

A Personal Commentary: Learning-Centred Institutions and the Practice of Teaching and Learning

***Robert Fleming, Associate Vice President, Academic, Kwantlen
University College***

As humans we naturally work in learning and knowledge-building communities where constructing knowledge is a socio-linguistic process. These communities go beyond disseminating inert content - becoming both the nexus of inquiry and the means to critical and creative learning outcomes. (Garrison, Kanuka, and Hawes, 2002)

The above excerpt from an article on blended learning at the University of Calgary speaks to the importance of understanding learning as an iterative, reflexive, and social process that varies with time, individual, and context, as well as with content. To be responsive and respectful of the variability and richness of learning experiences, as educators we must strive to enhance our learning processes - the experiences we facilitate for our learners and for ourselves - through an ever-expanding critical awareness of the complex personal, social, and environmental factors that shape our learning and the manner in which we construct knowledge within our communities.

The students we engage today - certainly at Kwantlen University College - seem to come from more diverse backgrounds and to possess more diverse skills, interests, and educational goals than when I first began teaching here fourteen years ago. Many of our students and / or their parents are relatively recent arrivals to Canada, and they represent more than seventy distinct cultural-linguistic backgrounds. Many are also the first in their families to experience post-secondary education, so they are clearing new paths without the benefit of emotional support borne of shared familial experience. Increasingly, many of our students are mature learners who have returned to upgrade their skills for the purpose of advancing their careers as well as to enhance their perspectives on culture and society. In order to provide quality learning environments for all of these unique students, we must strive to understand and support their diversity through the learning environment we create at Kwantlen.

Speaking in commitment to the goal of ensuring a dynamic and cooperative learning-centred environment, the Senate of the University of Windsor offers an eloquent public expression that I believe is also reflective of values and general practice at Kwantlen:

In our commitment, we seek to understand, prize and accommodate different learning styles, and we value and respect the integral role of learners in cooperatively defining and designing the learning process. We provide academically challenging and personally enriching experiences by engaging learners in all aspects of the learning experience, thus enabling growth and excellence in all spheres: intellectual, creative, social, ethical, physical, spiritual and emotional. (University of Windsor: Definition of 'Learning-Centred')

Learning-centred institutions focus on enabling student learning and persistence by striving continually to enhance, vary, and expand learning experiences in order to meet

the needs of their diverse students. Such institutions are committed to applying learning-centred practices in all aspects of educational experience, including teaching, research and scholarship, support services, and campus environment.

The formal educational experience - the classroom per se - is but one component of the overall institutional experience of learners. Just as the classroom learning community must be an open, reflective environment in which learners take responsibility for the knowledge they create while being attentive to the knowledge, experience, and expertise of others, so too must other key components of the institutional learning community be an open and supportive environment dedicated to enhancing learning processes: "In real terms, it means that every member of the institution now has a need to learn and develop themselves in reflexive ways that support student learning" (Macpherson, "Faculty Learning Communities", 2006). I believe we all have a responsibility to create the richest learning-centred environment we can, and this necessitates that we act in the interest of student learning - that we "[not] take process for granted, [but] give it equal status with content" (Massy, 2003, p.174). In making a commitment to do so we might also "acknowledge that the wisdom of practice is ... valuable to research ... and arrive at a more inclusive conceptualization of scholarship" (Kreber, 2003, p.40).

A fundamental role for the scholarship of teaching and learning is to provide individuals with formal opportunities, frameworks, and discursive communities through which they study and share experiences arising in their practice. To me, a key determinant distinguishing the activity of teaching from the practice of teaching and learning is the process of studying and disseminating one's research-informed knowledge about his or her practice. In understanding teaching and learning as a practice rather than a mere activity, I draw upon Alasdair MacIntyre's conceptualization of practice. MacIntyre (1997) maintains that a practice is an "arena in which the virtues are exhibited" and through which "goods internal" to a given human "activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve ... standards of excellence ... with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended" (ibid p.124-5). A practice is not any instrumental activity or function in and of itself, but the totality to which such activities or functions may belong: performing a sum is an activity or function, but mathematics is a practice.

Just as important as the conceptualization of a practice as a meta-activity in which human actors contribute to extending the excellence in a given arena, is the necessary accession that a "practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods" (ibid, p.127). To engage in a practice, then, one must acknowledge the "authority of those standards and the inadequacy of [one's] own performance as judged by them" (ibid, p.127). This is not to suggest that the standards of a practice are beyond criticism, for they are developing over time and contexts; however, the very condition for engaging in practice is acceptance that there is an authority situated in the best standards achieved to date and that those who possess the relevant experience are the only ones who are competent to judge (ibid, p.126):

To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the

practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and a fortiori the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn. (ibid p.131)

The achievement of the goods internal to a practice results when one subordinates oneself to the authority of a practice and other practitioners. In so doing, MacIntyre asserts, "we define our relationships to each other, whether we acknowledge it or not, by reference to standards of truthfulness and trust ... [and] to standards of justice and courage" (ibid p.129). In effect, we act virtuously. In order for the virtues of honesty, justice and courage to be realized by individuals engaged in a practice, they must be treated with respect and be judged by "uniform and impersonal standards" (ibid p.129) constitutive of the tradition to which the practice belongs.

With respect to the scholarship of teaching and learning, then, I believe the particular approach one takes to facilitate his or her study is of secondary importance to one's willingness to engage with the practice of teaching and learning as a whole - as both educator and learner. Regardless of whether one pursues specific case study analyses of learning environments, quantitative research on learning styles, qualitative research on multiple intelligences, pedagogical content knowledge development, etc. one is committing to self-reflective scholarly practice within communities of expert practitioners. By making this commitment, and by acknowledging the professional responsibility and authority of expert practitioners to adjudicate one's scholarly efforts, the individual practitioner contributes to scholarly tradition and extends the practice of teaching and learning.

References

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