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Book & Resource Reviews

Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work, by Matthew B. Crawford. New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2009. 246 pages, hardcover.

Reviewed by **G. Page West III**, Wake Forest University.

Are the students that you teach truly engaged in the course work they do, exhibiting a spirit of inquiry and finding this work intrinsically rewarding? Or are your classes often populated by those who seem to view business education instrumentally, focusing on their eventual job placement outcomes, rather than by those who have a passion for business? If these questions resonate with your recent teaching experiences, then *Shop Class as Soulcraft* can provide a thought-provoking perspective on the reasons why. Author Matthew Crawford's polemic on the educational imperative of creating "knowledge workers" for the 21st century challenges the practice of business education and encourages us to consider how we might make a difference in our own classes.

Crawford brings a unique perspective to the conversation about business education. Following his interest in philosophy as an undergraduate at UC, Santa Barbara, he earned a PhD in the history of political thought at the University of Chicago. After unsatisfying work experiences at an information technology company and as executive director of a Washington think-tank, he decided instead to pursue his passion for mechanics and opened a motorcycle repair shop. There are wonderful descriptions in this book that rival those of Pirsig's (1974) *Zen* classic. But along the way he adroitly compares the nature and values of manual work to that of knowledge work, explicitly and implicitly asking questions about business education that began this book review. He advances the argument that meaningful work and self-reliance are both ideals tied to the struggle for individual agency, which has become elusive in the modern world of work. The separation of cognitive work from manual work over time has led to conditions where individual agency—individuals finding meaning through work that allows them to develop an ethos of excellence—has declined significantly. Crawford connects this workplace dynamic with the educational process.

The introduction and chapters 1, 2, and 3 set the foundation for the argument of the book. This sec-

tion presents a compelling case for the satisfaction and intrinsic richness that one derives from doing manual work. Crawford laments the decline of shop classes in high schools because it means that young people today far less often experience systematic encounter with the material world, through which is appreciated the value of craftsmanship (doing something well, for its own sake). The origination of shop classes paralleled Henry Ford's assembly line innovation that severed "the cognitive aspects of manual work from the physical execution. Such a partition of thinking from doing has bequeathed us the dichotomy of white collar versus blue collar . . ." (31), and reduces opportunity for agency for those removed from doing.

In chapters 4 and 5, the author recites his early experiences in learning mechanics, and then his later experiences in industry. These chapters plumb the relationship between intellectual virtue and moral virtue. To seek truth in fixing something requires a commitment where one answers to a standard that goes beyond the personal, to an objective value defined by the object itself and manifested in customer appreciation. When someone is not deeply immersed in the details, and thus, not involved in the source of problems, the occasions for the exercise of judgment are diminished and the moral-cognitive virtue of attentiveness will atrophy.

Crawford beautifully illustrates these ideas using examples of the evolution of engine mechanics. Early motorcycles required riders to use hand pumps to make sure the engines were adequately lubricated with motor oil. Mid-century automobiles incorporated dipsticks to let drivers check levels to make sure there was sufficient oil in the reservoir for the automatic oil pump. New Mercedes don't even have dipsticks, just an "idiot light" that tells the owner "service required." In contrast to the stark engine compartment of a 1963 VW bug, easy to service, open the engine compartment of any automobile today and you will confront systems and complexity way beyond understanding and abilities. Look inside a computer—how does it actually work? These developments "disburden us of mental and bodily involvement" (56), chipping away at self-agency because we neither understand how things actually work nor how to fix them or improve them.

Chapters 6 through 9 leverage the earlier ideas into commentary on the modern workplace and

college education. In the modern economy dominated by large companies, knowledge workers are further removed from the actual production of goods and services, and they are now subject to the same sort of routinization that is a result of a focus on systems and process. An “imperative of abstraction” (138) exists in which performance is not evaluated by the value actually created in the production of a product or service, but in metrics having to do with process efficiency, teamwork, codes of conduct, presence of diversity, and other soft subjective measures. For knowledge workers, the deep dive into the minutiae of how a complex organization works is not likely, and thus mastery of the system—which leads to problem discovery, creativity, and the satisfaction of crafting a valuable solution—is attenuated. This affords fewer occasions for the experience and rewards of direct responsibility that accompany manual work. Neither thinking without doing, nor doing without thinking, is intrinsically rewarding.

College education contributes to this dynamic, Crawford claims. The current education regime values “knowing that” as opposed to “knowing how.” Whereas “knowing how” usually comes from experience and immersion in order to appreciate the situated character of work, “knowing that” depends on a broader “technocratic/meritocratic view of education [that] treats it as instrumental . . . for getting ahead . . .” (145). College students of business don’t learn specific applications; they are pliable generalists unfettered by any single set of skills, and thus have a ticket to an open future. Business students today do not have the opportunity to take the organization apart, see how all the parts actually work and how they work together, identify and solve problems at a deep level. The broad nature of business education eliminates the possibility of mastery.

One concern I have is that there is a sort of paradoxical line of reasoning in this book. Although Crawford extols the virtues of rolling up one’s sleeves and getting greasy through manual work, lofty ideas about attentiveness, an ethos of excellence, and self-agency remain far removed from the reality of replacing a clutch rod oil seal. More significantly, the author is not well-versed in business education, so commentary on the education of knowledge workers may lack perceived credibility. If meaningful problem solving occurs

through the deep dives leading to mastery, his inexperience in business education is itself problematic. On the other hand, the problems he identifies are those we also encounter through others with deeply relevant experience in business education (e.g., Glenn, 2011; Mintzberg, 2004).

The strength of *Shop Class as Soulcraft* is that Crawford manages still to put the microscope on what business educators do and how they do it. In part this is because the nature of work and the intrinsic rewards derived from it are not domain-specific, they are universal. Drawing on shop class, the nature of craftsmanship, and the mechanics of motorcycle repair as both reality and metaphor drives this home. As I read his account of tearing down a starter to discover why it would not work, the satisfaction he received from solving the problem struck me as the same sort of intrinsic reward that academics find in research and teaching. We tear down complex business phenomena: We observe, think through relationships, collect data, confirm our theory, and then explain our work through publications and teaching. What is more intrinsically rewarding than this hands-on process of discovery and elucidation? Would that our students experience this same intellectual joy!

The ideas in this book will certainly spark critical reflection and conversation. Already I have shared it with my colleagues, and we are beginning to discuss how we might adjust our degree programs or courses in order to more meaningfully engage students. For my own courses, I intend to rethink how I can better connect theory to practice, how deeper drill-downs into content can proxy the sort of tearing down that occurs in manual work, and how I can provide additional opportunities for experiential learning. This rethinking is perhaps particularly relevant for important conceptual content in my domain of teaching (strategy), such as the application of value-chain analysis or resource-based theory.

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