

The Real Game: A Real Hook to Involvement

By Nancy S. Perry

Abstract

Unfocused kids put in seat-time but never become personally involved in school. They graduate with no career goal or skills and often enter into dead-end jobs. This is both an individual and an economic waste. Career guidance programs are meaningless to the student who believes others control his fate. We need a hook to get these students involved in planning for their futures.

The Real Game Series can provide that hook. *The Real Game Series* is composed of six programs, from Grade 3 through adulthood, which offer increasingly challenging concepts and vocabulary related to life and work. In the context of game playing with a serious purpose, students are involved in real life situations within the safety of the classroom. This hooks them into the relevance of education and career planning.

* * *

The Real Game: A Real Hook to Involvement

By Nancy S. Perry

We've all seen them – the students who don't seem to care. They sit in classes day after day, putting in seat time until they are old enough to leave. As a junior high counselor many years ago, I was frustrated by the lack of involvement of those students in their own lives. They have flat scores on interest surveys. The technical manual states that this may be due to lack of exposure to life's experiences. In most cases, I believe, it shows a general indifference to the world – an external locus of control that makes an individual feel powerless, a pawn in life's passage. I tried everything to get them involved. I even went so far with one student as to promise to help him achieve any goal he could set – no matter how trivial or unconventional. He could not, or would not, come up with even one thing he wanted to accomplish. Of course there may be deeper psychological implications, but I still hold to my belief that if we can get these unfocused kids to care enough to become involved in any way, their futures will be brighter.

Why do we care? We care because we can see the future unfold for this boy and so many like him. Since he was bright enough and had the perseverance to sit through high school for lack of anything else to do, he would probably decide to get a diploma and enter the work world – lacking any career goal or the skills to enter the primary labor market. We care because we know that career indecisiveness is an economic drain on our country. Every year, companies spend billions on recruiting and training new workers, only to have them leave because the job did not turn out to be satisfying. Consider the equal amount spent by governments in unemployment insurance and dropouts from government training programs. Add to this the astronomical amount of money in lost productivity because unhappy workers are less productive. It is a staggering, and unnecessary waste of human and economic potential.

Good career guidance programs with quality labor market information can certainly help to promote informed career planning but I knew it was not enough.

Students had to take control of their lives. Through a government grant, I co-authored a student career portfolio, entitled *Get a Life*, that tried to help students see that they are responsible for their career development and their futures. Others can help with programs and encouragement, but ultimately, each individual must take that responsibility. On the back cover we wrote, “You are the one who is responsible for making the most of your life. Enjoy a wonderful journey of exploration as you discover who you are and what you want for your future.” Most students with whom we worked became enthusiastically involved in that journey. The portfolio became the cornerstone for parent/student/teacher conferences in which students discussed their thoughts about the future and how they might achieve their goals. We now had the map for guiding students through their career planning, but the “hook” to get the uninvolved student excited still eluded me.

At this time, I was “loaned” to the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (NOICC), a government interagency focused on career information and development, to manage the *Get a Life* project. While there, a Canadian colleague, Phillip Jarvis, contacted NOICC about a program he had “discovered” in Newfoundland. It seems that Bill Barry, a writer and actor, had been disturbed by his 12-year-old daughter’s lack of interest in school. She had come home with the usual complaints about irrelevant subjects. Most of us would have given the “you’ll understand when you grow up” lecture, but Bill took it to heart and said, “What if we could give young people a practice run at being an adult while they’re still in school – something that feels like the real world they’ll soon be part of?” Bill set out to develop an engaging tool that would make learning about careers and work fun and interesting. This became the genesis of *The Real Game*. Jarvis had observed the magic of excited students in the pilot program in St. John’s, Newfoundland. He knew this would be something big. Could this be the hook I had been searching for?

In the space of six years, *The Real Game* evolved into a series of six internationally-recognized career education programs serving over 3 million young people in ten countries (at any given time). NOICC became a partner in the project by piloting the Canadian version in several U.S. states. The response was so overwhelming that NOICC invested in adapting the program for U.S. schools and in the development of training programs. To date, teachers in over 50,000 classrooms in North America are using the program series. The hook had been found.

The Real Game Series consists of six separate programs, each of which is tailored to a specific range of age and grade levels. The basic aim of the series is to introduce realities of the adult world of work in a meaningful way and to help participants master the life/career building competencies stated in the Canadian Blueprint for Life/Work Designs, adapted from the NOICC National Career Development Guidelines. All of the activities of *The Real Game Series* have been keyed to competencies in the three areas of: personal management, learning and work exploration, and career building.

THE REAL GAME SERIES

PROGRAM	GRADES	AGES
The Play Real Game	3 to 4	8 to 10
The Make It Real Game	5 to 6	10 to 12
The Real Game	7 and 8	12 to 14
The Be Real Game	9 and 10	14 to 16
The Get Real Game	11 and 12	16 to 18
Real Times, Real Life	Post-secondary	Adults

The programs are packaged in three-ring binders that include all facilitator and student materials (including overhead transparencies, posters, and reproducible masters) needed to implement the programs for as many participants as desired, year after year. The series is extremely flexible with the ability to customize the lessons to fit almost any institutional framework. Currently the series is being used in K-12 schools, colleges, universities, one-stop career resource centers and employment service sites, vocational rehabilitation and workers' compensation settings, human resource offices, correctional institutions, military settings and community volunteer agencies across Canada, the United States and internationally.

The series incorporates increasingly challenging concepts and vocabulary which students learn by taking on real life and work roles in the safety of the classroom. Through playing the games, students and teachers get dramatic new insights into the relevance of the curriculum to future life and work opportunities. They see connections not obvious to them before, such as why math, science and English lessons are important to their lives.

Below is a synopsis of the six programs:

The Play Real Game: Grades 3 & 4

The Play Real Game introduces grades 3 and 4 students to basic life/work concepts and vocabulary as they play the roles of adults who create neighborhoods, find jobs for themselves and others, and work together as town citizens to accomplish a worthy goal. While having fun with maps and role-playing, the students learn the value of community, the joys and responsibilities of teamwork, the importance of essential employability skills and how education can relate to occupational choices.

The Make It Real Game: Grades 5 & 6

The Make It Real Game takes grades 5 and 6 students on a simulated journey into the global economy while reinforcing the importance of teamwork and cooperation. Role-playing as adults, each with a unique personal history, students form companies that research and develop creative projects, which are presented to an audience at the conclusion of the program. Language arts and social studies abilities are developed as students discover for themselves that there are many different ways to achieve an occupational goal and that everybody's work is important.

The Real Game: Grades 7 & 8

The Real Game gives grades 7 and 8 students the opportunity to explore adult realities such as taxes, living expenses, workplace environments, and unexpected emergencies. Students role-play adults in randomly assigned occupational roles and see how schoolwork relates to occupational choices and, therefore, to lifestyle and income. Delving deeper into their roles, students learn how to budget time and money and see the value of a balanced lifestyle, community involvement and lifelong learning. By the end of the game, students realize that satisfaction in work is a priority issue in life and that it is an outcome that they can achieve by making the choices that are right for them.

The Be Real Game: Grades 9 & 10

The Be Real Game shows grades 9 and 10 students how a person's career is built with everyday choices and decisions, starting in childhood and encompassing every area of life including family, friends, education, recreational activities and lifestyle choices, community involvement and dealing with labor market conditions. As they role-play a high school student through to an experienced adult worker in a variety of employment, unemployment and family situations, students explore in-depth the importance of transferable skills, self-knowledge, lifelong learning and career planning. They are exposed to dozens of occupational possibilities and encouraged to actively pursue their dreams.

The Get Real Game: Grades 11 & 12

The Get Real Game presents students in grades 11 and 12 with a wide array of occupational possibilities and lets them simulate a 5-year school to work transition as they try to achieve the occupational goal they have chosen. In-depth factual information is supplied for each option so that students can realistically explore different possible gateways to their goals, including postsecondary education, various forms of on-the-job-training, workplace experience, internship or apprenticeship, military service, volunteer and community work, entrepreneurship and self-employment. As they pursue their occupational goals, students learn how to budget their time, research their options, define their goals, plan a course of action and present themselves well in an interview.

Real Times, Real Life: Adults

Real Times, Real Life helps adult learners to put their lives in perspective, relieving the negative self-image that often comes with unemployment so that they can begin to plan their careers with confidence. Role-playing as workers from 1900 to the present day, participants get a short course in modern history, learn to appreciate that change is constant and inevitable, develop an understanding of the modern labor market and see how skills acquired in one area of life are transferable to another. Working in teams, participants learn how to assess their situations and create realistic action plans, and where to go for help when they need it.

Example of a Real Game

Let me illustrate how these “games” involve students in real life situations within the safety of the classroom. *The Real Game* for the middle school level begins by letting the students dream about the lifestyle they want to have as adults. They choose housing, transportation, luxury items – whatever they want for their future. Each choice has a

price tag attached but the students are told to ignore those. Then each student is randomly assigned an occupation from a set of occupational profiles – which are arranged in an order to assure a diverse working population from untrained to professional workers. It is made clear to the students (and their parents) that the assignment has nothing to do with the child; it is simply a way of dividing the occupations. Therefore, each child must become an actor and role-play for the rest of the game. Each profile contains basic information about the occupation – gross monthly income, usual vacation allowance, education/experience requirements, licenses or certifications needed, transferable skills, and a short job description. This information is followed by an essay on “A day in the life of a (occupation)” which also serves as a language arts lesson, introducing the vocabulary related to that occupation. Each student is told that he/she is now the expert on that occupation and must help others to learn about it. This is accomplished by a gathering, maybe a tenth high school reunion, where students meet old classmates and answer the usual question, “What are you doing now?” Each student must then tell about his/her occupation. Other activities follow that help students to see the range of requirements and financial rewards of different occupations. Then students are told that they must prepare a budget (math skills) based on the role assigned. One of the first “real life” lessons is that a certain percentage comes right off the top for taxes, retirement plans, insurance, etc.

What! cried the seventh grader. *You mean I don't get to bring home what I make? It's not fair.*

Then, of course, there are those lifestyle plans. What are the payments on the house you chose? The car? The boat? Every adult knows that monthly payments are only the beginning – all require upkeep or maintenance. Of course, we also have to eat and wear clean clothes and maybe have a little fun along the way.

I thought my parents didn't like me because they kept saying no to the Reeboks. Now that I'm playing The Real Game, I can't understand how they have been able to say yes so often.

---- 7th grade student

Budgetary adjustments are made as students face reality -- maybe keep the house but get a less expensive car and forget the boat. These are individual decisions, based on individual values. The only requirement is that the budget must be balanced. Then students must face the task of time management, “So much to do and only 168 hours in a week to do it all!” They learn that time, like money, must be budgeted. Work, commuting, sleep, meals, shopping, cleaning, etc., are necessities but there should also be some leisure time. How will that be spent and what will be the cost (budget implications)? The class, which has been divided into neighborhood groups, is ready to plan a vacation. Each neighborhood is to travel together and must not only agree on the destination but also on the cost and length of the vacation. Another reality strikes home – those that have the money may not have the time and those that have the time may not have the money. Innovative problem-solving is encouraged – as long as it is legal. (No, Mr. Postal Worker, you cannot steal social security checks.) Bartering is rampant and the credit card shows its dangerous face (budget implications). Amazingly, decisions are

made and everyone has learned a bit about the give and take of teamwork. No occupational road is completely smooth. Changing technology, economic recession, environmental catastrophe, resource depletion – these are some of the causes of layoffs and cutbacks. A worker in each neighborhood receives a pink slip. Their services are no longer needed. After the initial shock, the neighbors rally. It is not the end of the world. Various solutions are considered – networking, retraining within the industry or in a new occupation, relocating, self-employment and entrepreneurial pathways are explored. Resumes are prepared and, using their transferable skills, students apply for new work.

The Real Game offers many more activities than outlined here but this should give you an idea of why *The Real Game* is enthusiastically received by students, teachers, administrators and parents.

An extensive piloting program has been a key factor in the success of the Real Game programs. In Canada and the U.S., at least 100 pilot sites from coast-to-coast have participated in the testing of each program. These involved over 5,000 individuals (students, teachers, parents, and community members) and over 125,000 hours of focus testing over a period of two to three months. The volumes of feedback are used to improve the programs to meet the real needs of students and teachers.

Program Evaluations

Extensive evaluations have been done in Australia and the United Kingdom. In Australia, over 100 schools participating in the pilot program have been involved. Students, parents, teachers and administrators were given written evaluation forms for both individual activities and the program as a whole. Teachers, or facilitators, also participated in focus groups. Students were given the opportunity to complete pre- and post-program World of Work Surveys and a supplementary questionnaire to self-report the impact of *The Real Game* in the understanding of 20-core career issues. The overall reaction to *The Real Game* from teachers, parents and students was overwhelmingly positive. As one teacher said:

From this resource came a realization that secondary school studies have a direct impact on their future lifestyle, an aspect that can only have a positive impact on school retention rates.

Students, too, echoed the lessons learned. As one student said:
I liked TRG because it made me realize that being grown up is harder than it looks.

Even parents were enthused about the program. Here are samples of two parent responses:

At last school subjects can be seen to relate to real life and provide a reason for learning.

She has learned that to gain most of her dreams, she has to work hard along the way.

On a more formal note, the following areas of student competency were identified as having improved through the delivery of *The Real Game*: (Evaluation of The Real Game 12-14: Final Report, 2001)

- Understanding about the world of work
- Increased vocabulary relating to the world of work and other aspects of adult life.
- Literacy/numeracy (mathematics) skills
- The importance of budgeting and managing money
- Working in groups
- Prioritizing what is important in life
- Researching and exploring issues
- Problem-solving and negotiating skills
- Communication skills
- Using technology
- General knowledge
- Interpersonal skills
- Awareness of different ways of earning income
- Knowledge about a variety of jobs
- Awareness of relative earning capacities

Conclusion

The Real Game Series is unique in that it provides a personal career-building context that participants and facilitators at all levels find enjoyable and stimulating. Using the Blueprint for Life/Works Designs (www.blueprint4life.ca) competency and performance indicator template, each game in the series incorporates increasingly challenging ideas and vocabulary. The games focus on teamwork and community interactions, involving parents throughout the process. Why is it so successful – because it demonstrates that learning can be fun. It is also successful because of thorough research, extensive development involving educators, parents, students, and labor market specialists, and good management strategies – developed and administered by the National Life/Work Center. An innovative approach to partnerships has produced a winning formula for implementing *The Real Game Series*. Partnerships begin with government contacts and finding effective networks across the countries that wish to implement the program. A “TRG Series Partnership Framework” outlines the roles and responsibilities of all partners involved in the development and implementation of these programs. Agreed upon phases include program conception and definition, prototype development, piloting, evaluation/revisions, and implementation. International partners have agreed that the series needs to be financially self-sustaining, on a not-for-profit basis, with cost-recovery pricing well below commercial equivalents. The dream can become a reality when *The Real Game Series* is used to provide that “hook” of involvement.

As one teacher said:

I had several students who would be classified as at risk of leaving early. For this group it was definitely of value as they realized that having aspirations/dreams is necessary and that education is needed to help achieve these.

The dream can become a reality when *The Real Games Series* is used to provide that hook of involvement.

NOTE: The National Life/work Center and Real Game Inc. partner with America's Career Resource Network (formerly NOICC/SOICC) Association for on-going development and implementation of The Real Game Series throughout the United States. For further information visit www.realgame.org or www.arcna.net, or contact:

National Life/Work Center
1410 King Street, 4th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22314
Toll-free Tel: 1-888-700-8940
Toll-free Fax: 1-877-929-3343
Email: info@lifeworkinc.us
Web: www.realgame.org (U.S) www.realgame.com (International)

References:

- Barry, B. (1996, revised 2000). *The Real Game Facilitator's Guide*. St. John's, Newfoundland (Canada): Real Game Inc.
- Edwards, A., Barnes, A., Killeen, J., & Watts, A.G. (1999). *The Real Game: Evaluation of the UK National Pilot*. NICEC Project Report. Cambridge: CRAC.
- Evaluation of The Real Game 12-14: Final Report*. (2001). Commonwealth of Australia: Training and Youth Affairs, Department of Education.
- Perry, N. & Van Zandt, C.E. (1993). *Get a Life Career Portfolio*. Alexandria, VA: American School Counselor Association
- Jarvis, P. (December 2, 1988) *A Nation at Risk: The economic consequences of neglecting career development*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Computer-Based Systems for Career Information (ACSCI), St. Louis, MO.
- Jarvis, P. (2000). *The Real Game Series: Bringing real life to the classroom*. Memramcook, New Brunswick, Canada: National Life/Work Centre
- Jarvis, P. (2003). *Career Management Paradigm Shift: Prosperity for citizens, windfall for governments*. Memramcook, New Brunswick, Canada: National Life/Work Centre
- The Real Game Series Brochure*. (2000). Memramcook, New Brunswick, Canada: National Life/Work Centre.