2000 is the magic number, the first year of the 21st century, the century when we finally get serious about education. Educational change is in the millennial air and my school district, like most others, has signed on with a number of redesign and reform efforts. One reason I know the district is serious is that, as a department chair and mentor teacher, I am the recipient of reams of paper related to changing the system: copies of reports, statistical abstracts, reform proposals and other documents that have originated in bureaucratic offices and think tanks hundreds or thousands of miles from the small rural town of Corning, California where I teach.

A common theme running through many of these documents is the need to prepare students for the 20th century workplace. The U.S Department of Labor’s SCAN Report for America 2000 (1992), a document curriculum leaders in my district take very seriously, supports this need. Here are a few of its imperatives:

All American high school students must develop a new set of competencies and foundation skills if they are to enjoy a productive, full, and satisfying life.

The qualities of high performance that today characterize our most competitive companies must become the standard for the vast majority of our companies, large and small, local and global.

The nation’s schools must be transformed into high-performance organizations in their own right.

The report urges that students graduate with “workplace know-how,” which consists of the following five “competencies”:

1. Resources: Identifies, organizes, plans, and allocates resources;
2. Interpersonal: Works with others;
3. Information: Acquires and uses information;
4. Systems: Understands complex interrelationships;
5. Technology: Works with a variety of technologies.
From the Editors

In this quarter’s “Connections: Research and Practice” column, we are pleased to feature two articles based on classroom research studies conducted by members of Teacher Researchers for Educational Equity (TREE), a statewide teacher research project of the California Writing Project. For two years, a group of more than fifty teachers conducted individual research projects in their own classrooms and schools, meeting as a group three times a year to discuss issues of equity and diversity and to support each other in their ongoing research.

The first of these articles, Rochelle Ramay’s “The Now of School,” confronts the idea that education needs to be a preparation for “real life.” In an effort to help her high school students come face-to-face with their futures, she is forced to rethink the purpose of school.

In the second article, “Revising Revision: How My Students Transformed Writers’ Workshop,” Jan Matsuoka asks her students for opinions on her Writers’ Workshop and get some surprising and ultimately helpful answers.

Both articles illustrate that when teachers look closely at their own classrooms, they challenge their assumptions and stretch their vision.

Additionally, the report lists a “three-part foundation of skills and personal qualities that are needed for solid job performance.” These include basic skills, thinking skills and personal qualities.

So who’s to argue? These lists sound like accurate, if vague, descriptions of the skills necessary for success in the world beyond high school. But how would we know when and if our students have achieved these competencies? It was time to do what the district had been urging us to do: rethink our competency tests.

Although I’d scored hundreds of them, I’d remained consciously oblivious to my school’s English language arts competency exam until two years ago. The test presented the simplest of tasks that nearly every freshman passed the first semester of high school. For instance, students were asked to correctly address an envelope and to describe a process, like how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And, because students were able to retake the test as often as necessary, not passing and ultimately not graduating was never an issue.

Now, however, I wanted to lead my department in rethinking the design of the school’s competency test. I vowed that we would write a competency test that authentically allowed students to demonstrate their preparation in English language arts for life beyond high school, a test that would give them a chance to show that they were ready to meet the world’s challenges.

As I began thinking about the test, I was led to question all sorts of issues. What does someone need to know when he or she graduates from high school? Where might English language arts fit, and how should students demonstrate whatever it is they need to know? My questions led me right back to my classroom. What should be covered in classes that I teach?

I turned to my students for help with some answers. In particular, I decided to work with a heterogeneous group of juniors in the American literature portion of an interdisciplinary studies curriculum. The class was composed of twenty-one students, nearly half of whom spoke, read and wrote Spanish and English fluently. They were on the verge of graduation, making decisions and dreaming of futures merely four semesters away. I was wondering how the “workplace know how” advocated in the SCAN report could be made real for this group of students, representative of a diversity authors of publications such as the Scan Report habitually gloss over.

Here’s a look a year later at some of the individuals in my class, all of whom, like it or not, will soon find themselves in the workplace of the 21st century:

**Danica:** No one ever notices when she is absent from school. A quiet girl, Barbara’s best friend, but few others know her. She rides the nearly two-hour bus ride to school, lives with her grandmother. Her mom lives in Fresno and “I miss seeing her, but I can’t go back until she gets her life together.”

Danica welcomes everyone, demonstrates kindness, a shy smile, and an invisible existence. She
lives a difficult life, separated by many barriers her peers can never see: poverty, isolation, displacement.

*Carl*: “I started shaving in seventh grade. Everyone thought I was a lot older than I was.” I met Carl when he was a freshman in my lowest English class. He talked too much, but with his great sense of humor, I couldn’t help but like him. When he became a sophomore, we lost touch. I heard he’d left school, got in some kind of trouble, and then wanted to return for his junior year. “What happened to you that year?” I asked him one day after school.

“Well, I started stealing stuff from some houses and then some stores. Mostly money and stuff I could sell. My cousin bought most of it.”

“Were you into drugs?”

“No, I just wanted to buy stuff, ya know, like video games.” But Carl pulled himself out of his pattern the last time he was in The Hall. “I was in the same place as twelve-year-olds who had tried to kill people. I knew I didn’t belong in there, so I turned myself around.”

Carl left high school three weeks before graduation.

*Alma*: “I thought out of all the kids in our class, I’d be the one who wouldn’t graduate.” She smiled. She knew she would be walking across the stage in June. Tough girl who’d spent a year on home study because she didn’t get along with other kids. Living with her boyfriend since her sophomore year. Not pregnant. Aggressive. Angry. And graduating.

*Nathan*: A dark character always dressed in black. A percussionist constantly drumming rhythms only he understands. Nathan has enlisted in the Marines. I haven’t made the connection yet, but he has. He wants the toughest they have to offer, the most demanding and demoralizing. Nathan comes from a home that is rough, but he’s not proud of it.

*Alex*: Hispanic male who looks Anglo; tie dye, Grateful Dead, Army boots, hockey sack, skater.

---

Alex speaks softly, made puppets to demonstrate the sinking of the *Titanic*. His artistic talent and sense of justice make him popular and powerful. He got in a tangle with the vice principal and nearly lost his chance to stay on this campus. He worked out the problem. “Maybe the Army,” he says. Where did that come from?

*Allen*: All league, all section in football, baseball, basketball, track and field. Traveled to the state track meet after qualifying in two events as a junior. Great student. Great kid. Allen will be attending a major private university on an athletic scholarship. He works hard at everything. He never rests. How will he do in an urban setting, three hours from his small home town?

*Barbara*: Eighteen and raising a two-year-old. Already her future is unlike anyone else’s. She has to get a baby-sitter so she can go to the Friday night football game. She’s determined to graduate, “For my son. I want to be a police officer.” So she joins the junior force. But Barbara gets distracted and nearly fails American government and may not graduate. “Barbara, what happened?” I ask her. Her life got complicated, she says, but now she’s back on track and doing her homework, reading about the branches of government and caring for her child.

*Armando*: Armando had to move to independent study at the end of last year. His girlfriend, a freshman, delivered a baby and Armando needed to work. But he got tired of her, quit being around, abandoned school, but resumed this year with a new attitude. Weekly he showed me his art work. I commented and suggested. After a long weekend, his current girlfriend, a freshman who is in one of my classes, returned to school with black eyes and a broken nose. “I got in a fight and my dad is going to press charges on the girl who did it.” She thinks...
she's pregnant. After a lot of emotion and investigation, the girl admits Armando hit her. He's eighteen, could be sent to jail. She won't press charges. I see them walking hand in hand on campus.

Moving a group of students as diverse as these to a proscribed set of "workplace competencies" would be no easy task.

Karen: "So Karen, what's up for you next year?" I knew there would be no problem with her graduating. "I'm going to Butte (community college) and become an RN."

"How are your grades? What about your science class?"

"I'm not taking any science this year. And I think my grades are good."

"Aren't you supposed to take a lot of science?"

"I don't know. Besides, I don't like it very much. When I get to Butte I'll take it. I want to be a nurse so much that I know I can get through anything. I love helping people."

Jesus: What a kid! Smart, creative, articulate, explosive and opinionated. On All Soul's Day he gave a powerful presentation to the class about Mexican tradition with marigolds. He asked dynamic questions, focused his group's projects, and landed in the midst of a classroom stand-off with Armando. Jesus had plans. "Mrs. Ramay, I'm gonna work so hard this year. My grades are good. I want to go to UC San Diego and study Spanish. Try to become a teacher." Jesus could do it too.

He danced for the school's Ballet Folklorico group. This same boy, I heard later, had bought a gun. He lived with Veronica, his girlfriend, and earned As in almost every class.

Now, Jesus is in San Diego, but his future isn't what he'd planned. Not even close. He dropped out of high school, moved, fathered children there and here, joined a gang. One day he came back for a quick visit. He wore a beeper and his eyes darted around as we talked. Actually, I asked the questions. He was waiting for a friend to meet him.

Moving a group of students as diverse as these to a proscribed set of "workplace competencies" would be no easy task. Discussing the issue, Allen had a bright idea: "If we want to know these things, then we need to find out what it's like outside of school from those people who graduated. We could interview some of them, or something." The other twenty students nodded in agreement. We began mapping out a temporary plan for the year. Our inquiry focused on job shadowing. Students would follow someone who holds a specific job in which the student is interested, debrief as a group, find common threads, and draw conclusions for instruction in English language arts. Pretty straightforward and doable in the context of school.

In October of 1996 and January and March of 1997, I took my juniors on some vocational visits. The purpose of these visits was to ask questions, make notes, and come to an understanding about what the world outside of high school would expect from them as workers. We came up with a core question that the students would ask each worker they encountered, "How do you use reading and writing in your work?" Each student maintained a research notebook.

Their first trip was to a county-wide job fair focusing on local career opportunities. Emergency medical technicians, military recruiters, and small business owners gave talks and presentations. My students arrived with a list of questions to ask presenters. At the end of the day we filed onto the bus heading back to campus. The students chatted about the inside of the ambulance, criticized a student from another school who had asked the speaker an inappropriate question and bragged about the free gadgets they'd picked up; magnets, insulated cups, pencils, and the like. It was a start. I felt good.

As we debriefed the next day, they shared some of their answers to the questions they'd asked. "I asked the man from Wal-Mart what he had to know
when he got out of high school to do his job, and he said he wasn’t sure. What do I write in my notebook about that?”

“Yeah, I asked what kind of writing had to be done in the Army, and the recruiter couldn’t explain.”

“What was with that karate guy at the end?” Nathan wondered about the motivational speaker who had shared stories about his own life; kicking a drug habit then starting his own karate studio.

Now what? Students were only beginning this process, but as these representative responses suggest, it seemed time to move the students to a little deeper level of insight. So I talked about the kinds of observations and conversations I’d had as a model of ways for them to think about gathering information. For instance, when I talked with the emergency medical technicians, it was clear to me that they loved and were dedicated to their work. My students, who had been so focused on the role of literacy in the workplace, missed this entirely. The students nodded and listed other kinds of questions for the next trip, such as, “What attracted you to this particular line of work?” and “Would you recommend to your own children that they pursue your profession?”

In preparation for our next visit, as I wanted students to observe their subjects as well as interview them, I took the class through a simple observational activity. Students sat in pairs with their desks facing each other. For five minutes, one person tried to assemble a tangram while the other person observed. The assembler was directed to talk throughout the time to articulate his or her process. The “researcher” watched facial expressions, body language, and the process by which the partner solved the problem, and listened to the assembler’s tone of voice, word choices, and explanations without venturing an opinion. The sole purpose of the exercise was to gather data which could later be analyzed. Once the five minutes expired, the roles were reversed.

The class loved this activity. They shared all sorts of details: the girl who puffed her cheeks as she worked, the boy who began breathing heavily as the time limit approached, the student who made jokes to detract from his inability to solve the puzzle. Then they drew conclusions from their observations. Even well after the study ended, the class talked about this process.

I had hoped their enthusiasm for this activity would have some carryover when, the next day, we headed first to our region’s community college and then located in the same area. At the community college, the students observed mostly “vocational classes,” watching and interviewing reentry students and first timers. They spoke to instructors and looked at curricular materials. Each student traveled with a partner so that when we debriefed at school, they would be able to compare their findings.

In the afternoon, we toured the hospital. Doctors led the students through the facility from intensive care to the boiler room. The students observed premature infants and cardiac surgeons. The hospital was so quiet that almost none of the students spoke aloud to the doctors. Occasionally they asked about a machine or a patient, but mostly they were silent. On the trip home, they told shocking medical stories which were mostly unrelated to what they had observed. Some said they felt uncomfortable in intensive care knowing many of the patients might die, while others claimed to be fascinated by this facility saying they couldn’t stop staring.

“I asked one of the nurses to show me the kind of stuff she does, and she had tons of colored folders. She told me she spends most of her time writing in them. That sounded fun to me…”

One of the tour interns was from the small mountain town of Yreka, located about 3 hours north of Corning. Yreka and Corning play football against each other, so the students had heard of the small town. The doctor talked about attending a local community college, transferring to UC Davis, then USC. I couldn’t have planned a better situation: a person from a town similar in size as the one where my students live, follows a college path that students in Corning might access, then chooses to return to contribute to the community that supported him in his youth.

The next day students recounted what they’d observed. From all three visits, the job fair, the com-
munity and the hospital, we constructed a chart divided into several sections: observations, conclusions, common findings, recommendations for further study, and application for the competency.

Just because we hear what is good for us, will we recognize the importance of listening to experience, or do we need to make our own discoveries?

At the community college, one student said he’d noticed the differing ages of vocational students compared to traditional college students and commented on a huge tattoo on one of them. Another said that the environment was “nice.”

“What kinds of reading and writing was happening in the classes you observed?”

Danica smiled shyly, “I forgot to ask about that. The lady we talked to told us about how hard it was to have a kid and go to college too.”

“Anyone else?”

“The teacher gave me one of the handouts he gave the rest of his students. It’s about some kind of seminar on horticulture.” Jesus had visited the agriculture department.

“It sounds like you had some trouble getting information. What happened?”

Karen said, “Let’s talk about the hospital. Maybe that will be easier. There was a lot more to see there.”

“Not really,” Alma reported, “I wanted to see more in the nursery. They only had one baby in there and it didn’t look very sick. I wonder why it was in there anyway.”

“Did anyone speak with the doctor from Yreka?”

“No.” The class laughed at Yreka’s “lousy” football team.

“Remember that big fight after the basketball playoffs up there?” Allen shook his head trying to gain his composure.

“I think the hospital was the most interesting.” This is Joany. “All the people were really nice to us. I bet it would be a good place to work. The cafeteria sure was cheery.”

“What did you observe there that gives you this impression?”

“Well,” Joany looked through her notebook for clues, “I asked one of the nurses to show me the kind of stuff she does, and she had tons of colored folders. She told me she spends most of her time writing in them. That sounded fun to me. I like organizing things. I want to be in the medical field when I get out of school, and I’m glad I got to see what goes into the files.”

“So Joany, what conclusion might you draw from this observation?”

“You need to be organized and have good handwriting.”

Now it seemed like we were finally getting somewhere. “Nathan, what did you observe?”

“The maintenance man got paged all the time. He was so polite about it, too. I would have been so mad at people interrupting me. So write down for observation, ‘interrupted,’ and for conclusion write, ‘need to be flexible.’ I guess you need to know how to talk on the phone too, about all sorts of things.”

The remainder of the debriefing followed similarly. One by one the students shared what they’d observed and drew a conclusion. Later on we would begin to consider additional questions and ultimately consider the impact of these findings for the new competency.

Our last inquiry visit was to Chico, about 25 miles away, where students actually “job-shadowed” a person whose job matched their own interests. With the help of the vocations counselor, I spent nearly two full school days orchestrating this day. She and I each spoke with dozens of business people who were willing and excited to have students spend a morning with them. We organized times, contact persons, and agendas. With support from my district, we hired a
substitute to drive students to their individual locations, then pick them up once the morning ended.

Each student had his or her own person for the morning. Students were supposed to ask questions, watch the job in progress, read materials the professional was expected to read, and read writing the professional wrote for his or her job. I accompanied a pair of students to the studio of an artist who had created a mural for a parking structure in Chico. The artist was completely open to describing his work and showing us the process he’d followed for the mural’s completion. I asked most of the questions.

Returning to the classroom, students once again shared one by one what they thought about this visit. A few liked the person they followed, others didn’t have much to say. Some kids shared from their journals, told what they’d seen, others spoke without notes.

“When you write, you need to somehow put yourself into it.”

“All jobs demand some kind of technical reading.”

“You need to be flexible.”

“You have to know how to get the information that’s important to you by asking the right questions.”

These responses and sharings of their observations surprised me. How insightful. How right on. Aren’t they smart? Even the guidance counselor who observed this debriefing nodded and smiled. As I had been saying all along, these kids are good!

I felt myself grinning and smiling. Now all I had to do was write the competency.

Summer vacation began and I was proud of the way I had nudged my students to look seriously at their futures. When I spoke with teachers and friends, they validated how terrific my study was.

I began a serious look at a redesigned competency for English language arts, rereading student notebooks, studying the debriefing chart, and just plain thinking about ways attributes of success outside of high school might be demonstrated at school.

But something didn’t feel right. It felt empty and fake. I couldn’t quite catch my discomfort. It seemed that if kids could discover what they needed after high school and it matched what adults said, then we’d found the cure. We all agreed. So if both sides were saying the same things, what was the problem?

That fall, on the first day of school, I had an experience that led me to understand my discomfort. Barbara, the young mother, ran into my room. “Did you hear about Danica? She’s pregnant. She’s ruining her life!”

“Didn’t you warn her?” I asked.

“I told her all the time. She didn’t listen. No one ever listens about what can happen.” Barbara then listed the names of a number of girls who were pregnant, some of them who knew how difficult Barbara’s life is.

That afternoon I shared Barbara’s story with my car pool colleague. “This proves we can’t teach kids not to get pregnant. If they can’t learn it from their friends, we sure can’t teach them. Maybe because it isn’t real to them.”

Had these visits been mere assignments?

That night I couldn’t sleep. Barbara’s story. Danica’s pregnancy. What was happening?

Talking to Barbara and my teaching friend forced me to rethink the discussions my class held about writing skills in the workplace. I replayed and relooked at everything: visits to the hospital and community college, job shadow debriefings, conversations with the artist. It all began coming together. Danica hadn’t listened to Barb or asked her any questions because there was no way Danica could relate to Barbara’s situation. Danica could not project herself into Barbara’s future. And the more I thought about this, the more sense I found in the ways my class had approached these questions about the future.

I was filled with questions. Just because we hear what is good for us, will we recognize the importance of listening to experience, or do we need to make our
own discoveries? Does knowing the possibilities and demands of the future necessarily lead us to prepare for that future? What can school do for students' futures? Where does a competency test fit in? Barbara and Dancia had led me back to square one.

I understood now that during my students' research and my observations of their processes, none of the information made much sense to them. How did the questions they asked, the answers they heard, and the observations they made come together? Had these visits been mere assignments? They thought the people they shadowed were polite and friendly, or the job was interesting or dull. How could these experiences possibly have anything to do with them? The kids never mentioned possible implications of their research for themselves or school, but most especially they never spoke of what any of this research had to do with their own futures.

I recalled how bored they seemed with the presenters and the format of the job fair. They seemed restless during the debriefing, staring or waiting silently for their turns to report. And although we were charting various experiences, they seemed disoriented with their talks, somewhat confused about what they were supposed to say.

I had been so impressed by the words my students had reported that I had not consciously observed them. During debriefings, these students never talked to each other about what they'd observed; no conversations away from my direct influence. What I had labeled as discussions was in fact only students reporting what they'd observed. The classroom had been quiet during our debriefings. As one spoke, the others sat quietly waiting their turns. I should have noticed that this "look at the future" was fake and the kids knew it.

And the most telling of the missing pieces? When something exciting and interesting is happening anywhere on a school campus, other classrooms, the playing field, the staff room, students and teachers constantly talk about it and the whole campus knows. But no one outside of our class had heard about what we were attempting to do. No one.

Showing kids what they need to know when they graduate from high school is naive. It's like taking math and knowing that we have to do well this year so we can be ready for next year, instead of learning this year's information for its own sake. Math sticks when it's real, when it is connected to a real person's real life. When we learned the multiplication tables, we had no idea what they meant or represented. It took our own lives to make the real meanings for them. Even now, they mean different things to different people. And for some they are completely meaningless. My students knew before I did that these visits were contrived exercises.

When athletes practice, at what point does the practice become more than just drills? I asked my teaching partner who shared these students with me, the varsity girls' volleyball coach, "When do you think your starters really begin connecting practice time with actual game play?"

"About the last quarter of their senior year." And yet these girls have been playing volleyball since elementary school. "They somehow don't trust that the game will be anything like the practice. I guess they know it's mostly drills, and games aren't at all like practice. But when they become seniors, practice starts making sense to them."

Now what? Is school fake? Contrived? Artificial? Certainly sometimes. But it is also a place where magical moments occur. We've all witnessed the light turn on. But the truth is, we just don't know what school does for each and every individual. And individuals make school. We also know that school is a separate reality; it isn't home or work. It is its own place.

Working with so many students, a teacher never knows when she helps make school real. I asked my daughter, a University of California freshman, "Who was your favorite teacher?" Although she had many fine teachers who encouraged and inspired her, she told me it was her first-grade teacher because "she didn't treat me like I was little." Could her teacher have ever predicted this kind of influence?

continued on page 35
The Now of School

continued from page 8

Our classrooms are filled with students living in complete turmoil, whose lives are more complicated than a child's should ever be. Some of them make it to school, others pack their bags and move on. Yet even despite severe poverty and little homesupport, most kids "make it." The only stability that exists in their tumultuous lives is found at school. Here is the one place where the societal deprivations of poverty and isolation can be overcome. To try to prepare these students for "real life" ignores the real life they now experience.

It seems, then, that creating a test for measuring a student's future success is irrelevant. We cannot tell the future because the future doesn't stand still. We are all evolving, and neither the future nor our students stop to wait for the other. My students looked into the faces of the future, and none of them felt connected or even interested in the possibilities. They showed me that school must be more than what "the test" expects. No test can measure how they will interpret what they learn, nor the potential they see for themselves.

School is not fake. It creates links: person to person, idea to idea, dream to dream. Daily I witness students challenging themselves by meeting the demands of their course work, searching for connections and opportunities to learn, and measuring their performances against curricular expectations. They fine-tune a paper, connect with a passage, or encourage a friend. They ask important questions and laugh at their mistakes. And when we blend the exuberance of youth, the curiosity of minds, and the safety of thought, we create places where real learning and thinking prosper. This is real.

Reference


Rochelle Ramay teaches English at Corning High School in Corning, California, and is a teacher consultant with the Northern California Writing Project.