

Am I Prepared For the Real World? A Student's View

As the completion of my college career approaches, I am beginning to wonder if my education at WCU has sufficiently prepared me for the real world of work. It is a question any senior in any major could ask herself. But my conclusion scares the hell out of me. I fear that I am nowhere near being prepared for the future. The business world I am entering is not like the neat system described in the lectures and textbooks I have encountered. It is full of constant changes and uncertainty, an environment full of disorganization, eternal ambiguity, recurring problems, and stress levels so high that Prozac becomes a necessity in the daily diet.

The first and most evident problem in my preparation is the teacher-centered approach that has influenced our education for so many years. It is based on the idea of teaching as telling:

The primary goal [in traditional schooling] is the transfer of information from an expert (the teacher) to novices (the students), with the expert controlling such critical elements of the process as the syllabus, pace and sequencing, and mode of expression. In practice, this usually means that the expert lectures and the novices record and absorb. Interchanges between teacher and student are limited to brief question and answer sessions, and there is little or no interaction among students. (Garvin)

On my first job, will I have people lecturing me or telling me what to do every step of the way? I think not. My employers will expect me to be an active learner, figuring out lots of things for myself. But in traditional schooling, students do not develop the skills they need to question, research, and work independently through their own creativity and originality. They follow the same process throughout their educational careers--listen, record, read, memorize, regurgitate, forget--and this process does not help them become effective business people. Having little experience with active learning in school, students come to the work force without the ingenuity, drive, and flexibility that is needed to work effectively in any demanding job.

But some teachers are skeptical of active learning because it entails a level of ambiguity which threatens their position as the controlling center of attention. A program of active learning decentralizes authority, giving students an equal voice in the classroom decision making. When the balance of power shifts from the autocratic to the democratic in the classroom the primary concern is no longer with the course material delivered from teacher to student. Pupils must understand classroom processes and the climate of learning. Feedback and open discussion must allow students to learn from other students as well as from textbook or teacher.

With active learning, actual experience and interaction leads students to a point where they genuinely care for their education and invest a personal interest in its structure and value.

Gavin observes that "students today are distressingly disaffected with formal education. Class time is more or a chore than a delight." Students view traditional education methods as drudgery, as monotonous and unresponsive to creativity and change. Contrary to popular belief, students do value and enjoy learning. They have, however, been dissatisfied and bored with the substance and methods of misdirected teaching. Gavin quotes John Dewey, who saw even early in this century that "teaching can be compared to selling commodities. No one can sell unless someone buys, [yet] there are teachers who think they have done a good day's teaching irrespective of what pupils have learned." Students need to be given more responsibility within the classroom in order to have an involved interest and to retain more than the teacher's words. Teachers and students should work as partners so that, in Gavin's words, the "true ends of education--the ability to use knowledge, to think creatively, and to continue learning on one's own--be achieved."

But there is another problem in addition to teaching methods. The content of our courses often fails to recognize that the world is always changing, that people cannot know what is to come with each passing day. The future is not a glass window through which we can see the struggles and complications of tomorrow. But teachers and textbooks have led us to believe that we hold a magnifying glass that enables us to see tomorrow and know what to do when it comes. Teachers and textbooks have portrayed the business world as a fantasy land, a clearly organized environment where everything is easily understood. Howard Schwartz describes this illusion:

The organization is like a clockwork: everyone knows what the organization is all about and all are solely concerned with carrying out its mission; people are basically happy at their work, the level of anxiety is low, people interact with each other in frictionless, mutually supportive cooperation; and if there are any managerial problems at all, these are basically technical problems, easily solved by someone who has the proper skills and knows the correct techniques of management.

These lessons are a farce, false precepts that cause naive hopes and eventual disillusion in students who must eventually face the ultimate "messiness" of the actual business world.

In truth, organizations are a snake pit and students need to be exposed to the facts about the reality of tomorrow. It is humiliating to realize that the time and effort I have spent learning and practicing traditional education is going to be the core of my difficulty in stepping into tomorrow's business world. These realities cause me anxiety and discomfort. I would rather have been exposed to these facts long ago so that I could change, adjust, and prepare myself to deal with them.

Professors need to leave their desire for control and their theories of fantasy at home. They should enter the school building to talk but also to listen to their students. Allowing active participation could generate new attitudes in their students. Teaching false positivity does not mean that teachers are performing well. Yes, the truth hurts, but side-stepping the truth is more dangerous and more damaging. Teachers need to realize the needs of the students. Active learning methods should be implemented into classroom strategy along with the delivery of facts about the organizational snake pits that students will face in the "real world."

Valerie Jeffords, BSBA, Management, Spring, 1995

References

- Garvin, David A. "Barriers and Gateways to Learning," in Education for Judgment. Boston, 1991.
- Schwartz, Howard. "The Clockworks of the Snakepit: An Essay on the Teaching of Organizational Behavior," The Organizational Behavior Teaching Review, 1986-7.

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