Preparing Kids for Careers

Some of the best predictive data about occupational trends come from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). A review of BLS data for the period 1998-2008 reveals a number of occupations that are likely to be in demand in the coming decade and beyond. Included: Fourteen simple career skill-building exercises for students in elementary, middle, and high school.

The mission of education, as we all know, is to help prepare students for the future. An important element of that preparation involves the development of career skills. Preparing today's students for tomorrow's careers is not an easy task, however. As society's needs and desires change, so too do the nature and number of potential occupations. (Few people today work in jobs related to the production of horse-drawn carriages, for example.)

Fortunately, certain needs and desires -- such as those for food, clothing, shelter, entertainment, education, and health care -- do remain relatively constant. By analyzing them, it is possible to predict with some degree of accuracy many of the occupations that will be in demand in the future.

Some of the best predictive data about occupational trends come from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Based on a review of BLS data for the period 1998-2008, I've targeted 14 skills that I think today's students will find most valuable in a future job search -- and identified 14 skill-building exercises that will help students develop and practice those skills. Those 14 skill areas and related skill-building exercises are the following:

- **Business-Management Skills:** Students should understand how companies operate, how company products and/or services reflect market needs, and how companies meet market needs to make a profit.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Conduct a survey to determine the needs and desires of students in your class. Identify those needs and desires that students believe are not being met adequately by existing companies. Arrange students into small groups, and ask each group to develop a business plan for a fictional company that would satisfy one of those unmet needs. Compare plans and discuss which company probably would be the most successful.

- **Communication Skills:** Students should be able to communicate ideas and thoughts through writing and speaking.

Skill-Building Exercise: Display a picture of an urban city scene. Ask each student to write a description of what he or she sees in the picture. Have students share their descriptions with their classmates and then discuss the differences in student perceptions. Brainstorm with students the words they could use to describe the picture (a) most quickly and easily and (b) most thoroughly and richly.

- **Computer-Use Skills:** Students should understand the importance of computers and computer software in most jobs.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Arrange for students to visit a local business (preferably a large company). Have students talk to company employees about how they use computers in their jobs and which software programs they use. Ask students to share their findings with their classmates. Create a master list of all the ways in which employees use computers at the company visited.

- **Computer-Programming Skills:** Students should understand how computers complete a task or set of tasks.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Choose an activity that students are familiar with (such as playing a video in a VCR, for example). Ask students to analyze the steps (tasks) involved in completing the activity and to organize those steps into a flow chart. Explain that the flow chart demonstrates how tasks can be organized into a continuum of individual steps -- the underlying structure of all software programs.

- **Cultural History and Geography Skills:** Students should be able to locate various countries on a map and understand how the customs and beliefs of people in those countries are similar to and different from their own.

Skill-Building Exercise: Arrange students into small groups, and assign each group a different country. Ask students in each group to use print and online resources to research family life in their assigned country and to create a drawing or collage showing a living room or family room in a typical home in that country. Display the drawings on a classroom bulletin board, and discuss with students the similarities and differences of those rooms and compare them to a typical living room or family room in the United States. Encourage students to investigate further how geography, religion, climate, and so on,

influence the contents of living rooms in other countries.

- **Foreign-Language Skills:** Students should be able to speak a language other than English.

Skill-Building Exercise: Ask each student to make a list of five to ten phrases he or she commonly uses when talking with friends. Have students use print and online resources to learn how those phrases are written and spoken in several different languages. Create a classroom "English to ..." translator of modern colloquial expressions.

- **Graphic-Design Skills:** Students should be able to convey thoughts and feelings using a variety of forms.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Arrange students into groups, and ask each group to identify a local or national current events story. Have each group use original drawings, as well as pictures cut from magazines and newspapers, to create a wall poster that conveys the message of the story without words.

- **Human-Relationship Skills:** Students should be able to accept differing opinions and behaviors and get along with others in order to create positive relationships and a harmonious environment.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Invite students to imagine the following situation: *Bob hired Andrew to paint his house. Andrew completed the job and asked Bob for payment. Bob was dissatisfied with Andrew's work and refused to pay.* Ask students how they would settle the dispute in a way that would satisfy both parties. Ask students what Bob and/or Andrew could have done to avoid the problem.

- **Information-Management Skills:** Students should be able to locate, collect, organize, store, and retrieve data and information.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Brainstorm with students procedures someone might use to collect, organize, store, and retrieve data about the types of cars parked in a shopping center in your city or town. Have students work in small groups to plan how to put some of the most popular procedures to work. Discuss which procedures worked best and why.

- **Money-Management Skills:** Students should be able to manage financial resources and maintain a positive balance between expenses and income.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Arrange students into groups of five, and tell students that each group represents a family consisting of a father, a mother, and three children. Provide each "family" with $3,800 in play money, and tell family

members that the money is for their expenses for the next month. Ask members of each group to estimate how much money they might spend on a variety of expenses, including food, clothing, housing, entertainment, and so on. When the lists are complete, have students share them with their real families, and ask those family members to help them determine how much those items actually cost in your area. Encourage students to compare the actual costs with their estimated costs.

- **Problem-Solving Skills:** Students should be able to solve problems.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Invite students to survey friends, relatives, and acquaintances to identify common problems people experience in everyday life. Then ask students to work in teams to brainstorm solutions to some of the most common problems. Encourage students to write up their solutions and present them to the original survey participants to get feedback on whether the proposed solutions would work.

- **Science and Math Skills:** Students should have a fundamental understanding of the natural world.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Arrange students into small groups, and ask each group to mark off with string a 3-inch by 3-inch square somewhere on the school grounds. Have students in each group examine their marked area with a magnifying glass and prepare a list of all items found within the square, such as insects, soil, rocks, plants, and animals. Then ask students to calculate the total area examined by all students and to estimate the total number of items found.

- **Teaching-Training Skills:** Students should understand how to teach facts and concepts to others.

  Skill-Building Exercise: Teach half the students in the class how to do a new craft project. Teach the rest of the students how to do a different craft project. When the projects are done, ask each student to list the steps he or she followed to complete the project. Then have each student use his or her list to teach the project to a student who learned the opposite project.

- **Vocational-Technical Skills:** Students should be able to use a variety of tools, machines, natural resources and equipment to build, install, set up, operate, and repair mechanical and electronic devices and to create products made from various materials.

Skill-Building Exercise: Ask students to draw a schematic of their home's electrical wiring system and bring the plans to class. Then provide students with cardboard and have each student build a scale model of his or her home, outlining the electrical system with string. (The string should be glued to the proper walls and outlets).

Simple skill-building exercises such as these will help your students become more aware of the types of jobs most likely to be available in the future, prepare them for the tasks those jobs will demand, and provide them with a foundation in the skills those jobs will require. These 14 exercises are not intended to represent the only career-related activities that students should participate in; hopefully, they only will serve as a starting point for original skill-building activities specifically suited to the needs of your students and your curriculum.

Not all students will leave school proficient in all 14 skill areas, of course. All students, however, should be given the opportunity to develop a basic level of competency in each skill area and should be encouraged to develop mastery in those skills best suited to their individual interests.

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