Transition to Common Work: Building Community at The Working Centre, 

Reviewed by Michel Desjardins, Professor Emeritus, michel.desjardins@gmail.com

“Wax on, wax off.” You might recognize this iconic phrase from the 1984 movie The Karate Kid, in which the wise Asian teacher, Mr. Miyagi, introduces young Daniel to karate, hoping to provide him with the personal and practical skills to fend off the bullying he’s been experiencing. Rather than start with a graduated series of classes in a martial arts centre, Mr. Miyagi has Daniel perform a series of menial tasks, including waxing Mr. Miyagi’s 1947 Ford. The relevance of these tasks to learning karate only becomes evident to Daniel over time.

I taught my first university course the year this movie came out and the phrase stuck. In constructing that course, I struggled with the basic pedagogical challenges of what to teach, how to teach it, and where to start in order to help generate transformative learning for students. Mr. Miyagi’s phrase struck a cord in me.

The challenge of how best to prepare students to learn increased over the years. 2012–2013 brought with it an opportunity to act anew on that challenge. In my role as Associate Dean of Arts at Wilfrid Laurier University I managed a project to develop a new academic program grounded in the Working Centre, a sprawling social enterprise in downtown Kitchener, a few kilometres from Laurier’s Waterloo campus. The “Community Engagement Option” came to fruition in 2013 (https://students.wlu.ca/programs/options-and-minors/options/community-engagement/index.html) thanks to a collaborative effort by committed Laurier and Working Centre members, including Joe and Stephanie Mancini, the Working Centre’s heart and soul.

During the planning stage and the next two years in which I taught a core course in that cross-disciplinary program, the Mancinis became my twenty-first century Miyagis. Their Working Centre, and the ways in which our students actively responded to it, provided me with an example of effective, field-based learning that can have lasting influence.

The Mancinis created The Working Centre in 1982 to help people find work. Their social enterprise now comprises several buildings in downtown Kitchener and an astonishing array of services, including job searching and counselling, a thrift store, free and low-cost food, a bicycle shop, a commercial kitchen, transitional housing units, a dental clinic, a community-shared agriculture project, a barter organization, public access com-
puters, and computer recycling. Over 1,500 people currently use Working Centre services and projects daily.

Coursing through the Working Centre’s veins from its earliest days are the teachings of Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, Ivan Illich, E. F. Schumacher, Jane Jacobs, Jean Vanier, Moses Coady, and Thomas Berry, to name only the key (mainly Catholic) thinkers. Transition to Common Work explains how those ideals have been put into practice.

The more than 200 students to date who enrolled in the “Community Engagement Option” since the beginning have found their learning at the Working Centre to be vital in preparing them for life after graduation. What did I learn as an educator from their responses?

First, engagement with the Working Centre gives students hope. They witness actions intentionally grounded in moral principles, and they see the possibility for their own work and lives “to be meaningful […] their labour to do no harm to the earth and not be exploitive of other people” (165). As educators we can forget that curriculum planning needs to go further than designing courses and programs that prepare students to enter graduate school. For many of my students, the possibility of “living lives of leadership and purpose,” to use the Laurier mantra, took shape for the first time in their university studies when exposed to the Working Centre’s inclusive, respectful ways of relating to others.

Second, in a university context in which the job clock ticks louder and louder, with the refrain “how much money can I earn?” echoing in the background, the Working Centre philosophy of work is often the wax on, wax off moment that nudges students to think more broadly about work. “Work as gift,” the Mancinis emphasize, “seeks to create places where the work accomplished feeds the human spirit, allowing relationships to flourish and deepening craft and skill” (51). In the context of the Working Centre’s five other “virtues” – living simply, serving others, rejecting status, building community, and creating community tools – this less-materialistic attitude to work is transformative.

Third, in a university culture that rewards individual accomplishments with grades and scholarships, it came as a welcome surprise for students to encounter an emphasis on solidarity, sharing, and reciprocal relationships. “Western culture usually nurtures independence from others,” the Mancinis write. “The opposite is true at The Working Centre” (170), which cultivates interdependence. For many students, their learning came alive when experienced with people who wouldn’t usually be together.

Fourth, the Working Centre’s “pastoral circle,” a type of Hegelian learning path, led students to appreciate the people-centric nature of knowledge, the value of their own judgment, and the responsibility to make a
positive difference in the world. Here’s how the Mancinis describe this circle of learning:


Honouring the fundamental humanity of others, respecting the learner’s own ethical guidelines, and demanding action: That our students found this type of learning surprising and empowering is an indictment of our current university culture. We shouldn’t have to ask why students in a place like the Working Centre are inspired. We should ask why they don’t often have the same response in their standard university programs.

Teachers and students are not the only ones who are likely to find inspiration in Transition to Common Work. This remarkable chronicle of the emergence and underlying philosophy of the Working Centre will captivate those seeking new models of community development and social enterprise – as will Joe and Stephanie Mancini, recipients of the Order of Canada (2016), who lead the Centre by example with hope and commitment.