

# Re-Seeing in the Mirror of Creative Critical Reflection: Unifying the Identity through the Transformative in the Vocational Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay examines the practical application of transformative education in a vocational classroom where students learn how to write a resume. The construction of a new resume in this classroom calls on students to reexamine their previous work history in order to make connections between their past, their present, and their future. This reexamination also calls upon the student to critically reflect on the meaning and structure of their work history and, in the process, examine habits of mind and meaning perspectives which have previously defined them. When students successfully negotiate this process, they find a revised sense of identity, re-seeing themselves in their internal mirror. Their images of themselves take on new dimensions, and they feel more capable of completing their education and succeeding in their new career path.*

**Keywords:** *Critical Reflection, Employment, Identity, Interviewing Skills, Meaning Perspectives, Resume Writing, Transformative Learning*

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## INTRODUCTION

The transformative exists palpably in my vocational classroom. In a journal such as this, scholars and theorists often write and speak of the transformative as an abstraction, an idea which we pursue through study and examination. That suits such scholars and academics, as it should and must, but the vocational student has a different need, one that calls for the transformative as a life affirming and freedom giving enterprise. In response to that need, the transformative must come as an immediate, accessible, and tangible experience. Without that transformative reality, my students' vocational and heroic journey might falter even as it

reaches its fullest expression. If they don't find the transformative in the world within them, they may well miss the success they wanted to earn in the world outside them.

## ADULT VOCATIONAL STUDENTS

Adult vocational students come back to school to make a substantial difference in their lives. They come from jobs that deaden them and their future. Low paying service jobs, fast food and other restaurant employment, production lines, thankless retail positions, and a general lack of recognition have brought them quickly to the

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end of their career cul-de-sac: no benefits, no chance for advancement either in position or pay, and a sense of futility about their jobs and the life that surrounds them. Many stay in those blind ends, but the ones who enter vocational schools do so as an act of courage and of faith. They want to see and experience more in their lives and in their families' lives. Many come as the first person in their extended family to enter post-secondary education. Some come as the first in their family to finish secondary schooling. Almost all come to school to get more than a career change. They come to achieve a life beginning, a shift from all the paths they have known or have seen, from the meaning perspectives that have helped keep them where they have been. I learned this from them, from their repeated cries to serve in a position where it matters that *they* do the work and no one else. They have worked at jobs that anybody can do, they tell me, and now they want a career where they become somebody who matters. This sort of professional and personal shift needs to happen from within as well as from without. They can learn all the external, instrumental information they need and feel good about that knowledge, but this sort of renewal of life needs a transformative component, a revision of seeing and experiencing from within, a transformation of meaning perspectives and habits of mind, to make the outward achievement fully realized.

When these students come to my week-long, sixteen hour classes to work on their résumés in one and interviewing skills in the other, they often anticipate boredom and irrelevance. Résumés come as a new and, they suspect, unnecessary idea, and interviewing frightens them. Their previous anybody-jobs required no resume and little if anything in interviewing skills. If they could fill out an application, come to work sober and relatively on time, they could have the job. Tom, an older student, told me that he had done only "menial work" in the past as a janitor, so he assumed he had nothing to offer at the end of his studies but what he learned at school. He couldn't see or feel his own excellence, his own innate and demonstrable abilities

because his anybody-job world had given him a set of habits of mind about himself and his capabilities. These ways of seeing himself and his skills wouldn't help in his studies at school, and if he completed his studies, they wouldn't help him in his new career. In his essence, if he continued to feel like a menial worker and person, he would continue to expect menial work and a marginal life. Worst still, without his active awareness, he would ask for such work in his résumé and interviews.

## STUDENTS' STORIES

Students tell me any number of stories about how they have been treated in the past, almost always badly. In some cases, they open and close the business operation, balance the cash drawers, make bank deposits, hire, fire, and train other employees, and order and receive inventory. After all that effort and management responsibility, they still have minimal, non-management job titles like, "crew leader," "cashier," or "customer service representative," and they receive the kind of minimal salaries that reflect those titles. They work long and hard, make money for their employers, indeed the entire national economy, and they get paid something just above minimum wage. Rather typically these days, some of the workers get better titles, even Store Manager and the like, and become salaried employees. Their salaries might look reasonable at first glance, but they work unconscionable hours to do their job. As a salaried employee, they do not get paid for these nearly endless hours let alone receive the overtime pay they actually earn. That reduces their actual hourly pay to something even slightly lower than minimum wage. Otherwise, they get precious little by way of recognition from employers and supervisors. Their employers seem to assume that if they got any verbal or written recognition, they might expect some form of compensatory recognition. Indeed, their employers and supervisors often make clear how replaceable they are in their jobs no matter the cost and difficulty in replacing them.

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