A Content-Based Career Design Course for University Students

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A content-based Career Design EFL/ESL course can give students a deeper understanding of the meaning of work, information about various occupational options, and a chance to consider the appropriateness of their personalities for various occupations. As is the case of all content-based learning, students get the chance to develop their English skills by studying meaningful, engaging content. Materials for a content-based university Career Design course included: background readings about the philosophy of vocation, readings of interviews with people of many different professions in Japan and Taiwan; various personality assessment quizzes which provide clues for the appropriateness of various vocations; video; and the graduation pledge. Receiving feedback from students is crucial for a content-based course because the risk of using inappropriately leveled materials is greater than courses using an EFL textbook, and such feedback can provide the teacher with valuable information for future courses.

Why create career design materials for a content-based course?

A well designed and implemented content based course can give students the chance to improve English naturally, in the context of studying an academic subject. A content based approach involves academic learning, as well as language learning. Thus, such a course has its own aims, and its own value, over and above aims for students to develop greater proficiency in English. Indeed, the dual purpose seems to facilitate language learning and increase motivation (Kasper 2000). Describing content-based courses, Pally (1999) notes, "Students advance their knowledge of two disciplines—the target language (the linguistic benefits of CBI) and the content area (the pedagogical benefits)—with greater motivation and less anxiety (the psychological benefits)." Pally goes on to note basic learning skills are gained because students learn to gather, synthesize, evaluate, and organize ideas of their own, which develops critical thinking skills.

Given the fact that all students plan to start careers, the topic is inherently interesting and useful to students. Reading specifics about various occupations, in narrative format, is a unique introduction to the working world. Likewise, having the chance to think about vocation, both from academic and personal perspectives, has potential to engage the minds of young adults. One problem of this course, and any content-based course, is finding relevant materials at the appropriate level. This challenge was handled in different ways, with differing results, noted below. A second problem of teaching Career Design is that university-age students, having never worked, have very little prior knowledge.

Career Design Material Development Considerations

Recommendations for selection of appropriate materials for a content based course often presupposes the use of a textbook. When creating a course of an uncommon nature, such as Career Design, there are very few materials available. One of the "intuitive approaches" suggested by Rowntree for selecting content includes, 'Searching for other subject-matter materials; journals, current magazines, TV, internet, library' (O'Dowd 2000)**.** Deciding to embark on designing a course such as this one—which involved creating a course more or less devoid of a model—involves many difficult materials-related decisions. In this age of easily accessible information materials can be readily found about most any topic, but the main challenges for an educator designing a course are: finding appropriately leveled materials; and finding thematically consistent material that fulfills the course's objectives. An EAP course such as the one described here might approach the latter challenge with greater latitude, keeping in mind that using understandable material that will engage students is more important than material that the educator might otherwise deem best for thoroughly learning the course's subject. For the EAP (or EFL) educator the material should be selected to fit the students' level; for regular university courses students must handle the level that the educator presents.

Authenticity of Content

As for implementation once the material is selected, the educator must decide how important authentic is as opposed to appropriately leveled. Ideally material can be both. This university's EAP program director expects instructors to use authentic materials: articles for native speakers, textbooks written for native speaker high school students, or textbooks for adult learners. Any such material poses significant challenges for non-native speakers, and some of the material for the Career Design course proved too difficult for many of the class members. It would be advisable for most Japanese students to have such authentic materials sheltered—shortened and simplified for readability. This would violate the principle of authenticity**,** but have the advantages of not overwhelming students while providing them more appropriately leveled vocabulary. Kasper (2000) notes, "If content-based materials are to be effective in helping ESL students build language and academic skills, allowing them to progress from the cognitive and associative to the autonomous stage of skill development, these materials must be made as accessible as possible to these students (9)."

Materials Developed for a Career Design Course

What follows are several topical areas covered in this course, with brief explanations of the materials, related problems, suggestions for improvement, and student survey results when available.

Ways of Thinking About Vocation

The Internet was the source for materials gathered for the first part of this course, *Ways of Thinking About Vocation.* Typically, students think about questions of salary, benefits, and market availability when considering various careers.

In this course, students read a series of short articles aimed to introduce students to alternative ways of thinking about vocation. The course began with these readings in order to give students a context, or an alternative context, within which to place subsequent learning. The articles presented: (1) Karma Yoga (see Appendix 1); (2) the Protestant Work Ethic (see Appendix 2); (3) The Japanese Work Ethic (see Appendix 3); and (4) Buddha's Right Livelihood (see Appendix 4).

These readings on the philosophy of vocation, and attitudes towards vocation, were meant to encourage students to perceive occupations as something other than a way to make money. While karma yoga has a very esoteric connotation, it merely provided an ancient view of work as service; or in terms of India, where the teachings arise, work as a means to serve God. This approach contrasts the approach of only using materials of obvious interest to students (pop stars, travel, etc.). With this approach, students are treated as intelligent adults who are able to consider foreign concepts (in this case karma yoga), and either reject them, or integrate them into their vocation-related schematas. These readings were also meant to challenge students for the rigors of an English-only university program. The ideas, particularly the religious ideas, were not promoted, but rather presented as alternatives open to question and debate. For example, it was pointed out that when workers perceive they "have no right to the fruits of their labor," they are ripe for exploitation by those wielding the power—the owners and bosses.

Students were given vocabulary, multiple choice questions, and short answer quizzes about the readings. For future classes I will create a worksheet or two to compare and contrast these different ways of thinking, which would also serve to summarize the readings.

People at Work

The second set of materials used in the course were interviews with people talking about their working lives. The main set of readings were entitled, Japanese at Work (JAW), interviews conducted by myself over a period of five years and made into a reader. Although in this case the interviews were published by Kansai Time Out magazine and made into a reader with permission, creating materials by interviewing or writing is one option (albeit time-consuming) for a content-based educator. A final project involved students doing their own interviews, some of which were published on the class's website (teacher being webmaster). In addition, all interviews were uploaded onto the computer as pdf files.

A *Benefit/Harm* worksheet was created to apply a principle of right livelihood and ask students to assess jobs based on the criteria of what benefit, or potential harm, they offer society. To the right of each vocation covered by an interview, the worksheets provided space for students to write a benefit to society—such as a fisherman providing food or a garbage collector keeping the city clean—as well as potential harms such as a fisherman overfishing or a police officer who might abuse his or her power. Students were also asked to rank each vocation on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of benefit to society, and also rank each vocation on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of personal appropriateness. The presentation of these worksheets would be more effective if: First, I had provided sample answers, written by myself, and; second, I had collected and commented on the worksheets after

students completed writing about just a few vocations, rather than at the end, when students had completed filling out for the first twenty (of 26) vocations. With an interim check, I could have provided some students with valuable feedback and ideas. See <www.aiu.ac.jp/~spiri/japanese%20at%20work.htm> for sample JAW as well as sample *Benefit/Harm* worksheets (Spiri 2004).

In addition to (JAW), Taiwanese at Work (TAW) interview readings were used. The format of these readings was not question and answer like JAW, and they were much longer (see the above JAW link for TAW samples). For these reasons, and because they were about individuals from a relatively unknown culture, they were slightly less popular than JAW. For a subsequent course a summary worksheet, and/or a cultural comparison worksheet for both JAW and TAW will be offered. One problem with this Career Design course was it sometimes lacked integration. What did the respective Japanese and Taiwanese individuals reveal about their cultures? Their country's economies? Did any interviewees approach work as karma yogis (viewing their work as a chance to do service)? Not exploring questions such as these were missed opportunities to create a well-integrated course.

Table 1. Rating Scale for Student Surveys

rating	liked/disliked category	usefulness category
5	liked very much	very useful
4	enjoyed	(in between)
3	not good, not bad	a little useful
2	disliked	(in between)
1	hated	not useful

Table 2. Results for JAW and TAW Student Surveys

rating	like/dislike JAW	usefulness JAW	like/dislike TAW	usefulness TAW
5	9 students	8 students	7 students	6 students
4	7 students	8 students	4 students	4 students
3	4 students	5 students	7 students	10 students
2	2 students	2 students	4 students	3 students
1	1 student	0	1 student	0

As the surveys indicate, reading interviews with individuals talking about their occupations was a popular aspect of the course. Student comments further supported the numerical results despite the lack of integration. These materials could serve as the foundation for a future Career Design course.

Personality Assessment Quizzes

In order to determine the appropriateness of a given occupation, various personality assessment tests may be given such as *The Career Key* (Jones, n.d.), and *The Flower* exercises from *What Color is Your Parachute?* (Bolles 2004). This exercise invites students to contemplate several vocation-related factors such as desired location for future job, desired salary, type of work, etc., and write answers in the petals of a whole-page flower. For homework, students did *The Career Key* online "professional career test," and they completed *The Flower* exercise in class. Also, students took *Self-Scoring Personality Tests* (Serebriakoff 1996) and *Self-Scoring Emotional Intelligence Tests* (Daniel 2000). For the latter, 40% of the more difficult questions were skipped. For the former, students answered approximately 300 either

"A," or "B" questions, or "yes," "no," or "?" questions from the following sections: (1) Extroversion, (2) Emotional Stability, (3) Creativity, and (4) Strong-Mindedness. Some sample questions from each section follow:

1. "Are most people likely (B) or unlikely (A) to be trustworthy?" ;

2. "Do you (A) or do you not (B) feel confused if you are interrupted while working?"

3. (Create unique drawings from simple forms); and

4. "Are you forgiving to people who have wronged you?" (Daniel 2000).

Since the materials were completely authentic, they were very challenging; thus I restated and simplified approximately half of the questions for students (either in writing beforehand or verbally while answering them in class), and allowed time for dictionary checking and consultations. Students then tabulated their scores by assigning numerical values to "A" and "B" answers, adding them, and reading an interpretation of the results which showed various degrees of extroversion, emotional stability, creativity, and strong-mindedness. Some students felt confused, questioning whether the test results had any meaning. Questioning the legitimacy of any psychological test is reasonable, especially considering the cultural assumptions inherent in a test made for North Americans. It was recommended to students that they not take the results too seriously, but view the tests as a chance to reflect on their personalities and strengths and weaknesses—as well as a means to learn English. Most did see the value in having time to reflect on personality-related questions,

and learning English, whether or not the interpretations were *true* or meaningful. Also, some students appeared to forget the connection between personality and vocation appropriateness. Again, the main reason for this confusion was the lack of integration. Providing a follow-up worksheet would have clarified the purpose of the tests, as well as allow a review, connecting various personality traits with various vocations.

Table 3. Results for Personality Test Student Surveys

rating	like/dislike	usefulness	like/dislike Emotional Intel.	usefulness Emotional Intel.
5	5 students	6 students	4 students	5 students
4	10 students	4 students	6 students	5 students
3	6 students	8 students	8 students	7 students
2	2 students	4 students	3 students	5 students
1	0	1 student	0	1 student

In particular, students felt these tests were not useful, at least not as useful as the JAW and TAW. Exactly *how* students interpreted usefulness is a key question that the survey was not clear about. Did students comment on whether the tests were useful for them to learn about their personalities (ie. Do what the tests purport to do)? Conversely, did students comment on whether the tests were useful to them as language learners (giving them the chance to learn and practice English while reflecting on their own personalities)? More carefully worded survey questions could answer these questions.

Comic/Videos

In the context of *Right Livelihood*, the comic *A Chicken's Life* **(**PETA 2000**)** was used. This comic, written for children, contained cute pictures and understandable input that was not without challenging vocabulary. The story was informative about chickens, providing students with a view of the world—and slaughter—through the eyes of a chicken. Input that contains visual images, as comics do, is important for EFL students in a content based class. "Visual aids, such as graphic organizers, films and videos, and hypermedia technology, help to enhance comprehension and so provide dual support for ESL students' interaction with content-based textual materials (Kasper 2000)."

The first video used was selected scenes from *Dancer in the Dark* **(**von Trier 2000). Scenes were chosen that depicted life in a factory. A cloze exercise of those scenes was provided for homework, along with audio. Then, in class, the video was watched. While the language was, for the most part, not difficult by film standards, the factory scenes often had a lot of background noise, making comprehension difficult. Also, students would have benefited from practice readings of the script along with some sort of analysis/discussion of the content. In short, more time should have been spent with this film.

The second video shown was of a controversial nature. The education process should, among other objectives, allow students to see and think beyond the superficial, and this sometimes shocking video allowed students to consider the ramifications of meat-eating. The class watched the sometimes gory, sometimes painfully graphic PETA *(People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)* video, *Meet Your Meat* (2000). Students were provided the transcript, as a cloze activity, in class, and were invited to not watch, only listen, if scenes of animal torture would bother them. While overall survey results showed low rating for this activity, four students gave it a "1" for likeability (hated it) while giving it a "4" or "5" for usefulness. Several commented that they can now better understand vegetarianism. No doubt, a pop culture video would have been more popular, but the video gave the students the chance to think deeply about issues of food, food production, animal rights, and death. I made it clear that the video was produced by a vegetarian society, and I am not a vegetarian, but was showing it to provoke thinking; increase awareness of the (often unintended) consequences of our actions (in this case meat eating); and give students the chance to better understanding a foreign idea, vegetarianism. They also could better understand why Buddha, in his *Right Livelihood* (Knierim) teachings, recommended that we avoid being involved in animal slaughter.

The Graduation Pledge

This was not a class activity as much as a culminating activity of the class. The concept of *The Graduation Pledge* was explained to students, and they were invited to take the pledge. In many ways, this is what the course was all about: inviting students to perceive vocation differently, to see a connection between vocation and a just world, and to take responsibility for creating and maintaining a just society and world through vocation. The pledge is taken at over 100 American universities, and schools in several countries. The pledge itself is a minimal statement, and means only as much

as a student makes it. It's not designed to make students whistleblowers or environmentalists—just to encourage them to think about vocation in deeper ways than merely earning as much money as possible.

The pledge in full is:

"I _____ pledge to explore and take into account the social and environmental consequences of any job I consider and will try to improve these aspects of any organizations for which I work." (Manchester College).

After the meaning and purpose of the pledge was explained to students, small cards printed from the website, with the pledge written on it, were distributed to students. It was emphasized that no one was required to sign the pledge, and it only constitutes a promise to oneself, to think about the implications of our work. Out of a class of 24, 23 signed and returned the cards to me, including one student who was otherwise negative about the class.

Conclusion

Deviating from an EFL textbook, which might present dialogs and/or a sequence of discussion topics devoid of academic substance, is both exciting and challenging for students and teacher. An educator must balance the dictates of his/her department (expecting authentic materials for example) with pedagogical considerations (materials should be only slightly above the English level of students). Whether the course is *Career Design* or some other course, teachers should be aware that there are ample potential teaching materials for a content-based EFL course: readings from websites, articles from magazines,

and book chapters. Teachers may also create materials by writing articles, making worksheets, or creating audio (interviews or narratives). The main challenges are finding the time for collecting and preparing such materials, and integrating them into a cohesive, focused course. Sheltering materials—making the materials understandable for non-native speakers—involves difficult decisions for any content-based teacher. Most students, however, appreciate the authentic and nearly authentic materials of a content-based course because such materials are more meaningful than the dialogs or grammar exercises of a typical EFL/ESL textbook. Moreover, giving students the chance to consider the philosophical and practical ramifications of vocation through a Career Design course is one of many educational options for a content-based educator.

Appendix 1

Karma Yoga – (a portion of one of two readings about karma yoga).

'That unique text of Indian wisdom, the *Bhagavad Gita*, has much to tell us about working and the right attitude towards work.'

'The world is imprisoned in its own activity,' we are told, 'except when actions are performed as worship of God. Therefore you must perform every action with purity, and be free from all attachment to results. You have the right to work, but for the work's sake only. You have no right to the fruits of work. Desire for the fruits of work must never be your motive in working. They who work selfishly for results are miserable' (Wu Wei, n.d.).

Appendix 2

The Protestant Work Ethic (a portion of the paraphrased, annotated and simplified text students studied).

"With the Reformation, a period of religious and political upheaval in Western Europe during the sixteenth century, came a new perspective on work. Two key religious leaders who influenced the development of western culture during this period were Martin Luther and John Calvin. Luther was a monk who became dissatisfied with the Catholic church and was a leader within the Protestant movement. He believed that people could serve God through their work, that the professions were useful, that work was the universal base of society and the cause of differing social classes, and that a person should work diligently in their own occupation and should not try to change from the profession to which he was born. To do so would be to go against God's laws since God assigned each person to his own place in the social hierarchy (Hill, n.d.).

upheaval – change that causes confusion

monk – like a priest; lives in a monastery

diligently – with great effort

hierarchy – levels

Appendix 3

Buddha's Right Livelihood (the entire text presented to students)

Right livelihood means that one should earn one's living in a righteous way and that wealth should be gained legally and peacefully. The Buddha mentions four specific activities that harm other beings and that one should avoid for this reason: 1. dealing in weapons, 2. dealing in living beings (including raising animals for slaughter as well as slave trade and prostitution), 3. working in meat production and butchery, and 4. selling intoxicants and poisons, such as alcohol and drugs. Furthermore any other occupation that would violate the principles of right speech and right action should be avoided (Knierim, n.d.).

Appendix 4

The Dynamics of the Japanese Work Ethic (a portion of the text provided students)

"The average U.S. citizen has at least three perceptions about Japan: First, Japanese automobiles sell better in the United States than those made in the United States. Second, if you want a quality piece of electronic equipment, buy Japanese. Third, Japanese people work all day everyday and children go to school on Saturday. While these perceptions are not entirely accurate—it's common now for workers to have two days off a week, and Japanese schoolchildren attend school on Saturdays only twice a month—they are nevertheless grounded in the reality that the Japanese, are in general, loyal and diligent workers. How, and perhaps more significantly, why, is this so? How does a work ethic become ingrained in the fabric of a society? This paper seeks answers to these questions (Stewart 2004)."

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