

Making Connections with Student Interests (And Having Fun at the Same Time)

Janet E. Wall

Abstract:

Our interests inspire how we interact with our environment and with others. Interests drive our life planning decisions. Because interests are so central to our lives, it is vital that career development professionals help individuals make connections between their interest areas and common life experiences. Connections can be made by integrating and actively associating a person's interests with school subjects, hobbies, people, out of school activities, education and training, and occupations. This article provides some ideas for accelerating the integration of interests with life choices.

Our interests are powerful influencers on what we prefer to learn, how we occupy our time, what activities we enjoy, how we craft our futures, and other life activities. Although values and abilities are important, various studies have supported the idea that people who are working in jobs that satisfy their interests tend to be happier, more productive, and stay on the job longer.

Frequently, counselors and other career development professionals use interests to match persons with occupations and careers. Since interests are so powerful in our decision-making process, matching interests to occupations and careers is a legitimate, important, and useful exercise. Less often, interests are used to help individuals integrate their preferences with school subjects, majors, hobbies, extracurricular activities, level of education required by occupations, training opportunities, and relationships with other people. Counselors should help individuals understand that interests influence more than occupational choice, although the interest-occupation match is clearly important.

A first step in using interests is to provide a measurement of those interests in order to determine which interests are most dominant. Many commercial interest inventories are available for purchase, but a number of good inventories are available without charge. See <http://onetcenter.org/IP.html> and <http://www.navy.com/lifeaccelerator> for two good possibilities. Although several instruments might be found on the Internet, a career development professional needs to be selective, using only those instruments that have some technical credibility.

Many interest inventories are based on John Holland's theory. Holland described people and the environment according to six categories – Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. A brief definition of these categories, follows.

Realistic – people and environments that involve working with one's hands machines, equipment, and animals

Investigative – people and environments that relate to problem solving and research

Artistic – people and environments that encourage creativity, design, writing, and the performing arts

Social – people and environments that serve and assist others

Enterprising – people and environments that involve leading people and selling things or ideas.

Conventional – people and environments that involve details and accuracy

Once students have identified interests, they need to integrate their interests with various real life situations -- situations they encounter on a daily basis. Career development professionals can help individuals hasten the integration by using a person's interests in a variety of situations. Here are some examples:

Students can be asked to

- guess the probable interest area of a person who would like a birthday present of a telescope, a karaoke machine, a toolbox, a book of poetry, or a motivational tape.
- determine the likely dominant interest area of persons like Dr. Phil, Donald Trump, Tiger Woods, Mother Teresa, or Jennifer Lopez
- label the probable dominant interest area of the lead character or characters in movies such as Million Dollar Baby, Aviator, Ray, or the Incredibles; or in TV series such as Friends, Law and Order, Navy CIS, The King of Queens, ER or Everybody Loves Raymond.

Interests can be incorporated into the school curriculum through such activities as

- identifying the primary interests of other people by reading their biographies or autobiographies such as My Life by William Jefferson Clinton or Kate Remembered, a biography about Katharine Hepburn
 - associating interest areas with artwork such as the Dancer by Degas
 - explaining how computers are used in occupations within each of the six interest areas
- Individuals can begin to relate interest areas with occupations by
- listing the various occupations of persons in their school or workplace, then determining the interest area best representing that occupation
 - compiling a list of occupations in their own interest area and researching the amount of education and training required to enter that occupation
 - researching the typical wages of occupations in their own interest areas
 - interviewing persons in various occupations and determining whether or not they have jobs that satisfy their measured interest areas

Further ideas and reproducible activities can be found in *What Do I Like to Do?: 101 Activities to Identify Interests and Plan Careers* by Janet E. Wall (available at www.proedinc.com).

Dr. Janet E. Wall is the former president of the Association for Assessment in Counseling and Education, and has been instrumental in the development of the ASVAB Career Exploration Program and DISCOVER. She co-edited another book called Measuring Up: Assessment Issues for Teachers, Counselors and Educators, also available from Pro-Ed, Inc. (www.proedinc.com) She is an independent consultant specializing in assessment, career development, program evaluation, and technology. Contact Janet at sagesolutions@earthlink.net or at 202-465-5774.

This article originally appeared in NCEA's web magazine, Career Convergence, at www.ncea.org. Copyright National Career Development Association, (May, 2005). Reprinted with permission.