This chapter frames the transition to adulthood in the context of the moving from formal educational settings to the often less-structured learning that occurs in workplace settings. Although schooling may end, learning continues.

Transitions From Formal Education to the Workplace

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Any transition, by definition, involves moving away from one “place” and turning attention toward another. The elementary school student transitions to middle school. The transfer student leaves behind the community college and adjusts to life and learning in a university setting. The graduate leaves behind school and must become adept at learning on the job. It might be natural for the young adult transitioning from school to work to assume that he or she has been prepared for whatever is next. Yet, the forms of learning and evaluation prevalent in school settings (e.g., assignments, exams, and projects) are rarely central to workplace learning, where mastering one’s responsibilities often requires a much less-structured route to acquiring necessary knowledge. New graduates encounter new modes of learning, new ways of being, and new settings for working, and they are often left feeling unprepared. This transition is, to borrow Settersten’s (2005) phrase, “a blurry space” (p. 553). Therefore, helping young adults understand and navigate workplace learning is a key component of the transition to adulthood. This chapter highlights key aspects of the transition from school to work and suggests ways that adult educators can help young adults develop the skills they need as they leave the formal classroom and enter a rapidly changing workplace.

Leaving the Classroom

Given the many points at which an individual may make the shift from a primary focus on education to a focus on employment (e.g., dropping out or “stopping out” before graduation from high school or college, graduating with a high school diploma or college degree, completing graduate school), it is misleading to think of the school-to-work transition as something that is experienced in a consistent way from person to person. In fact, recent shifts
in the economy have also shifted the “traditional milestones of ‘adulthood’” (Settersten & Ray, 2010, p. xii); it is no longer accurate to assume that graduation plus job equals financial (or residential) independence. However, across the literature, there are some common themes: feeling unprepared and encountering tension.

**A Time of Feeling Unprepared.** New graduates often describe a sense that something is missing or has been missed as they leave college and begin working. Martin, Matham, Case, and Fraser (2005) spoke with recent graduate chemical engineers, finding them “adequately, if not well, prepared to face the challenges of work in industry” (p. 178). At the same time, these graduates felt as though they had been “thrown into the deep end” on the job, unsure of what they should be doing, while also indicating that they “felt confident to tackle new problems and formulate a solution” (p. 178). They may have been adequately prepared, but they felt ill-equipped.

Farner and Brown (2008) noted that students did feel ready for the work world, but their data indicated that lower division students were more likely to feel confident than those closer to graduation. It is possible that the greater level of confidence expressed by younger students is misplaced, if the confidence is based on an inaccurate perception of their own abilities or the realities of what it takes to navigate the postcollege world; if this is the case, gaining a more realistic perspective before graduation is a positive outcome—even if it does result in lower levels of confidence in older students. Another possibility is that as upperclassmen near the end of their studies, they develop a sense of being unprepared for the postcollege world, and it is this sense of inadequacy that contributes to the lower confidence levels. Farner and Brown’s study did not explore this aspect of preparedness, but the authors did suggest that the seeming mismatch in perceptions of work-readiness between potential employers and new entrants to the workforce could feed a sense of dissatisfaction on either side.

**A Time of Tension.** As Gardner and Lambert (1992) suggested, “being ‘in college’ has been a self-explanatory status and a laudatory one” (p. 4). Leaving school, however, brings a change in that status that often creates uncertainty. For college seniors in Yang and Gysbers’s (2007) study, there was a relationship between decreased career search self-efficacy and increased psychological distress, suggesting that these students experience a “perceived lack of resources for the career transition” (p. 168). They also suggested that some students experience increased anxiety during this time—even if they feel ready for the transition—because they are aware of the potential risks inherent in the transition from college to work. One graduate described the transition as “a low time” (Perrone & Vickers, 2003, p. 69) and a “very uncomfortable kind of world” (p. 72).

Leaving school may also trigger changes in self-concept for which the young adult may or may not be prepared. The college-to-work transition can be a time when individuals make an “active investment” in developing identity and understanding “new meanings of career” (Stokes & Wyn, 2007, p. 495).
As Nyström, Dahlgren, and Dahlgren (2008) described, “graduates’ vision and experiences of their professional trajectories do not seem to follow a specific temporal and logical progression in their career. Rather they appear in different order and at different points in time after graduation” (p. 215). In recent decades, the growing proportion of students who are “nontraditional” in some way—nearly 75% according to Chao, DeRocco, and Flynn (2007)—perhaps demonstrates this, as men and women evaluate current and future career options and determine that returning to school is the next best step for a desired career trajectory.

Holden and Hamblett (2007) followed college graduates for two years. Beyond themes of learning about the job, learning about the organization, and learning about self, they highlighted an underlying challenge. Participants expressed a desire to fully participate in their work community, which Holden and Hamblett called a desire for “cohesion” (p. 572). And yet, participants acknowledged that understanding the rules of their workplace would only begin once they failed in some way, labeled by Holden and Hamblett as “fragmentation” (p. 572). In other words, new graduates were seeking to connect and simultaneously realizing the connection might only occur after they had experienced a separation of sorts (i.e., failure). Likewise, Vaughan and Roberts (2007) described this as a time of both “security and exploration” (p. 91) when an individual’s background (e.g., education, work experience, etc.) may strongly shape his or her approach to the options and the decisions encountered during this time of life.

Social class boundaries and norms may also play a role in the transition from school to work. Lubrano’s (2004) interviews with “Straddlers”—men and women from blue-collar backgrounds who worked in white-collar settings—highlighted another set of challenges the young adult may face. Lubrano suggested that certain social norms are often necessary for success in a white-collar setting—navigating office politics, managing appropriate self-promotion, or networking, for example. For many young adults who are the first in their families to attend college or work in white-collar settings, these social skills may not have been part of their parents’ work environment and, therefore, not part of the young adult’s experience prior to engaging in the workforce. As one first-generation college graduate described her emerging understanding of the influence that workplace politics had on her work environment:

My dad, he had politics [on his job], but a different kind of politics. You know, being working class, construction worker, I guess it would be, probably like a much cruder, more blatant version of what I go through. You know, just think about it, all these big, strapping, young to middle-aged [men], who work with their hands … engaging in politics. It’s a different game, but yet, it’s probably some of the same rules. (Olson, 2010, p. 128)

Beyond being unfamiliar with some of these social moves, the young adult “Straddler” may actually find them distasteful or unethical: Lubrano (2004)
suggested that the idea of networking may feel like a “dirty word” (p. 144) for those from blue-collar settings, as it contains an element of maneuvering relationships for personal gain. Even the new employee who “just came to do my job” (Olson, 2010, p. 128) will likely encounter interactions that do not make sense or norms that create internal (and possibly interpersonal) tension that the young adult is not able to fully articulate.

**Preparing for an Unknown Future**

In response to a rapidly changing world, several recent reports have highlighted the necessity of developing “21st-century skills” in the rising workforce. A majority of employers (63%; Banerji, 2007) reported that “college graduates lack essential skills to succeed in today’s global economy” (para. 1). These employers highlighted skills like teamwork in diverse groups, creativity, innovation, and critical or analytical reasoning as critical for success in an increasingly complex, multicultural economy. The definition of what comprises these “21st-century skills” varies. Gallup, Inc. (2013) used a list created by the Innovative Teaching and Learning Research project (collaboration, knowledge construction, problem solving and innovation, self-regulation, the use of technology for learning, and skilled communication) as the basis for a recent survey exploring the connection between these skills and quality of work life.

Casner-Lotto and Barrington (2006) identified oral and written communications, professionalism/work ethic, and critical thinking/problem solving as the “most important skills” (p. 7) for the 21st-century worker. Grit, tenacity, and perseverance topped the list of “critical factors for success in the 21st century” in a draft report released by the U.S. Department of Education (Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013). In at least one instance (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, n.d.), the regulatory body responsible for state-level higher education policy is mandating changes to the core curriculum (i.e., general education requirements) that go beyond requiring “traditional” content-area core curriculum requirements, such as communication, math, or science. Beginning in Fall 2014, Texas institutions of higher education must demonstrate that these courses also incorporate and promote the development of the following “21st-century competencies”: critical thinking skills, communication skills, empirical and quantitative skills, teamwork, social responsibility, and personal responsibility.

What employer wouldn’t want a tenacious, professional, hard-working employee who could express herself clearly orally and in writing? What teacher hasn’t hoped that his students were becoming collaborative, critical thinkers? And yet, with even the most cursory glance at these lists, the reader is bound to experience cognitive dissonance between these ideals and his or her experienced reality. As revealed in Casner-Lotto and Barrington’s (2006) report of employers’ perceptions, more than half of high school graduates were deficient and only one in four college graduates were “perceived to be excellent” (p. 7) in these skills. Likewise, Gallup, Inc. (2013) reported that during their last
year of school, only 22% of high school graduates and 27% of college graduates indicated that they had “often” applied what they were learning to real world problems (p. 10).

It is unclear how best to bridge the gap between what is provided and what is needed to better prepare graduates for this transition, particularly as calls for accountability, assessment, and demonstrated outcomes become increasingly central to educational policy. Dahlgren, Hult, Dahlgren, Segerstad, and Johansson (2006) suggested that a graduate’s transition to work is shaped by the presence or absence of continuity between academic training and the type of employment he or she secured. Greater continuity allows for “immediate” (p. 583) socialization and accelerated acceptance into the professional community. Borden and Rajeciki (2000), surveying those who had recently obtained a bachelor’s degree in psychology, found that these graduates did not express a strong connection between the content of their classes and preparation for future employment. Borden and Rajeciki further suggested that faculty and administrators who “take their responsibilities for guidance seriously” (p. 168) can help undergraduates develop appropriate expectations for post-graduation jobs. And yet, some graduates are left wondering what they gained by pursuing higher education. Coulon (2002) interviewed recent graduates in New Zealand who described themselves as “underemployed,” and only 30% of those interviewed indicated that their current work “required graduate ability” (p. 293). In the current economic climate, which Settersten and Ray (2010) called a “do-it-yourself economy” (p. 53), where low-pay, low-prestige, service sector jobs are increasingly prevalent, college workshops, career coaching, or faculty mentoring may be an important first step. However, there are many paths along the transition to adulthood; it is unrealistic to aspire to completely preparing every student for every possible postgraduation outcome. Furthermore, the individual whose transition into the workforce does not involve a straight line from high school through college to career-level job may find very little in the way of resources or support for making their way.

Learning a New Kind of Learning

As mentioned elsewhere in this volume, the transition to adulthood is increasingly multidimensional and nonlinear, and the transition from school-based learning to workplace learning is equally complex. Facilitating this transition and helping young adults adjust to the new forms of learning they will encounter on the job requires more than a cursory nod to “what Millennials are like” or a seminar on intergenerational work relationships—although this information may be helpful (e.g., Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). Although men and women who finished college as nontraditional or adult learners may have previous work experiences to draw from, they also talk about the challenges of mastering a new work environment (Olson, 2011).

It is perhaps a cliché to declare that change is the only constant. Regardless, significant changes do occur during this stage of life. There are notable
differences between the structured, formal learning environment and the informal learning that is standard in many work environments (Candy & Crebert, 1991), and this has perhaps become even more prevalent in the years since Candy and Crebert made this declaration. Etheridge (2007) identified “learning to think like a nurse” (p. 24) as a critical and important learning step for helping new graduate nurses learn to translate their skills and knowledge into proficiency when working in clinical settings for the first time. Brown (2004) described the decision making of recent graduates as “ongoing, iterative, and often nonlinear” (p. 377). As Candy and Crebert (1991) suggested, graduates can experience a “smooth passage” (p. 588) as they transition to work if they are aware of how the new environment may also shape their patterns and process of learning. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex and multifaceted issue, and recognizing that freedom and flexibility may be limited due to external constraints (i.e., accreditation or accountability issues) or budget limitations, several strategies may help educators who are working with young adults on both sides of this transition.

**Highlight the Necessity of Noncognitive Skills.** In studying the relationship between “21st-century skills” and work, Gallup, Inc. (2013) found that individuals who indicated having “often” participated in activities designed to develop these skills during their last year of school also reported higher work quality, in terms of having a role in decision making and being valued in the workplace. The Gallup, Inc. study did not elaborate on the nature of this relationship and, of course, it is not wise to speculate that the development of these skills causes higher work quality. However, if skills such as collaboration, problem solving, or communication are integral to the contemporary workplace, then it may be reasonable to conclude that individuals who have developed these skills are more likely to succeed. And indeed, initiatives such as the core curriculum requirements being implemented by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (n.d.) are based on this conclusion; throughout the state, colleges and universities are being required to rewrite classes and revamp assessments to incorporate and develop these skills.

However, is it the impartation of these skills, or the student’s self-awareness of these skills that reaps the real benefit? Are students aware of the efforts of educators and administrators to impart these skills? Educators may recognize the importance of developing professionalism in students and may incorporate classroom policies related to attendance and attention that are designed to impart these skills. However, as Weimer (2013) suggested, one of the biggest challenges facing educators is “convincing [students] that what happens in college classrooms is very similar to what happens in the world of work” (para. 4). Raising this awareness may be as simple as raising the visibility of the noncognitive aspirations of an assignment—including a statement that “this assignment is designed to develop your skill as a member of a team” or “this is a complex problem; be sure to address multiple approaches to the situation,” for example. This approach may seem a bit obvious or pedantic to the
educator, but for the student such links can serve as advance organizers between the required assignment and the anticipated outcome.

Noncognitive skills are, almost by definition, difficult to measure or assess. In addition, they do reveal and require a certain level of maturity, which the young adult may or may not have. Designing ad hoc workplace learning events around contemporary events or felt needs will likely increase engagement and participation. In addition, it may be critical for the educator in the workplace to help the young adult understand what is expected of them—especially in terms of these types of skills. A young adult who has been conditioned to expect that every team project will involve working together for a few hours over the course of a month with classmates he or she may never encounter again is almost certainly ill-prepared to manage team conflict on a long-term project. Taking the time to outline how “teamwork” or “collaboration” might work differently in the workplace from how it was experienced in the classroom will be time well invested in the young adult’s transition to the workplace.

Incorporate “Real-World Realities” Into Assignments. The academic calendar is filled with new beginnings. There are ceremonies and seasons for new years, new semesters, new marking periods, new classes, new teachers, and new opportunities. There are mandated and predefined breaks every so often as well: teacher in-service days, semester breaks, even—in some places—time off for the opening day of deer season. Upon leaving school, the new entrant to the workforce, who has spent the majority of his or her life internalizing these cycles and seasons, suddenly encounters an environment where work is year-round, vacation time must be “earned” and “spent,” and opportunities for a completely new start are few and far between. To be sure, these two environments are inherently different from one another. Schools will almost certainly always have marking periods, and most workplaces will not operate on an academic calendar. The young adult will need to navigate this change in culture and expectations.

The new entrant to the workforce also encounters a new reality: He or she may have very little control over the work that must be learned, mastered, and performed. There is immense value in helping learners develop autonomy and in allowing them to pursue learning projects that are interesting. And yet, by including a few more scripted assignments, such as requiring students to choose from a short list of project ideas or creating an assignment where one person starts a project and another must complete the project (picking up where the first student left off), the educator on the “school side” of the school-to-work transition can help prepare students for postschool realities. The contribution of these types of assignments to the student’s eventual workplace learning can be maximized by challenging the student to engage in post-project self-reflection to articulate what was learned from the assignment and identify skills that were developed throughout the project.

Those on the “workplace learning” side of this transition also have a role to play. Young adults have spent the majority of their lives in educational settings
where learning is something that can be measured against externally defined and imposed “standards.” Therefore, the challenge facing the workplace educator is finding a way to help the young adult to identify work assignments and workplace interactions as a type of learning. Just as the classroom educator can help prepare students by imposing external constraints and structure onto assignments, the workplace educator can help facilitate this transition by creating benchmarks to help the young adult “measure” his or her progress and learning.

**Recognizing a Complex Transition**

Regardless of the level of schooling completed or the type of workplace encountered, the young adult is almost certainly managing change on multiple fronts—social, professional, economic, and so on. Furthermore, two individuals with the same degree from the same institution in similar entry-level jobs may have very different workplace learning needs, simply because one is a first-generation college graduate who finds the social aspects of his or her white-collar workplace perplexing, whereas the other developed an understanding of middle-class norms over the course of a lifetime. There is no one-size-fits-all program for helping young adults adjust to the realities of the workplace and the learning encountered therein. At the same time, conscientious educators—in the classroom and in the workplace alike—can facilitate this transition for young adults by intentionally creating learning experiences that are designed for the time of life where schooling may end in a society where learning must continue.

**References**


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