

THE UNREAL HYPOCRISY OF 'REAL WORLD'

AN ARTICLE SERIES

ARTICLE 8

This “bonus” installment of Semantics or Sabotage is the product of one of the best parts of a robust LinkedIn network — collaboration. After publishing “Underemployed: My Fight with ChatGPT and Why I Won’t Back Down,” I received a thoughtful message from my colleague and connection @Stephanie Discepolo, who asked what I thought about the term “Real World” as it’s used in CTE. I’ll be honest — I hadn’t given it much thought. But the more I sat with it, the more it bothered me.

Even in an article series designed to dissect the language that shapes CTE — every loaded word, every limiting frame — I had missed a phrase that absolutely belongs in the conversation...‘Real World’.

And that’s exactly why I love using @LinkedIn as a collaborative tool. Together, we can crowdsource our professional development, create our own community-driven content, and tackle the language and ideas that define our field.

So, I asked Stephanie to share her perspective on why the phrase “Real World” deserves a closer look. Here’s what she said:

“The term ‘real world’ no longer fits the times. It divides school from life, as if students aren’t already part of the world around them. What they need isn’t to ‘enter’ the real world but to experience authentic, career-connected learning that helps them find their direction and purpose. After all, what defines the ‘real world’ today is constantly changing, and so should our language.”

Her insight was spot-on, and it has shaped not only the words that follow, but my personal view of ‘Real World. Thank you, Stephanie—your feedback reminded me that sometimes, the most powerful professional growth doesn’t happen in conferences or committee rooms, but in the comments and messaging sections of our LinkedIn posts.

Thank you all for your support, for reading, commenting, and reposting. Let’s continue to build out our robust CTE and WBL community platform on LinkedIn! Now, on to the final installment of the Semantics of Sabotage Series.

We’ve all heard it — and most of us have spoken it: “We’re preparing students for the ‘real world.’” It’s one of education’s most recycled phrases, rolled out in presentations, program brochures, and graduation speeches. It sounds noble. Purposeful. Even visionary.

But underneath the good intent lies one of education’s most quietly condescending assumptions — because as the absence of light begets darkness, the absence of good, begets evil, so too the absence of realness begets fake...vapidness! Have you ever pondered that? When we label one space ‘real’, we are also labeling everything else outside of and excluded from that space as fake. This is not an implication; it is a direct deduction from the language.

The Hidden Hierarchy of ‘Real’

When someone says that CTE or Work-Based Learning helps students experience “the real world,” they usually mean *outside of or beyond High School*. But this same term is used by College professors to describe life after college graduation. How can one term have multiple applications for different groups. The obfuscation of the term ‘real world’ is crystal clear. I know that statement seems oxymoronic, but it is true. The term ‘Real world’ is both confounding and enlightening...is just that confusing

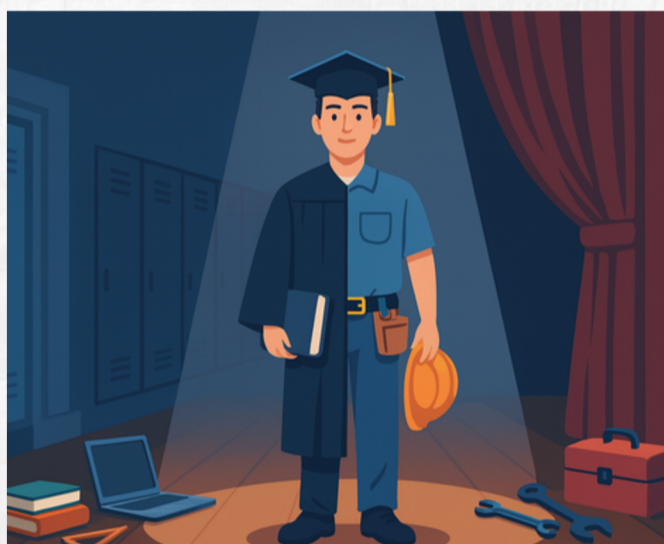
The term 'real world' creates a silent hierarchy of legitimacy:

- School = preparation
- Workplace = reality

That's not only unfair — it's inaccurate.

A student repairing a diesel engine, analyzing agricultural yield data, or assisting in a veterinary clinic isn't practicing make-believe. They are performing meaningful, marketable work. The educator guiding that process isn't staging a simulation — they are orchestrating authentic, applied learning within the local community for the benefit of local employers, customers, and economies.

To suggest that these moments are somehow *less real* simply because of where they occur on a timeline is disingenuous. That the same activity occurring after graduation is 'real world', but move it a few weeks prior to a high school commencement ceremony, and it becomes 'not real' (and that means fake), diminishes the work of both the student and the teacher.



The False Divide: Academic vs. Applied

The phrase 'real world' also keeps alive an old educational divide — the idea that 'academic' and 'applied' learning exist on opposite ends of a spectrum. An idea, by the way, that has been disproved through copious amounts of research

The idea that 'academic' and 'applied' learning are dichotomous...is a relic of another era.

Modern industry doesn't separate thinkers and doers; it rewards those who are both. The engineer who can weld. The welder who can design. The healthcare technician who can interpret data and code a workflow.

Remember, 4 weeks ago, this quote from the article titled, "Hard Truths about Soft Skills":

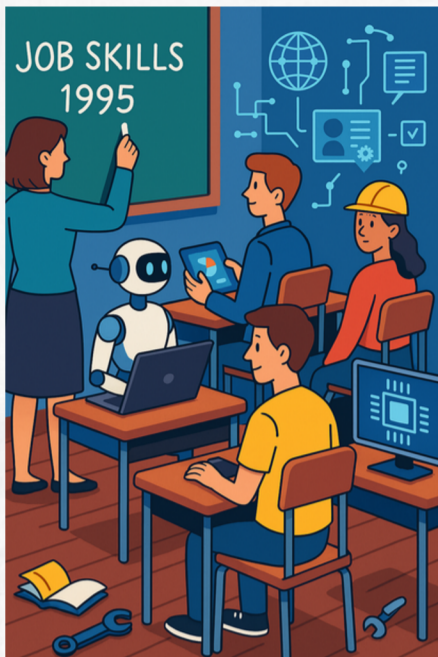
Thucydides once warned that a society separating its warriors from its scholars would have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools. Today, America risks a similar divide: separating technical mastery from human mastery

Mike Rowe provided a modern take on this thought when he responded to something that Marco Rubio said in a political debate, "We need more welders and less philosophers". @Mike Rowe dissented, "The world needs smart people who work with their hands and wise people who can think critically, and ideally, those can be the same person. We don't need fewer philosophers, we need more welders who can think."

When we label certain forms of learning as 'real world,' we reinforce the myth that only one kind of intelligence — practical intelligence — has tangible value. In truth, every industry relies on the synthesis of both conceptual understanding and practical execution — theory and application working in tandem.

CTE doesn't oppose academic learning. It completes it.





The Outdated 'World'

There's another problem baked into the phrase: whose world are we calling "real"?

Because if we're talking about the world many educators graduated into, it doesn't exist anymore.

Today's workforce is fluid, credential-based, and AI-augmented. Careers evolve faster than curriculum guides. Remote work is normal. Apprenticeships are expanding into white-collar fields, such as Architecture, Finance, & Medical Lab Technicians.

If we use 'the real world' as shorthand for our experience of work, we risk preparing students for a 'future' based on our past. Being prepared for the future of 20 years ago, is no longer relevant to the jobs of today! The "real world" isn't a static destination — it's a moving target. And our language should evolve with it.

Better Words for a Better Frame

Maybe what we really mean isn't real — it's relevant. Instead of praising programs for taking students "into the real world," we should describe them as:

- Authentic learning experiences
- Industry-embedded environments
- Applied learning ecosystems
- Professional contexts
- Professional world

Even better, maybe we stop pretending there's a line at all.

Work-Based Learning doesn't take students into the 'real world' — it reveals that they've been in and constructing it all along.



Closing Thought: A Challenge to Our Language

Educators love to say that words matter — and they do. Because our language shapes our posture.

When we say 'real world,' we diminish our own 'world'...the classroom and CTE laboratory.

When we talk about 'exposure to industry,' we imply that students are outsiders looking in, rather than emerging contributors within it.

CTE and Work-Based Learning aren't a bridge to 'the real world.' They're proof that the bridge already exists — between classroom and community, between skill and opportunity, between education and economy.

So maybe the next time we're tempted to say that our students are 'getting a taste of the real world,' we should pause and ask:

- Whose world?
- Real to whom?
- And why do we feel the need to draw a line between learning and living?

Because there is nothing more real than when CTE and WBL operate as intended — when education and economy finally move in sync and connect learning to life!

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