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# Learning Curves: Fieldwork as Context for Interrogating the Dynamics of Work in American Culture

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JUDITH HILTNER

# Learning Curves: Fieldwork as Context for Interrogating the Dynamics of Work in American Culture

JUDITH HILTNER

SAINT XAVIER UNIVERSITY

For the past quarter century, eloquent voices in the academy have articulated the value of hands on experiences in the workplace to reinforce and interrogate classroom learning. Internships and other types of fieldwork experiences enable students to test career options, improve their employment potential, challenge assumptions underlying theoretic approaches to the discipline, gain familiarity with the language and ethnography of the professional work places they plan to enter, and enlarge their sense of the role of research in their fields. A protracted experience that counterpoints theoretical and applied dimensions of a discipline can nurture critical habits of mind that will persist in the life of the full-time worker, making him or her a more valuable citizen of the profession.<sup>1</sup>

At Saint Xavier University in Chicago, Honors Fieldwork 350/351 is the central component of the program's junior year. All students in the Honors Program engage in a junior year fieldwork experience that can take a wide range of forms, including a traditional internship, individual or group research under the direction of a faculty mentor, or applied projects designed to enhance learning in the student's discipline. But the program designers also believed it important that students engaged in fieldwork projects continue as a group to meet during their junior year to share, compare and explore the fruits of their experiences. Contemporary learning theory and empirical research on the pedagogic benefits of fieldwork reinforce the conviction that the value of individual on-site learning is enhanced when it is linked to a group inquiry that encourages critical examination of applied field experience and expands the theoretical and intellectual contexts for assessing such experience (Braid, Wagner, Moore, Portnoff.)

In Honors Fieldwork 350/51, individual and group fieldwork experience becomes a primary text for weekly class meetings during the fall and spring semesters focusing on workplace issues in American culture. Students are challenged to explore the sources and implications of their own "work ethic" and the sources of stimulation and frustration in their past and present work experiences, including academic work. They discuss the implications of conflicting theories about motivation, management style, and accommodating diversity in the workplace. This essay describes the components, evaluates the benefits, and explores the rationale for and

challenges of designing courses that attempt to integrate the experiences of students engaged in fieldwork across the disciplines with a sustained inquiry into the dynamics of work in our society. Although our junior year fieldwork model was designed for a relatively small Honors Program, I am convinced that it could be adapted for larger programs, simply by offering multiple sections of a course comparable to Saint Xavier's Honors 350/351: Honors Junior Year Fieldwork I & II.<sup>2</sup>

### FIELDWORK PLACEMENTS

In the beginning of their sophomore year Honors students receive their copy of the *Junior Year Fieldwork Handbook*, which includes the rationale, objectives, requirements, and approval procedures for their fieldwork experience.<sup>3</sup> They are informed that they must submit their initial proposal for their fieldwork project or placement by February 1 of their sophomore year. In order to accommodate the academic and professional objectives of students across the disciplines, fieldwork options vary widely, including traditional internships, study abroad, experiential learning opportunities such as NCHC's "Semesters" or institutes like those sponsored by the Fund for American Studies, lab research with faculty mentors, original projects that advance student learning and skills in a specific area, or preliminary research for their senior projects. Students are encouraged to consider whether volunteer work or, in some cases, even part-time jobs they currently are engaged in could be shaped into a fieldwork project by identifying a research focus and a product that would result from such a focus.<sup>4</sup>

Fieldwork Proposals must include an explanation of how the project reinforces the student's learning goals and must identify the on-site supervisor or the faculty mentor who will be overseeing the student's progress. Students must also describe the activities in which they will engage and the product that will result from the project. Products vary considerably according to the nature of the projects: they may include journals, documented essays, annotated bibliographies, portfolios, or posters for an undergraduate research conference presentation.

Honors program administrators and faculty support students in their proposal drafting process in a number of ways. We arrange workshops conducted by our University's internship coordinator and our Study Abroad coordinator. We provide them with extensive lists of area nonprofit organizations whose missions may correspond not only with their professional goals but with their broader personal growth agendas; we encourage them to research non profits that interest them and to design and propose internship projects to organization administrators if none currently are in place.<sup>5</sup>

Some students encounter difficulties pursuing internships this early in their college careers; by fall of their sophomore year most of them have completed very little course work in their majors and have not cultivated a professional perspective on their fields. But this accelerated timeline actually has proven to have unanticipated benefits. Internship supervisors in some settings welcome eager students who might be able to work with them for a longer span and undergo a more protracted apprenticeship. In areas where their inexperience precludes a traditional internship, students

are encouraged to think of creative alternatives, designing projects that will enhance their learning and first-hand experience in the field by other means.<sup>6</sup> They also are encouraged to think beyond narrow professional spheres and consider more civic-oriented projects, perhaps forging commitments that will endure throughout their professional lives.

Students continue to revise their fieldwork proposals until all the requisite information has been supplied and the proposal is approved by our Honors Junior Year Fieldwork Coordinator, a pre-requisite for registration in Honors 350. In her response to fieldwork proposals, the Fieldwork Coordinator indicates what students will be doing in the Fieldwork class meetings throughout their junior year and suggests how the fruits of the fieldwork experience they have described might fit into the course. They are informed that the class will examine discoveries students have made about the professional dimensions of their academic areas of specialization and explore workplace issues in the students' fields of interest, including power relations, discrepancies between stated and actual qualifications, types and degrees of employee satisfaction, management style and its effects, among other issues that surface in the students' experiences. They are encouraged to begin exploring such issues as soon as their fieldwork experiences begin by keeping a regular journal or log of their observations and insights into the "dynamics of work" in the professional or academic setting they have chosen.<sup>7</sup>

## **FIELDWORK CLASS: INQUIRY INTO THE DYNAMICS OF WORK**

### **RATIONALE FOR THE CLASS**

Although our students will spend the major part of their lives in the workplace, college curricula do not generally provide analytic tools for addressing the issues, dilemmas, frustrations and challenges they will confront. We typically do not provide them with an intellectual framework for assessing the potentially conflicting appeals of the material, spiritual and creative rewards of work, or the role that work plays in shaping their values, providing community, and impacting family life. Unless they pursue majors in areas such as industrial psychology, management, or the sociology of work, rarely are they challenged to think about factors that motivate or discourage productivity and gratification in the workplace or issues of power, diversity, discrimination and justice in the professional setting. They are not encouraged to consider the wide-ranging effects of work, including "burn out," health-related consequences, and the connection between work and self-esteem.

The entire academic experience of most students has reinforced the myth that, if one works hard, one will be rewarded and that individual effort will ensure high marks, awards and honors. We often do not prepare them for the fact that, in a wide range of fields, they will be subjected to factors beyond their individual control that may influence their potential for success, including the objectives of management and administrators or the state of the economy. We seldom effectively prepare them for the transition from a realm where individual effort is rewarded almost

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exclusively to cultures where achieving goals may require the ability to work productively with a team.

Further, students in fields that do not incorporate comparative cultural study are not familiar with the changing ideologies regarding work throughout history, i.e. work as punishment, as spiritually redeeming, as essential to social order, or as the source of self-actualization. Many are unaware of the social and cultural factors shaping these ideologies—the fact that work ethics and the structural conditions of work are arbitrary, contingent, and subject to change. Students need to be more conscious of and critical of their own culture’s prevailing work values and the assumptions that underlie dominant workplace structures and practices in order to imagine and create alternatives to traditional patterns that are oppressive, unjust or unproductive.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the dynamics of work increasingly are being tapped and exploited by the popular media as a theme for engaging mass audiences. Twenty-five years ago, Pauline Kael indicted the Hollywood film industry for ignoring the workplace almost entirely, but today it is the setting for the most popular films and television shows. Whether the workplace is the police department, hospital, law office, television/newspaper or magazine pressroom, bookstore, restaurant, or urban high school, the “dynamics” of work are being portrayed in ways that reinforce cultural needs and fantasies or that reflect cultural fears and anxieties. How much does the media’s depiction of work influence our own expectations, and what critical tools are required to assess the media’s effects on popular audiences?<sup>9</sup> These issues have vital impact on our students as they make the transition from college to full-time professional life, and a course reflecting upon them can help provide at least some of requisite tools for dealing with the panoply of work-related concerns they will face for the rest of their lives.

## FIELDWORK COURSE STRUCTURE

As a typical Honors 350-51 course syllabus (See Appendix ) indicates, the year-long, once-a-week Fieldwork class consists of discussion of readings, guest lectures by faculty who research work-related issues, student fieldwork reports, a class research project on media depictions of the workplace, and preparation for drafting Honors senior project proposals due at the end of the spring semester.<sup>10</sup>

## COURSE READINGS

Selecting readings for class discussion can be one of the most stimulating and enjoyable dimensions of preparing the class. The more frequently one teaches it, consults with colleagues from a range of disciplines, and researches the literature of “work,” the easier it is to identify key themes and issues around which to group engaging and challenging readings. Several anthologies currently in print feature readings organized according to issues impacting the dynamics of work. *The Oxford Book of Work* groups excerpts from longer pieces into three chapters: 1. The Nature of Work (different assumptions about the role or function of work), 2. Types of Work, and 3. Reform of Work. Each section includes excerpts from fiction, poetry, and philosophic works spanning the history of Western Civilization and exemplifying

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variations on these themes or issues. The text, however, includes a disproportionate number of selections written by English authors and includes no critical apparatus, such as questions to generate student writing, or questions to stimulate critique of the assumptions underlying the selections.

Another anthology, *Making a Living: A Real World Reader*, includes primarily modern and contemporary nonfiction essays by American historians, journalists, sociologists, political scientists, and reformers. Readings are grouped thematically according to issues such as “The Meaning of Work,” “The Work Ethic,” workplace discrimination, and the workplace in the twenty-first century. Each chapter includes provocative questions to trigger student reflection, research and writing.<sup>11</sup>

Several texts in particular generally elicit strong responses from students and stimulate absorbing discussion. One is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, which develops the author’s theory about the conditions that foster maximum engagement in and gratification from work. Another is *Working*, Studs Terkel’s classic collection of interviews with workers from across the socio-economic spectrum in America. The two texts afford powerful contrasts between worker engagement and worker alienation, trigger lively debate about social class assumptions underlying depictions of the workplace, and provoke students to voice deeply held convictions about what makes work valuable and the connection between work and self-esteem.

In my experience with this course, discussion of readings such as those I have described has proven the most successful component. Students are vested in addressing issues they know will be of vital significance for the better part of their lives. Discussion of these texts seems to provoke and partly exorcise anxieties they have about professionalism and enables them to fathom and articulate values they want to live by. They are provided with a chance to explore and assert the role they think work should play in their lives as a whole. Many of them insist that work must be “more than a job,” that their lives must be more than their work, that money should not be the prime gratification, that their work directly or indirectly should benefit society, and that they would leave jobs that cease to provide avenues for cultivating their gifts and talents or that do not reinforce a strong sense of personal efficacy. These are convictions that inevitably will be tested in the professional worlds they enter, and it may be of consequence that they initially were voiced and reinforced in a setting characterized by lively debate, differences in opinions and values, and analysis of texts that struck them as deeply significant.<sup>12</sup>

## GUEST SPEAKERS

When I teach this course, I invite faculty from the departments of Sociology, Psychology, and Management to share with students the products of their research on issues related to employee motivation, management theory, ethical issues in the workplace, the challenges of diversity, and changes in the workplace triggered by technological and cultural innovation. In my initial experience with the class, I was disappointed that some of the faculty presentations elicited little response from the students, failing to generate lively discussion. Students told me that in some instances

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they wanted to respond or even to challenge the speaker but felt “unqualified” to interrogate speakers who struck them as knowledgeable experts.

The speakers who have elicited the liveliest responses are those whose comments resonate with students’ own work and study experiences. For instance, an industrial psychologist engaged them in lively discussion of the effects of various management styles, and, more importantly, helped them identify and critique assumptions about human motivation that dictate management approaches. Do they believe that humans are basically lazy and require carrots and prods to produce their best work, or are people naturally creative and productive when their gifts and talents are tapped? Most students also responded strongly to the passionate comments of a sociologist decrying the effects of the quest for uniform standards in public education and its stifling of creative teaching.

I realized the first time I taught the course that I had not supplied a clear context for the series of speakers: an intellectual frame that would encourage students to critique what they were hearing or to identify and interrogate the speakers’ underlying assumptions.<sup>13</sup> This was partly due to the fact that, although I knew the general issues the speakers would be addressing, I could not anticipate exactly what they would say. Labor issues, of course, are ideological, and my faculty guests reflected the typical range of academic persuasions from mildly Marxist to ardent capitalist; their commentary naturally was colored by their own professional and intellectual commitments. In subsequent semesters I have tried to supply a stronger introductory frame for the speakers I plan to invite so that students can more effectively assess their assumptions, respond more actively to their comments, and critique their presentations. In follow-up discussions, I encourage students to identify issues the speaker subordinates or ignores and to consider how their focus is influenced by their field of inquiry, whether sociological, psychological or economic. I also have substantially reduced the number of guest speakers to one or two per semester, selecting those best able to provoke and stimulate students and to generate the most penetrating discussion.

## FIELDWORK REPORTS

At various points in the fall and spring semesters students share with the class the fruits of their fieldwork experiences. I group fieldwork reports according to general professional or disciplinary areas so that students working in media settings, for instance, report in one class, while those engaged in fieldwork in education report in another. Students describe their activities and discuss the gratifications and frustrations they encountered. They share the key themes recurring in their journal entries, problems they encountered and how they attempted to resolve them, and indicate how the experience has affected their commitment to the profession. Finally they indicate what they learned about themselves, their talents, strengths, and limitations in the fieldwork experience.

In the second part of their presentations they are encouraged to move beyond their own experience and focus upon issues related to the dynamics of work in the professional setting they selected, issues that we have been exploring in class discussions, including workplace culture, management style, diversity issues, *etc.* They

also are encouraged to address contextual issues relevant to that particular profession or workplace, such as the tension between quality and marketability in media settings or pressures to “teach for the test” in educational settings. One problem in integrating fieldwork presentations into this course is that not all of the students are engaged in traditional workplace settings, especially students completing preliminary research for senior projects or designing an original project with a faculty mentor. Although course objectives dictate a focus on workplace dynamics, expectations for fieldwork reports must be flexible enough to accommodate the variety of fieldwork activities the students are pursuing. Ideally, students will be able to make connections between any form of sustained work and at least some of the key issues upon which the class has focused.

In my initial experiences with the course I considered the fieldwork report component only moderately successful; the key problem was eliciting the interest of students in each other’s fieldwork experience. Why should they care what another student has experienced or learned? As might be expected, responses were most lively when we were able to draw out common threads among the reports and connect them to issues that the entire class cared about and that we had been focusing upon in our readings and discussions. For instance, students working in radio, television and newspaper settings all referred to “free speech” issues, which generated a lively discussion of the dilemmas confronting professionals in editorial positions, specifically the challenges to “free speech” for newspapers and radio stations at private, religiously affiliated universities such as Saint Xavier.

Successful fieldwork report experiences prompted me to institute a significant change in the format I initially employed. Instead of spontaneous and potentially unsuccessful attempts on the part of the class and the teacher to identify themes and issues of general interest in a group of related fieldwork reports at the time they are being presented, the group itself assumes the challenge of making their experiences real and relevant for a general audience of peers. Now I ask each group to meet before the presentation date, share their experiences and their reports with one another, and identify key differences and similarities. They identify the issues likely to prove most informative, provocative and relevant for their audience, and issues that connect most intimately to the themes and texts we all have been discussing and critiquing in class. They prepare a presentation and a discussion generated by their combined experience of the dynamics of work in their fields or disciplines. As Wagner observes, the best model for conducting discourse drawn from individual experiences without losing a communal focus is found in psychotherapy and its application of group therapy techniques (27). His discussion of ways to adapt such a model to a fieldwork class is useful in developing this component of the course.<sup>14</sup>

## CLASS RESEARCH PROJECT

In order to examine the popular media’s treatments of the workplace and initiate discussion of their cultural impacts, students engage in a class research project in which each student selects several popular films or several episodes of a television series that focus on a workplace and workplace dynamics. Employing the strategies

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of content analysis and textual criticism (Vande Berg 21-27), students are asked to view the text repeatedly and to describe and interpret its treatment of the work setting, employee relations, effects of management style, workplace gratifications and frustrations, issues of diversity or discrimination, or other workplace issues represented in the text. They are encouraged to assess the “realism” of the depiction and to interpret its appeal to popular audiences—to speculate on the cultural fantasies, anxieties or fears that are being reinforced. Students are prodded to identify underlying ideologies of work reflected, critiqued or satirized in the texts they examine and to support their interpretations.

Each student produces a five- to ten-page essay analyzing selected texts, and all the students share summaries of their findings with smaller study groups and then with the entire class. Class discussions focus on the key patterns that emerge in the summaries and on the power of the entertainment media to reinforce or to challenge popular assumptions, fantasies and illusions about the world of work. Students respond well to this project, and class discussions generally provoke lively debate about the popular media’s tendency to reinforce stereotypes and widespread cultural values even in programming or films that on the surface appear to be challenging them. Although students generally are familiar with the texts their peers have selected, their choices for analysis are usually quite diverse; few students select the same films or television series, documenting how ubiquitous the workplace has become as a setting for storytelling in the popular media.<sup>15</sup>

## SENIOR PROJECT PROPOSAL

The final goal of the junior year Fieldwork course is to help students develop and draft their proposals for the research or creative projects which all Honors candidates complete during their senior year under the supervision of a faculty mentor who receives an independent study stipend for this commitment. They must have an approved proposal in order to continue in the program and to be admitted to Honors 352, Honors Senior Project Seminar, in the fall of their senior year. Early in the fall semester of the junior year Honors Fieldwork course, class time is dedicated to close readings of our *Senior Project Handbook* and to discussion of expectations, deadlines, sample proposals, and projects. In order to facilitate students’ planning and spadework, faculty from different disciplines are invited to class to describe research conventions and methods in their fields. They suggest valuable, manageable and “doable” types of projects that undergraduates in those disciplines can successfully complete and offer advice about designing the project and formulating a proposal.

For these presentations I invite colleagues who love research and who enjoy mentoring students in methods and project design. They convey their excitement and gratification in their own research, help to demystify the process for students, and provide excellent advice about choosing topics that really matter to them as well as limiting the scope of the project to what can viably be accomplished in a year’s time. In their evaluations of the class, students frequently claim that these sessions help ease their anxieties and help them conceptualize concrete projects that engage their

interest. Several Fieldwork class sessions in the winter and spring are committed to students' sharing progress reports on their senior project proposals.<sup>16</sup>

In my initial experience with this course, I failed to integrate the senior project preparation effectively into the thematic focus upon work and the workplace. In subsequent experiences I have prodded the class to consider academic and applied research as a model of work that has its own "dynamic" and ideological context. In view of Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "Flow," for instance, academic research should provide optimal work gratification: it is sequenced to provide constant challenges, it is willfully chosen and self-directed, and it advances toward clearly identified, concrete goals. But academic research also might be viewed as a form of professional socialization, the "ticket" that provides entrée into advancement in the discipline, and testimony that one has absorbed its codes and conventions. My goal is to encourage students to be circumspect about the project to which they are about to commit themselves. In some cases, this sort of critique of research as work might even prevent those who have no real conviction about the value of such a project from pursuing it.

It was also clear in their evaluations of the class the first time I taught it that students wanted more first-hand testimony from peers engaged in the research process rather than relying solely on the direction of faculty "experts." Now when I teach the course, I invite seniors who have nearly completed at least the first drafts of their projects to talk with the junior Fieldwork class about their process and progress, the frustrations, challenges and rewards of their work, and their honest assessment of the value of such work. They also describe their strategies for remaining "on task" and their working relationships with their faculty mentors, invariably triggering discussion of the variety of "management" styles and their effects on students engaged in extended projects. Junior Fieldwork students might also be asked to interview faculty who have been senior project mentors, inquiring about the qualities of effective proposals, work habits that promote successful completion of the project, and the interventions that stimulate motivation and focus should they begin to wane. In short, my goal is more effectively to treat the senior project as another form of work, in the dynamics of which the students are critically engaged.

## ASSESSMENT OF THE COURSE

Student evaluations of the Junior Year Fieldwork course and assessment of fieldwork products and of student performance in the class indicate that, despite the conceptual and practical problems cited throughout this discussion, a course integrating hands-on fieldwork with an analysis of the dynamics of work in our culture can be a valuable pedagogic experience for undergraduates. Students are almost uniformly positive in their assessment of the value of the fieldwork project in which they engage, not just because it has supplied them with first hand career building experience but because it has enriched their sense of confidence and personal efficacy. In some cases their internships have led to part- or full-time employment, and in a few instances negative internship experiences have triggered reflection that ultimately convinced students to change their professional focus. Students are appreciative of

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the fact that fieldwork proposal criteria are broad enough to enable them to design projects that tap into their own interests and, in some cases, projects that enable them to integrate their various fields of interests. Students engaged in preliminary research for their senior projects express wonder and delight that they can receive course credit just for researching and reading about topics that stimulate them. Other students note that the fieldwork project encourages them to continue satisfying volunteer work and to enrich the experience by reading theoretical and professional literature in the field. Students in education whose projects involve classroom observations and participation in teaching activities claim they feel more confident than peers who lack this experience as they approach their formal student teaching assignments.

In some cases the junior year fieldwork experience provides material for a far more ambitious and substantial senior project than students likely would produce without it; this is particularly true for junior science majors who can begin senior project laboratory research in the fall of their junior year and for students in other majors who elect to do preliminary research projects that will continue into their senior year. Recent institutional research on retention rates documents that the Honors program at Saint Xavier is having a significant impact on the retention of students who enter the university with high ACT scores and GPA's. The finding has been widely attributed to the personalized attention that Honors junior year fieldwork and senior project mentoring provide—a process that actually begins as early as fall of the student's sophomore year.

Clearly, the benefits of the Honors Fieldwork course affect more than the students in the Honors Program. Each year a small but significant proportion of students design projects that contribute to the mission and goals of programs, departments or offices on our campus, including our newspaper, radio station, public relations division, film series, and clinical programs. The Honors program receives accolades university-wide for these contributions. Faculty from across the four schools of the university seem to enjoy sharing with Honors students the gratifications of research in their disciplines and the fruits of their own research into the dynamics of work in our culture. In some cases students discover in the guest faculty their future senior-project mentors, or at least advisors who can help them formulate their proposals and find an appropriate mentor in the field. The process provides a means of getting a much wider range of faculty throughout the university vested in the Honors Program.

In their evaluations of the Fieldwork course students also have responded powerfully, although not with complete unanimity, to the class inquiry into the dynamics of work. Some students want to focus only upon what they view as “the tasks at hand”—their personal fieldwork and impending senior projects. But many students comment that it is compelling and revealing to hear how others in the group think about work and also claim to have been stimulated by the connections they could make between the themes and issues explored in the course and their own previous and current employment and fieldwork experience. They comment that the discussions, readings and speakers challenge them to think beyond the current tasks in which they are engaged and to consider the lifelong value of work, even though they sometimes acknowledge resistance to this topic of inquiry. And many students express a genuine interest in reading about the workplace experiences, gratifications,

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and frustrations of people quite different from themselves. Many of them who find these discussions valuable claim that the course will have lasting impacts, e.g., “an expanded view of work” and “the realization that if you pursue work that is wrong for you, it will kill some piece of you.”

The most consistent criticism comes from students who consider the interrogation of the dynamics of work too general and abstract. This is understandable given that the students in the class represent the entire range of our university’s curriculum, including the professional programs. Some students would prefer that the entire course focus on a specific, concrete issue such as discrimination in the workplace or sexual harassment, and some students would prefer that the course supply more practical advice to facilitate their transition to graduate school or into the career of their choosing. Although I have resisted revising the course to so narrow a focus, I have responded to student suggestions that it incorporate more “first-hand testimony” from the “front lines” by inviting job or graduate school recruiters to share with students the qualifications and qualities they prioritize in applicants and potential colleagues. But I believe the testimony of these representatives from the “real world” also must be critiqued to interrogate the values and assumptions underlying their comments. Most importantly, I have responded to students’ suggestions that the course tap more fully their own past work experiences; the first time I taught the course some students noted in their evaluations that it seemed to be designed around the assumption that they were completely ignorant of the world of work.

The more frequently I teach the course, read student evaluations of it, and solicit student suggestions about what it should include and aim to accomplish, the more I realize that some student resistance to an exploration of “the dynamics of work” in our culture is inevitable, especially at a university primarily comprised of first-generation college students. Many of them are struggling with conflicting needs for security and stimulation; they often are attempting to negotiate between parental expectations and their own desires, and they are not always willing to pursue an interrogation of issues that trigger anxiety about their personal and professional destinies. Students will even occasionally comment that they really aren’t interested in hearing, thinking and talking about what makes work valuable or meaningful for other people; their focus must be exclusively on their own professional satisfaction.

But the responses of students who claim that their field work experiences and classroom discussions of workplace issues force them to think “beyond the protective barrier of academia” and “engage them in a larger world of human experience” compel me to keep working with the course to enhance its value for all students who take it. Watching students grapple passionately with the implications of life-altering decisions before they begin making them persuades me that I should respect the “malaise,” or even the apathy, that some students express regarding the topic as a contextually valid and challenging “subject position” for negotiation, rather than as an obstacle to engagement.

## NOTES

I want to thank my colleagues Larry Frank, Laurence Musgrove and Jim Walker for reading and offering helpful suggestions for revising this article. I also want to thank the many Honors 350/351 students who have provided me with valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the course.

1. Educators endorsing experiential learning base their arguments on cognitive and learning theory as well as on empirical research that has documented its benefits. Braid surveys the work of cognitive theorists, the arguments of epistemologists and the research methods of anthropologists that reinforce the efficacy of integrative learning which bridges the “schism between academy and world.” She examines the application of these theoretical perspectives in the design of NCHC’s “Honors Semesters.” Wagner surveys three main traditions of experiential learning (group process, games/simulation, internships/field studies) and the learning theories that underlie and validate each. Representative of empirical research documenting specific benefits of experiential learning activities are studies that show positive correlations between internships and increased interest in the profession, enhanced personal efficacy, and sense of self as active participant/colleague in the profession (Moore, Prouty, Portnoff); studies that document correlations between experiential learning activities and greater job satisfaction in the profession, increased employment opportunities, development of stronger interpersonal skills, and higher starting salaries (Taylor, Ciofalo, Gabris and Mitchell, Fuller); and studies that document perceived improved quality of entry level employees after implementation of internship or fieldwork programs (Dale, Saul).

2. Saint Xavier is a coeducational Catholic university with 3500 ethnically diverse and primarily first-generation college students, located on Chicago’s far Southwest side. About 100 students currently are enrolled in the Undergraduate Honors Program. Honors students can pursue majors in any of the university’s four schools: Arts and Sciences, Nursing, Education and Business.

3. The *Handbook for Honors Junior Year Fieldwork* is available on our website: [www.sxu.edu/honors](http://www.sxu.edu/honors).

4. For instance, a student double majoring in Psychology and Religious Studies turned her volunteer work with the elderly in a neighborhood nursing home into a fieldwork project by conducting interviews with residents, staff and administrators focusing upon factors influencing morale of the residents. A representative sample of fieldwork projects in which junior Honors students currently are engaged includes interning at area radio stations, newspapers and law offices; conducting laboratory research with faculty mentors; designing a promotional campaign for our university’s film series; working with autistic children on basic speech skills; semesters in Spain and London; a Philosophy/Biology double major’s project to design a syllabus for an introductory course in Bioethics; projects by education majors working with teacher/mentors at local schools; a preliminary research project on Korean unification; and building a website covering South Side Chicago’s rock music scene.

5. Lists of nonprofits in the greater Chicago area are available on the Website of the Association Forum: [www.associationforum.org/resources/memberOrganizations.asp](http://www.associationforum.org/resources/memberOrganizations.asp). Websites exist

nationwide for comparable subsidiaries of the National Society of Association Executives (NSAE). In her workshops, our university's internship coordinator focuses on researching internships and resumé writing. Working with students individually, her staff posts their resumes on line, directs them to the office's extensive and current internship files, and connects students with Alumni Mentors who often provide excellent conduits to valuable internship options.

6. For instance, speech pathology or education students who have not yet accumulated the credentials to engage directly in clinical work or in student teaching have designed fieldwork projects incorporating observation of the professional setting, shadowing and dialoguing with professional mentors as they engage in their work, journaling, and researching specific issues they identify in the workplace.

7. Students have the option to begin their fieldwork projects the summer before their junior year. Generally, they register for one semester hour of Honor 350/351 for attending the weekly fieldwork class in the fall and spring of their junior year, and up to 2 additional credit hours each semester based on the number of hours per week they commit to their fieldwork projects or internships. Where appropriate, their fieldwork may be integrated with internship requirements in their majors. Students who spend a semester or year in study abroad automatically satisfy the Honors Junior Year Fieldwork requirement, under the condition that they also submit a Fieldwork Product based on the fruits of their experience.

8. The Introduction to the *Oxford Book of Work* supplies an effective summary of changing ideologies regarding the purpose and value of work, and chapters I and II provide a wide range of readings that exemplify these changing assumptions. Pages 206-07 of this anthology supply a useful condensed historical survey of the evolution of the workday, work week and work year, with its corollary "times off" for weekends and vacations. Readings in Chapter III reflect the gradual separation of home and workplace and the related binary opposition between public (professional) vs. private (domestic) identities. The introduction to Chapters I and II of *Making a Living: A Real World Reader* and the essays included in these chapters provide an excellent survey of historically conditioned work ethics and ideologies. A related objective for the course is to reinforce the notion of the college experience as a form of work, which students negotiate with their own "ethics." What constitutes "success" for them in their academic work—good grades or personal growth? What motivates and discourages them in their academic work? Do they regard course requirements as a "curse" or as an opportunity to cultivate their gifts and talents?

9. Kael, 216. Academics engaged in cultural criticism of popular television programming have made valuable contributions to scholarship since the 1960's (Gitlin, Newcomb), but not until the 1980's do we begin to see critics focus upon the implications of popular media depictions of the workplace. A pioneering example is Zynda's essay attributing the popularity of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* to its idealization of the workplace as family. He argues that the motif eased cultural anxiety over feminist threats to domestic order and other social trends widely viewed as undermining traditional family values. Darker treatments of the workplace in Moore's subsequent spin-off shows were never as popular with viewing audiences. In their comprehensive analysis of prime time television's depiction of the workplace, Vande Berg

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and Trujillo document the recurring metaphors for workplace dynamics reinforced by television programming (workplace as “family,” as “machine,” as “organism,” and as “political arena” ), as well as the dominant “lessons” about organizational life that are reinforced or suppressed by the medium.

10. Faculty and administrators who designed the Honors Program at Saint Xavier assumed that students’ senior creative/research project might evolve directly from their fieldwork experiences, which would provide fertile soil for cultivating research proposals. This has proven the case for some students, but others have gravitated towards completely different topics or issues for their senior projects.

11. My academic background is literary, and the first time I taught this class I had not yet discovered the wide range of materials available in anthologies such as the two I have described. Readings on my initial syllabus were disproportionately “literary.” They included disturbing and exhilarating fictional treatments of workplace issues. I still consider carefully selected excerpts from these sources excellent material for exploring and debating workplace issues: Melville’s “Bartleby” and “Tartarus of Maids”; critiques of the capitalist work ethic in *Walden*; disturbing selections from Rebecca Harding Davis, Theodore Drieser, and Upton Sinclair juxtaposed to inspiring depictions of work in Thoreau, Frost, Marge Piercy, Seamus Heaney; or satirical treatment of workers and the workplace such as John Updike’s “A & P.” Discussion can focus on the cultural conditions that influenced these texts and can critique their ideological assumptions: e.g. is Thoreau’s critique of his Concord neighbors’ work ethic “elitist” and “irrelevant”? Selections from one’s academic area may be limitless; teachers designing the course must think through the issues they consider valuable for students to interrogate, and determine which texts to connect and juxtapose. Student reactions and suggestions can help teachers discover the texts with the most resonance for their undergraduates. Discussions of texts such as these are extremely successful in a class comprised of majors from across the disciplines. Students “tap” into learning they have acquired from courses in their majors, personal experiences, and cultural texts that have made an impression on them since childhood; no one “voice” or ideological persuasion tends to dominate.

12. In their response writing, students frequently thank me for assigning chapters from Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow*. They find particular resonance in his discussion of “psychic entropy,” his term for mental attitudes—anger, fear, self doubt, jealousy, pain, anxiety—that undermine our attention and progress towards goals that matter to us most. They relate to the author’s anecdotes illustrating how even routine or repetitive jobs can be made stimulating by imposing personal challenges, and they describe ways in which they, too, have made boring but necessary work more interesting by employing such strategies. The text seems to inspire many students’ insistence that no kind of work is inherently more valuable or more interesting than others; their primarily working class backgrounds may account for Saint Xavier Honors students’ insistence on the value of all types of work performed with passion, love or intensity, perhaps easing psychic ambivalence about pursuing professional goals that differ from those of their parents.

Their responses to Terkel’s interviews in *Working* reinforce this hypothesis. Students seem most to admire the dedication to perfectionism and the pride in a job

well done voiced by many of Terkel's blue collar workers, whom they frequently compare to their own parents. At the same time they assert most adamantly the impossibility of their ever working for long in a setting where repetition, tedium or depersonalization stifles creativity, or where they are not respected as individuals and as professionals. They are eager to identify patterns that emerge in the narratives, especially in the conditions that trigger alienation and engagement, and the psychic effects of frustration or excitement with work. Both *Flow* and *Working* stimulate connections for students between abstract issues we are exploring and their actual personal past and present employment experiences. Both texts also provoke stimulating discussion of ethical issues in the workplace: Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges that "optimal" creative engagement can occur in work that is subversive to the welfare of the community as a whole, and some of Terkel's most frustrated workers are highly paid professionals engaged in work with potentially negative effects on society.

**13.** One student, for instance, told me after the class where the sociologist castigated the "stifling" standards movement in public education that she was weary of hearing professors in the College of Arts and Sciences tell her how miserable her life will be as a high school teacher charged with improving standardized test scores. So many of her friends currently teaching high school tell her how exciting, gratifying and creative they find their jobs. She was convinced that an effective teacher could be creative and also meet standards, but she was not sure how to challenge this professor's arguments or contest his "evidence," which was primarily anecdotal.

**14.** Following the suggestion of a student on the Fieldwork course evaluation, I now supplement student fieldwork reports by inviting graduate students, as well as former students who are now working professionally in the disciplines of their undergraduate majors, to share with fieldwork students the challenges and difficulties encountered in the transition from undergraduate to graduate work, and from academic life to professional life. The student had commented that he wanted to hear, "not about how fieldwork will help me but how it HAS helped others, and what is in store for me."

**15.** Although students particularly enjoy this project, and it triggers lively and provocative discussion, I have considered integrating alternative research and writing projects into this course. In their research writing textbook, *Fieldworking*, Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater provide suggestions and models for excellent essays resulting from close observation and analysis of work sites and workplace cultures. This text outlines carefully sequenced field research activities designed to produce ethnographic analysis of workplaces. Students are cued to observe and record field notes on physical details of the work setting and symbolic artifacts, insider language, behavior patterns and habits, dress, levels of authority, and quality of workplace communication and relationships. They also incorporate insights gained from interviews of work site employees, clients and administrators. Such a workplace ethnography could be a valuable and stimulating fieldwork product option for students in this course.

Other writing projects might include essays in which students attempt to trace how their own work ethic evolved, perhaps incorporating insights gleaned from interviewing parents and other relatives or acquaintances who have strongly influenced

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them. Students might also consider the influences of cultural institutions to which they have been closely bound, such as church and school. Finally, they might be asked to write an essay reflecting upon college as work. They could be asked to speculate on the kind of work ethic they have evolved in their academic life, and the factors that motivate and frustrate them in their efforts. What produces "Flow" in academic work? How does their academic work connect to their extra-curricular employment, and are the two at odds or are they in any ways mutually reinforcing?

16. In some instances senior project proposals evolve directly from junior year fieldwork projects, especially for students engaged in lab research and preliminary research projects. The topics or issues that they gravitate towards in their junior fieldwork research become the foci of their senior projects.

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**APPENDIX:  
SAMPLE HONORS FIELDWORK SYLLABUS**

**HONOR 350/351 : HONORS FIELDWORK I&II:**

**FALL, 2001: TUESDAY, 12:30-1:50**

**SPRING, 2002: THURSDAY 12:30-1:50**

**Course Objectives:** To share insights students are gaining from their fieldwork experiences, especially as they shed light on the “dynamics of work” in a wide range of fields. We all spend a good part of our lives in the workplace, but college doesn’t necessarily equip us with tools for assessing, evaluating and reflecting upon this important component of our lives. This course is designed to make us more self conscious about work place issues, including the effects of management styles and structures; the nature of power in the work place; issues regarding diversity in the work place; employee frustrations and satisfactions; disparities between employee expectations and actual work conditions; stated versus “de-facto” job qualifications; “trade-offs” between the material vs. the spiritual or creative rewards of work, and other issues that students wish to explore. Guest lectures and short readings will provide a springboard and a theoretical context for discussing students’ firsthand experiences in the work place.

A second objective of the courses will be to prepare students to produce a proposal for their senior year research/creative project. The proposal will be due during the spring, 2002 semester. Sample proposals will be examined and faculty from various disciplines will be invited to class to discuss the rewards and challenges of research in those fields, the conventions and expectations of research projects and what a senior project proposal should include.

**Texts (Hand out and reserve readings):**

“Defending the Senior Honors Thesis” Albert J. Spiegel, former Honors Student  
Selections from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*

Selections from Studs Terkel, *Working*

Selected essays, chapters, short stories and poems depicting and interpreting work and the workplace

Pauline Kael and Thomas Zynda chapters on media depiction of the workplace

**Course Requirements for Honor 350/351**

Fieldwork supervisor’s evaluation (submitted by due date)

Fieldwork product

In class report on your fieldwork experience

Completion of assigned readings, responses to discussion questions and active class participation

Work place in the media assignment

Senior project proposal approved by faculty mentor and submitted by due date

Attendance (Mandatory except on those dates you are excused; absences will result

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in lower grade for Course.) Participation in class discussions, informal sharing of your fieldwork experiences where applicable to class discussions of workplace issues

- Class 1: Tuesday August 27  
Introduction to the course, its objectives and course format  
Survey of fieldwork proposals, placements and intended fieldwork products  
Clarify information that still needs to be submitted to Dr. Hiltner
- Class 2: Tuesday September 3  
Discuss Spiegel essay “Defending the Senior Honors Thesis”  
Discuss expectations senior project  
Examine Senior Project Handbook, Discuss finding a mentor
- Class 3: Tuesday September 10  
Stimulation in Work  
Discuss Selections from *Flow*  
\*\*\*Supervisor evaluations for fieldwork completed in the summer due
- Class 4: Tuesday September 17  
Finish Discussing *Flow*  
Summer Fieldwork Experience: Education: Jenny Yarmoska, Andy Rybarczyk
- Class 5: Tuesday September 24  
Summer Fieldwork Experience: Accounting/Management: Stan Komorowski, Bill Mason; Study Abroad: Jennifer Huestis, Physical Therapy: Maureen Nelson
- Class 6: Tuesday October 1  
Guest faculty discuss research design in the professional disciplines, “Testimony” from current Honors students engaged in senior projects in marketing and education
- Class 7: Tuesday October 8  
Workplace Alienation: Discuss Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”  
\*\*\*Summer Fieldwork Products Due
- Class 8: Tuesday, October 15  
No class, start exploring ideas for your senior project, read a little, make initial contact with possible mentors
- Class 9: Tuesday, October 22  
Guest faculty member discusses factors contributing to employee alienation
- Class 10: Tuesday, October 29  
Guest Faculty discuss research design in History/Social Sciences/ Psychology  
“Testimony” from current Honors students engaged in senior projects in political science and psychology
- Class 11: Tuesday, November 5  
Workplace gratification and frustration  
Discuss Selections from *Working*

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Class 12: Tuesday, November 12

Discuss Selections from *Working*

Class 13: Tuesday, November 19

NO WHOLE CLASS MEETING. Students planning senior projects in science, math, communication or English meet with faculty in those disciplines and with Honors seniors doing projects in those areas

Class 14: Tuesday, November 26

No Class, prepare to present preliminary senior project proposal ideas, and to discuss readings on film/television depiction of the workplace

Class 15: Tuesday, December 3

Discuss Kael and Zynda readings on media depiction of the workplace  
Review expectations for discussion and paper on media depiction of the workplace

\*\*\*Share and turn in preliminary senior project proposal ideas

\*\*\*Supervisor evaluations for fieldwork completed in the fall due

### **HONOR 351: SPRING 2003: THURSDAY: 12:30-1:50**

Class 1: Thursday, January 16

Course objectives for spring (due dates for drafts of Senior Project Proposal)

Groups share their analyses and critiques of a popular media's view of work and the workplace

Class 2: Thursday, January 23

Group reports on the workplace as depicted in the popular media

\*\*\*Fall Fieldwork Products due

Class 3: Thursday, January 30

Complete group reports on the workplace as depicted in the popular media

Class 4: Thursday, February 6

Faculty member from Industrial Psychology discusses Factors Contributing to Employee Motivation

\*\*\*Papers on media treatment of the workplace due

Class 5: Thursday, February 13

Explore status of proposals for senior projects, Identify Mentors

\*\*\*"State of my Proposal" report due

Class 6: Thursday, February 20

Guest Faculty discuss Gender and Race issues in the Workplace, Career "Life Cycles"

Class 7: Thursday, February 27

Employee Frustration and Gratification: discuss "A&P," Selection from *Walden*, "To Be of Use" (poem)

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- Class 8: Thursday, March 6  
Fieldwork experience in medical settings and lab research: Rochelle Sweis, Christine Ejka, Christina Niemiec  
Clarify number of hours students should register for HONOR 352/53:  
Senior Project Seminar
- Class 9: Thursday, March 20  
Graduate school experience: question and answer session with students in law school, medical school, graduate programs in Arts, Sciences, Education and Business
- Class 10: Thursday, March 27  
Fieldwork experience in preliminary research projects: Obstacles, discoveries, frustration and rewards: Mike Piccarillo, Mark Kral, Dan Zec, Eric O'Brien
- Class 11: Thursday, April 3  
Fieldwork experience in Actuarial Study, Survey Research, Database Management, Journalism:  
Janet McHugh, Bill Dimitropoulos, Bill Mason, Kate Mata  
Fieldwork experience as study abroad: Electronic communication from Spain and England? Lisa Johnson, Mike Landis
- Class 12: Thursday, April 10  
No Class: Prepare Senior Project Proposal
- Class 13: Thursday, April 17  
\*\*\*Selected students present Senior Project Proposals (mentors and Honors Senior Project Coordinator attend)  
Clarify when any necessary revisions are due  
\*\*\*All Fieldwork Products Due
- Class 14: Thursday, April 24  
\*\*\*Selected students present Senior Project Proposals (mentors and Honors Senior Project Coordinator attend)  
Clarify when any necessary revisions are due
- Class 15: Thursday, May 1  
\*\*\*Selected students present Senior Project Proposals (mentors and Honors Senior Project Coordinator attend)  
Clarify when any necessary revisions are due  
\*\*\*Supervisor evaluations for fieldwork completed in Spring due

