

Thoughts on Career-related Experience in the Curriculum Reform

'Students should be entitled to five learning experiences that correspond to 'moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic' development in the aims of education. Areas of ... career-related experiences to link studies with career aspirations and job opportunities.' (Curriculum Development Council, 2001, 3.2)

Under the framework of the Curriculum Reform, Career-related Experience is one of the five essential learning experiences that students should undergo in school curriculum. In the view of students, it is their entitlement to encounter elements of career education (in a broad sense) during their primary and secondary schooling. However, what does Career-related experience mean and refer?

Firstly, the meaning of Career-related Experience (CRE) does not confine to 'work experience'. In the Western countries (e.g. US & UK), it is a common practice that schools assign students, usually at senior secondary levels (e.g. S4-equivalent) to have 'work experience' in a wide variety of firms and offices. The aim is to enable students to have first-hand experience of work through undertaking placement and to acquire certain related skills through the short experience (usually 1-2 weeks). Career-related experience refers something broader, in terms of aims and practices. Generally speaking, it aims to enable students to learn about *the world of work* and careers through a variety of learning activities. It does not necessarily mean work placements.

Secondly, Career-related experience is not synonymous with the traditional notion, 'career guidance'. The latter term refers helping students to make suitable informed choice in their future careers. In this sense, the traditional field of 'career guidance' or sometimes re-dressed as 'career counseling' are often marginalized in schools, especially in this highly competitive, exam-oriented context. Teachers usually think it is too young to talk about careers (especially below 14) and prefer to help or counsel students in their possible academic study pathways instead. Building on these perceptions, schools, which emphasize 'career guidance', would be likely to associate with negative, non-academic labeling. Under this kind of context, it is understandable that the importance of developing understanding of *the world of work* and *careers* (not 'career guidance') from an early age is heavily undermined. Career-related experience (CRE) as a *prelude* to future career guidance opportunities should be reinforced. It is schools' obligation to ensure healthy, positive conceptual development on careers and world of works among our students. According to research, most students have rejected most jobs by late primary school, on the basis of perceptions (Foskett &

Hemsley-Brown, 1997). But what makes them to have these perceptions? If schooling does not provide CRE in an earlier age, the task will simply be left to mass media, parents and peers. This leads perfectly to the following section on *what* and *how* should be included in CRE.

Career-related Experience under the framework of Life-wide Learning

‘...one of the most important aspects of active learning is that it can connect the learning that young people undertake in institutions to the world outside. The evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, is that young people value this kind of learning activity – real situations, real problems to solve, real people with whom to work.’ (‘Learning Beyond the Classroom”, Tom Bentley, 1998)

‘Life-wide learning refers to student learning in real contexts and authentic settings. Such experiential learning enables students to achieve certain learning goals that are more difficult to attain through classroom learning alone.’ (Curriculum Development Council, Basic Education Curriculum Guide Booklet 6, 2002)

No matter how we name them, whether as ‘active learning’ or ‘life-wide learning’, these ‘out-of-classroom’ activities are well recognized *globally* as effective means to develop student understanding of *the world of work* and to connect learning to life beyond the school. Such learning opportunities of CRE could be in a form of visits, projects, interviews, or running real-life/ virtual businesses. The effect of introducing such structured or semi-structured learning and relating it explicitly to learning outcomes, is beyond acquiring context-specific knowledge and generic skills. It also helps students developing related positive values and attitudes (e.g. punctuality, integrity, honesty) in the sense of increasing employability among the students. Furthermore, evidence shows that teachers and participating agencies also gained in the process, in terms of widening views between the two sectors.

What should be included in CRE and how?

Whether the activity is about visiting a workplace, mentoring by/ working with businesspersons, or solving a real-life, work-related problems¹, a Career-related experience (CRE) should address the following dimensions:

(1) *Student Perceptions* - Profiling perceptual components of *the world of work* or the

¹ See Appendix for the typology of CRE activities

occupational fields concerned

- (2) *Work ethics* - the concept of good working attitudes related to the experience;
- (3) *Knowledge related to employability*- Understanding of current labour market and the notions of 'employability', with examples of possible entry points, progressions and trends in the selected field, as well as 'personal qualities' required.

(1) Student Perceptions - Profiling perceptual components of occupational fields

In order to develop understanding of the world of work among students, teachers often bring their students to authentic situations, such as visiting a typical work place in a selected career, as part of a project or as life-wide learning. There are three aspects, in helping students to profile perceptions on a certain occupational field.

- *Image construction/ re-construction* – Whenever a child come in contact with a job or a career field whether through direct experience or second-hand experience they will develop some forms of image and perception of the nature, characteristics and status of the job. New information from the CRE will simply add, extend or modify the existing models in the child's mind. In practice, teachers need to aware about these *prior perceptions* about the subject career or field and build these elements into the design of the CRE activity. For instance, teachers could direct students to compare what are their prior perceptions on nursing, help them to identify the source of these perceptions (maybe from their parents, TV...) and also to encourage to spot out any perceptual change after the CRE visit.
- *Invisible components of the world of work* – Some careers or jobs are more visible in the society and create stronger images than others. For example, the supermarket checkout assistant's job has high level of visibility through those elements that involve interacting within customers. All jobs though have important invisible components – for instance, shopkeeper's work in stocktaking and completing accounts. In designing a CRE, say a visit to a business firm, it is important that teachers need to encourage students to 'dig deeper' into what they have seen and heard. For example, in a solicitor firm sitting three workers, the solicitor, the legal administrator and the secretary have a shared visible component, in that they are office-based and involve working with documents. A 11-year student may see them all have the same 'boring office work'. However, the three jobs are very different, in terms of training required, intellectual challenge, skills and career pathway. The quality of CRE

should help students to ask the right questions and discuss the *invisible* components (e.g. job components, skills and competence, success factors, staff motivations) of *the world of work* through individual and teamwork, depending on the age groups of students involved.

(2) Work ethics - the concept of good working attitudes related to the experience

In the Curriculum Reform, the five priority values and attitudes are:

- Perseverance
- Respect for Others
- Responsibility
- National Identity
- Commitment

These priority values and attitudes are proposed to help students’ personal and social development for a wide range of contexts, including career opportunities, in a view to prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. The ethical side of ‘personal qualities’ is emphasized in job recruitment processes nowadays. Employers are increasingly keen to look for workers who are ethically upright, other than a person just with some impressive qualifications. Typical questions in their selection criteria: *Whether the person is honest, hardworking and committed? Could the person take up responsibilities? Could the person work effectively in a team?*

In order to pass this scrutiny, students need concrete, maybe even structured experience to construct or develop these values and attitudes in the context of work. This is where CRE came into place this important issue. In a typical CRE, we propose that students should be motivated to think through related ethical/ value issues:

Priority Values and Attitudes	Related work-related ‘personal qualities’	Examples of questions posed to students in a typical CRE
Perseverance	Positive thinking; AQ; Mental strength against the odds	How did the workers approach failures? Is there a ‘give-up’ point?
Respect to Others	Teamwork; Conflict Resolution; Hospitality; Politeness; Manners; Appropriate Dress-up; Repertoires of effective communications	What makes them work together effectively? Were there any conflicts, disagreement? Do they proud of their partners?
Responsibility	Punctuality; Honesty; Trustworthiness; Courage to be	What kind of responsibilities do they take up? Any extra work they are

	accountable;	willing to do?
National Identity	Sense of community/ national belonging; citizenship; Service to the communities/ city/ nation/ the world	Do have some ideology about their jobs other than personal ones?
Commitment	Self-motivation; Loyalty; Pro-activeness	Find out how the workers make commitment of the present job or profession? Why they choose the professions or job type?

This message of *work ethics* challenges us (professionals, parents and young people) about our conventional beliefs about what sensible employers want nowadays. We expect employers looking for young people with ‘A’ grade- qualifications. As the Chairman of the Commission on Youth, Dr Y. W. Choi addressed a group of young people in a territory-wide conference (in Cantonese),

「在知識型的社會裡，「側側膊」「以為自己好掂，其實好唔掂」，想蒙混過關的一定站不住腳。惟有不不斷進修，務求使自己有料才會屹立不倒。現今工作離不開拍檔，因此個人的技能及人際關係的處理最為重要，...工作時一定要「搏盡條命」，不要認為隨便找一份工作，有幾個錢放在口袋裡便滿足了，要切記僱主的評語比起任何其他事物來得重要，包括學歷。」(蔡元雲、July 2003)

Positive attitudes towards life-long learning, Social skills and paying respect to people, sense of responsibility and humble attitudes are all listed in Dr Choi’s *unique* speech, speaking in ‘modern youth’s language’. Most importantly, employers concern more about the working attitudes of their staff more than what qualifications they achieved in formal education. We sometimes embrace these personal qualities required by the current employment market under the over-arching term, ‘employability’.

(3) Knowledge related to employability

The notion of ‘employability’ attracts considerable attention in recent decades. It counteracts with the traditional selection criteria based on academic merits and qualifications. The concept touches the issues of the importance of developing the ‘right’ personal qualities or capacities for jobs. Also, it addresses the issues of fast-moving change of the job market. The job types available at present will probably no longer exist in three years. In this kind of context, people need to pick up specific skills and knowledge *in* the job quickly, not only *before* job. Therefore, it is the ‘personal capacities’ that count. In other words, an employer would look for a person

who is ‘employable’, in terms of attitudes, competence to learn fast and reasonably knowledgeable, to face the *uncertainty* in the world of work. The traditional career guidance approach of matching student’s attributes with job types often found inadequate, outdated and over-simplified. Students need to have the sense of making himself/ herself employable, no matter which way the labour market would steer towards.

In any CRE, teachers need to address the issue of what the career field concerned requires from the employers before entry and after recruitment. The heart of the focus should be on *what* and *why* the employers require that kind of personal qualities. Students would reflect on a more critical issue by putting themselves on the employers’ side. For example, it would be good to ask the students why employers put ‘Fluent Putonghua’ as an essential requirement for sales representatives in a jewelry shop in Causeway Bay. Students should also be encouraged to predict the future trends in the employment market, say in three years time, regarding developing their own personal capacities.

Facilitating CRE – fostering favorable environments and effective partnerships

CRE starts from good daily classroom practice. Students learn about the concept of *work*, as first taste of job during school activities: What makes a group of young people to face ten bosses a week, working in a 35 minute-time spells and is expected them to be punctual and to observe the prescribed code of conduct? In actual fact, students are ‘workers’. In this sense, whether the working mode of classroom learning models ‘factory work in the 50s’ or ‘a flexible, networked and collaborative office in the 21st century’, students would undoubtedly picked up the related attitudes and mindsets, throughout this full-time engagement. This leads to the following point about whether teachers (I refer to classroom teachers) are ‘in-touch’ with current development and future trends of the career world.

‘So do we expect all teachers to “teach” career education?’ The answer is a straight ‘no’. However, their task in general, may be to facilitate, to get involved and to provide suitable learning opportunities for their students in their remits. They need to review their own curriculum plans in individual subject areas, integrating CRE into their frameworks and programmes of study. In CRE, teachers (not merely relying on the Career-Guidance Masters) need to be the *facilitator of learning*, rather than

directors. In other words, they need to learn it together with their own students, whether it is a science-based CRE or a business mentor project. There are some possible learning points for teachers during CRE summarized and generalized below:

- To understand what is needed in the world of work currently;
- To understand which aspects my students needed to develop for employability, in terms of personal qualities;
- How could I put what I learned into my classroom practice, in terms of change in pedagogy, curriculum management and MCE?
- Any key players I need to work with, in terms of collaboration and partnerships? (e.g. Career and Guidance Master, parents, government departments, non-government agencies)

CRE indeed provides ‘epistemic windows’ for teachers to learn experientially about *the world of work* outside school. Evidence shows that teachers found significant impacts of their participation in CRE-related programmes on their approach to learning and teaching and on valuing knowledge and expertise that students acquired from CRE (Cumming and Carbine, 1997). However, CRE needs good partners from outside. It could be a company firm, factory, public service or even an umbrella agency that promote CRE at schools. More research and development is needed to explore what makes a good partnership to promote quality learning in CRE. In a broader sense, good partnership in CRE should mean (1) *respecting each other’s agenda*, (2) *collaborating under an agreed agenda* and (3) *celebrating the achievements on the students’ agenda*.

Conclusion

The essay provides trains of thoughts to cover a series of ‘conceptual strongholds’ associated with Career-related Experience in the Curriculum Reform in Hong Kong. It may be incomprehensive and may seem lacking systematic local evidence to support the points made, but it certainly provides some preliminary contexts for future research and development works to investigate this area. According to a recent survey on KLA implementation under the Curriculum Reform, there are only 42% of secondary heads (21% primary heads) claimed to offer CRE to their students. No matter how we explain the data, whether it is the scarcity of CRE providers out-of-school, lack of teacher education about CRE, the perceived image of CRE (often negative, Dearing, 1996), or all three, more development work needs to be done. After all, there is no disagreement in the field that CRE would help us to break down a series of existing barriers between:

- The world of school learning and the world of work
- Formal learning and informal experience
- Abstract knowledge and Concrete applications
- Mindsets of teachers, employers, future employees (students)
- The operating systems of different kind of organizations

(Bentley, T., 1998)

*“If changing is really learning, if effective organizations need more and more intelligent people, if careers are shorter and more changeable, above all, if more people need to be more self-sufficient for more of their lives, then **education has to become the single most important investment** that any person can make in their own destiny. It will **not** be education as most of us have known it, the old-fashioned learning...”* (Charles Handy, Retired Professor at the London Business School, *Age of Unreason*, 1989, p168)

(By Stephen Y.W. Yip, Chief Curriculum Development Officer (Life-wide Learning), March, 2004)

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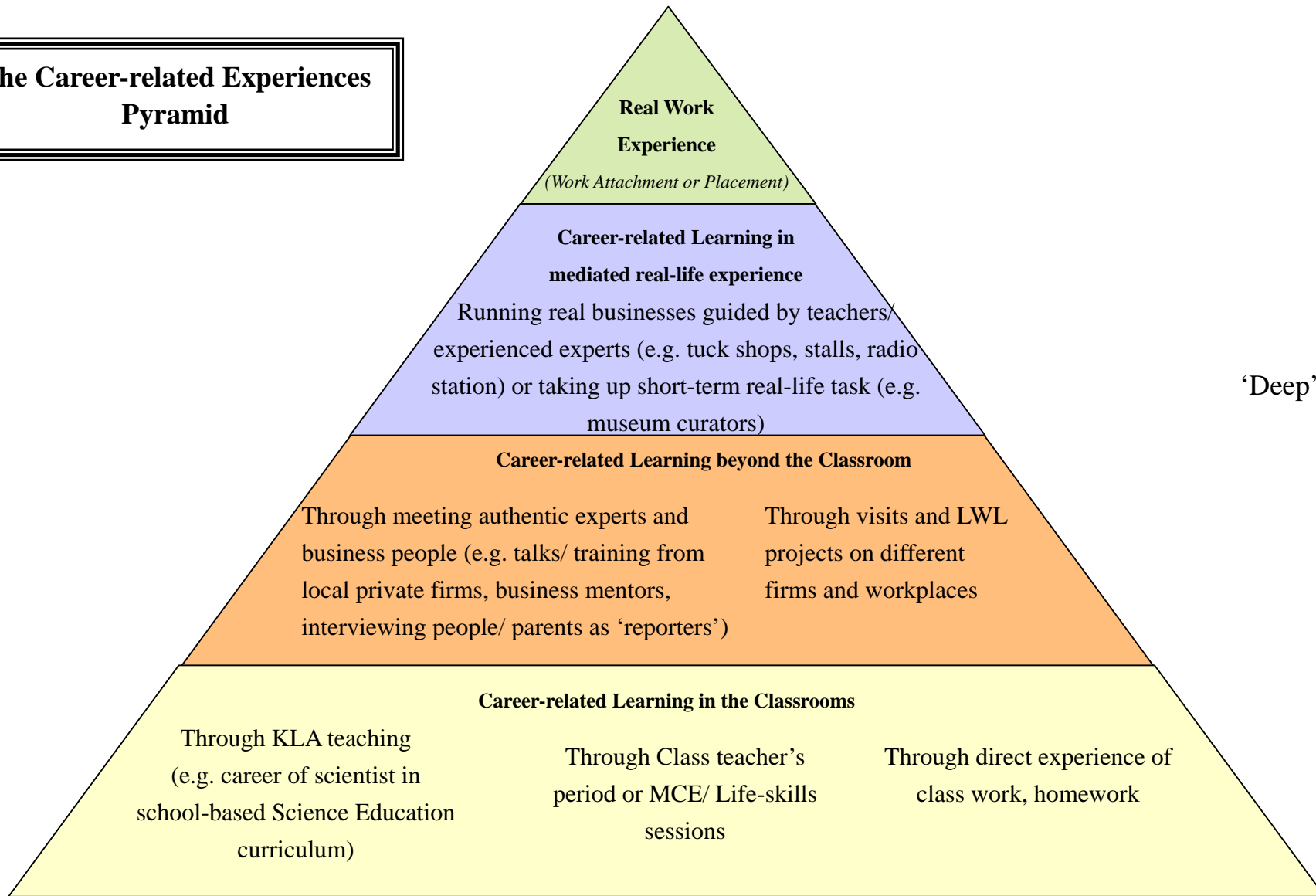
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The Career-related Experiences Pyramid



'Deep' Learning