Chapter L
Learning to Work and Working to Learn:
What We are Learning and How Technology and Assessment Can Help

Gary Brown
Washington State University, USA

Theron Desrosier
Washington State University, USA

Debbie Edwards
Washington State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The relationship between higher education and the world of work is complex and often characterized by a great deal of misperception, underscored by the recent press for accountability purportedly in response to reports of public dissatisfaction with the lack of transparency in institutions of higher education. This chapter explores the complex relationship between learning outcomes assessment, employer expectations, and traditional and emerging pedagogies. An approach used at Washington State University that uses assessment and technology as levers to help students and faculty bridge the real and the perceptual divide between learning in school and learning in the world of work is presented.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education, like K-12 at the beginning of the century, is now responding to increased attention to accountability. In addition to concerns about access and affordability, there is an increased focus on accountability for students' learning. In spite of the recognition of the value of diversity, the growing accountability pressures have encouraged adoption of standardized measures

that support comparisons among institutions. That press for comparisons is visible most notably in initiatives like the Volunteer System of Accountability (VSA) supported by key higher education professional organizations.

A large force behind the renewed focus on accountability is a concern that graduates are insufficiently prepared for the challenges of the coming century and the emerging global society (Owen, 2008). Nonetheless, pressures to overtly prepare students for future jobs are often looked upon with suspicion by parts of the faculty culture. At face value, the divide between higher education and the world of employers sometimes appears vast. In this chapter, we examine more than surface level understandings and demonstrate how the rift can be effectively mediated.

Teaching Goals, Learning Goals

Perhaps nowhere is the mismatch of goals more problematic than between faculty in higher education and their students. Angelo and Cross (1993) captured faculty perceptions in their well recognized "Teaching Goals Inventory," which was included in their seminal work, Classroom Assessment Techniques. In that work they published findings from their administration of surveys to thousands of four and two-year full and part-time faculty. Their research revealed that the two most commonly identified teaching goals faculty cited as the key foci of their individual courses were either discipline specific knowledge or critical thinking. Consistently lower in priority among all teaching populations were the numbers of faculty who identified "career preparation" as an essential teaching goal. (Only "liberal arts and academic values" consistently ranked as a lower priority.) In the decade and one half since that book came out, a variety of formal and informal studies have confirmed the most common purpose students identify for attending institutions of higher education is *career preparation* (Pryor, et al., 2006). The goal distinctions in Angelo's and Cross' inventory are invaluable for helping faculty deepen their reflective practice, but perhaps lost in the general discussion is the notion that career preparation needs to be, finally, the implicit if not explicit aggregate of all teaching goals because what employers, the global society, and individuals who aspire to enrich their lives requires, finally, are good learners. The dichotomy is ultimately false. When taught and learned well, critical reasoning subsumes discipline specific knowledge, liberal arts and academic values, and is precisely what defines career preparation and career success. One who learns to think critically becomes by habit and evolving disposition a lifelong learner. David Kearns (2000 in Doyle) notes, "Industry requires a workforce that can keep pace with technology—people who have the fundamental skills and an ability to continue learning." He says we "will need employees that can adapt, continue to learn, and keep pace with rapid developments" (p. v). Lett (1990) adds important specificity, arguing that we need graduates who "can share the process of discovery. The necessity to be interdisciplinary, coupled with the exponential explosion of information, demands that our students must sharpen their critical thinking skills more than ever before. They will need to evaluate data more effectively and more quickly." He qualifies his point, however, noting, "Unfortunately, we seldom formally teach or even identify these skills in the classroom" (p. 2). In other words, though learning how to learn is the best career and life preparation students can gain from their educations, communicating that message is easier said than done.

It has been that challenge, however, that has been at the center of the collaboration at Washington State University among Career Services, Student Employment, and the Center for Teaching, Learning, & Technology.

In this chapter, we first want to:

1. Establish and clarify the challenge.
2. Report the successes and challenges of one growing strategy for meeting that challenge