



What is real-world Learning?

Real-world learning involves intentionally designing the curriculum, so it is relevant and contextualised, making learning meaningful and inspiring. Core to real-world learning is connecting subject knowledge to real-world learning experiences and problem solving bringing the curriculum to life.

When real-world learning is embedded into the curriculum it can add relevance to what students are learning, inspiring, and motivating them to learn, improving engagement, attendance, creating new opportunities for pupils to learn and grow outside of the classroom which can help to foster a sense of belonging and connection within the community, while also providing pupils with valuable real-world experience and skills as seen in the Excelerate schools in Scotland (Dabbous, D., Laczik, A., Rogers, L. & McGrath, S. (2023). Collaborating with partners such as community organisations and employers can contextualise learning moving away from students learning being

abstract but allows them to understand how concepts, ideas, theories are applied in the workplace thereby increasing their understanding and knowledge creating an authentic learning experience. It also offers opportunities for students to learn about labour market information and career opportunities to help them make informed career and lifelong learning choices as well as understanding the skills and behaviours required for the world of work, increasing career readiness.

'These opportunities gave the young people insight into the world of work and of understanding how business worked. There was every sense that through these experiences the students had developed increased confidence and learned how to work more independently'. Rogers, L., McQueen, H. & Spours, K. (2020) Evaluation of career colleges London: The Edge Foundation and Commercial Education Trust:



When real-world learning is planned strategically it creates intentional, meaningful learning experiences linked to the schools vision creating opportunities for deeper learning and sustainable partnership working. NFER researchers conducted a study of real-world learning (RWL) in School 21 in Stratford, East London and XP School, in Doncaster, to examine the theoretical thinking, the common practices used and assess how well the model works. While the emphasis in each school was slightly different researchers identified several common characteristics of the two schools:

- An overarching whole-school ethos valuing authentic work relevant to the real world
- An emphasis on the development of young people's character, especially communication
- Open-minded, creative and collaborative leadership
- Development and delivery of a broad curriculum via projects/expeditions
- Awareness of and involvement with the local community
- A strong emphasis on CPD with additional days for planning.

In conclusion, the authors acknowledge that both School 21 and XP are new and small schools which lend themselves to the design principles of RWL but make

recommendations as to how some elements could be absorbed by other schools. (NFER (2019))

Making education relevant to a young person through real-world learning has a key role to play in students' motivation, their engagement with studies, thereby underpinning their achievements. Instilling a love of learning that will carry with them throughout their lifetime. There is a consensus from most young people, parents and employers that the education system should be preparing young people for their futures, by embedding life skills in the curriculum.

[The Edge Foundation](#) commissioned a [survey](#) in 2020 which found that three quarters of 14-19 year olds want their education to be relevant, giving them the tools and skills they will need in their career. Other takeaways included:

'Learning through doing' is a teaching approach that 83% of parents would like their children's education to include more of and 90% of teachers think it's important to offer their pupils and students the opportunities to learn through practical, real-world scenarios. In fact, 81% of teachers agree it would be useful for them to spend time in industry in order to bring their teaching and career guidance to life.

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The Edge Foundation also commissioned Dr Lynne Rogers and Dr Susan McGrath from UCL Institute of Education to draw together an [evidence base](#) from international academic literature to provide a concrete foundation for our work, which includes real world learning. The evidence base supports that through engaging in real world authentic activities in the community, the classroom and/or with local employers, young people learn about the world around them including different career pathways and professions. Evidence suggests that students' understanding is increased when they are given meaningful opportunities to apply, interpret and solve problems situated in the real world, that motivation is enhanced, and that longer-term retention is higher than in more didactic teaching approaches (for example, Lindemann-Matthies & Kamer, 2005; Scherz & Oren, 2006; NFER, 2019).

For those responsible for the curriculum, teaching within a real world context provides many opportunities to link curriculum learning to careers and employer engagement, something that is reflected in the [Gatsby Benchmarks](#) where four of the eight benchmarks relate directly to careers, labour market information, encounters with employers and experience of the workplace. However, the Gatsby Foundation also found that many teachers lack experience of the world

of work or are out of date with current practice, do not understand how subject knowledge is applied in industry and business to solve real problems, and many have had little or no training in embedding careers education into subject teaching. This necessitates that teachers need intentional, meaningful CPD time to engage with employers and explore real-world learning opportunities so that they can learn about the application of subject content in the real-world and from this develop authentic activities for students. The [Careers and Enterprise Company](#) published a paper on [Teacher CPD delivered by employers. What works?](#) Which suggests that teacher placements are 'potentially effective' and that they lead to positive outcomes for teachers such as increased knowledge and awareness, increased capacity to deliver learning and changes in practice. Secondary school teachers reported that the placements: allowed them to be of more help to their pupils; and improved their subject teaching. (Abbott and colleagues (1996).

The CEC have also launched the [Teacher Encounters](#) programme which provides an opportunity for teachers to engage directly with employers to see and learn about the different career pathways relevant to their subjects, and to observe how their subject is applied practically in business.



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The Edge Foundation also delivered a programme of Teacher Externships which involved teachers/lecturers interacting with a local employer, observing how their subject was used in business and discussing different career pathways relevant to their subject. Teachers/lecturers then returned to school and planned a project linked to the curriculum, or developed curriculum-based resources, using the business they had visited as the context and setting. Their students completed the work or project within school, to enhance their understanding of the relevance of the curriculum, develop their employability skills, prepare them for the workplace and make informed career choices. Through this experience, 95% of teachers agreed they gained valuable insight into the world of work, with 91% agreeing that as a result of their experience, they felt more confident offering career advice to students.

Teacher comments included:

"Students will be assessed in much more realistic ways allowing them to gain valuable experience in applying key skills in a safe environment to make mistakes, tuning these skills before going onto use them in higher education or the workplace."

"From the first CPD, to then externship itself, everything had been positive and inspirational. I ceiling has been put on what we could achieve allowing us to be creative and innovative in our approach to applying the experiences into the classroom."



Employers also benefited from the experience with 100% of employers agreeing that they would recommend the overall teacher/lecturer externship programme to other employers and 100% of employers agreeing that participating in the teacher externship programme enabled them to achieve their own objectives/goals.

Employer comments included:

"The Externship allowed us to participate in a way that did not overstrain our resources (the time of engineers and the support team). By teachers spending a day on an Externship, they can apply their gained insight to inform lessons / activities / projects on a wider scale in terms of number of pupils reached and on an ongoing basis."

"Wonderful experience being able to help the teachers and help them understand what employers expect within various positions of employment. This may help schools to input this information into the curriculum, which will hopefully prepare young people better for when they go out into the 'real' world!"

Embedding authentic real-world learning within the curriculum also offers secondary schools evidence to Ofsted inspectors under the new Ofsted EIF where inspectors will be looking for what opportunities pupils have to encounter the world of work and how the school uses the Gatsby Benchmarks to develop and improve their careers provision. The governments' [Careers guidance and access for education and training providers](#) updated January 2023 also states that schools and colleges should engage fully with national, regional and local employers and professional networks to ensure real-world connections and meaningful encounters with employers' Embedding authentic real world learning throughout the curriculum, collaborating with employers, can help schools achieve statutory requirements in an intentional meaningful way.

All that being said, some amazing practice is already taking place. Please explore the examples and toolkits on the Edge Foundations Practice website which will hopefully give you inspiration to embed real-world learning within your context and setting.

References

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