

# Learn to Earn: A Pragmatist Response to Contemporary Dialogues About Industrial Education.

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## "Learn to Earn": A Pragmatist Response to Contemporary Dialogues About Industrial Education

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Industrial Education**

*Judy Whipps*

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Has our commercialism been so strong that our schools have become insensibly commercialized? . . . Is it possible that the business men . . . have really been dictating the curriculum of our public schools?

—Jane Addams ([1902] 2002, 85)

In spring 2006 I attended a forum created to stimulate dialogue between educators and business leaders titled "Learn to Earn," one of a series of statewide meetings convened by Nolan Finley of the *Detroit News*. The majority of the audience participants were K–12 educators, with a sprinkling of college/university professors; many of the scheduled speakers were local business leaders. According to the introductory remarks, this forum was convened in order to help educators prepare students for the job market (particularly for jobs in technical areas such as engineering and health care). The subtext of the conference appeared to be an opportunity for the business leaders to tell teachers how to prepare students for the needs of their industries.

A representative of one of the area's largest employers was the most specific about its "needs" from the education system. He began by saying that every organization—including schools—must be "market driven," responding to the needs of their customers. He advocated that educators should wake up every morning and say to themselves, "What do my customers want?" The customers of education, according to this speaker, are the employers in our community. The best education, he thought, should follow the models of the best companies: they should produce quality products, be profit driven, and have lean processes. Colleges in particular should ask employers, "What do you need?" and then work to produce that.

As a representative of his company's human resources department, this speaker asked for more technically trained students as an outcome of the education system; we do not need to produce, he said, "history

majors like myself." I not only interpreted this remark as a devaluation of the liberal arts and humanities [End Page 59] but feared that it contained an all-too-familiar class-based approach to education. Was it that he needed to hire workers with practical skills, whereas the skills of creativity and leadership associated with the liberal arts are best reserved for business and cultural leaders like him? Was my field of study, philosophy, one of those unnecessary topics for his workers?

This framing of education in service of industry is part of a recent national movement, not just created by Michigan's industrial crisis. Jonathan Kozol's 2005 book, *The Shame of the Nation*, illustrates how job markets and employers are being incorporated into children's education, even starting as young as kindergarten. He visited a Columbus, Ohio, school where posters on the wall in a kindergarten class asked, "Do you want a manager's job?" with subsequent posters asking, "How will you do the manager's job?" In classroom exercises in this same class, "the children are learning to pretend that they're cashiers" (Kozol 2005, 89–90).

Unfortunately, as Kozol points out, particularly in urban schools, educating for "careers" has meant educating for jobs in the lower economic levels, for many students are tracked into career programs as early as junior high, and few of these programs prepare the students for college-level work. As he says, "'School-to-work' is the unflinching designation that has since been used to codify these goals, and 'industry-embedded education' for the children of minorities has become a term of art among practitioners" (2005, 99). Such programs are often theoretically supported by descriptors such as "utilitarianism" and "Taylorism in the classroom" (Kozol 2005, 94), yet this approach often results in graduates who do not have the appropriate education to transcend class barriers.

This tension between commerce and education is not new. Kozol's work echoes early twentieth-century progressive reformers such as Jacob Riis, the author of the powerful 1902 book *The Battle with the Slum*. Riis saw that, like today, the quality of education depended on the

economic class of the parents. He asks, "Do you not see how the whole battle with the slum is fought out in and around..."



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**JUDY WHIPPS**  
**Grand Valley State University**

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Learn to Earn: A Pragmatist Response to Contemporary Dialogues About Industrial Education, weathering stabilizes duty-free entry of things and objects within the personal needs.

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