

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students
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Center



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

DEEPER LEARNING RESEARCH SERIES | FEBRUARY 2015

LET'S GET REAL:

DEEPER LEARNING AND THE POWER OF THE WORKPLACE

By Nancy Hoffman



While the phrase “college and career readiness” pervades current policy debates about high school improvement, “career readiness” often seems like an afterthought, tacked on as if to suggest that an academic, college-prep course of study—the real priority of most recent school reforms—will automatically produce better job prospects.

In the United States, we tend to assume that young people should become educated and then go to work, as though the two were entirely separate stages of life. But this dichotomy blinds us to the fact that work itself can be a powerful means of education. Indeed, the workplace is where many young people become most engaged in learning high-level skills and content, insofar as work gives them opportunities to apply academic subject matter to real-world problems.

Moreover, the workplace often pushes adolescents to grow up, challenging them to conduct themselves appropriately, regulate their own behavior, follow difficult assignments through to completion, work in teams, solve unscripted problems, and communicate effectively with colleagues of differing ages and backgrounds.

In short, the workplace is an excellent place for young people to develop the range of academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities that are referred to, collectively, as “deeper learning.”

This paper argues that the current discussion about deeper learning in the nation’s high schools ought to be reframed, in order to acknowledge that career readiness isn’t just an outcome of the K-12

curriculum but a process—often overlapping with academic studies—through which young people learn deeply and prepare for working life.

PUTTING THE CAREER IN “COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS”

YOUTH EXPERIENCE IN THE LABOR MARKET

The recent recession had an inordinately heavy impact on the young, especially young people of color, youth from low-income backgrounds, and youth who have either dropped out of high school or graduated without clear plans for further training or education.

Over the last decade and a half, the youth labor market has plummeted to levels not seen since the end of the Great Depression, and it appears to be recovering slowly, if at all. In 2000, 44 percent of U.S. teens were in the labor market; by 2011, the figure had dropped to 24 percent. And for urban, low-income teens of color, the odds of having a job—any job at all—now stand at roughly 10 percent. Further, among young people lucky enough to find paid employment, work

tends to be sporadic and limited to the service economy, with first jobs paying much lower wages than in the past. In 1980, food and personal service categories (e.g., cooks, cashiers, waiters, hair and beauty workers, home care aides) accounted for 15 percent of youth employment; today, they account for 27 percent.

As a result, large numbers of young people—and a majority of those from low-income backgrounds—are unable to land starter jobs, which would have allowed them to gain initial work experience, earn some money, and feel the pride that comes with a paycheck. In the past, it was common for new high school and college graduates to have already had significant exposure to the workplace, its culture, and its demands. But today, growing numbers of students leave school without having any real job experience at all—and the less experience they have, the less likely they are to land a job in the future.

Given that fewer and fewer young people are able to find initial work experience on their own, it has become more important than ever for educators and business leaders to introduce teens to the workplace, help them learn about the range of work options they can pursue, and give them opportunities to develop work-related skills and knowledge that will allow them to gain a foothold in the labor market. Until school reformers take “career readiness” as seriously as “college readiness,” teens will continue to experience leaving school as a sudden shock, rather than a smooth transition.

WORK AND THE MATURATION OF ADOLESCENTS

However, providing teenagers with exposure to the workforce isn't just an economic necessity; it also provides a critical opportunity for them to grow up.

In recent years, leading psychologists—Robert Halpern, most prominently—have argued persuasively that the nation's high schools are failing to engage adolescents in ways that respond to their developmental needs. As Halpern points out, many young people find school to be terribly boring, and it is not because boredom comes naturally to teenagers. A wealth of evidence suggests that many apparently disengaged students are, in fact, lively and engaged thinkers in their lives outside of school. Often, students who seem listless and uninterested in math or social studies turn out to be self-taught experts in computer programming, civil war history, music, or some other field of their own choosing, which they pursue with passion

and commitment. School may fail to grab them, but they certainly are looking for things to grab onto, and which can help them define themselves as adults.

In order to mature, young people need to participate in activities that take them out of their comfort zones, challenge them, place them among adult workers in authentic settings, and ask them to perform. We can achieve this and better support the transition to working life, Halpern asserts, if schools mix in-school learning with out-of-school, work-based experiences that gradually increase as students advance toward the completion of high school.

INITIATING YOUNG PEOPLE INTO WORKING LIFE: THE VIEW FROM THE ALPS

Switzerland provides perhaps the most compelling example of an educational system that thoughtfully integrates academic and work-based learning. Certainly, the U.S. differs from that country in many ways, and it would make little sense for us to try to import the Swiss model. However, we might have something to learn from their efforts to promote deeper learning through exposure to the workplace.

The Swiss Vocational Education and Training (VET) system includes fields such as dance, music, child care, IT, elder care, and engineering, as well as traditional trades, banking, insurance, and advanced manufacturing. Roughly 30 percent of Swiss companies host 16- to 19-year-old apprentices who do everything an entry-level employee would do, under the wing of credentialed company trainers. Students get paid an average monthly starting wage of around \$700, rising to around \$1,200 by their final year.

Young people rotate among three learning sites—the workplace, a training organization that focuses on the given sector, and school—over a three- or four-year apprenticeship period. Learning is highly personalized, and students are encouraged to consider their options for further education or different careers. Further, the system does not deliver narrow occupational training but provides young people with a well-rounded education, combining classroom instruction in academic subjects with carefully supervised participation in the workforce, giving them opportunities to solve real-world problems, interact with adult workers, take on challenging assignments, and reflect on their own progress over time.

In short, the Swiss model amounts to a truly deep learning experience, showing that the classroom and the workplace can complement each other in powerful ways, providing young people with much-needed opportunities to ease into the workforce and transition into adulthood, while also preparing them to go on to higher education, if they choose to do so.

WORK-BASED DEEPER LEARNING IN THE U.S.: PROBLEMS AND PROMISES

No education system in the U.S. features the length, depth, and specificity of Switzerland's VET. But this country does boast some excellent examples of schools that seamlessly integrate academics and career preparation and that treat the workplace as an important site for deeper learning.

EXEMPLARY MODELS

Impressive career education programs include up-to-date vocational high schools and centers, career academies, High Tech High Schools, Project Lead the Way, Big Picture Schools, Cristo Rey schools, and early college schools. Each provides applied learning related to the labor market, from programs linked to industries (e.g., finance, veterinary technology, information technology, and health care), to individualized multiyear mentorships, to an engineering curriculum that starts students on design thinking in the elementary grades. And each provides opportunities for students to engage in problem solving, teamwork, communicating with diverse colleagues, and other aspects of deeper learning.

Systemic statewide approaches are also being developed that aim to provide much larger numbers of students with workplace experiences. For example, Linked Learning aspires to enroll every California high school student in a career/academic interdisciplinary curriculum with pathways into postsecondary education. And the eleven state members of the Pathways to Prosperity Network, directed by Jobs for the Future in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education, are doing significant work to create career pathways in grades 9-14.

Collectively, these models represent a growing movement to rethink the role of career preparation in the high school curriculum and create integrated educational models that engage adolescents in learning advanced academic content through a combination of classroom activities and work-based experiences. Moreover, all of these models

understand the workplace to be a powerful site for deeper learning.

THE EMPLOYER INTERMEDIARY CHALLENGE

A major challenge in designing work-based learning opportunities is encouraging employers, employer associations, and workforce nonprofits to provide apprenticeships and internships. The larger the number of students, the more difficult it becomes to make workplace experiences available. Further, teachers and school leaders need time and capacity to develop these experiences while attending to their other responsibilities.

Intermediary groups—such as workforce development boards, community foundations, and public sector organizations—can help states and school districts set up programs and broker relationships among high school educators, community colleges, and employers.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To scale up existing opportunities for work-based deeper learning, federal and state policies should incentivize:

- Employers to take young people into workplaces for meaningful learning experiences
- Educators to implement work-based experiences as a means of learning deeply
- Intermediary organizations to translate between educators and employers and provide the infrastructure that makes collaboration possible

Incentives may involve, among other measures, subsidies, tax credits, training levies, vendor contract requirements, teacher externships, investments in career pathways, expanded learning time, internship credit, state resources for Workforce Investment Boards, and new career education programs based on regional labor market trends. These approaches will require careful attention to principles of educational quality, with an emphasis on deeper learning.

Every young person should have the opportunity to gain the knowledge, skills, and competence needed to obtain meaningful work. This will require a substantial rethinking of American high schools. Learning to work, learning about work, and experiencing a productive workplace—all powerful frames for deeper learning—should be integral to secondary-level education.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy. We work to achieve the promise of education and economic mobility in America for everyone, ensuring that all low-income, underprepared young people and workers have the skills and credentials needed to succeed in our economy. Our innovative, scalable approaches and models catalyze change in education and workforce delivery systems.

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Students at the Center—a Jobs for the Future initiative—synthesizes and adapts for practice current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Our goal is to strengthen the ability of practitioners and policymakers to engage each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college, career, and civic life. This project is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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