

An Employer Based Career Education Model

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IN THE way it has attempted to prepare the young for adult life, our public education system too often has posed an artificial barrier between learning and living. As James Coleman has noted, today's young people live in information-rich but experience-poor environments. This is especially true of the school environment in which reality and coping with reality have usually been "taught" through the reeducation of the outside world into synthetic, symbolic form.

Yet even the most artful synthesis, for all its mass efficiency, has limited effect. The fact remains that most people learn best (and like learning best) by performing useful tasks in real situations and by getting real rewards for those tasks.

The Employer Based Career Education (EBCE) concept is based on this assumption and is fitted to this style of learning. It is intended to remove the barriers between education and living—to demonstrate that in fact they are the same thing.

EBCE, so called because learning will take place at employment settings outside the locus of the school, is one of four different pilot models being tested nationally under the aegis of the National Institute of Education. Like the other models, EBCE is a test of one alternative approach to career education, a broad and ambitious concept incorporating all the kinds of education which have existed in our minds and practice: occupational training, preparation for higher schooling, political and social aware-

ness, self-awareness. Career education is a concept designed to treat as inseparable all the roles people must learn to assume in life: producer, consumer, learner, user of leisure time, member of the civic body.

Unlike the other three models, EBCE is geared exclusively to secondary students. EBCE test sites, under the supervision of nearby regional educational laboratories, are located in Oakland, California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Charleston, West Virginia; and Tigard, Oregon. And although each reflects the unique flavor of its locale and personnel, all share these basic characteristics:

- Student learning activities take place at employment settings and other community sites entirely outside the secondary school.
- The model is guided by an advisory board consisting primarily of employers but often including union representatives, students, parents, and school personnel.
- The model's curriculum is individualized and competency based. Students, in large measure, demonstrate what they have learned by what they can do.
- The model utilizes a small staff to coordinate the learning activities of students, but the basic learning experiences are supplied by employers.
- EBCE students represent a cross section

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of students in the geographic area of the model site in terms of aspirations, backgrounds, and general capabilities.

- The model program will qualify the student for a high school diploma.

Favorable Features

Those of us associated with EBCE research see in the model these favorable features:

- The total community in which the student lives is recognized as the best learning resource. The various tasks of daily community life are the foundation of the curriculum.

- Students intolerant of vicarious learning have the benefit of "experiential" learning.

- All learning experiences have to have clear relevance to career aspirations.

- Students have direct exposure to a wide variety of job opportunities available in particular career areas. For example, a student might be made aware of both the vertical and horizontal range of occupations in the transportation industry.

- By making work and community settings the sites of learning, EBCE shows both students and their adult associates that education and life responsibilities are inseparable.

- Education is not delegated to a special societal group, for example, educators; adults in the total community are responsible for the education of the young in a direct way.

- In order to help students learn, adult workers who have learning facilitator roles are forced to deepen their own knowledge, occupational competency, and communication skills.

- In adult work associates, students have a great variety of behavioral models to evaluate and, in various degrees, to adopt or to reject.

- EBCE may influence both employers and employees to see supplemental educational activities as an integral part of the learning that takes place on the job. Thus, learning opportunities for adult workers might expand at work sites. For example, one can envision students and adults together studying the relative

strengths of graphics versus writing, and their interrelationships, in making reports. The fallout of such activity ranges from better technical reports to a better understanding of the uses of media.

Yet if the potential benefits of EBCE are great, so is the magnitude of the EBCE task: to develop within three to five years a body of experience and research data that would document the feasibility of an entire alternative secondary education system, harnessed to the career education ideal and drawing its curriculum from the life of the adult community.

And curriculum is the key research concern of the model, even though the comparative cost of the system, child labor laws, transportation, and accreditation are also important considerations.

Basically, EBCE assumes that the raw materials for an entire secondary curriculum exist in the work and leisure setting of the adult community. Furthermore, it assumes that those resources can be directly "refined" and utilized by students to learn the kinds of things that will allow them to live satisfying lives, occupationally and personally. Thus, it is being designed to test those assumptions.

Concerns

As the design is created, EBCE personnel are coming to grips with several concerns.

First, what should the EBCE secondary curriculum be? Answering this question is an arduous task which must draw on the experience and insight of all concerned: employers, parents, students, educators. At the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory we have used the initial inputs of these persons to design a two-part curriculum for our Tigar site.

The first part consists of eight major goal areas within which each student will participate in the design of his individual learning program. The specific objectives

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and learning activities to achieve them will be based directly upon the employment and community experiences the student chooses. The second part consists of 20 basic competencies which all students must master. These basic competencies represent an attempt to define a set of performances which, at a minimum, any person must acquire to live successfully. They include such life skills as obtaining and managing credit, administering first aid, and securing a job. All 20 competencies have been identified by employers, parents, and students involved in the pilot program.

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The specific means by which the student will acquire and demonstrate these competencies will draw heavily on the employment and community environment. However, both the goal areas and the competencies must be regarded as tentative starting points. The program experiences of each student, which will be documented in case study form, will ultimately shape the definition of EBCE "core" goals and competencies.

In fact, this is a second key concern of the project: to identify the ways in which various traditional "disciplines" appear in work situations. For example, writing is one of the goal areas. In 50 case studies, then, we will look for the ways in which students going through various work and community experiences had to deal with written communications. If it is found that these students encountered technical reports via letters and memos as the most common form of writing, the data would have clear implications for EBCE (and public school) curriculum design.

In addition, the discovery of patterns in which various disciplines appear in business, civic, or leisure settings would contribute to the design of truly interdisciplinary curriculum. Such a curriculum would go far beyond the integrated studies of the present

school environment. In the school, such learning experiences are integrated synthetically by teachers. In a real setting, the integration has greater credibility because it exists within the tasks being performed. In addition, students themselves analyze the interrelationship of disciplines required by work.

Just as it must identify what disciplines appear in work and how they interface, EBCE research also must identify the ways in which the various disciplines are learned in conjunction with and within the work setting. Data on such learning patterns will be useful in plotting the most effective sequence of learning experiences. This implies that the curriculum design of EBCE will be primarily a process rather than the creation of content in the form of materials and simulated activities. Understanding of this process will be stressed in the training of adults to assist students in using jobs and community activities as learning experiences. This training has great potential for enriching the jobs and community involvement of adults and for stimulating their own learning interests.

And, a final concern: the EBCE project must discover ways of helping youngsters draw directly on the learning resources of the total community with a minimum of mediation by adults. From an employer viewpoint, unnecessary time spent in such mediation represents a drag in the efficiency of workers. For the student, it perpetuates dependency and insulation from the beneficial impact of direct experience.

Curriculum and the work in which it exists must be mutually reinforcing. If learning does not mesh smoothly with work and community life, employers and other adults will abandon it. This implies clearly that the EBCE project must include development of student skills in information finding, self-directed learning, and decision making. Incorporating these skills into a curriculum based in employment and community settings could be a major step toward returning to students the kind of experiential learning process the schools eliminated 50 years ago. □

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