

Heal the Academic-Vocational schism

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Status-conscious traditions have kept faculty apart, hampering efforts to blend their curricula and hurting their students.

Since the passage of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education and Technology Act of 1990, educators have made a concerted effort to enrich vocational curricula with academic content. Today colleges have seen a new burst of energy around "contextualized learning," the attempt to make subject matter more relevant and comprehensible by teaching it in the context of another subject--for example, teaching mathematics through fashion or automotive technology.

Much has been achieved, but attempts to integrate the academic and the vocational curricula will be limited or subverted unless we deal with the cultural and institutional factors that created the academic-vocational divide itself.

For a long time in the West, intellectual elites have tended to distinguish between physical work and technical skill--labor, the mechanical arts, crafts and trades--on the one hand, and deliberative and philosophical activity on the other. The latter emerges from leisure or, at least, from a degree of distance from the world of work and commerce. The distinction carries with it judgments about intellectual acuity and virtue.

This difference runs through America's cultural history, although it seems at odds with the country's strong orientation toward practicality. It was evident after the Revolutionary War, when mechanics were portrayed in editorials as illiterate and incapable of participating in government, and it contributed to the structure of curriculum tracking in the 20th century's comprehensive high schools.

At the postsecondary level a longstanding tension persists between liberal study and professional or occupational education. Is the goal of college to immerse students in the sciences and humanities for the students' intellectual growth and edification, or to prepare them for work and public service?

With the increase in occupational majors since the 1960s, the vocational function is clearly ascendant, yet you don't have to work in a two- or four-year college very long to sense the status distinctions among disciplines, with those in the liberal tradition, seen as intellectually "pure" pursuits--mathematics, philosophy--having more symbolic weight than education or business or, to be sure, the trades.

Such tension plays out when arts and sciences faculty are brought together with faculty in occupational programs. The way subject areas and disciplines are organized in school and college leads future faculty to view knowledge in bounded and status-laden ways. And there is no place in a historian's training, let's say, where she is assisted in talking across disciplines with a biologist, let alone to a person in medical technology or the construction trades.

Those separations are powerfully reinforced when people join an institution. The academic-vocational divide has resulted in separate departments, separate faculties, separate budgets, separate turf and power dynamics. Now egos and paychecks enter the mix. These multiple separations lead to all sorts of political conflicts and self-protective behaviors that work against curricular integration. And it certainly doesn't help that efforts at integration are often framed such that the academic side will bring the intellectual heft to the vocational courses, a laying on of culture.

If the conflicts are mild, curricular integration still faces limits. From what I've seen, the work of integration tends to stay at the technical, structural level: Where in carpentry or nursing is math used, and how can we teach it in that context? This is a reasonable focus--the specific work that needs to be done.

But one could also imagine discussing how carpentry and nursing are mathematical activities. Or how the math being learned can transfer to other domains. Or how thinking mathematically opens up a way to understand the world: carpentry and nursing, but also employment and the economy, social issues, the structure of the physical environment. Educators tend to teach mathematics in vocational settings in the most practical, applied terms, and to locate further mathematical topics as the domain of liberal study.

The academic-vocational divide also leads us to think about vocational students in limited ways. They are narrowly job-oriented, hands-on, not particularly intellectual. That characterization is reinforced by loose talk about learning styles. It is true that a significant number of vocational students did not have an easy time in school and can barely tolerate the standard lecture-based, textbook-oriented classroom. It is a grind for them when, in pursuit of a degree beyond an occupational certificate, they must take general-education courses.

But dissatisfaction with the standard curriculum does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in liberal-arts topics. Countless people, young and not so young, come alive intellectually when the setting is changed, from museum-based educational programs to staging Shakespeare in prison. And the change in curriculum and setting doesn't have to be that exceptional. I think of a welding student in his 40s, a tough, goal-oriented guy, who excitedly told me about a field trip in his art-history class, and his amazement and pleasure that he was able to identify architectural structures by period and knew something about them.

If we sell our students short, we have done the same with the vocational curriculum. Despite all that John Dewey tried to teach us, we often underestimate the rich conceptual content of occupations. A powerful feature of contextualized learning is that it forces us to articulate the conceptual dimensions of the vocational course of study.

Likewise, occupations have a history and sociology and politics that can be examined. And they give rise to ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical questions: Students confront traditions and standards, and have to make decisions about the right action; they make aesthetic judgments; they are moved to reflect on the power of the tools and processes they use, and what deep knowledge will enable them to do; and they begin to identify with and define themselves by the quality of their work.

As I noted, faculty on the liberal-studies side of the academic-vocational divide aren't primed by their training to see all of this, and, sadly, vocational education itself has fostered this restrictive understanding. The authors of an overview from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education conclude that, historically, "vocational teachers emphasized job-specific skills to the almost complete exclusion of theoretical content." Indeed, as a profession, vocational education has further restricted the education of its students by excluding from its curriculum the study of the economics, politics, and sociology of work.

The assumptions about work, intelligence, and achievement that underlie a curriculum are as important as the content of the curriculum itself. A lot of historical debris has kept us from bridging the academic-vocational divide--now is the time to start sweeping it away.

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