

Helping CTE Students L(earn) to Their Potential

CAREER AND TECHNICAL
EDUCATION IS IDEALLY
SUITED TO TEACHING
STUDENTS THE SOFT
SKILLS NEEDED TO
SUCCEED IN THE 21ST
CENTURY WORKPLACE.

A recent survey of 400 LEADING AMERICAN CORPORATIONS by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills notes that managers consider 70 percent of high school graduates lacking professionalism and work ethic skills. A 2005 survey by the American Society for Training and Development reached similar conclusions.

Ever since the education secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS 1992), American corporations have been imploring schools to better prepare graduates for the world of work. Along with an obvious need for a solid foundation in SCANS skills such as core academics, the need for good interpersonal and personal skills such as responsibility, self-esteem and integrity were also emphasized. These latter qualities are widely described as "soft" skills because they tend to be tricky to scientifically measure and are believed to be even trickier to somehow attempt to teach.

Processing Experience

Teachers commonly express frustration with what they perceive to be a widespread lack of emotional intelligence among high school students and wonder to what extent important employability skills can actually be taught. In order to make real progress with students needing to develop transferable employability skills, the students must first be ready to consider the worth of having such skills. The best way to do this is by facilitating student reflections on learning. In fact, CTE teachers must help their students learn to process a range of human experiences that they will inevitably encounter in the world of work.

Teachers spend considerable amounts of

time helping certain students work through negative circumstances. But beyond such individual counseling, students should be collectively encouraged and empowered to find the keys to interpersonal and personal success. It is daunting to consider exactly how to teach students to be on time, cooperative or honest, but students can be guided to better handle situations that parallel routine workplace challenges.

The Association of Experiential Education (AEE) offers useful educational insights and research about how to constructively nourish such student learning through direct experience and focused reflection (www.aee.org). Using direct, hands-on experience to increase learning is certainly valued by career and technical educators; but the degree to which CTE students focus on reflection, or clarify values, seems to depend largely on the personal strengths of each teacher. Should the "unwritten curriculum" within our CTE programs (*i.e.*, emotional intelligence skill building) become more sophisticated and deliberate? The real-world atmosphere of CTE programs also provides a realistic context for developing such transferable skills. It is possible to enhance student learning of such skills without using the highly sophisticated techniques of AEE practitioners if we, at least, heed their advice on how to ensure such learning optimally occurs. CTE teachers can readily facilitate this in numerous ways.

Expanded Hook and Closure Lesson Activities

It is commonly assumed that students will eventually figure out the meaning behind what happens in the world around them. Unlike times gone by when the study of philosophy and logic were central to the curriculum, 21st century students are looking for balanced

Edward Bronson

is the assistant director of career and technical education for the Madison-Oneida BOCES in Verona, New York. He can be contacted at ebronson@moboces.org.

guidance from a mature perspective in order to properly frame their own analytical abilities and to formulate proactive responses to daily challenges. CTE teachers are very busy making sure that students expand their knowledge and refine psychomotor skills. Beyond this, they should linger awhile on first stimulating student curiosity (the lesson plan hook) and then later on framing reflection (closure) regarding the potential importance of class activities for future careers.

There is an element of unpredictability in every lesson plan; this requires teachers to be nonjudgmental about weighing learning interactions that went particularly well, or not so well. The commotion of each day should not override a teacher's determination to constantly promote long-term employability concerns. It is time very well spent to talk honestly with students about how things are actually achieved in the world.

Teachers may ask students to discover such realizations on their own via writing in daily journals or completing some sort of daily self-assessment. Carefully organized group sessions with opportunities for constructive, democratic input by each class member can be an incredibly powerful means of reinforcing key employability skills relevant to future success. If your school has implemented graduation standards for exemplary conduct, post them and examine the elements.

Nonfiction Career Literature

There's an incredible amount of first-person, nonfiction literature that engages young readers in virtual workplace scenarios. Students can be assigned team responsibility for the discussion of single chapters if tackling the entire book within a short time period is simply too daunting. Socratic questioning of students by the teacher can help students identify professional mindsets that career professionals from all walks of life are bound to encounter in the workplace. The opinionated perspective of a career author can occasionally exceed the parameters of what a CTE teacher would necessarily want to tackle alone. Debating the words of a published career author can easily initiate substantial class discussions about what it likely means to be a successful professional in virtually any field.

The Role of Guest Speakers

Many students express entrepreneurial ambitions and dream of owning a business that could make them rich. Inviting craft professionals or business and industry contacts from your career area to speak with your students can generate amazing discussions among students. Students will be intrigued to listen to someone with substantial real-world credentials. It's a real bonus if this guest speaker also happens to be a school alumnus; students yearn to hear the success stories of graduates they can relate to. Consider the possibility of hearing the guest speaker's presentation in the actual work environment. Class discussions after a guest speaker has left can readily include identifying key workplace competencies that led to his or her success. Discussions may also include such items

STUDENTS OFTEN SEEM TRAPPED BY THEIR OWN NEGATIVE SELF-TALK, AND UNEXAMINED NEGATIVE BELIEFS CAN SABOTAGE ANY POSSIBILITY OF MAKING PROGRESS ON SO MANY LEVELS.

as priority planning and different management styles. Students could be asked if they would want to work for that person and why, or why not?

Cross-Program Project Collaborations

CTE campuses are microcosms of the world at large. There are countless opportunities for students to share their relative expertise in each program area with other CTE students when working on collaborative projects. At the Madison-Oneida BOCES in Verona, New York, seniors develop extensive business plans that contain components beyond the scope of normal program emphasis. Therefore, it is not unusual for equine students to meet with pre-engineering students to help them with detailed

construction plans for a state-of-the-art stable facility. Cosmetology students, likewise, consult with carpentry students on building codes for renovating a salon, or with graphic arts students on designing advertising. This sort of active, cooperative learning is promoted by the results of educational research that has shown that such learning is realistic and retained. It also perfectly replicates the sort of interdepartmental collaboration used in thriving corporate environments.

Positive Psychology

There is a whole new area of psychology that is devoted to the serious study of human behavior from a positive perspective. Students often seem trapped by their own negative self-talk, and unexamined negative beliefs can sabotage any possibility of making progress on so many levels. CTE teachers need to help students dissect self-limiting thoughts that they may harbor yet rarely fully comprehend. Those who succeed in their careers tend to have affirmative, engaging and enthusiastic characteristics.

Teachers should help students to identify current work approaches with positive characteristics that are being effectively used by business organizations. One example is appreciative inquiry. With its precepts of collecting instructive work stories and identifying positive organizational results that can be equally applied in the classroom, it represents a new wave of organizational practice that identifies and promotes what is most constructive for increasing both individual and collective earning power.

CTE is perfectly situated to lead educational reform as never before in our history. By making students responsible for their own learning and by addressing all aspects of educational achievement with them, our graduates will not only be ready to tackle the challenges of careers yet unnamed, they will truly master destiny at a level that secondary students could never have even dared to imagine. Students need to believe they can do it and do it well. We are here to help them show the whole world how. ■