

REAL WORLD EDUCATION

What Is "Real World" Education?

"Real world" education describes approaches to learning which encourage engaged, meaningful learning of the many competencies, skills, habits of mind, etc., that students need to constructively participate in the real world throughout their lives.

- It is not just a method or technique.
- It is a way of conceiving of the educational task that focuses on the connection between school and life and the greater world not only as an end of education but as an excellent means to achieve the end.
- It has significant implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Why Adopt a "Real World" Approach?

Empowering Students Versus Teaching Subjects

When an educator makes the fundamental philosophical paradigm shift from conceiving of teaching as covering subject matter to that of facilitating the holistic development of children, a "real world" approach often emerges as a natural construct upon which to hang one's pedagogical ideas. It is this very shift that is the most crucial step in adopting a real world approach. Once this transformation has occurred, *one no longer sees subject matter as an end but as a means. . . a means of developing humans to better navigate life's journey.* While there is no one formula which defines this "real world" approach, *the common thread of helping children develop competencies for life in the real world becomes central* to all pedagogical and curricular efforts. One no longer conceives of schooling just as preparing students for the next grade level or helping them become acquainted with the academic disciplines.

The exponential growth of knowledge within the disciplines and the concurrent rise of interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, applied, and integrative knowledge (challenging the traditional boundaries of the academic disciplines) have also encouraged educators to make the shift from primarily transmitting subject matter information to cultivating children's learning and real world competencies. *We can no longer teach it all even within our areas of expertise and life's challenges rarely fall within the bounds of only one subject area anyway. It becomes increasingly hard to defend the meaningfulness and relevance of one's education when subject matter and skills are taught in isolation from the other disciplines of knowledge and are rarely applied, used, and practiced in "real world" ways and settings.* We have found that a "real world" approach does not destroy the traditional knowledge disciplines or render them without value but rather returns them to their rightful and useful place as a means of helping one function successfully in the real world.

Changing Conceptions of the Learner and the Learning Process

There is a mounting body of converging educational research which is forcing a reconceptualization about the teaching/learning process itself and how people learn best. Cognitive science and brain research have been exploding our myths about learning, knowledge, and even intelligence itself over the past twenty years. *No longer can we conceive of students as empty vessels to be filled with a static body of isolated, disconnected factual information transmitted from a fixed, controlling source.* This research tells us that *learners can improve their intelligence* (intellectual capacities and potential) and that *intelligence itself is dynamic and multifaceted.* Intelligence has many capacities beyond the verbal and math abilities stressed in modern conceptions of education. It also suggests that learning is a much more *constructed* experience than previously thought. *Knowledge is seen as something to use and apply instead of something to stockpile or declare.*

The learner's active participation and interaction in and within particular meaningful, diverse experiences and contexts is crucial to the level of understanding and learning achieved. Cooperative and democratic learning contexts provide a crucial laboratory environment for students to develop and practice the competencies they will need in the real world. *Students learn better and see the usefulness of their learning when they can apply and use it in and through real world experiences and contexts.* Allowing students to have some influence in their environment promotes ownership and involvement of the whole self. This better promotes deeper learning and likewise better prepares them for the real world because they get to apply and use new knowledge in meaningful, relevant ways.

Authentic Assessment and the Limitations of Traditional Testing

The growing amount of research which questions the heavy emphasis on traditional testing in education serves as another reason to look to a real world approach to teaching and learning. The inadequacy and limited value of traditional assessments in accurately and fully capturing what and how well students are learning have pushed many to find more comprehensive, integrative, authentic means by which to tell if students are learning and are able to transfer competencies, skills, and knowledge beyond the test or classroom. *Alternative, performance-based, and authentic assessments have emerged as better ways to see what children are learning and can do and how well they can transfer it to real life.* To be able to see growth and change over time, portfolios and progressfolios have also rooted themselves into the assessment landscape as invaluable tools to facilitate this process.

The above assessment measures also promote learning through and during the assessment. Real world assessment breaks down the divide between curriculum, instruction, and assessment and keeps learning the focus throughout. Learning is often interrupted during time-consuming traditional testing and assessment practices. The new ways to conceive of assessment involve students in their own learning and evaluation and develop their metacognitive ability to be self-reflective. *The ability to monitor and evaluate one's own learning is a crucial attribute for the citizens, workers, and family members of the 21st century.* The rise of new qualitative assessment means as well as the critique of traditional testing approaches are important developments which encourage many to adopt a more "real world" approach to education.

The Changing Nature of Work and the Workplace in the 21st Century

The vast changes required by the global workplace in an information/communication age serve as another significant reason to reconfigure how we do education. The workplaces of today and tomorrow are rapidly changing and open-ended. Major technological and visual advances in communications demand that we no longer teach like we did in the 1940s. *Jobs and tasks are becoming more multifaceted and comprehensive, requiring a lot of individual responsibility, initiative, and the ability to learn efficiently and continually.* The growingly interdependent global economy increasingly requires persons who can work with knowledge and with others. National and international demographic trends and changes in international workforce composition also reinforce the demand for "real world" education. We must prepare children for the increasingly rich variety of backgrounds and perspectives that our children will be a part of in the workplaces of the 21st century.

The workplaces of tomorrow will increasingly require persons who are flexible, critical and creative thinkers, effective communicators, and constructive interactors who can make good decisions and solve problems independently and collaboratively. Real world education emphasizes the development of these competencies in individuals in and through applied, integrative, and authentic experiences and contexts as opposed to only the delivery of subject matter content by traditional teacher-centered, student-passive methods. *The development of these competencies for the next century is not merely a luxury for a few students, but is essential if our children are going to be gainfully employed throughout their lifetimes in this rapidly changing global economy.* "Real world" educational approaches offer a systemic and systematic way to reconceptualize and update education to match the 21st century for which we are preparing students.