avoid terminals).

The assessment of a work performance skill or achievement can utilize an adaptation of the simple continuum or scaling technique as

shown. Scale ratings such as poor-excellent or never-always provide for student self-evaluations of task performance and work behaviors that can lead to worthwhile and meaningful teacher-student discussions. Teachers can be very creative in evolving scales or other forms of assessment in accordance with the nature of the instructional experience and their own learning goals or purposes.

Rank ordering has been a popular assessment technique since many teachers are familiar with and have used rank order procedures in other contexts. Two examples used by an English and an industrial arts teacher are illustrated below. The parenthetical identification of the work functions in the English class example are for your convenience to show how the teacher used rank ordering to distinguish among three people-oriented work functions. They were not part of the exercise as presented to the student. In both illustrations the student directions for rank ordering have been eliminated.

_____demonstrating a technique (instructing)	_____working with wood
_____telling a story (entertaining)	_____working with metal
_____giving a short talk to present information (speaking-signaling)	_____working with clay

School Policy and Inservice Education

Schools can take the lead in establishing standards and initiating practices that deal directly with the development and evaluation of worker traits and behaviors and worker values and attitudes. For example, class cutting, irregular attendance, and tardiness are common instructional problems. One school system has recently instigated a strict class attendance policy citing it as one of the ways they hope to make the educative process more efficient and productive. The initiation of the attendance policy resulted in a two-hour student protest to show their opposition and at school board meetings parents and students complained that the regulations were unfair and too rigid. The school board and administrators drafted a revised plan but insisted on the need to have a class attendance policy. As in this instance, the home and community can and should share in developing and implementing the infusion of work values and worker standards in the educative process.

Utilizing a school *is* work approach as a program in the process of school reform need not be an expensive proposition. In fact, it can be

implemented through existing expenditures school by school, classroom by classroom. Naturally, the more teachers that engage in school is work activities, the more a school can hope to accomplish. One way to encourage more teacher participation is to provide an inservice program for teachers. Munson & Rubenstein (1985) have reported an inservice program using experiential exposures designed to encourage and help teachers in identifying how they can use their subject matter content and classroom activities in contributing to the work task mastery of students. Inservice education is a way to help teachers become familiar with the three d-p-t work orientation areas and the 24 work functions. Once they can identify, understand, and relate them to their subject matter content, they will begin to employ them in planning and conducting their classroom activities. The career development professional can become the catalyst for helping teachers as they begin to put work back in the classroom.

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