

Connecting Academics to the Real World

By Deb Rowe



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TWO CONCEPTS—ACADEMICS AND EXPERIENCE—HAVE A VAST IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING.

Herschbach (2001) opined that meaningful education connects what is learned in the classroom to the real world. Cummins (2001) stated that aligning new ideas to familiar events builds on prior knowledge. In practice, teachers who provide a framework of understanding instruct students who participate in the learning process with more clarity and enthusiasm.

Students need real-world connections to develop critical thinking skills that they will need to be successful after high school. Many secondary students say that they want to go to college; however, few can explain what they must do to get into college. Penn (1997) found that

high school students could not specify educational or career goals that would be relevant for their adult lives. Penn also found that students who graduate from high school may find themselves in a world that is unfamiliar and unplanned. After high school they enter the world of work, attend college, or some combination of the two. For many, these decisions are left to chance.

Jarvis (2006) stated that 69 percent of adults would have demanded more information about their jobs prior to accepting a position if they knew what was expected of them. Like many high school graduates, these adults began their working lives by chance. Osipow (1983) reasoned that individuals make poor choices when they are unable to maintain the same

pace as their cohorts. Super, Crites, Gribbons, and Lohnes (as cited in Jarvis, 2003) concluded that competent planning early in adolescence encourages realistic education and vocational choice.

The Real Game, California

The blending of academic and career education courses may lead students to become better prepared for life after high school. An instructional tool developed to blend academic coursework and career education is The Real Game, California (TRGC)—a career education curriculum that provides students with academic rigor, connects lessons to the real world, and can be utilized in any classroom. The curriculum incorporates students' prior "... knowledge, skills and attitudes, and cannot be learned entirely through traditional academic teaching modes," (Cartwright, Jarvis, Keeley, King and Redpath, 2006, p. 9). The curriculum teaches students the importance of being prepared to meet career goals and becoming lifelong learners (Cartwright *et al.*). "The learning objectives and performance measures of TRGC have been deliberately aligned with academic learning standards," (Gangitano, 2004, p. 1); therefore, concepts may be delivered independently or concurrently in all academic or elective courses. The TRGC curriculum simulates real work situations in order to holistically engage learners. Students obtain the skills necessary to understand concepts common to living in an adult world. These skills include, but are not limited to, budgeting, housing, lifelong learning, choosing a career and living in one's community. Due to its col-

laborative nature, this curriculum may inspire students to learn more (Miller, 1999).

Studies of The Real Game

Barns, Edwards, Killeen and Watts (1999) evaluated The Real Game series (TRG) curriculum in the United Kingdom. They studied 546 students from 16 schools (the participants were in grades seven through 10). Most schools partially implemented the curriculum in various delivery methods, usually one hour a day for a total of 12 hours (full implementation requires 25–30 hours). Using the “World of Work” (WOW) survey as the tool to evaluate student perceptions, Barns *et al.* found gains in career knowledge ($M=3.07$) but limited gains in the career beliefs of students ($M=2.50$). The survey showed the most positive results of how students’ opinions changed on the pre- and post-opinion surveys. Of the 30 survey questions, seven showed a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.0001$ level, two at the $p < 0.001$ level, and four at the $p < .05$ level. Barns *et al.* stated that the results showed that TRG contributed to the career development knowledge of students.

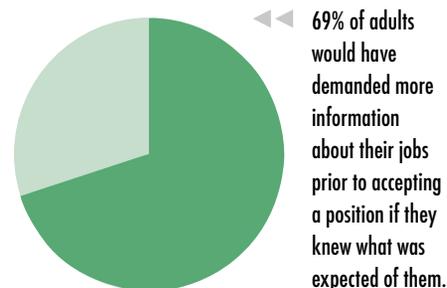
The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2003) in London piloted three versions of TRG in 43 schools and developed criteria to evaluate the curriculum beginning in the spring of 2003. Information was obtained from postal surveys, telephone follow-ups, focus groups, and TRG coordinators. Conclusions were stated in narrative form and included percentages of responses. The top five conclusions were (a) 28 percent of all schools surveyed were using TRG curriculum; (b) 62.5 percent of the schools offer TRG in years eight and nine by tutors; (c) 44 percent of the schools have adopted the curriculum and continue to use it; (d) 91.7 percent of the special education students, 66.6 percent of the gifted students, and 85.7 percent of all other students use TRG; and (e) 40 percent of the teachers were trained to successfully

use the curriculum and had adequate resources. Recommendations were offered to improve the implementation of TRG.

Dimmitt (2007) used qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate TRG series in America. Data included the WOW survey, the Secondary Outcomes survey, and the Attitudinal School Engagement questionnaire. Dimmitt evaluated three outcomes: (a) participants gained knowledge about the world of work, (b) participation increased students’ recognition of academics’ relevance to future plans, and (c) career development gains validated current research that supported academic achievement. Students from 12 Massachusetts schools in grades one through 12 participated in this study. Using a paired sample *t*-test, results showed that pre-test scores were not significantly different between the control and treatment groups ($p=.055$), while post-test scores were statistically significantly ($p < .000$).

The final analysis showed that the control group scores decreased ($M=9.76$ to $M=8.81$), while the treatment group increased ($M=10.71$ to $M=12.61$). Secondary outcomes, such as self-efficacy, were evaluated using an independent sample *t*-test, and results showed differences in pre- and post-test scores, though not statistically significant ($p=.156$). Future orientation was tested using five items on the WOW survey, and post-test scores were significantly different between groups ($p=.006$). Pro-social behavior included seven items on the WOW survey, and results on the post-test were significantly different between groups ($p=.007$).

Rowe (2007) participated in a pilot program of TRGC and conducted an evaluation of TRGC. The data included the WOW survey and shifts in student perception. The findings showed that statistically, the null hypothesis was rejected in five of 44 survey statements and accepted in 39 of 44 statements. Descriptively, there were 11 of 44 survey statements with a notable difference in the mean responses. Interestingly, there



was minimal to no shift in perception in the distribution of responses in 24 out of 44 survey statements. In sum, significant and notable shifts in opinion occurred in all three domains, in 9 of 11 goals, and in 12 of 44 statements. This investigation marked the first empirical examination of TRGC and extended educators’ understanding of students’ perceptions of the world of work.

Smith (2004) evaluated the use of two TRG programs (the Play Real Game [PRG] and the Get Real Game [GRG]) in 81 schools. The PRG finding showed that 90 percent of the teachers, 54 percent of the students and 90 percent of the parents rated the program as excellent, very good, or good. The GRG findings showed that 68 percent of the teachers, 42 percent of the students and 56 percent of the parents rated the program as excellent, very good, or good.

Program Description

Originally developed in 1994 by Bill Barry to provide real-world application for students in the classroom, TRG is utilized in 100,000 classrooms worldwide, as cited at www.realgame.org (2007). According to “TRGC Statewide Pilot Report” (2006), the adaptation of California’s version of TRG began in 2005. Curriculum changes were made by adding or removing sessions that best represented real life in California. The California Career Resource Network (CalCRN) utilized industry experts and educators to make changes to the program. CalCRN Executive Director Charley Cartwright was supported by an advisory committee

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co-chaired by Patrick Ainsworth, California Department of Education; Michele Alford-Williams, California Department of Rehabilitation; and Phil Jarvis, Canadian National Life Work Center.

In the 2005–2006 school year, CalCRN piloted TRGC in 18 schools and collected qualitative and quantitative data from each school. Educators from pilot sites attended a one-day training session and developed a site team that included students, parents, teachers, administrators and business partners. Teachers agreed to deliver the curriculum and provide online feedback to CalCRN throughout the program implementation. Upon completion of the pilot program, all participating sites were invited to attend a two-day debriefing, during which members from 15 sites shared information about their experiences in the classroom. Based on the pilot data, changes were made to the curriculum and the WOW survey to increase consistency and improve the alignment with learning objectives and other guidelines (TRGC pilot report, 2006).

Focusing on the relevance to real life, the High Five Principles—created by a Canadian team of career development leaders headed by Helen Hackett for the 1994 National Stay in School Campaign—illuminate the objectives of each lesson in the curriculum. Canada's National Life/Work Center (NLWC) and Real Game Inc. (RGI) imbedded the High Five Principles in TRG in 1995. In partnership with NLWC and RGI, the High Five Principles were also placed in all U.S. editions.

The five principles are (a) Change is

Constant—adaptability is an example of an important skill to carry into the future; (b) Learning is Lifelong—students will recognize opportunities to learn; (c) Focus on the Journey—students identify situations that can lead to new and better life choices; (d) Access Your Allies—a career path is not to be taken alone, and learn who can be a partner along the way. (e) Follow Your Heart—understand personal dreams and ideals. Recognizing these five principles will provide students with the motivation needed to deal with life's challenges.

TRGC gives students the information and the tools necessary to make career selections that will suit their personalities, while helping them understand the real world. Each lesson is aligned with the California Academic Content Standards, Grades six–12; Content Standards for Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning; California Career Technical Educational Standards; and the National Career Development Guidelines.

Conclusion

Choosing an effective career curriculum that enhances student perceptions of the world of work and integrates academics with real-world experiences may ultimately benefit students. Penn (1997) showed that students who graduate from high school often find themselves in a world that is unfamiliar and unplanned. Therefore, the implementation of vocational programs may better prepare students for choices they will encounter after high school. TRGC can be a valuable tool in preparing students for postsecondary

education and the workforce.

When State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell announced the Top 10 accomplishments of the California Department of Education in 2006, TRGC was on that list at number five. The Superintendent said technology is used more often as a tool to help students as well as teachers, the public and local education agencies, stating, "This is the best and fastest way to share vital information about education."

Connecting what is learned in the classroom to real-world experiences is a key component of student achievement. Similarly, students' understanding of the world of work may also improve their critical thinking skills and, ultimately, their own academic achievement. **T**

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