

MANDATORY FREE CHOICE LEARNING

The Institute for Learning Innovation defines free choice learning as “learning that fulfills the lifelong human quest for knowledge, understanding and personal fulfillment.” Heady words. I worked with the Institute 7 or 8 years ago when some of us in youth development were looking for phrases to describe our philosophy and practice that did not contain “after” or “school” and some in the world of libraries and museums were thinking about the intentionality involved in doing youth development “programming.” Fun work.

I recently went back to the files and onto the web to jog my memory and reconnect with the movement because of a disturbing and depressing interaction I had with 5 young people at an America's Promise Dropout Summit.

This wasn't the first time I've facilitated a youth panel discussion. Our organization used to specialize in doing these a decade ago before they became so popular that anyone is comfortable grabbing the mike. But it was the first time I ended a session shaken. It wasn't the stories about hardships, bureaucratic snafus or spirit-busting teachers that got to me. These are powerful but are almost always balanced by stories of teachers, family members, neighbors, youth workers who stepped in, sometimes after a significant delay, with a life line and a challenge. It was our discussion of learning.

Four of the five students had just started their senior year and shared their hopes for finding a college or a job. One young man in his mid-twenties, was enrolled in a GED program because he wanted to be a role model for his younger brother who is struggling and contemplating leaving school. All, it seemed, had places they were going in their lives. So I asked them, “As you think about where you want to be this time next year, what are some of the things you think you need to learn to be ready? Ready for college, work or life?”

My question was greeted with a long pause and blank stares. Finally, the most vocal senior said, “I guess I need to learn what they're teaching me so I can get my grades up.” Others chimed in in agreement.

It's great that you're committed to keeping up in your classes,” I said, but are there skills you need to strengthen, topics you need to understand better as you're preparing for the next phase.” More stares. Finally, the same senior offered a tentative thought. “I'd like to be better at public speaking,” he said. “I'd like to manage my money better,” said a second. “I'd like to do a real college visit” said a third. We were getting on a roll when someone in the audience interrupted with a question.

The young people fielded questions from the audience with the candor and wit I've come to expect of them. None had trouble with public speaking as far as I could tell. (The session, as always, would end with adults, educators included, telling me and the young people how articulate they were. They were even complemented on knowing how to dress for a conference.)

When it was time to wrap up, I took the discussion back to my earlier query. “My question about what you felt you needed to learn seemed to stump you,” I said. “I'm curious about why.”

Thoughts. Glances. Again, the same senior. “I don't think anyone has ever asked me that question before.” “Really,” I said. “What about the rest of you?” All five shook their heads. “We just learn what they teach us.”

Someone in the audience asked if any of the young people currently participated in afterschool activities or participated in the past. One played sports occasionally. One had a freshman buddy. One had a job. None could

name a community program that might have something to offer them, even though our conference bags were stuffed full of program fliers.

These young people will mostly likely graduate this spring. But they won't be ready. They may not even have the words to describe the skills they should have been honing throughout high school – the skills employers now have to train for according to a 2009 study published by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families and two other business membership groups. After basic English, the “high need” skill areas are: creativity/innovation, ethics/social responsibility, professionalism/work ethic, lifelong learning/self direction and critical thinking/problem solving.

Forty percent of the business respondents who offer some form of workforce readiness training report a “high need” in these skill areas, but have no on-the-job trainings to offer. So the high school graduates who are “deficient” in these areas wouldn't get many job offers even in a good economy. And you know the score on the higher-ed front. These students may enter college but they won't earn degrees.

Good youth workers make free choice learning mandatory. So do good teachers and good parents and good faith workers.

It was ironic at a dropout summit that there were four seniors who had not failed in school but who may falter in college, work and life because school had failed them. At least when you drop out you know you're in trouble.

So you can see why I'm ready to get mandatory free choice learning bumper stickers. It's not too late to teach learning to older teens. Maybe we just have to tell them it's required.

Reference.

Casner-Lotto, Jill, Elyse Rosenblum, and Mary Wright. “The ILL-Prepared U.S. Workforce. Exploring the Challenges of Employer-Provided Workforce Readiness Training.” Published by the Conference Board. 2009.