BUSINESS EDUCATION DIGEST

ISSUE **XVIII**
DEC **2009**

Work-Based Learning: A Critical Link to Secondary Students' Success

Hope Davis and Lisa Gueldenzoph Snyder[1]

ABSTRACT

The connection between school and work can be a critical factor of success for many students at the secondary level, especially for those students who do not plan to pursue formal post-secondary educational opportunities. Work-based learning provides opportunities for students to gain experiences that empower their employment goals. The knowledge students gain from classroom experiences can be immediately applied in the work-based learning environments, which can vary in their breadth and depth from school activities such as field trips and guest speakers to more formal experiences such as job shadowing, apprenticeships, and internships.

Although work-based learning can be a significantly beneficial experience, many high schools do not take advantage of offering this potentially rich educational experience for a number of reasons, such as the effort required to establish off-site programs and maintain on-going partnerships with local businesses. Additionally, students' lack of interest in programs can be a significant obstacle, especially when work-based learning opportunities do not provide financial compensation. However, all stakeholders – administrators, faculty, business partners, students, and parents – can realize the benefits of work-based learning when the outcomes are measured and documented. The research outlined in this paper provides that documentation by describing a focused partnership approach to education as a theoretical framework as well as specific benefits of successful work-based learning programs including relationships to student outcomes, retention and graduation rates, post-secondary enrollment, students' perceptions of relevant educational experiences, high quality work experiences, and interpersonal skill sets. The paper concludes with recommendations for work-based learning opportunities at the secondary level.

Focused Partnership Approach to Education

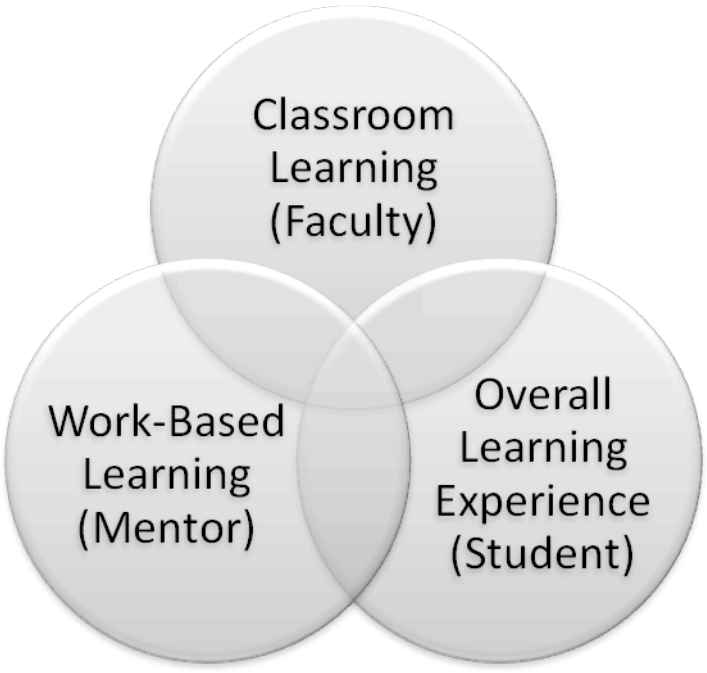
The foundation of a successful work-based learning program is the development of close partnerships with businesses that grow into lasting, mutually beneficial relationships (Abowitz, 2000; Dick, 1993; Ghysels & Thibodeaux, 2006; Riggert, Ash, Boyle, Kinney, Howarth, & Rudy-Parkins, 2004). Many organizations have streamlined their workforce in response to recent economic challenges and need the additional support that work-based learning opportunities provide. However, due to these same economic circumstances, they may not able to support paid internship opportunities. In these cases, a focused partnership approach can be developed between the school and the organization to offer closely supervised experiences that

[1]Hope Davis is a business teacher at Nash Central High School; she can be reached at HHDavis@nrms.k12.nc.us. Lisa Gueldenzoph Snyder is an associate professor of business education at North Carolina A&T State University; she can be contacted at lguelden@ncat.edu.

compensate students with course credit. These partnerships offer not only a framework for the work-based learning environment, but also provide a social and cultural context for students' professional development. This premise is supported by contextualist researchers who indicate that students' development is dynamically molded by their social and cultural context (Berndt, 1997). "Context, for researchers, refers to the social relationships in which students are involved" (McKenzie, 2007, p. 26). Therefore, the workplace relationships that students develop in their work-based learning experiences can provide a foundation for their future professional development.

John Dewey's (1925) foundational research indicated that relationships have the power to transform individuals; a genuine partnership requires growth and learning on the part of all involved parties. In the case of work-based learning, these parties include the student, workplace mentor, and classroom teacher. As Figure 1 suggests, a focused partnership exists when the classroom and workplace experiences combine to create an extended learning environment. Students benefit from applying classroom knowledge to their work-based learning experiences, and communication is fluid among all parties. Communication is important to an effective partnership and supports both individual and social growth for all parties of the partnership (Abowitz, 2000).

Figure 1. **A Focused Partnership Approach**



Dewey clarified the concept of a genuine partnership and its benefits noting that not all partnerships develop positive results. This is evident from Savoie-Zajc and Dolbec's (2002) research findings in which students experienced varying degrees of transformation from partnerships created

through a work-based learning program. This study involved 175 students who participated in work-based learning programs in Quebec, Canada. Of the students from one school board (district), 88% reported initial dissatisfaction with the partnerships created in the workplace. The students indicated during interviews that they were not able to form a bond with the workers and received indifferent treatment. However, the students as a whole from all six school boards indicated that they had an important role to play when it came to integrating into a community of practice and that the quality of the practicum rested upon their ability to take the initiative in establishing communications with other workers. Clearly, effective working relationships at the workplace itself in addition to intentional communication between the classroom and workplace environments have the potential to significantly affect the work-based learning experience. The following section highlights benefits derived from partnerships and bonds formed in work-based learning programs.

Benefits of Work-Based Learning Programs

Schools can realize noteworthy benefits from work-based learning programs. For example, Abowitz (2000) tracked the transformation of one of Cincinnati, Ohio's, worst inner city public school districts to one its greatest academic successes. Abowitz's research found that this transformation was attributed to a community of individuals representing a focused partnership approach. Business executives, school administrators, and teachers created a partnership to achieve positive student outcomes using a work-based learning program while maintaining a focus on academics. A team structure enabled students to matriculate with the same cohort and teachers throughout their high school career and thus fostered a greater sense of belonging (partnership). Further, a nurturing environment was provided by a single group of teachers who shared the responsibility of these young adolescents throughout their high school experience. This instructional approach was selected because of its merits as an efficient quality management concept (Abowitz, 2000).

Work-based learning programs are thriving in other countries as well. In 1995, Australia implemented nationwide work-based learning programs in their high schools (Misko, 2001). Australia's programs are comprised of committees of local stakeholders including employers, schools, community organizations, and secondary students. The students have an opportunity to explore industry-specific occupations with correlated on-the-job and off-the-job learning modules. Students receive industry-level skills as well as credit for work-based learning that is transferable to institutions of higher learning. Several benefits were realized from the work-based learning programs. Teachers reported that many of their students had greater commitment toward their coursework as a result of participating in work-based learning programs, and students indicated a new-found recognition of the relevance of their classroom learning (Misko, 2001).

Savoie-Zajc and Dolbec's (2002) research with Canadian schools at 34 different worksite locations also revealed work-based learning benefits. After student training was complete, data was triangulated from a series of student questionnaire as well as interviews with students, teachers, and the workplace representatives. Students stated that they experienced challenges but were able to overcome them with the support of the school staff, co-workers, and supervisors. Nearly all students (98%) reported confidence in being able to find work in the discipline in which they trained. Most students reported high levels of satisfaction with their training (Savoie-Zajc & Dolbec, 2002). The vocational center teachers followed a traditional model of work-based learning that included a formal classroom training program and the expectation that the workplace supervisors would give students an opportunity to complete tasks that the program required. However, the level of participation from mere observation to full productive worker varied significantly for the students in training at different worksites (Savoie-Zajc & Dolbec, 2002).

Work-based learning also has been applied to unique programs and institutions of higher learning. For example, Metropolitan College of Louisville, Kentucky, is not a traditional college. It is a very successful, work-education partnership developed in 1998 between UPS, local colleges, students hired as UPS employees, and governmental parties (Riggert et al., 2004). In the Kentucky area, there was a short supply of young adult college workers due to competition. In 10 weeks, UPS needed a ready and able workforce to handle an expansion of the Louisville world hub for their overnight delivery division and next-day deliveries. The solution was to hire high school graduates as employees and give them extensive support and the opportunity to go to college while they also worked as UPS employees. However, the benefits students gained from their partnership with UPS exceeded customary employment. In addition to a college education, students received planned social activities, a mentoring program, career counseling, and ultimately after graduation, employment opportunities at higher levels of the organization. UPS provided a supportive environment including educational reimbursement for tuition and bonuses for successfully completing a semester's work. The successful outcomes extended to all parties by increasing enrollments, educating the regions' workforce, increasing employee retention, and ensuring adequate staffing (Riggert et al., 2004).

In summary, notable benefits of work-based learning programs include academically better performing schools as well as an opportunity for students to experience more nurturing environments and explore specific, occupational sectors. Work-based learning programs may help students become more committed to their coursework as well as provide incentives to continue learning beyond their secondary education experiences. Valuable benefits continue to manifest for students beyond the termination of work-based learning programs as the next section illustrates.

Student Outcomes

In Misko's (2001) work-based learning program, participants reported positive student outcomes. According to a survey completed by the students who graduated in 1999, almost 80% of the participants surveyed were in gainful employment and/or further studies. Unemployment rates for work-based learning participants were only 12.1%. This was well below the nation's unemployment average of 16.8% for 15 to 18 year olds attending neither school nor institutions of higher learning in March 2000 (Misko).

Additionally, vocational courses have been historically targeted toward disadvantaged or at-risk students and the non-college bound (Halperin, 1994). Research by Stone and Aliaga (2005) followed a decade of education reform in the United States and a more recent development regarding the federal government proposing major legislative changes in vocational education. Goals of the reform were to increase enrollment in vocational education, to prepare students for the world of work, and to enhance educational and economic attainment. In a related study, the researchers noted that:

> Academically, early research indicates that career and technical education and work-based learning can help decrease dropout rates and increase college enrollment, as well as improve attendance and grades, although there are no studies available about the impact on test scores. (Hughes, Bailey, & Mechur, 2001, p. 127)

In related research by Stone and Aliaga (2005), one of the purposes of the study was to examine participation in work-based learning activities through a set of family background and school achievement characteristics. Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth allowed the researchers to draw a portrait of student participation in career-related education and pedagogies. A nationally representative sample of 9,000 students who were 12 to 16 years old in 1996 was used (Stone & Alliaga, 2005). They discovered important findings including:

> … a positive relationship between participation in career and technical education and school-to-work activities and key measures of high school achievement; however, most students do not concentrate in career and technical education or participate in any school-to-work activities. (p. 140)

An important finding that surfaced was that "the odds that youth who participate in work-based learning or related activities will graduate from high school are significantly greater than for those who do not" (Stone & Aliaga, 2005, p. 139).

Two of the most extensively discussed means for inspiring positive student outcomes have been the creation of small learning communities and the establishment of meaningful work-based learning experiences for students (Mac Iver & Legters, 2001). John Dewey (1916) made clear links between acting in common, communication, and communities in *Democracy and Education* (1916):

> Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common, and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—like-mindedness as sociologist say. Such things cannot be passed … like bricks; they cannot be shared … by dividing into … physical pieces. (Abowitz, 2000, p. 317)

Based on these research studies as well as Dewey's classical research, work-based learning and its learning communities have the potential to be a very powerful strategy to produce student outcomes such as attaining post-secondary education and gainful work experience and other secondary school benefits, such as attendance and retention rates.

Retention and Graduation Rates

An important finding in Stone and Aliaga's (2005) study identified that work-based learning or related activities are a factor in students' graduation from high school. Two other schools specifically demonstrate this significant progress in retention rates.

First, Abowitz (2000) documented that work-based learning students made important gains in terms of improving retention rates. In this study based on at-risk students in Ohio, the 60% increase in high school graduates in one year "was credited to the school's work-based learning program" (Abowitz, 2000, p. 319).

Second, Dick's (1993) study included two treatment groups of students: one group had either one or two years experience with a career training program (treatment group) and the second group was comprised of general-track students (control group). Telephone interviews with 70% of the total treatment population and 30% of the control group population, within a span of four years after high school graduation, revealed findings that the treatment group experienced higher graduation rates. High school graduation rates between males in the control group and the treatment group of the first-year career training students were the same. However, 100% of the males who participated in a second year of career training graduated compared with 79% of the control group. Female students in the treatment group had graduation rates of 92% compared with 66% of the females in the control group.

In summary, students' participation in work-based learning contributes to higher secondary school retention and graduation rates. In addition, students' participation in work-related experiences provides important opportunities for students to apply and relate their educational studies to occupational contexts.

Relationships to Post-Secondary Experiences

Work-based learning initiatives in the state of Michigan produced positive post-secondary experiences according to Neumark and Allen (2003). Students in work-based programs in Macomb and Kalamazoo counties indicated that extra adult guidance from their workplace supervisors and mentors contributed to students decisions about post-secondary opportunities. Students indicated that adults in the program helped them make career decisions by discussing specific post-secondary institutions and helping them narrow their fields of study. In these two counties, as compared with others in the state, success was attributed to stronger business and school relationships.

School districts also help students make important career decisions. For example, the East San Gabriel Valley Regional Occupational Program (ROP) serves several school districts in Los Angeles County. In the early 1990s, the average annual high school dropout rate for the area was 28% (Dick, 1993). Researchers collected data from three groups of secondary students from the school districts that the ROP served and found that within five years of high school graduation, students involved in work-based learning experienced greater rates of involvement in higher education (Dick, 1993).

Relevant Educational Experiences

Abowitz (2000) reported two indicators that related to students perceptions of their education as a relevant experience. First, students became involved in a work-based learning program with academic coursework simultaneously infused. This program included a class that focused on careers and used frequent guest speakers who represented various career clusters. The work-based learning program also included field trips, research into career interests, and job shadowing experiences. The culmination of this relevant experience was a 16-month paid internship beginning the spring of the students' 11th grade year. Second, students reported that the structure of a single cohort of students matriculating through their secondary grades with the support of a team of faculty provided a supportive context for learning. Students indicated that they were able to make real-world connections that influenced their lives in a relevant, meaningful way.

In work-based learning experiences, students have an opportunity to extend, fortify, and validate their rich knowledge base while applying this data to a work-related community of practice. The value of learning is qualified by students as they see how their coursework relates to their work experience and vice versa and are of higher quality.

High Quality Work Experiences

Work-based learning placements often vary. A research report by Hughes, Bailey, and Mechur reported that "many high school students may have jobs, but work-based learning job placements are of a higher quality" (2001, p. 23). Regardless of their career direction, students in work-based learning experiences learn more work-related skills and find adults more caring than students who merely find a part-time job on their own. Graduates of work-based learning placements more often find employment with higher wages (Hughes, Bailey, & Mechur, 2001).

Similar findings are noteworthy as well on other continents, such as in Misko's 2001 study. Students involved in work-based learning programs indicated that they felt they had a high quality work experience and even had an opportunity to develop industry-recognized qualification. Students selected an industry of interest and learned entry-level skills. The students indicated that they were able to determine if the industry was right fit for them (Misko).

Student participants in the Savoie-Zajc and Dolbec study (2002) voiced mixed reviews of their experience as a high quality one. Students expressed during interviews how important it was to their training experience to work with modern technology. However, only "30% of students reported having learned machine operations in the first practicum and 36% did so during the second one" (Savoie-Zajc & Dolbec, 2002, p. 9). High quality work experience was dependent on several factors including the work culture at the worksites and the students' direct supervisors.

Interpersonal Skill Sets

Students' work-based experiences may afford them an opportunity to develop significant competencies such as interpersonal skills**.** Students may gain soft skills such as socialability and collaboration from participation in work-based experiences. According to Perreault (2006), The Partnership for 21st Century Skills suggested that interpersonal skills should be integrated into core curriculums. However, soft skills are often negated because of their lack of inclusion in the teaching-testing cycle. Focused learning communities such as work-based learning programs and partnerships provide an opportunity for rich, contextual learning experiences and transfer of interpersonal skill sets. Perreault reported that work-based learning experiences are potential methods for students to gain the soft skills, attitudes, and dispositions that are often lacking in traditional curriculums. Based on the literature, work-based learning has the potential to add value to interpersonal skill sets.

Students in the Savoie-Zajc and Dolbec's 2002 study realized that interpersonal skills were crucial to securing successful careers. They quickly realized that their own resourcefulness, personal attitudes, and sociability with workers and supervisors would help break the barriers in the highly competitive and productive work environment. Students in Misko 2001 study

also indicated it was helpful to have the opportunity to collaborate with other workers and to gain the valuable social skills that were afforded them through work-based learning programs.

It is reasonable to infer from the literature that the development of interpersonal skills as well as the recognition of their importance made can make a significant contribution to the future employment of the student participants of work-based learning programs. Yet, the future of work-based learning is in question.

Recommendations for Work-Based Learning

In Stone and Aliaga's (2005) study of work-based learning, only a modest proportion of students reported participation in work-based learning activities at any time during their high school careers. "The majority of youth reported not participating at all in any of these activities while in high school" (Stone & Aliaga, p. 133). Many factors contribute to low numbers of student involvement in work-based learning options, such as a lack of student interest, an overburdened faculty, or a short supply of work opportunities in certain areas. Additionally, although most students who participate find value in the work-based learning programs, some schools' curriculum requirements may not support the time and effort required for students to participate in these experiences. However, the benefits can clearly outweigh the obstacles as outlined by the many positive student outcomes addressed in this paper. To establish successful work-based learning opportunities at the secondary level, the following recommendations are provided:

- ***Create Focused Partnerships*** – The business people who agree to provide workplace learning opportunities for students need to be valued as integral members of the focused partnership approach with both faculty and students. Communication is a critical component of any collaboration, and in work-based learning situations, communication must be routinely supported among all parties.
- ***Specify Relevant Work-based Experiences*** – To ensure students value their work-based learning experience as a relevant component of their education, the duties they perform in the workplace should be related to their coursework. To support this goal, faculty should indicate course objectives and discuss workplace duties with the on-site supervisors when partnerships are developed with businesses.
- ***Evaluate Students' Perceptions*** – Both formative and summative evaluations should be assessed during the students' work-based learning experience. To enhance communication, these evaluations should be shared between the faculty member and workplace supervisor. Any negative experiences perceived by the student should be discussed among all parties.

In conclusion, work-based learning can be a vital component that connects students' learning to real-world situations. In addition, to promoting

positive outcomes by increasing retention and graduation rates, students who participate in work-based learning opportunities are more apt to perceive their education as relevant as well as benefit from enhanced interpersonal skills.

References

Abowitz, K. (2000). Democratic communities and business/education "partnerships" in secondary education. *The Urban Review, 32*(4), 313–339.

Berndt, T. J. (1997). *Child development.* Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education.* New York: Free Press.

Dewey, J. (1925). *Experience and nature.* LaSalle, IL: Open Court.

Dick, J. (1993). *Business/education partnerships' impact on high-school student graduation from high school, continuing education, and job status.* Riverside, CA: California Educational Research Cooperative, 1–16.

Ghysels, M., & Thibodeaux, K. (2006). A new approach to business partnership. *Leadership, 36*(2), 18–21.

Halperin, S. (1994). *School-to-work: A larger vision.* Washington, DC: American Policy Forum.

Hughes, K. L., Bailey, T. R., & Mechur, M. J. (2001). *School-to-work: Making a difference in education.* New York City, NY: Institute on Education and the Economy, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Mac Iver, M. A., & Legters, N. (2001). Partnership for a career-centered high school reform in an urban school system. *Journal of Vocational Education Research, 26*(3), 412–446.

McKenzie, G. K. (2007). Preparing today's adolescents for the challenges of tomorrow. *Montessori Life, 19*(4), 26–32.

Misko, J. (2001). *Destinations of school leavers who participated in structured workplace-learning programs.* In Research to Reality: Putting VET Research to Work. Proceedings of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association Conference, 4th Adelaide, Australia, March 28–30, 2001.

Neumark, D., & Allen, A. (2003). What do we know about the effects of school-to-work? *Journal of Vocational Education Research, 28(1)*, 59–84.

Perreault, H. R. (2006). What makes the soft skills so hard? *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, *48*(3), 125–128.

Riggert, S. C., Ash, D., Boyle, M. A., Kinney, J., Howarth, D. A., & Rudy-Parkins, C. (2004). Metropolitan college: Building community value through education-business partnerships. *Innovative Higher Education, 29*(1), 7–19.

Savoie-Zajc, L. & Dolbec, A. (2002). *Considerations of learning in the workplace in Quebec: Pulp and paper students' perspectives.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the America Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 1–15.

Stone, J., & Aliaga, O. (2005). Career & technical education and school-to-work at the end of the 20th century: Participation and outcomes. *Career and Technical Education Research*, *30*(2), 125–144.