

'Shop Class as Soulcraft':

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If you have purchased a used tool for your garage or basement wood shop, chances are that it came from the dismantled shop class of a public school.

Inspired by this finding, philosopher/motorcycle mechanic Matthew Crawford, in his book, "Shop Class as Soulcraft," defends a dying school curriculum. He explores the value of shop class, manual competence and knowledge of the material world. He argues that shop class and home economics, in which manual craftsmanship is learned, develop values and skills in children that are increasingly ignored in the never-ending craze to follow the latest trends in education.

Crawford's ideas are striking a chord in people who question whether we are on the correct path in eliminating these traditional areas of education. Crawford has appeared in The New York Times Magazine, on "The Colbert Report" and in a recent NPR interview with John Dankosky.

Solving physical problems has provoked and satisfied human curiosity for thousands of years and has nurtured prized skills and values. In a shop class students have to make decisions and face real consequences. If a bird feeder doesn't hold bird feed, or a loaf of bread doesn't rise, there is no blaming someone else. In a society where laying blame is the norm, shop class has no room for blame or excuses.

In shop class, students focus on the functioning final product, so collaboration becomes a necessity. Teachers become beacons of knowledge and students become problem solvers.

Creating a functioning product out of raw materials gives young people a palpable sense of pride. A child gains the respect of his/her parents and friends as he/she brings home an object that attracts birds or tastes good. Since young children do not understand abstractions, developing a sense of pride in real accomplishment helps the child's natural understanding of the world

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around them. This deep satisfaction of making something is well understood by the hobbyist furniture maker, weekend mechanic or home baker.

Shop class also gives students the chance to learn the story behind the products. Knowing this, Crawford argues, "gives one some independence from the manipulations of marketing." In a society bombarded by advertisements, understanding the way things are made creates the ability to discern the difference between quality work and cheaply crafted objects and the self-reliance to reject the junk that is pushed by advertisers.

Shop class and home economics are relevant today. We need people to make and build things. We cannot maintain a healthy economy by importing every item we need and every person cannot be employed in the so-called "information" or "service" sectors. Manual craftwork cannot be outsourced. Welding, plumbing and service crafts like care workers at hospitals will always be required on-site and are thus "safe from the logic of outsourcing."

In a Turning Point Project article, the author explains: "As we switch from prior modes of learning to technological modes, we are creating different kinds of children and ultimately, a different society." Public education has shifted its focus from educating the population to training them to use computers. In the process society discards and devalues manual competency.

Crawford notes, "The hardheaded educator will say that it is irresponsible to educate the young for the trades, which are somehow identified as the jobs of the past." As shop classes, home economics kitchens and even science labs (in favor of computer-based simu-