INTEGRATION OF GENERAL EDUCATION INTO THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING CURRICULUM

Kwok Hung LAI
Student Affairs Officer
Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education(Morrison Hill)
Vocational Training Council

Index: General education, seamless learning experience, curriculum integration

Abstract: As our economy is moving towards knowledge-based post-industrial era, graduates need to re-equip themselves to meet with rapidly changing expectations of employers and society. Vocational education institutions also need to provide a seamless learning experience to students and enhance their lifelong learning abilities. General education should form an integral part of the total education experience, instead of ad hoc extra-curricular activity. It should be well integrated into the existing vocational training curriculum. This paper discusses the arguments for such grounds and suggests how this can be implemented.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the structural change in the economy, nine years' basic education in Hong Kong is not sufficient to prepare for a smooth transition of the 16- to 19-year-old school leavers to employment. According to the experiences of many OECD countries, vocational training programs in the last two decades are unsuccessful to lower their high unemployment rates (see Lo, 2000). Hong Kong is currently experiencing difficulty in youth employment due to a similar structural change. In terms of unemployment rate, persons in the 15 – 19 age group were hardest hit, with a high unemployment rate of 27.6 per cent, against the overall rate of 6.1 per cent (Census and Statistics Department, 1999: FB8). However, at the same time, a large number of IT job vacancies are currently unfilled because of skill shortages. Structural change in the economy is believed to be the intrinsic cause of unemployment, especially after the Asian Financial Crisis (Chan, 1999). Markets are global by nature, and the Hong Kong SAR must move quickly if it is to take, and keep, its place at the forefront of the information age. Failure to do so will carry a heavy price in terms of growth and competitiveness.

CHALLENGES OF THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Hong Kong's economy is moving towards a "knowledge-based" post-industrial era, where workers are expected to be intellectual (see Ho, Denny 1999; Chung, 1999; Cheng, 2000) to survive in the E-cultural Revolution (see Kanter, 2000). Today's jobs will be relics of the past as traditional jobs "disappear". The present concept of work has its origin in the 18th and 19th centuries when growing companies and bureaucracies in the industrialized countries had to divide work in differentiated tasks to get things done. Due to globalization and increasing competition, work will take the form of tasks or projects which requires new technological skills as well as the 'skill' of finding and doing work in a world without clearcut and stable jobs, but emphasis in deregulation and flexibility, as new technologies can spring up tomorrow, making those of today obsolete overnight.

Employers nowadays emphasize the need for employees who have good personal and social skills, together with any technical 'know-how' which may be required. Employees are expected to be able to work in a rapidly changing environment, to engage in 'rule-making' rather than just 'rule-following' behavior, to work in project teams, to communicate well with colleagues, and to share the same 'personal chemistry' as others in the organization (see Brown & Scase, 1994). High school leavers are also expected to have general knowledge of work requirements and a good working attitude, but the present curriculum in Hong Kong only prepares pupils for academic studies and does not equip them with general skills and knowledge for work (Cheung & Lewis, 1998). Past researches further reveal that Hong Kong students are very pragmatic, instrumental and focusing on study-related matters rather than social life on campus (Kwan & Ng, 1999; Lai, 1999b; Pomfret & Lai, 1999a). Such discrepancies should be dealt with in the new millennium to respond to societal and employers' needs.

Mass education that was created for an industrial era is not satisfactory for the approaching information era, as the traditional educational systems have not kept pace with ongoing changes in societies in terms of new technology and the production of new information, as well as economic and social changes in a world rapidly experiencing global interdependence (see Parrott, 1998). The prevailing conception of knowledge as an external entity is breaking down. Knowledge is considered as internal and subjective, closely connected to the learner and the situational context. So, the existing bureaucratic system of administration is incapable of meeting the needs of the education system in the 21st century as traditional emphasis on acquiring information is being replaced by a focus on learning to learn and on the ability to use knowledge (Murphy, 1999).

As proposed in the recently published *Education Blueprint for the 21st Century* by the Hong Kong Education Commission (1999), it is clearly stated that "learning should be focused upon students' personal development and is not limited to school subjects or examination syllabus. Students should have a comprehensive learning experience through the formal, non-formal and informal modes." We must ensure that our students are fully equipped for the knowledge economy of the 21st Century by expanding their access to education and training. A fundamental overhaul of Hong Kong's education and vocational training system is needed to meet the community's changing needs (Commission on Strategic Development, 2000). Recognizing that vocational competence is no longer a sufficient quality to enable diploma and certificate graduates to meet the challenges posed by the millennium 2000, vocational training institutions must get away from traditional subjects and old method of rote learning that are not relevant in the information age. Besides, to attract and retain the best and the brightest talent to maintain a competitive edge, one of the main strategies of vocational education reform is to strengthen general education and to integrate it into the existing vocational training curriculum, instead of being antecedent to or concurrent with professional education (see Zlatic *et al.*, 2000).

As universally accepted, education benefits the individual in ways not only related to jobs or work but in ways that enhance self-discovery, self-fulfillment and the acquiring of knowledge, ways that enable one to be a responsible citizen at an international level. It is necessary to integrate socially-useful productive work with general education in the academic stream to equip all students with certain elementary skills. So, in addition to work skills, students must also develop diplomatic skills, an appreciation of differences (Sabo, 2000), recognize personal inadequacies through life-long learning and workplace re-training after graduation. General education, thus widens the students' scope of knowledge and develops a global sense. In fact, in a recent survey of graduates of the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (Morrison Hill), quite a significant proportion (77.3%) of the respondents "strongly agree" or "agree" to incorporate broader training, such as leadership skills, knowledge of world-wide issues, interviewing and presentation skills, problem-solving techniques, etc. into the curriculum (Pomfret & Lai, 2000).

GENERAL VERSUS SPECIALIZED EDUCATION?

To achieve ever increasing excellence of performance and service that completely satisfy both internal and external customers by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations,[1] and to "provide a better physical and learning environment to attract able students foster their total development"[2] through improving and expanding student facilities and services to enrich campus life",[3] the restructured Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Institution (IVE) organizes general education in her nine campuses to enhance a balanced development of students' moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic capacities in an ever-changing world. These programs aim at broadening students' horizons, widening knowledge of liberal arts, sciences and humanities, fostering their rational inquiry and independent thinking, and inculcating sense of personal and social responsibilities,[4] and providing them with an enriched perspective from which to examine and appraise personal, professional and social issues. The content of the programs includes civic awareness development, Chinese and Western culture, social participation, thinking methods, understanding of society, etc. through the use of open forums, workshops, group projects, visits, and community services. Students are encouraged to develop their talents in areas other than academic and professional fields. All first-year full-time students are expected to participate in a minimum of six sessions of general education as extra-curricular activities in order to satisfy the requirement to obtain certification, which is not a prerequisite for promotion or being recorded in the testimonials. For students who regard technical education just as an investment for better job opportunities instead of total education, existing policy gives no incentives for them to get involved in general education as extra-curricular activities. For the first year of implementation, only 25% of all first year students are awarded with the full certificate in the Morrison Hill campus. On the contrary, general education (or courses existing of similar nature) forms part of the curriculum and is a requirement for graduation in other tertiary education institutions in Hong Kong.

What role does general education play in the vocational education realm? Stereotypically, the "meat" of vocational education is the technical training which lies in the hands of the academics, who tend to students' cognitive and skills development, while student affairs personnel minister to the affective growth or the "soul" of the students (see Zeller, 1997: 10). As "managers" of the out-of-class experience rather than as educators, student affairs personnel pay attention to the so-called co-curriculum, student activities, affective or personal development or simply the "non-cognitive" part in the whole education of students. In the newly formed IVE, general education, being formalized as part of the student affairs realm, is expected to play supplementary, secondary or "para-education roles" to enrich the narrowly and increasingly specialized technical training curriculum by providing both a common core of knowledge and a breadth of knowledge and skills (see Kanter *et al.*, 1997: xxi-xxii; Papish, 1999). Is the present arrangement the best means to increase effectiveness with few resources? If we think that our traditional vocational training curriculum is too "narrow" for our students today, then the planners can simply widen the curriculum and incorporate broader training elements into the existing core modules?

---

[1] Total Quality Management and Continuous Improvement (TQM & CI) concept as outlined in *Total Quality Improvement: A Quality Policy dedicated to all staff within the VTC* (*VTC Quality Policy*)

[2] Goal 3 of the seven main Goals which enable the VTC to implement its Mission

[3] one of the VTC Strategies to achieve Goal 3

[4] Please refer to Lai (1996, 1997, 1998, 1999a) for a detailed analysis of the development of civic education in colonial Hong Kong as well as the implications on student affairs services in tertiary education.

SEAMLESS LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The very notion of the definition of a good teacher has changed in the last decade by adopting or promoting a more holistic notion of what it means to teach well. Parker Palmer (1998: 11), one of the pioneers in this line of thought, views teaching within the context of building learning communities, that "the courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that the teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require". What Palmer emphasizes is the so-called seamless learning experience, and educators and administrators need to establish truly collaborative effort to analyze, strategize, and implement programs which require a unified effort to build learning communities (see Lamadrid, 1999).

A recent study of Papish (1999) further confirms the beliefs that academic and student affairs are polar opposites (Blake, 1996) or that there is little readiness for cooperation (Hintz & Stamatakos, 1978) are not supported. Student affairs professionals should advocate and facilitate seamless learning environments, featuring collaboration between academics and administrators for the benefit of students. In the Morrison Hill campus, collaboration has occurred via standing committees, counselling services, career planning and placement, students' financial aids and welfare, students' scholarship award and presentation, student activities, community functions, such as blood donation and most recently, in a survey of values of teaching staff.

The whole educational experience is becoming widely accepted, where academic and extra-curricular activities, campus facilities and social interactions all play an important part in a successful educational programme, leading to academic achievement and all round development (Pomfret & Lai, 1999b). Thus, general education, as part of the whole educational experience instead of just extra-curricular activities, should be integrated into and be part of the vocational training curriculum.

MODES AND STRATEGIES OF INTEGRATION

Inter-disciplinary teams can be formed so that collaborative efforts of integrating general education and professional abilities in the areas of critical thinking, time management, leadership, presentation skills, communication, project management, team work and meeting management skills, and ethical decision-making abilities within the contexts of different disciplines of studies and to give relevance and currency to course materials. Efforts to change general education concern the whole institution and inevitably entail disagreement about the content, structure, and philosophy of what should be done. Those involved in this change process should adopt an attitude of welcoming conflict and looking for ways to negotiate differences. Because academic departments have a good deal of autonomy in how they allocate their time on core modules for their students, integration of general education into an existing curriculum requires thorough discussion and mutual understanding, compromises as well as an open attitude towards a common goal of what should be taught to students. In fact, much of the content of general education requires interdisciplinary efforts to be successfully implemented. Coming up with a design is only the first step to change. The real work of general education takes place after a proposal has been accepted, when deciding on the details and making resources available are crucial. Some programs may require a joint effort of current teaching staff and the student affairs officers to implement them. Others may need a re-deployment of existing staff to conduct. When considering whether to deploy existing academic staff or involve solely the student affairs officers to conduct general education course or a joint effort of these two disciplines, respective departments concerned need to know how involvement will affect them. This is a crucial issue. The

period of early implementation is an especially fragile time for changes. Departments that participate in it need to be encouraged and rewarded and staff teaching in general education courses should be evaluated and considered in tenure and promotion decisions (see Kanter *et al*., 1997: 130). A thorough evaluation of the integration or changes should begin at implementation, before problems become insoluble and errors become institutionalized. Evaluation should be seen as part of an ongoing process of assessment and reform of general education.

CONCLUSION

Along with the growth of mass education, rapid expansion of university education before transfer of sovereignty, decline of manufacturing sector, along with the recent development of community colleges offering associate degree courses, vocational education suffers a surfeit of predictions, warnings, and labels. Institutions are expected to adapt to changes in the labor market and to respond to societal needs out of tight budgets and intensified competition for resources. Vocational training institutions, such as the nine campuses of the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education, should consider redesigning their curricula to meet a range of educational goals, from producing educated para-professionals who can function in the global economy, to addressing learning styles by adding teamwork and experiential activities to more traditional and structured lecture formats. At the same time, it is necessary to improve the quality of teaching and eliminate a culture of "low expectations" or an image of being a "no-choice substitute."

The continuous structural changes have increased the importance of up-to-date skills and competencies, calling for the development of effective strategies for lifelong learning. General education is providing students with a base for lifelong learning after graduation. The basis for employability is now broadening. Productive work habits, personal confidence, decision-making skills and a commitment to learning are becoming as important as specific vocational skills. To improve the employability of all students, most education and training systems are trying to reduce the traditional separation between vocational education and academic or general education (McKenzie & Wurzburg, 1997/1998). Since total and lifelong education is both an organizational goal and a global trend, general education should be regarded as an integrative part of this total educational experience.

REFERENCES

Blake, E. S. (1996). "The yin and yang of student learning in college" *About Campus*, 1(4), 4-9.

Brown, P. & Scase, R. (1994). *Higher Education and Corporate Realities: Class Culture and the Decline of Graduate Careers*, London: UCL Press.

Census and Statistics Department. (1999). "The profile of the unemployment population in Hong Kong, 1999" in *Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics, September 1999*, Hong Kong SAR: Printing Department, FB1-21.

Chan, S. C. (1999). "The cause and ways to tackle high employment rate" *Hong Kong Economic Journal Monthly*, 23(1): 13-16 (in Chinese).

Cheng, K. M. (2000). "Information era, knowledge economy, learning society" *Journal of Youth Studies*, Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 3(1): 3-9.

Cheung, C. K. & Lewis, D. (1998). "Expectations of employers of high school leavers in Hong Kong" *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 50(1): 97-111.

Chung, Y. P. (1999). "Educational reform under economic restructuring" *Journal of Youth Studies,* Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 2(2): 40-48.

Commission on Strategic Development. (2000). *Bringing the Vision to Life: Hong Kong's Long-Term Development Needs and Goals*, Hong Kong SAR: Printing Department.

Education Commission. (1999). *Learning for Life – Reviewing of Education System: Framework for Education Reform*, Hong Kong SAR: Printing Department.

Hintz, J. A., & Stamatakos, L. C. (1978). "Goal congruence and perceived need for greater cooperation between undergraduate faculty and student affairs staff" *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 19(2), 46-152.

Ho, K. L. Denny. (1999). "The employment situation in post-industrial society: the way to survive for youth" *Journal of Youth Studies,* Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 2(2): 14-27.

Kanter, R. M. (2000). "Are you ready to lead the E-cultural Revolution?" *Inc*, Boston: Goldhirsh Group, 22(2): 43-4.

Kanter, S. L., Gamson, Z. F., London, H. B. & Arnold, G. B. (1997). *Revitalizing General Education in a Time of Scarcity: A Navigational Chart for Administration and Faculty*, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Kwan, P. Y. K. & Ng, P. W. K. (1999). "Quality indicators in higher education – comparing Hong Kong and China's students" *Managerial Auditing Journal*, 14(1/2): 20-27.

Lai, K. H. (1996). "Civic education in the transitional period" *Apple Daily*, 16 July 1996.

Lai, K. H. (1997). "Compulsory civic and moral education in university" *Apple Daily*, 31 May 1997.

Lai, K. H. (1998). "A new direction for civic education in Hong Kong SAR" *Journal of Youth Studies*, Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 1(1): 151-58.

Lai, K. H. (1999a). "Civic education: a focus on student affairs practice after reunification" *Educational Studies*, 25(2): 205-15.

Lai, K. H. (1999b). "Changing needs and students' involvement in student affairs practice", in *Managing Change in Student Affairs: A Collection of papers prepared by Members of the Asia Pacific Student Services Association attending the annual meeting of the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education, United Kingdom*, edited by APSSA, 24-28.

Lamadrid, L. (1999). "Putting descartes before the horse: opportunities for advancing the student affairs link with academic affairs" *College Student Affairs Journal*, 19(1): 24-34

Lo, W. C. (2000). "Economic restructuring and youth employment training" *Journal of Youth Studies*, Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 3(1): 10-16.

McKenzie, P. & Wurzburg, G. (1997/1998). "Lifelong learning and employability" *The OECD Observer*. Paris; Dec 1997/Jan 1998.

Murphy, J. F. (1999). "Core strategies for reforming schooling" *School Administrator*, December, 1999, 56(11).

Palmer, P. (1998). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Papish, R. A. (1999). "Collaborative common ground: A shared vision of student learning" *College Student Affairs Journal*, 19(1): 44-51.

Parrott, J. (1998). "New challenges for educational and social policies in international settings: A Review Essay" *Comparative Education*, 34(3): 341-7.

Pomfret, M. J. & Lai, K. H. (1999a). *Study on Students' Utilization of Campus Facilities, Gains and Learning Experiences*, Internal research report, Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (Morrison Hill).

Pomfret, M. J. & Lai, K. H. (1999b). "The whole education experience", paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Vocational Education and Training Association (IVETA) held in Sydney, Australia.

Pomfret, M. J. & Lai, K. H. (2000). "The effects of whole educational experience on graduate employability and further study", paper presented at the International Conference on Vocational Education and Training, IVETA Conference 2000, in Hong Kong.

Sabo, S. R. (2000). "Diversity at work" *Techniques*, 75(2): 26-8.

Zeller, W. (1997). "Two cultures united: residential programs of the 21st century" *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 26: 7-13.

Zlatic, T. D., Nowak, D. M. & Sylvester, D. (2000). "Integrating general and professional education through a study of herbal products: an intercollegiate collaboration" *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*. 64(1).

CORRESPONDENCE

Kwok Hung LAI

Student Affairs Officer

Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education

(Morrison Hill)

Vocational Training Council

Hong Kong

6 Oi Kwan Road, Wanchai,

Hong Kong.

Telephone No.: (852) 2835 8398

Fax. No.: (852) 2575 7102

E-mail Address: khlai@vtc.edu.hk