

Career Guidance: Helping Students Make Smart Choices

"The one thing everyone learns in my class is that they always have a choice in life, and that they are always responsible for the choices they make."

Sound like a psychology lecture for college students? A motivational seminar for executives? It may be hard to believe, but these are the words of a 9th grade teacher whose students study speech and communication at a high school on the edge of inner city Los Angeles.

At the 85% minority San Gabriel High School in San Gabriel, California, students spend an entire year in the classroom learning how to make the decisions that will affect the rest of their lives. Then, they demonstrate their new-found power by wisely choosing academic and vocational pathways to help them accomplish the goals they have set.

Students Have a Plan

Doug Campbell, Chair of the Communications Department at San Gabriel High School is one of the teachers of this unique class, aptly entitled Directions. He told us how staff first realized that having an in-depth career guidance component in place in the classroom was changing the way students experienced school.

"Guidance counselors reported that students who had taken the Directions class seemed to have a plan when they came in at scheduling time," he said. "They were clearly more involved in choosing their classes, rather than simply accepting the schedule given to them by the counselor."

This trend was underscored recently, when a 14-year-old female freshman told her counselor she wanted to take a drafting class. "What made you decide that?" the counselor asked, surprised at a choice that was more typical of male students. "We talked about a career in drafting in my Directions class, and I realized that's what I wanted to do," she responded. "It was the beginning of our realization that we were on the right track," Doug told us. "Students were actually seeing that there is a purpose for being in school."

Other students were making choices, too, and not just from among the technical and vocational course offered. Some were requesting drama classes because they wanted to enter sales and marketing and needed additional communication skills. Others who were not on a college prep program, switched over to college prep. One thing was clear: students were getting more focused about school.

Change Inevitable

It all started a year earlier when the Board of Education announced that it was looking at either removing the district's five credit speech requirement, or revising the course's content. The population had changed socio-economically, and the Board wanted to see a department that was more in tune with the needs of a multi-cultural community. "We're next door to East Los Angeles, and the focus had shifted," Doug remarked.

So, heeding what seemed like a life-threatening call to duty, the teachers in the Speech and Communication Department got together to see what they could do. It was clear the missing piece was a curriculum that would help these students be more successful in life, and certainly the subject of communication was related to this need. The idea arose of the possibility of combining the best of both worlds: speech and communication with career guidance.

Expectedly, there was initial skepticism about how such an integration of such seemingly diverse subjects could possibly work. Also, some teachers felt threatened by having to teach something so totally new, and wondered why the class they'd taught in the past was no longer "good enough." But the Board quickly approved the new program, and knowing the very existence of the department was at stake, all agreed to give it a try. Enrollment of the entire department staff in a *Career Choices* training, held in nearby Santa Barbara, bolstered the teachers' courage and gave them some practical skills to implement the curriculum.

The transition was made smoother by an extremely supportive administration. The Assistant Principal for Curriculum made sure the new class was successful by investing time and money to give the teachers three hour-long planning meetings, covering them with costly substitutes, and providing money for texts and workbooks. "They're behind us 100% to do whatever we need to make it work," Doug told us.

A Happy Marriage

In the classroom, the marriage of career education and speech proved to be a happy one. "The more we got students communicating through discussion, group work and other forms of verbalization, the more we realized they were acquiring skills they could use in the world of work," Doug told us. By interacting with each other on group projects, the students were learning to work cooperatively, a skill which is absolutely essential to success in today's workplace. "The *Career Choices* curriculum gave us plenty of latitude to do these kinds of group activities, and to relate them to the students' personal experiences and feelings," he said.

Students teamed up to do mock interviews and practiced expository speaking by presenting reports they researched on careers. "This built up students' self-image and gave them more confidence to eventually enter the workplace," Doug told us.

Because there are no right or wrong answers for many of the exercises, creative solutions were found for grading students' work. Points were given for completed assignments and no credit was given when work was half done. "All the answers are self-generated, so there's no reason why students couldn't give a complete response," Doug said. "By requiring this, they were motivated to fill out the entire worksheet instead of the more usual half."

The Choice Process

When students did activities in *Career Choices* that dealt with clarifying their work values and learning decision making and goal setting, they discovered that they could make choices that were related to their own individual preferences. "Even ninth graders, who typically believe they don't have a choice about coming to school, were able to see they did indeed have a choice," Doug reported.

To further emphasize the point, Doug took the class on a tour to hear first-hand from other teachers how much truancy was occurring in their classrooms. A discussion followed about the consequences of the choices truant students were making, underscoring the point that we are all making choices, good or bad. "It may be risky to present attendance as a choice, but it gives students a feeling of responsibility for their education, instead of one of powerlessness," he said.

But Doug believes that the real process of learning to make choices, began when his students worked in groups and did activities in *Career Choices* to explore different attitudes. "They saw how unique everyone is and so were able to express their own individual viewpoints more easily," he said.

At first, most shared that their goal in life was to make a lot of money. But when they felt safe enough to talk more openly, their goals changed, and one student revealed, "I'd rather travel than make money."

"New and different choices flowed out of an awareness of their own uniqueness," Doug said. "It's an evolving process, and must be done very slowly and gradually. A lecture about everybody having choices just doesn't do it."

For this reason, Doug recommended that all teachers go through the complete *Career Choices* textbook in sequence. This not only helped keep a uniform focus for all the classes, but also allowed students to build their awareness of the central issues: who am I, what do I want, and where am I going, in a natural progression, much like peeling the layers of an onion. At the center were the insights and realizations that would lead them towards making smarter choices.

Doug showed the video *Forrest Gump* to help students explore how choices depend on personal values. He asked students to recall three values that were held by characters in the film. One student focused on Forrest's love of life, and commented, "If you put love of life above all the bad things that can happen in life, you'd probably never commit suicide." He was thinking about a rock star who had recently committed suicide, and concluded that if the rock star had had Forrest's perspective, he would probably still be alive today.

"It was a terrific assignment," Doug told us. "No two students told the same story, and it fit right in with what we were doing in the *Career Choices* book: Clarify your values and you can enter a career that you really enjoy."

An experiential understanding of this important lesson was driven deeper by a game Doug introduced to the class. He asked students to choose between two groups: in one, they would get \$5 a day to just show up, and in the other, the first person who showed up would get \$50, the second \$45, and so on down to \$0 for the 10th person and all those who followed. Fifteen students chose the \$5 group, because they didn't want to compete. When Doug asked those who chose the \$50 class what time they would show up, one said, "I'd show up an hour before to make sure I got in." The next said, "I'd show up two hours before." A third student said, "I'd sleep in the hallway!"

"They learned that if you pick a competitive field, somebody's always going to be sleeping in the hallway," Doug reported. "I wanted them to see that both security and competition are fine choices, but life is full of trade-offs, and each has its own consequences."

Ready To Move On

Towards the end of the year, Doug invited the heads of the different departments in the school to present their subjects to his class. "Our goal is that students leave Directions knowing what all the classes available to them are about," he told us. "When they see their choices in a format that makes sense to them, it's more obvious what to choose.

Matching this information with what they had learned about themselves from the *Career Choices* activities made the task of selecting classes an easier one. "I told them to go back to the pages in the book, especially the Bull's Eye Chart in Chapter 3 (where they charted their personality, preferences, and passions), and look at what they'd written," Doug said. "Then, when they're filling out their schedules, they make choices based on what they discovered about themselves."

"Personally, I really enjoy using the *Career Choices* curriculum, and I'm really excited about it," Doug concluded. "I like the personal dimension it offers, because that allows students be more alive and alert, which is motivating and enjoyable for me. And most of all, I love saying there are no right answers!"