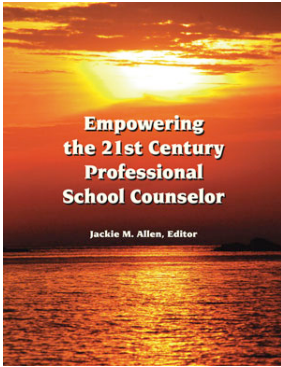


Empowering the 21st Century Professional School Counselor



This book is unique in that teams of counselor educators and practicing school counselors were invited to submit chapters on current topics in the field. This collaboration assures the inclusion of the latest theories and research and, at the same time, provides experiential credibility of the practices described. Major sections include: *Professional Issues and Challenges*; *School Counselor as Practitioner*; *Leadership Issues and Challenges*; *Care for the Care Giver*.

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Chapter 26

The Real Game Series: Helping Students Imagine Their Future

Phillip Jarvis
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Abstract

Accelerating change in contemporary workplaces and in society in general is altering the focus of career development from helping people *choose* career destinations to helping them *learn* essential career and life management competencies. These competencies cannot be learned solely from books or lectures. Theories of cognitive science tell us that real learning of such competencies can only occur when people are actively engaged in situations where the competencies in question must be applied. This dramatically changes the theoretical bases and the practice of career development. Among the most effective learning strategies for career and life management competencies are future-based simulations with role-playing in which learners imaginations are engaged. In fact, a natural modality of learning for even the youngest of children is pretending to be an adult (imagining) through role-playing.

It has been said that the future belongs to those who can see it coming. It takes imagination to “see” what has not yet occurred. Students who can visualize themselves living purposeful and satisfying adult lives become more engaged in the present—in school, social activities, relationships and hobbies. Students who see no connection between school and their future put in seat-time but may never become personally engaged in school. Some eventually drop out. Others graduate with no life and career goals or skills and may go on to dead-end jobs. In an era of accelerating technological change, global competition and increasing workforce gaps, the staggering waste of human and economic potential this represents can no longer be tolerated.

This chapter will introduce a series of learning resources for teachers and counselors that help teachers and counselors help students to imagine themselves in adult life and work scenarios set in the future. The more students get into the drama and embellish their adult roles, through both research and whole-hearted engagement of their imaginations, the more learning occurs. When they come “back from the future” it is with stories they will never forget, with a greater awareness of potentially appealing career options, and with increased appreciation for the relevance and importance of succeeding in school.

Introducing The Real Game

Bill Barry, a teacher, writer and actor, decided something needed to be done when his 12-year old daughter said she couldn’t see any connection between her school subjects and her dreams (Perry, 2004). Bill took it to heart and asked, “What if we could give young people a practice run at being an adult while they’re still in school – something that feels like the real world they’ll soon be part of?” Bill set out to develop an engaging program that would make learning about careers and work fun and interesting. This was the genesis of “The Real Game.”

There is clear evidence that helping students “make informed and considered career decisions results in improved matches between people and their work. Such

matching manifests itself in improved utilization of education and training resources, higher levels of worker satisfaction, preferred patterns of employment stability and mobility, increased income and benefits, and many attendant benefits to families and communities.” (Gillie, S. & Isenhour, M.G., 2003). It is difficult for educators to find ways to help students make informed career decisions in an era of academic accountability and high stakes testing. Yet, without a vision of their career future, too many students fail to see the personal relevance of their studies, thus lacking motivation to do their best academically. Moreover, it has been the tradition of most academic institutions not to address career issues until students reach high school, if at all. Thus, too many students who enter post-secondary programs or the workforce after high school are ill prepared, have no clear goals, and lack the necessary career management skills to succeed. Opportunities for those who find themselves in these situations are limited at best, which in turn puts enormous pressures on a myriad of other societal institutions, including families.

As we continue to search for ways to address this challenge, we need to keep a watchful eye for any vehicle that can assist us. *The Real Game* is one such program. With its humble beginning, when a father created an experiment in response to his daughter’s concerns that what she was learning in school did not connect with her dreams, *The Real Game* has evolved into a series of programs and an international phenomenon (Barry, 2005). Today, millions of children and adults are engaged daily in the programs of *The Real Game Series* (2000), acquiring critical career management skills they will use all their lives, increasing their awareness of potentially satisfying career opportunities, and gaining hope and confidence about their future.

In the simplest terms, *The Real Game* engages students in a classroom setting around career management issues in such a way that they become immersed in real life, practical adult scenarios in which they learn and practice skills in making career and lifestyle choices (Jarvis and Gangitano, 2004). In our experience, one of the most difficult challenges of the classroom teacher is convincing young people that what they are doing in school is important and will arm them with skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will help them create a successful life for themselves. Far too many students simply fail to see the relevance of their experience in school. With the best of intentions, we endeavor to impart knowledge to our students without helping them understand how this knowledge will touch their lives in real, practical ways that make sense to them “here and now.” This is exactly what *The Real Game* does, in a way that is fun and engaging for students, *and for educators*.

The Real Game Series (2000) consists of six separate programs, each of which is tailored to a specific range of age and grade levels, as follows:

THE REAL GAME SERIES

PROGRAM	GRADES	AGES
The Play Real Game	3 to 4	8 to 10
The Make It Real Game	5 to 6	10 to 12
The Real Game	7 and 8	12 to 14
The Be Real Game	9 and 10	14 to 16
The Get Real Game	11 and 12	16 to 18
Real Times, Real Life	Post-secondary	Adults

The programs are packaged in three-ring binders that include all facilitator and student materials (including overhead transparencies, posters, and reproducible masters) needed to implement the programs for as many participants as desired, year after year. The series is highly flexible, allowing customization of the lessons to fit almost any institutional framework and schedule. These programs are used in K-12 schools, colleges, universities, one-stop career resource centers and employment service sites, vocational rehabilitation and workers' compensation offices, human resource offices, correctional institutions, military settings and summer camps, faith-based groups and other settings across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, The Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Hungary, Australia, and New Zealand.

The series incorporates increasingly challenging concepts and vocabulary which students learn by taking on real life and work roles in the safety of the classroom. The learning objectives and performance measures are deliberately aligned with state department of Education academic and career and technical education learning standards, as well as with the *National Career Development Guidelines*, the *American School Counselors Association (ASCA) National Model for School Counseling Programs*, and the *Secretaries Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) Employability Skills*.

With specific regard to the ASCA national standards in the *ASCA National Model* (ASCA, 2005), *The Real Game Series* (2000) completely aligns itself with all three domains: academic, career, and personal /social development. The lessons do a wonderful job of linking the importance of academic success with future work and life realities. It also focuses significantly on what would be considered the "soft skills" (e.g., respect for self and others, teamwork and collaboration, personal responsibility, and many others). As a school counselor, the author has come to view this resource as invaluable for engaging students and a vehicle to place them in the right environment to explore their futures and acquire the vital skills they will need on their personal journeys.

Career Management Principles

Five career management-guiding principles called the "High Five" are incorporated into all six programs in the series. They are:

1. *Change is Constant - "We change constantly and so does the world around us."*
The day has long past when one could enter the work force after high school or other post secondary programs, find one or two jobs, retire at the end of one's working life, and predictably expect a pension. Today's students will likely encounter a succession of jobs, occupations, and even industry sectors during their careers, including some that do not yet exist. They need to understand that constant change is now the norm, and they need to be able to find the opportunities and new possibilities in change.
2. *Learning is Lifelong - "Graduating from high school or college does not mean the end of learning."*
Because change is constant, learning must be ongoing. We will never really be "finished" learning. Any number of opportunities / circumstances could arise that would require us to learn something new or different in our career journeys.
3. *Focus on the Journey - "Traveling through life is like going down a road: Pay attention to the journey, with all its roadblocks and opportunities."*

This principle perhaps best illustrates the shift in thinking in career planning in a changing world. The old question, “What would you like to be when you grow up?” has now been replaced with new questions like, “Who are you now? What do you enjoy doing? Who needs what you like doing?” We now focus on the journey itself, rather than the destination, paying attention to the opportunities, relationships, and situations we encounter on every step of our journey. Jobs are now stepping stones, not destinations.

4. *Access Your Allies* – “*The journey of life is not taken alone. Family, friends, and teachers can help you decide what steps to take on life’s path.*”

Now more than ever, we need to identify those in our lives, on our journey, who can help us achieve our goals and dreams. Collaboration and teamwork skills are crucial in the 21st century work environment. We also must be willing and able to be a good ally to others in helping them on their journey.

5. *Follow Your Heart* – “*Know yourself, believe in yourself, and follow your heart.*”

Dreaming can lead to an understanding of what we really want in life. Knowing what you want and keeping it in the forefront of your mind can give you the motivation needed to deal with life’s challenges. The more we can clearly imagine the dreams with which our heart resonates, the more we naturally move towards their fulfillment. Students need to get in touch with their hearts and begin to dream in technicolor about their future.

The Real Game Programs

Below is a synopsis of the six programs that are divided into two-year grade level programs and an adult program.

The Play Real Game: Grades 3 & 4

The Play Real Game introduces basic life/work concepts and vocabulary for 8- to 10-year-olds as they play the roles of adults who create neighborhoods, find jobs for themselves and others, and work together as town citizens. While having fun with maps and career roles in any community, students learn the value of community, the joys and responsibilities of teamwork, the importance of essential employability and life skills, and how education relates to career and life choices.

The Make It Real Game: Grades 5 & 6

The Make It Real Game takes 10- to 12-year-olds on a simulated journey into the global economy while reinforcing the importance of teamwork and cooperation. Playing adult roles, each with a unique personal history, students form companies that research and develop creative international projects, which are presented to an audience at the conclusion of the program. Language arts and social studies abilities are developed as students discover for themselves that there are many different career possibilities in any community and that everybody’s work is important.

The Real Game: Grades 7 & 8

The Real Game gives 12- to 14-year-old students the opportunity to explore adult realities such as taxes, living expenses, workplace environments, and unexpected emergencies. Students role-play adults in randomly assigned occupational roles and see how schoolwork relates to occupational choices and, therefore, to lifestyle and income. Delving deeper into their roles, students learn how to budget time and money and see the value of a balanced lifestyle, community involvement, and lifelong learning. By the end of the game, students realize that satisfaction in work is a priority issue in life and that it is an outcome that they can achieve by making choices that are right for them.

The Be Real Game: Grades 9 & 10

The Be Real Game shows 14- to 16-year-old students how a person's career is built with everyday choices and decisions, starting in childhood and encompassing every area of life including family, friends, education, leisure and lifestyle choices, community involvement, and dealing with changing labor market conditions. As they role-play an experienced adult worker in a variety of employment, unemployment, and family situations, students explore in-depth the importance of transferable skills, self-knowledge, lifelong learning, and career planning. They are exposed to dozens of career possibilities and encouraged to formulate and actively pursue their own dreams.

The Get Real Game: Grades 11 & 12

The Get Real Game enables students in their last years of secondary school to simulate a five-year school-to-work transition to their current occupational goal. In-depth factual information is supplied for each role so students can realistically explore different possible gateways to their goals, including postsecondary education, various forms of on-the-job-training, workplace experience, internship or apprenticeship, military service, volunteer and community work, entrepreneurship, and self-employment. As they pursue their personal occupational goals, students learn how to budget their time, research their options, define their goals, plan a course of action, and present themselves well in an interview.

Real Times, Real Life: Adults

Real Times, Real Life helps adult learners to put their lives in perspective, relieving the negative self-image that often comes with unemployment so that they can begin to plan their future with confidence. Role-playing as workers from 1900 to the present day, participants learn that change is constant and inevitable, develop an understanding of the modern labor market, and see how skills acquired in one area of life are transferable to another. Working in teams, participants learn how to assess their situations and create realistic action plans and where to get help when they need it.

Implementation of The Real Game at Lee Middle School

To see what these programs entail, what follows is a glimpse into the middle school program, with specific reference to its use for the past five years by Michael Gangitano at Lee Middle School in Woodland, California. *The Real Game* begins with students dreaming about the lifestyle they would like as adults. They choose housing, transportation, entertainment, travel, pets – whatever lifestyle items they dream of in their future. Each choice has a price tag, but the students are initially told to ignore cost. Then each student is randomly assigned an occupation from a set of role profiles that represent the diversity of work roles one would expect in any community, from untrained to highly skilled professionals. Students must step out of their egos and engage their imaginations to step into the future, where they take on the role of an adult character with a specific occupation for the duration of the game.

Each role profile contains basic information about the occupation – gross monthly income, usual vacation allowance, education/experience requirements, licenses or certifications needed, transferable skills, and a job description. With their roles, students receive unique “Day in the Life” descriptions of what their character encounters on a typical day. This also serves as a language arts lesson, introducing vocabulary specific to the occupation. Players become “experts” on their assigned occupation, create business

cards for themselves, and describe their roles to other students. Through “meet and greet” scenarios, like a high school reunion for example, players meet old classmates and answer the usual question, “What are you doing now?” Participants do research and become creative as they use their imagination to describe and answer questions on their occupation. Other activities follow that help students to see the range of requirements and financial rewards of different occupations.

They choose their housing and transportation options and then must figure out how they are going to make ends meet, just like their parents have to do. They are *required* to balance their monthly budgets. Because the average salary varies greatly depending on what job a student has, some students must make very difficult decisions on what they are willing to part with in order to balance their budget.

What! You mean I don't get to bring home what I make? It's not fair.

--- 8th grade student

Then, of course, there are those lifestyle plans. What are the payments on the house you chose? The car? The boat? Every adult knows that monthly payments are only the beginning – all require upkeep, maintenance, insurance, etc. Of course, we also have to eat and wear clean clothes and maybe have a little fun along the way.

I thought my parents didn't like me because they kept saying no to the Reeboks. Now that I'm playing The Real Game, I can't understand how they have been able to say yes so often.

---- 7th grade student

Budget adjustments are made as students face reality—maybe select a smaller house, without acreage, get a less expensive car, and postpone plans for the boat for a while. These are individual decisions, based on individual values. The only requirement is that the budget must balance.

Now I know why my father grumbles under his breath when I see him pay the bills at the end of the month.

---- 8th grade student

Then students face the challenge of time management, “So much to do and only 168 hours in a week to do it all!” They learn that time, like money, must be budgeted. Work, commuting, sleep, meals, shopping, cleaning, etc., are necessities, but there should also be some leisure time. How will that time be spent and what will be the cost (budget implications)?

Now the class, which has been divided into neighborhood groups, is ready to plan a vacation. Each neighborhood is to plan a group vacation and must not only agree on the destination but also on the cost and length of the vacation. Another reality strikes home – those with the money may not have the time, and those with the time may not have the money. Innovative problem solving is encouraged – as long as it is legal. Bartering is rampant, and the credit card and loans may show their dangerous faces (budget implications). Amazingly, decisions are made, and everyone has learned a bit about the give and take of teamwork.

No occupational road is completely smooth. Players learn that changing technology, economic recession, environmental catastrophe, and resource depletion are some of the causes of layoffs and cutbacks. A worker in each neighborhood receives a pink slip. Their services are no longer needed. After the initial shock, the neighbors rally.

Various solutions are considered – networking, retraining within the industry or in a new occupation, relocating, self-employment, and entrepreneurial pathways are explored. This is when all the students learn how to create a resume, using their transferable skills as one tool they will need in their career journey.

As students progress through the lessons of *The Real Game*, they begin to understand and appreciate the complexity of adult life in ways they never imagined. They have an opportunity to closely examine how they would like their adult lives to be. They truly begin to draw connections between what they are learning in school now and how it will impact them tomorrow, as well as twenty years from now. It is simply amazing how this phenomenon unfolds before their very eyes.

Because this curriculum is activity based, hands on, and very practical, it is easily adaptable to students from varied backgrounds and ability levels. Students strong in certain skills such as math, become very helpful to those who are not through the team building aspect of the curriculum. Students become good collaborators and are able to identify who their allies are and how to access them. The curriculum can easily be introduced into a language arts class, social studies, mathematics, or science class because it addresses real life skills that need to be mastered in those classes. As the students approach the end of the game, they link their past, present, and future lives through the activity—“circle of life.” They are now able to use the information and experience from the class to establish a road map, one that comes with a myriad of skills they can use to negotiate on their journey through life.

The Real Game offers many more activities than outlined here but these illustrate why students, teachers, administrators, and parents enthusiastically receive *The Real Game*. In addition, we have seen the community business members come on board to be the latest partners in the collaboration. They recognize the need to have their future workforce equipped with the skills taught in *The Real Game*. This program becomes the bridge to bring all the stakeholders together sharing a vested interest in improving the lives of all our students.

The following is an excerpt from a proposal submitted to a local Rotary Club by its president in support of *The Real Game*:

- The Real Game is a structured curriculum that makes real the reasons for math, social studies, and language subjects being taught.
- It augments and correlates with adult-world reality.
- It stresses and makes obvious the need to stay in school and advance.
- It has continuity with Real Game programs taught in earlier and later grades.
- It reinforces through repetition prior class material through exercises and role-playing.
- It introduces for the first time concepts of cost of living, wages, job application, work ethics, the nature of money, how to make it, and how to lose it.
- It can open up dialogue and discussion with parents who, to students’ surprise, are using this material every day. It is, indeed, “REAL.” (Baker, 2003)

A development model with extensive piloting was a key factor in the success of the Real Game Series. At least 100 pilot sites from across the United States and Canada tested every session in each program in the series. Over 5,000 students, teachers, parents, and community members were involved in over 125,000 hours of focus testing over three to four months for each program and provided extensive suggestions for improvements.

This process was repeated 12 times in 6 programs, both English and French over an 8-year period. This resulted in extensive post-pilot fine-tuning before any program was launched.

The overall reaction to *The Real Game* from teachers, parents, and students has been overwhelmingly positive from the outset. As one teacher said, “From this resource came a realization that secondary school studies have a direct impact on their future lifestyle, an aspect that can only have a positive impact on school retention rates.”

Students, too, echoed the lessons learned. As one student said, “I liked TRG (The Real Game) because it made me realize that being grown up is harder than it looks.”

Even parents were enthused about the program. Here are samples of two parent responses: “At last school subjects can be seen to relate to real life and provide a reason for learning.” “She has learned that to gain most of her dreams, she has to work hard along the way.”

The following areas of student competency are identified in the National Pilot Feedback Summary (1997) as usually improving through exposure to *The Real Game*:

- Understanding about the world of work
- Increased vocabulary relating to the world of work and other aspects of adult life
- Literacy/numeric (mathematics) skills
- The importance of budgeting and managing money
- Working in groups
- Prioritizing what is important in life
- Researching and exploring issues
- Problem-solving and negotiating skills
- Communication skills
- Using technology
- General knowledge
- Interpersonal skills
- Awareness of different ways of earning income
- Knowledge about a variety of jobs
- Awareness of relative earning capacities

By engaging students’ imaginations to visualize possible future life and work scenarios, they more clearly see the relevance of their school experience to future career success. In my experience at Lee Middle School, one teacher reported, “I have had several students in my Real Game classes who would be classified as at risk of leaving early. *The Real Game* helps these students realize that having dreams and aspirations is necessary, and that education is a key to helping them achieve their dreams.”

Conclusion

The *Real Game Series* (2000) is an excellent series of learning resources for anyone searching for a key to unlock the mystery of how to make education relevant and connected to the “real world” for all students, including those with special needs of learning, behavioral, and physical challenges. It is a magical experience for those who are willing to climb on board, focus on the journey, and follow their hearts. In a perfect world, these programs would be team-taught, with counselors, academic subject teachers, peer facilitators, volunteers from the local business community, and parents all involved. It takes some organization to implement these programs, but the materials are

exceptionally teacher-friendly, and once the programs are up-and-running, they tend to take on a life of their own, impacting the entire school in positive ways.

Note: The National Life/Work Center and Real Game Inc. partner with career development organizations across the United States. For further information visit www.realgame.org. The California Career Resource Network (CalCRN) has adapted *The Real Game* specifically for students in California. For more information on *The Real Game California* visit: www.californiacareers.info. Programs in *The Real Game Series* are being used in over 10,000 schools and community agencies in virtually every state and territory in the United States.

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