DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 363

AUTHOR
Brown, Bettina Lankard

TITLE
Generic Skills in Career and Technical Education. Myths and Realities.

INSTITUTION
ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.

SPONS AGENCY
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.

REPORT NO
No-22

PUB DATE
2002-00-00

NOTE
4p.

CONTRACT
ED-99-CO-0013

AVAILABLE FROM

PUB TYPE
ERIC Publications (071)

EDRS PRICE
EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS
Communication Skills; Competency Based Education; Constructivism (Learning); Context Effect; Creative Thinking; Cultural Awareness; *Education Work Relationship; Educational Research; Employer Attitudes; *Employment Potential; Entry Workers; Experiential Learning; High Schools; Integrated Curriculum; *Interpersonal Competence; *Job Skills; Learning Modules; Learning Theories; Lifelong Learning; Literature Reviews; Partnerships in Education; Problem Solving; Professional Continuing Education; School Business Relationship; Skill Development; Social Environment; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; Tech Prep; Technological Literacy; Vocational Education; Work Environment; *Work Experience Programs; Workplace Literacy

IDENTIFIERS
Australia; Canada; *Career and Technical Education; *Contextualized Instruction; High Schools That Work; United Kingdom; United States; Work Based Learning

ABSTRACT
Exploring the relationship between generic skills (sometimes called employability skills) and career and technical education (CTE) requires asking these three questions: Are such skills taught in CTE? Can they be taught? Do employers value them over technical skills. A literature review of 14 books, reports, and journal articles concludes that employers want their workers to possess general competency skills such as diligence, creative thinking, sociability, and cooperativosness. Reasons cited for the importance of these generic skills include workplace competitiveness, productivity concerns, and business growth. Educators emphasize the importance of contextual teaching and learning in both classroom and work-based situations to students' skill acquisition. Instructors recommend that student workplace experiences be well monitored to insure the greatest opportunity for learning because of variables such as number and quality. (AJ)
Generic Skills in
Career and Technical Education
Myths and Realities No. 22

Bettina Lankard Brown

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090
Generic Skills in Career and Technical Education

Generic Skills Cannot Be Learned through Traditional Instruction Methods

Current learning theories support the notion that learning occurs through an individual's interaction with others in the context of a real-world event. These theories support the teacher's role as one of facilitator, not lecturer or director. Learning occurs as students develop knowledge, construct meanings, and test out their theories in their community and social environments. Learning generic skills is no exception to this process. Students may learn techniques or practices that reflect a specific skill in the classroom, but they must be able to experience their application in the real world. To help students "learn in context," teachers must become master practitioners among student learners, gain personal exposure to the world of work, and adapt their teaching to support authentic learning (Giddens and Stasse 1999).

The importance of contextualizing the teaching of generic skills is evident when one considers how the culture in which the skill is practiced has a bearing on how it is demonstrated and what is viewed as appropriate (Leveson 2000). For example, in the United States, displaying a certain set of physical operations such as eye contact or good posture serves to illustrate good communication skills; however, in other cultures, displaying these behaviors may be considered acts of aggression or rudeness. "Effective communication requires adequate content knowledge of the subject being communicated and some appreciation for the context or culture in which the communicative act occurs" (Hyslop-Margson 2000, p. 62).

Difficulties in teaching generic skills occur, according to Hyslop-Margson, when instruction puts differing categories of concepts under a single identifier, such as "generic skills." To illuminate this point, Hyslop-Margson contends that it would be a mistake to place team spirit in the same category as the baseball skills of pitching, batting, and catching. The latter skills can be learned and improved by practicing a set of physical operations, whereas skills such as teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking must be learned in context and preferably linked to students' social worlds. "Indeed, in an educational forum advocating critical thinking, teachers share a responsibility to help students contextualize knowledge by discussing the historical, social, and economic conditions from which it emerges" (Hyslop-Margson 2000, p. 64).

Drummond, Nixon, and Wiltshire (1998) offer several broad approaches to developing skills within the curriculum (p. 21):

- Integrate generic skills within the career-technical education curriculum
- Use free-standing modules that are not integrated into the curriculum, relying on the support of student tutors
- Initiate work placements or work-based projects that will help students to develop employment-related skills within the context of real-world situations

Employers Say They Want Workers Who Have Technical Skills: They Can Train for Employability

In a survey of 400 employers concerning their perceptions of workplace basic skills and competencies required for current and potential employees, the employers said that they want entry-level workers to possess employability skills rather than technology competencies. The
most important to these employers (rating over 92.6%) were basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, and interpersonal competencies; technology competencies and systems competencies rated the lowest at 54.5% and 52.8% respectively (Richens and McClain 2000). In another study, employers identified lack of soft skills (e.g. general social skills, calling if one is going to be late or absent, staying on the job despite frustrations, etc.) as the primary barrier to employment (Owen et al. 2000).

Additional support for the importance of "employability" skills was given by a panel of six business and industry officials who were interviewed to learn their perceptions of necessary skills of employees, the importance of employability skills, school-to-work transition, the national skill standards, and the need for a four-year college degree ("Interview with Business and Industry" 1997). All six employers identified "communication skills" as the primary skill that employers want. Specifically, employers want workers who have the ability to read for information, interact with customers, talk with customers, listen to other people, negotiate, write, and work well with others.

John F. Smith, Jr., president and chief executive officer of General Motors, says—

what young people need more than a four-year college degree are transferrable career skills. Education programs should focus on contextual learning, covering math, science, reading, and writing in a way that puts this knowledge in the context of what is needed on the job... and must give students a solid foundation in the basic skills required in all occupations. ("Interview with Business and Industry" 1997, p. 22)

In engineering, for example, communication skills are often considered more important than high-level mathematics, group work skills more important than academic individuality, and a commitment to lifelong learning and continuing professional development more important than a theoretical contribution to research-focused projects and development (Marsh 1998).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that employers want their workers to have the general skills that will enable them to show up for work; be on time; be diligent, thoughtful, and creative in performing their work duties; and, most important, possess the social skills that enable them to work well independently with other workers, in teams, and with the customers they serve. Increased competition in the workplace has only augmented the need for these skills as their absence can lead to loss of productivity, staff, and business. Most educators see the importance of being able to ground their teaching in the context of real-world situations so that students can not only learn how these skills are used in the workplace, but can practice their use among others and learn how to demonstrate them across a variety of settings. Finding ways to do this effectively is where the challenge lies. Students' contextual learning experiences must be well monitored to ensure that they are affording students their greatest opportunities for learning. As Guile (2002) notes, because workplace experiences vary, learning opportunities are not distributed equally across them. Thus, "work experience has often ended up affirming the idea that its main purpose is to assist young people to learn how to reproduce preexisting activities" (pp. 268-269).

References


Marsh, R. Re-Engineering the Engineering Degree Course. 1998. (ED 442 626)


Puel, D. J. "The Changing Roles of Vocational and Academic Education in Future High Schools." Paper presented at the Central Educational Science Research Institute, Beijing, China, October 4, 1999. (ED 434 242)


This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-001-001. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. Myths and Realities may be freely reproduced and are available at <http://ericavce.org/mr.asp>.
NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

☐ This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

☒ This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").