

Making a “Real World” of the College Classroom
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2004 Faculty Development Conference
New Mexico Association of Community Colleges
Western States Consortium for Faculty Development

Presentation Overview

In the “Call for Presentations” announcement for this conference, I came across the following sentence: “*The 2004 Faculty Development Conference will focus on improving education in the classroom to prepare students for success in the real world.*” The last two words of this sentence will be integral to my presentation. The “real world” is a term frequently used by educators and learners to refer to what lies *outside* educational institutions; by implication, if what lies outside of classrooms is “real,” then obviously what lies *inside* of them is not real—in other words, *fake*. At least, that’s the unspoken assumption by those who draw distinctions between educational environments and the “real world.” My presentation will focus on practical actions educators and administrators may take to erase this distinction; to make education “matter” to students by *directly* connecting classrooms (as well as specific programs and entire institutions) to larger professional communities—by not “educating” students so much as “professionalizing” them. I will introduce specific and direct ways of making the educational experience matter to students both inside and outside classrooms.

Pedagogical/Institutional Practices

In this session, I will offer pragmatic instructional activities to help bring the “real world” into the classroom and the classroom into the “real world.” In addition, I will promote the establishment of tangible, mutually-supportive relationships between institutions of higher education, local professional communities, and area school systems. For community colleges the significance of specific degree programs depends on the community’s acknowledgement of their worth and value; hence, without infringing upon the academic freedom of educators, the role played by such relationships in the development and enactment of various curricula should be strongly encouraged and enhanced.

About the Presenter

In addition to teaching in and coordinating the English program at UNM-Taos, I serve on the Student Success Task Force, the Community Relations Committee, and the Faculty Senate. I began teaching in 1986 and since that time have taught at the University of Maine, Northeastern University, and the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University, as well as at schools in Fiji, Japan, and Venezuela.

Applied Academics, or “Real World Education,” at Community Colleges

The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, criticized occupational education for focusing too narrowly on low-skill, entry-level jobs. In response, the National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education a year later recognized that “[w]hat is really required today are programs and experiences that bridge the gap between the so-called ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ programs.” That same year, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Act called specifically for integrating occupational and academic education.

The ameliorative thrust of much of the literature concerning the “New Vocationalism” is making vocation-based programs more academic by having students write, analyze, study vocational history, and so on. Growing out of this movement is another body of literature, called “Applied Academics,” which argues that the gap between occupational and academic education is most effectively bridged when educators seek not only to “academicize” vocational curricula but to “vocalize” academic curricula.

In 2000, the \$5 billion-funded Workforce Investment Act (WIA) altered the federal system of job training and workforce development. Writing in *New Directions for Community Colleges* (#115, Fall 2001), James Jacobs recognizes why this legislation is a watershed policy for community colleges:

Never before has such a large and comprehensive federal law been created assuming the participation of community colleges. Indeed, through almost all aspects of WIA from drafting of the legislation to the current issues over implementation, American community colleges have been considered a critical factor in the success of this legislation. (93)

This legislation plays to the strengths of community colleges partly because it targets constituencies those colleges have historically served: adults wishing to improve their employment and economic status. "Community colleges are uniquely positioned as gatekeepers for local sub-baccalaureate labor markets," Jacobs observes. "Whereas high schools are often unable to develop sustained ties with employers and four-year colleges concentrate on baccalaureate degrees, the comprehensive mission of community colleges makes them readily able to contribute to this important sector of the economy." (94)

Classroom Based Application: Vocationalize the Academic Curriculum

Here are some suggestions on meaningful ways instructors can vocationalize non-vocational or "academic" courses:

- In addition to the standard "Objectives" and "Requirements," list on your course syllabus the "Applied Skills" or "Employability Techniques" that students will receive from the course. Be certain your coursework addresses such skills and techniques.
- Many students have jobs or belong to local community groups; others may not belong to a formal organization but belong to a community of people who share similar interests (hunting, basketball, etc.). Have these students act as informal "representatives" of these work-place or community groups and, whenever possible, incite discussion of them within appropriate academic contexts.
- Offer an automatic letter of recommendation to students who successfully complete your course (with, say, a B or above) composed on institutional stationery and mailed to the student at the course's conclusion. The letter could give a brief overview of the course's objectives and applied skills, state the student's name and grade, and offer your contact information (if desired) should potential employers seek you out as a reference.
- Create an on-line discussion group pertaining to the academic concerns of your course. (This may be done through most course webpage software programs or through the "Groups" components of search engines like Yahoo! and MSN.) From their home computers, students may log-in and post/respond to messages by other students. Not only is the electronic exchange of ideas and information very much a part of professional communication these days, but it also (1) provides a space for shy or quiet students to express themselves, (2) requires students to write and to "publish" their writing publicly, and (3) engage in continuous, informal, but professional dialogue with classmates they may come to see as "colleagues."
- Create venues (including on-line discussions, if possible) between students and members of the community whose professional capacity relates to the course discipline.
- Incorporate into your coursework meaningful components that require (1) writing and (2) information literacy. Both components may effectively be engaged cross curricularly, thereby unifying the college experiences of students despite their declared areas of concentration. In addition, both require skills that are employed frequently in the many occupations.

Institution-Based Application: Creating Partnerships with the Community

Postsecondary educational institutions should create meaningful partnerships—not simply formal, upper-echelon ties—with regional businesses and organizations:

- The Bridge Program at the City Colleges of Chicago, the Workforce Development Program at Shoreline Community College in Seattle, and the Fast Track to Work Office at Cabrillo Community College in California are examples of successful programs resulting from strong collaborations between colleges and local employers and community-based organizations. Such programs should be studied by community colleges that simply “exist” within communities and whose relationship with specific organizations and employers consist of formal, but not necessarily meaningful, liaisons between administrators.
- Collaborative counsels or cohorts between community colleges and regional businesses and organizations will help to link the mission of each college with the needs and expectations of the community it serves. Bringing college instructors, students, and administrators together with community leaders, employers, and other professionals to discuss community needs and concerns will have many benefits, but two overriding ones should here be pointed out: (1) college personnel will have a better idea of what kinds of programs, skills, etc., local business people deem “employable,” and (2) local professionals will feel that they are contributing to the educational mission of their local college and, hence, may give more credence to the degree and certificate programs graduates complete.
- Program and departmental partnerships of the kind discussed above should be on-going and meaningful. English faculty ought to meet with local writers’ groups, book discussion groups, as well as businesses to get an idea of what people are doing and looking for *writing-wise* in the greater community, and vice versa. Likewise, instructors of sciences ought to meet regularly with regional offices responsible for monitoring environmental conditions, and so on.
- Many community colleges do not have a close-enough relationship with the primary and secondary school system also serving that community. This is unfortunate because all educators are responsible for nurturing intellectual growth and inculcating practicable skills among the same general population. The transition from primary to secondary to post-secondary education, especially within the same community, ought to be somewhat seamless. However, many younger students report a “bump” when they enter college—it’s a “different world” from high school. While entering a brave new world is frequently difficult and not necessarily a bad thing, if the “bump” results from very different academic standards and expectations between secondary and postsecondary teachers then there exists an unfortunate gulf between both institutions that should be addressed and possibly breached. A consortium between all community educators that provides venues for collegial dialogue would help bridge such gaps and enhance the educational experience for all members of that community, young and not-young alike.