

Facing Reality & Making Connections

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“First I’ll give you the good news: out in the real world, you’ll find there is no such thing as Algebra...the bad news is that you’ll have to write more term papers than ever, only they’ll be called memos, reports, speeches, and briefs.” Bob McTeer, CEO of the Reserve Bank of Dallas, as he offered his commencement address to Texas Lutheran University.

Of course, as educators, we all know that in the real world, term papers eventually morph into memos, and algebra is evident in our bridges and architecture. In academics, the real world seems to have made a come-back. It is, unfortunately, a world full of bankruptcies, recession, and unemployment. According to Dr. Chris Chinien of UNEVOC, three overarching forces, globalization, technology, and demographic shifts, drive the modern workplace. These changes are so significant that they are transforming our economic and social landscape into a new and formidable reality. While the nineteenth and twentieth centuries prepared individuals for an economy that thrived on agriculture and manufacturing, the emphasis in the twenty-first century focuses on process and information. According to the Census Bureau’s projected job growth between 1998 and 2008, the job outlook involves positions in technology, law, and healthcare.

The effects of these shifts are apparent on global, national, and local levels, and they have serious implications for our economies, for our workers, and, perhaps more than ever, for our students. With the recent recession and the record number of workers finding themselves unemployed, community college instructors face many challenges. Among them is the question of how we can best help our students gain and keep employment in this new economic landscape.

An employer’s success today depends upon the ability to survive continual change. The differences between the economy of yesterday and today can be summed up in one word—adaptability. Under the old manufac-

turing guidelines, employers looked for individuals who possessed certain skills and knew specific information. Under new guidelines set in the information age, employers are now looking for individuals who can find, synthesize, manage, and deliver information. As community colleges prepare students to enter the workforce, this shift necessitates an expanded focus. While it may have once been sufficient to teach proficiency in a technical skill, today's economy dictates that skill sets are broadened to include "soft" or "transferable" skills (also referred to as "professional" or "workplace" skills). These skills include, among others, a heavy emphasis on communication, teamwork, the right attitude, and flexibility.

While these skills may have once been thought of as professional or managerial, they are now demanded for most employees across varying fields in virtually all positions. In a recent Teaching-Learning Center and grant-sponsored workshop, Human Resource Representative Stephanie Williams of M & F Bank remarked that the business world can "always train candidates to do what [they] need them to do. [Businesses] cannot train [employees] to exhibit professional skills." Translated, employers expect potential candidates to arrive for an interview already in possession of these soft skills. Business and industry leaders are seeking employees who can already communicate effectively, compute accurately, think and react skillfully. This demand reflects what we have already witnessed over the past several years: economic shifts are demanding a better-prepared workforce, possessing all the technical, academic, and professional skills needed to get the job done well.

In response to this demand, many businesses and individuals have turned to local community colleges. Record numbers of students have returned to school in hopes of fine-tuning or revamping their skills. These students believe that further education will allow them to be more competitive applicants in an overwhelming pool of qualified potential employees. Duke Hospital, one of the areas largest employers, now receives over 800 resumes in a single week. How can we help our students to compete among hundreds of other highly qualified applicants? Our mission statement at Durham Technical Community College

outlines our responsibility in teaching students how they can prepare to meet the challenges of an evolving workplace. We are charged to “offer education and training opportunities that enhance and upgrade workers’ skills necessary to meet the challenges of a changing workforce.”

Educators have often embraced the idea of Lindeman’s life-long learner. It now appears that the business world is openly embracing the very same idea. Jack Welsh, the CEO of General Electric, believes that “When the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, the end is in sight.” If we do not teach our students how to adapt to new situations and exhibit the skills now necessary for economic opportunity, we are setting them up for an end plagued by failure.

Businesses are telling us that the ability to adapt to new situations is essential for new employees and that soft or transferable skills are what give applicants the competitive advantage in the hiring process. The reality of our new economy is that most individuals will change careers several times throughout their professional lives; it makes sense that transferable skills will be necessary as they move from career to career. Once we acknowledge the importance of teaching these transferable skills to our students, we are faced with a new challenge: How do we maintain our course curriculum and ensure the development of these soft skills?

The answer to this question is revealing itself in a less complicated way than we had originally anticipated. As we began to research how we could implement soft skills into a Developmental Reading 090 and an English 111 course, we were struck by the simplicity of honing and reinforcing these skills. Above all, we wanted to preserve our current course objectives and teach our assigned curriculum while maintaining an atmosphere of academic freedom. We discovered that in many cases, we already promote the development of these skills by default in our classroom activities.

As we continue to teach, maintain, and meet our course objectives, some of these soft skills are presently included in the curriculum by circumstance. Our group work, for instance, encourages students to learn to

work well with others. Oral presentations and problem-based learning, which are regularly included in our lessons, necessitate the development of communication and problem-solving skills. The skills learned during these activities are rarely the focus of what we are doing; however, it may enhance their development and, ironically, the material we are teaching, to broaden our lessons by including these skills as specific objectives.

As much as we hate to admit it, there is often a disconnect between the skills that we attempt to teach in our classrooms and our students' perceptions of those activities' relevance to their future goals. Rather than viewing the learning process as a foundation for their future, all too often students see it as one more hoop to jump through before getting to where they want to go.

We understand how the tasks we ask our students to perform provide a foundation for later endeavors, but we could be doing a better job of helping students see the connections. Ironically, students have been searching for these connections all along. Our own students have often asked us how what we are doing in class is relevant to the real world. To be honest, we used to stumble on our answers. We'd tell them feebly, "learning this will make you a better person," yet somewhere in the back of our minds we were left with a nagging little thought that we didn't really have a concrete answer for them. For example, while we often put our students in groups and ask them to complete certain tasks, we hadn't traditionally asked them to think about the dynamics within the group.

By asking our students to evaluate their own role in the group, we ask them to review soft skills on a conscious level. When we included an oral presentation component, we rarely asked students to make a conscious connection between the material and the soft skills they learned while preparing their presentations. By videotaping their presentations and asking them to complete self-evaluations, we are reinforcing soft skills and asking students to assess their current skill levels. These self-reflective activities draw critical connections for them; our students begin to link our course objectives to their own personal and professional growth.

By incorporating critical thinking skills concerning the development of soft skills during our current activities, we help our students begin to draw connections between these skills and their future economic opportunities. By teaching our students to recognize process, we are teaching them the soft skills they need in order to survive. In our own experience, this has also been met with a reinvestment on the student's part. By connecting our classrooms to the real world, we not only increase our students' chances of success and witness a renewed effort with definite goals; we also increase our own credibility.

When we started this project, we wanted to further incorporate soft skills into our current course curriculums while maintaining the predetermined course objectives. We knew we needed to illustrate the connection between what we already do in our classrooms and what our students will encounter in the workplace. Our goal over the course of the semester has been to explore various methods of teaching students to "present themselves" effectively. The outline of our project, included below, shows how easily these soft skills can be applied using a preexisting course outline while meeting current course objectives. In this project, our goals were to:

- * Illustrate a link between the workplace and the classroom;
- * Demonstrate the relationship between course objectives and the eventual workplace (logical reasoning, audience awareness, critical evaluation and analysis, and problem-solving in this case);
- * Show possible adaptations of concepts; and
- * Develop ideas that can be adapted and used in other courses and in various disciplines.

We originally piloted our project in an English 111 course. We devised a unit centered on job-preparedness and it is working as the basis for the traditional core requirements of this writing-intensive course.

Ultimately, English 111 has been adapted in five stages. The five stages are summarized below:

Stage 1: Making Connections

- * The class is introduced to “workplace skills” and the grant project “Presenting Yourself.” [Funds available through the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Act of 1998 allowed a team of instructors to develop a pilot program introducing students to presentation skills.]
- * The class will take a short version of the MBTI and explore possible career interests/options based on their results.
- * A modified diagnostic (a preexisting requirement for the course) is given. The writing assignment asks students to reflect and respond to their current characteristics, their skills assessment (MBTI), their potential professions and the skills (including soft skills) required by those professions. The last part of the diagnostic asks students to relate these skills to English 111 objectives and their goals for the course.

Stage 2: Exploring Connections

- * Assignment for Paper One: Students will pick an article/essay to analyze and critique concerning a potential problem or challenge in a potential workplace.
- * Assignment for Paper Two: Students will explore the different points of view regarding this workplace issue including possible solutions to the problem.
- * Assignment for Paper Three: Students will collect, analyze, and summarize at least ten credible sources in the field dealing with their selected topics.
- * Assignment for Paper Four: Students will create and defend their own solutions/alternatives to the research problems/topics.
- * Assignment for Final Portfolio and Presentation: Students will present and defend their research. They will focus on both written and spoken communication. PowerPoint presentations or acceptable visuals are required. Students must submit a final portfolio.

Stage 3: Evaluating Yourself

- * Students will informally present the first drafts of Paper One on a self-selected workforce problem/challenge.
- * These presentations will be used as the benchmark for current skills assessment and they will be used again later in the course for self-assessment.
- * Videotaped presentations will be reviewed by instructors, and then placed in the library on reserve with instructor feedback for students to view when they are asked to complete their self-evaluations.

Stage 4: Learning to Present Yourself

- * Instructors will use a one-week adaptable unit.
- * Lessons will focus on how to develop effective presentations and portfolios.
- * Individual students will formally review the informal presentations and self-assessments will be conducted.

Stage 5: Presenting Yourself

- * A review of presentation skills will be conducted at the end of the semester.
- * Students will be given subsequent workdays for portfolios and presentations.
- * The final paper's solution to the workplace problem identified in the second paper will be presented formally.
- * The final presentations will be videotaped and reviewed for assessment.

The plan we have devised is a work in progress. We do not claim to have all the answers, but we are proud of the fact that that we are trying to address the concerns of our students, our college mission, and our local employers. In the early stages, we hoped to foster further discussion concerning the need, impact, and methodology of teaching essential soft skills to a student population that is preparing to enter a rapidly changing economy. We now feel it is important that we help our students

understand the relationship between future opportunities and soft skills. We need to help them understand that there will be jobs in the future for those who have achieved the necessary credentials and possess the essential soft skills demanded by employers.

During the traditional job interview, our students have 10-30 seconds to make a first impression. They will rarely receive a second chance to impress their potential employers. While we cannot offer them second chances at their first impressions, we can offer them several chances to perfect their future first impression. Within the safety of our classrooms, we can help our students understand what it means to present themselves to future employers through self-reflection and feedback in a more open and less competitive environment than they may later encounter. By acknowledging the life-long learner as a necessity, not only in our classrooms but in our workplaces as well, we are trying to guarantee our success through theirs.

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