Self-directed learning, andragogy and the role of alumni as members of professional learning communities in the post-secondary environment

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Abstract

Framed around the context of the historical policies and practices that have brought us to the current state of affairs in the education sector, this paper presents several key themes which focus on the need for schools to provide educated adults who can enter the society and the workplace fully prepared and ready to contribute to the organizations and corporations of a 21st century global economy. This preparedness now includes both work readiness and the development of global citizenry (diversified, culturally sensitive and fully contributing social citizens). The challenge of educating such citizens becomes particularly poignant to post-secondary (PSE) institutions. The paper explores self-directed learning, a stronger focus on andragogy (versus pedagogy) and re-visiting the role of the multidimensional stakeholders who have a vested interest in the success of adult learners. A theory of action is presented as a starting point for educational leaders to leverage collaborative relationship-building, connectivity and linkage to key groups such as alumni and community leaders.

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1. The challenge: adult learners preparing for societal ‘readiness’

Hargreaves & Shirley (2009) provide a poignant review of the educational movements that have impacted didactic reform over the past seventy-five years. The mid-40’s to the mid-70’s were a period of complete teacher autonomy and innovation, but also, inconsistency. The next decade introduced the first concepts of privatization and performance targets. This quickly morphed into another ten year period of massive standardization (in curricula and assessment) and established the fierce competitive arena which still exists today. The new millennium introduced the concept of “New Public Management” (Hargreaves, 2007) and the increased role of government in driving policy and establishing goals. The introduction of the No Child Left Behind Policy Act in 2001, which legislated that every child deserves access to quality teaching & learning, sealed that fate for many American schools (Leithwood et al., 2004; Webber & Scott, 2012).

The shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy has seen many of our educational institutions struggling with revolutionary cultural shifts, loss of direction and vision, re-invention of identity, and the re-defining of leadership. Concurrent with these transformations is an emergence into a ‘new era’ – a period that promises a strategic focus and renewed engagement by a multidimensional group of broad stakeholders (students, staff, faculty, alumni and community members). The exploration of partnerships with external stakeholders became a key strategy in re-defining policy (Elmore, 2010; Labaree, 2011; Pawlowski, 2009; Robinson, 2006). The current environment has now expanded to include the importance of defining an inspiring and inclusive vision, strong public engagement, achievement through investment, corporate educational responsibility, students as partners in change and ‘mindful’ learning which embraces personalized learning and lively learning communities (Christensen et al., 2011; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Harris & Jones, 2010; Holmes, Clement & Albright, 2013; Labaree, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2004; Pawlowski, 2009; Stewart, 2004; Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Willms et al., 2009).

It is, indeed, a brave new world. And one which now seems to be defined by the need to provide educated adults who can enter the workplace fully prepared and ready to contribute to the organizations and corporations of a 21st century global economy (Christensen et al., 2011; Collini, 2012; Ferguson, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Selingo, 2013; Wagner et al., 2006). In the context of this paper, this ‘preparedness to contribute’ includes both work readiness and the development of global citizenry (diversified, culturally sensitive and fully contributing social citizens). This challenge becomes particularly poignant to PSE institutions and in particular, to professional faculties within those institutions (such as science, engineering, medicine, business and law) which focus on disciplines critical to a knowledge-based economy in the midst of recovering from the recent financial tsunami that has shaken our economy-based world to its core. Wagner et al. (2006) point out that the industrial economy of the early twentieth century needed only a small number of college-educated citizens:

It wasn’t until the 1950s that half of our students received a high school diploma; even through the 1960s, a majority of midlevel managers in businesses did not have college degrees. Throughout the twentieth century, students who dropped out of high school were able to seek and hold good stable jobs that paid a middle-class wage. (p. 9)

Wagner et al. (2006) postulate that not only have those secure blue-collar jobs all but disappeared, the basic requirement for a young adult to be considered ‘work ready’ now includes completion of not only secondary school, but also finishing a college diploma (at the very least), and better still, a University undergraduate degree. This seems to suggest that the purpose of elementary and secondary schools has changed from skill and competency training to preparing our youth to become ‘college-ready’ (Leithwood et. al., 2004; Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009). It has also created interesting discussion amongst philosophers and scholars of educational theory about the historical and re-defined purpose of public education (Labaree, 2011; Stewart, 2004) and the role of universities in particular (Collini, 2012). If one was to embrace this new paradigm – that elementary/secondary schools prepare our youth for higher education – then this shifts the onus of preparing young adults for the world (in the broadest sense), to the post-secondaries, colleges and universities. The adaptive challenge of reinventing any type of post-secondary institution now becomes very much about how we teach adults for the purpose of preparing them to ‘take their places in society’ (Independent Schools Queensland, 2012), including initial entry into the workforce (or re-
entry via a new career) and taking on the role of a global citizen.

2. The opportunity: Self-directed learning, andragogy and engagement of vested stakeholders

The concept of ‘flow’ – deep absorption in an activity that is so intrinsically interesting that people see it as worthwhile even if no further goal is reached – provides an understanding of the experiential factors which may be critical in providing an ‘optimal experience’ for human learning (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005; Willms et al., 2009). The concept of learning, for learning’s sake, is further expanded in the findings of Dunleavy et al. (2012) who demonstrate that intellectual engagement is highly linked to flow, and subsequently, results in both higher grades and a richer learning experience.

2.1 Self-directed learning

Expanding on the concept of intellectual engagement, Hargreaves & Shirley (2009, p. 85) posit an interesting, and simple set of questions which help contextualize ‘personalized learning’: Does the learner have a passion? Is the learner good at it, or can (s)he become so? Does it serve a compelling social need? Cross (1981), in her review of adult learning, suggests that self-directed learning (SDL) as a vehicle for personalized learning is a highly effective method, supported by motivational theory which takes into consideration important factors that impact the learning process in adult learners (point in their life cycle, cultural and personal preferences and interest in the subject matter). Self-directed learning is not for everyone. It does seem to better suit a characteristic type (Cross, 1981; Stockdale & Brockett, 2011) with an inherent interest in the flow model of intellectual engagement. The author’s personal assessments indicate that self-directed learning (as a sub-set of personalized learning) can be one solution that supports several key opportunities currently available to post-secondary institutions targeting adult learners. These include needing to: 1) engage in continuous program improvement; 2) consider andragogical methods over pedagogy; 3) meet recent changes in accreditation standards that require increasing experiential learning and assurance of learning; 4) better meet the needs of a demographically and culturally diverse student body; 5) develop expansion initiatives to ensure programs keep current with the shifting needs of employers and 6) engage with community (alumni, donors, community and business leaders).

Table 1
Possible Strategies and Actions for Implementing an SDL Program

| Strategy | Action |
|----------|--------|
| Focus on improving teaching & learning for the purpose of increasing societal readiness. | • Establish a culture where instruction is ‘student-centred’ (Cornelius-White, J.H, 2010) and held as a ‘gold’ standard; SDL is faculty facilitated, for maximum benefit to the student (as the student defines that benefit).<br>• SDL is identified, by the leadership, as a priority solution for preparing eligible adult learners to take their place in society and in the workplace; |
| Develop teachers who support SDL. | • Recruit teachers who value student-centred instruction;<br>• Encourage and support personal performance goals which include participating/leading student-centred experiential projects;<br>• Establish Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Communities of Practice (CoP) specifically for the purpose of discussing SDL: what defines an ‘SDL-eligible’ student? how do SDL students learn? how do we assess and measure learning in an SDL program? what needs to be changed in current teaching methods to accommodate this type of learning?<br>• Explore what is needed for a teacher to guide an SDL learner. (Grow, 1991);<br>• Consider ‘team teaching’ approaches (assign 3-5 core faculty per SDL project) which invite |
diversity in teaching methods and provide a richer student/teacher interface;
- Welcome and engage teacher coaches – trusted ‘experts’ who enrich course content, ensure applicability to real-world situations and have joint responsibility for the accountability of the student; this could be a key role for alumni.
- Encourage on-going personal reflection and the self-testing of assumptions and beliefs that could be blocking movements forward;
- Provide teachers with additional pay, course release or equivalent merit allocation for their participation in SDL courses.

| Build infrastructure & technology needed to support an SDL program |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| • Build trust and ensure that the conditions teachers need to improve SDL student outcomes are in place; |
| • Establish a variety of e-site, virtual and open source learning forums (myVLE, Moodle, Studifi, etc); |
| • Provide on-going training for staff who are uncomfortable with new technologies or the means in which they are used; |
| • Create physical learning & study spaces (other than a traditional classroom) where SDL students can gather, share, discuss and assist one another. |

| Develop a comprehensive SDL program |
|-------------------------------------|
| • Develop intake criteria for SDL students using reliable measures of self-directedness (e.g. PRO-SDLS, Stockdale & Brockett, 2011); |
| • Determine and set ambitious learning goals for SDL students; |
| • Set an andragogical framework for student-driven SDL programs. |
| • Each SDL project must work directly with a business and/or community partner, incorporating out-of-the-classroom engagement and demonstrating applicability to real-world problems; this is another key role for alumni. |
| • Integrate a fully-blended rigorous learning experience which includes attending selected classes, on-line learning, internship, and both a written and oral ‘defense’ component; |
| • Leverage existing non-credit ‘co-curricular’ opportunities to incorporate a credit component (e.g. student club and community projects). |
| • Position SDL opportunities as capstone courses in the last year of a multi-year program. |
| • Encourage graduate and PhD students to work with undergraduate students on SDL courses. |

| Reallocate resources |
|----------------------|
| • Engage and/or hire expert facilitators (alumni) to help. A ‘multi-dimensional’ CoP needs to stay focused on improving teaching and learning (through SDL programs) and not drift into fulfillment of self-interest. (Pawlowski (2009); Pawlowski (2011); Robinson, 2006). |
| • Re-assign internal advancement staff (development/fundraising, marketing/communications, alumni relations, community outreach) to search for ways to support the mechanisms needed for SDL-focused programs. |
| • Consider the use ‘sports coaching’ techniques to motivate and support SDL students. |

| Assess ‘assessment’ and make data-based decisions at specified times along a defined continuum. |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| • Develop a detailed, specific rubric for SDL courses, encompassing the 3 R’s of ‘effective instruction’ (rigor, relevance and respectful relationship) – in both content and instruction. (Wagner et al., 2006). Success in an SDL will be highly dependent on these 3 core competencies working together; |
| • Ensure that there is consistency in the usage of the rubric (meeting assurance of learning and accreditation identified criteria), including timely and accurate collection of data. |
| • Measure progress regularly. |
| • Ensure 1:1 interaction that includes face-to-face (and not just technology); |
Develop testing of reasoning and application of knowledge, focusing on what students should be able to do once they complete an SDL (that they wouldn’t have been able to do through completion of a traditional course).

- Develop collaborative relationships with alumni and key community partners
  - Establish clear lines of authority;
  - Ensure alumni and community partners remain an integral part of any learning networks – develop partnership agreements with external individuals/groups who wish to join the CoP and/or PLC;
  - Establish clear communication channels for teachers to communicate with partners, and partners to communicate with both the SDL students and with each other;
  - Work with the Alumni Office staff to identify, build, strengthen and steward relationships and seek new interest;
  - Work with Development Office and Career Centre staff to identify funding and placement opportunities that provide a defined return on investment for alumni and partners;
  - Recognize, acknowledge and celebrate SDL partners.

2.2. Andragogy versus pedagogy

Merriam (2001) offers a provoking discussion on the emergence of andragogy (the art and science of helping adults learn) as a distinct professional field of practice – its own scientific discipline different from that of pedagogy (the art and science of helping children learn). Wlodkowski’s (2008) groundbreaking work presents four motivational conditions he believes to be critical in teaching (motivating) adults: Creating an atmosphere that promotes a learning community where everyone feels respected and connected (establishing inclusion); helping learners see relevance to their experience (applicability); creating challenging and engaging experiences that value learners’ viewpoints (enhancing meaning); and helping learners recognize that they have been successful in their learning – according to their own standards (confidence and asymmetry). Knowles (1980) presents five assumptions underlying andragogy. These describe the adult learner as being an individual who: Is independent and wanting to direct their own learning; has learning needs related to changing social roles; has an ‘accumulated reservoir of life experiences’; is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge; and is primarily motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors. A key differentiator between the adult classroom and the child’s classroom is the existence of mutuality between teachers and students as ‘joint inquirers’. In other words, adult curriculum should be student-directed as opposed to teacher-directed (Cornelius-White, 2010).

2.3. Engaging invested stakeholders

Alumni, as a sub-group of community, are an exceptionally relevant unit to any educational institution (Dolbert, 2002; Flynn, 2012; Shakil & Faizi, 2012; Singer & Hughey, 2002). Their achievements directly reflect the success of their alma maters and, reciprocally, any enhancements to the quality of education at their schools automatically increases the perceived value of a graduate’s degree. The nature of this connection creates a highly synergistic relationship. Alumni are valued, vital, lifelong stakeholders of an educational community and, should be kept informed and involved in its vision and priorities. They are their school’s best ambassadors. They bring real world experience to the contemporary learner. They are in a unique position to provide advice and counsel. Opportunities can be developed for involvement at all levels: governance, advisory councils, as members of PLCs, special task forces and projects; in the classroom they can provide mentoring, guest lecturing, knowledge exchange and funding for scholarships, program support, research and faculty/staff salary support; in the work place, they can offer practicums, summer and co-op placements.

Ultimately, faculty, staff, students, alumni and community/industry leaders have a vested interest in coming together in a sharing of responsibility for teaching and learning that is school-wide, university-wide and district-
wide. This interest supports the features recommended by key researchers (Birman et al., 2000; Guskey, 2000; Killion, 2002; Pugach & Johnston, 2002; Zepeda, 2012) as being critical to designing a collaborative culture that ‘works’: A reform approach; a significant duration of time for planning; diverse participation; content focus; strategies designed around active learning; and encouraged coherence. Preparing to fully engage multidimensional stakeholders begins by taking a look at the “no shame, no blame, no excuses” approach suggested by Wagner et al. (2006, p. 144). In addition to alumni, social venture businesses, socially responsible corporations, government organizations and community organizations are embedded in societies around the world. They meet specific needs unique to the communities they serve. They embrace local values, pride of place, integrity and commitment to civic duty.

Trusting these groups for the purposes of assisting with curriculum and/or course re-design is not instinctive. The fear of ‘letting outsiders in’ is an on-going challenge for many educational institutions. Moving from co-operation to true collaboration means having to identify reciprocities and overcoming the fear of being critiqued and losing control (Pawlowski, 2007). The importance and necessity of developing strategic, healthy partnerships with those who share the responsibility for educational needs is prevalent in the literature (Jeynes, 2007; Pawlowski, 2009; Pugach & Johnson, 2002; Steinmann et al., 2008; Wagner, et.al., 2006). PSE School highly encourages the role of students in its decision-making (Astin & Astin, 1996; Louis et al., 2010, Pugach & Johnson, 2002). They have also been exceptionally successful at identifying and sustaining key external partnerships. Advancement professionals, already employed in key roles such as alumni relations, community outreach, fundraising and government relations, can be deployed to ensure that external partnerships are fully collaborative alliances which are reciprocal and: i) serve to fulfill the school’s mission of improving teaching, learning and/or student outcomes; ii) clearly identify roles; iii) take into consideration underlying motivators important to both partners and iv) support valid business motives such as corporate citizenship and return on investment (Pawlowski, 2009; Pawlowski, 2011). Incorporating best practices in volunteer management is also key. Educators are encouraged to seek advice and counsel on volunteer management from exemplar local volunteer organizations who have engaged these stakeholders very successfully through their not-for-profit work. The time, effort and resources given to building external relationships can result in invaluable rewards, including: Objective advice; sharing of ‘real-world’ expertise, knowledge and talent; mentorship; advocacy; financial contribution; and the offer of internships and employment opportunities for PSE School graduates (Pawlowski, 2009; Steinmann, et al., 2008). Examples of opportunities that can be offered to alumni, in particular:

- Invite alumni to create their own Community of Practice (CoP) that would bring content experts together with students, key staff and faculty members to explore the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influence work readiness, citizenship and continuous learning, and, how self-directed experiential courses can teach and strengthen these skills.

- Expand PLCs to bring in as much diversity, and gather as many multiple perspectives, as possible. Expansion can include multidisciplinary alumni – those who may have participated in SDL as students, prospective funders, leaders in religion, arts, social sciences, the not-for-profit sector, businesses and professional associations.

- Utilize surveys and focus groups of alumni and employers to determine whether former students who participated in self-directed learning (either at your school, or elsewhere) were better prepared for their post-graduation worlds. Also of interest would be whether participation and scoring on key national and global school rankings improves because students feel they had better hands-on experiences through self-directed learning. This could be tracked through analysis of historical data and conducting targeted sample surveys.

3. Managing the Change Process

The effective use of critical data creates the need for urgency that often begins moving organizations forwards towards meeting many of the difficult challenges identified in this paper. Wagner et. al. (2006, p. 133) suggests that the way to move from one’s current reality to a future desired state involves moving through specific
staged ‘whole-system’ phases of the change process. These phases include preparation (a thorough understanding of the problem the school is trying to solve), envisioning (exploring what success could look like) and enactment (implementing a new practice). These authors recommend the use of critical ‘change levers’ which have been proven to help ensure successful implementation: strategic use of data, accountability by all stakeholders (internal and external) and a keen understanding of relationship building.

Authentic change is not about simply ‘fixing’ an existing product, but taking the nucleus of that product through an innovative revolutionary adaptive change – one which is intentional and planned, involves many organizational components, and eventually creates a better or more effect product (Cawsey & Deszca, 2007; Holmes, Clement & Albright, 2013). Basom and Crandall (1991) pinpoint several barriers that cause resistance to educational change innovation. These include an interrupted sequence of leadership, the tendency to cling to tradition, competing needs and the possible under-representation of faculty in the decision-making process. Tangible change is about taking an old concept and adding a disruptive innovation which could have impactful consequences. Disruptive innovation is a term coined by thought leader Clayton Christensen and which he refers to as ‘the innovator’s dilemma’. According to Christensen (1997) and Christensen, et. al. (2011), a new concept begins to take root at the ‘bottom of a market’ and then consistently and relentlessly moves up the market (because of demand), eventually displacing established systems. In this case, the author is postulating that the ‘disrupter’ is the student – the adult learner seeking new ways of learning through a format that meets both individual learning style and the need to participate in highly experiential ‘real-world’ application that contributes to finding his or her place in society and gaining a competitive advantage in the workplace upon graduation. The disruptee is our current university educational system. This system accepts the concept of self-direction but operates within the current paradigm of putting the teacher ‘in charge’.

In turn, creating the need for urgency begins with an objective, thorough self-analysis. Wagner et. al., (2006) suggest incorporating four key components – context, culture, conditions and competencies (4C model) – to set the arena for change.

Figure 1: A 4C self-analysis system framework for a post-secondary institution. PLC: Professional learning community.
3. Theory of action and the role of leadership

4.1 Theory of action

If we believe that our purpose is to educate our students to take their place as ethical, responsible and contributing global citizens, and that our alumni and valued stakeholders (members of our professional, business and civic community) are treasured, lifelong partners of an educational institution, then we must include them in the shared responsibility and shared accountability of supporting continuous improvement of learning for these students.

4.2 The role of leadership

Beyond establishing trust and realizing the importance of communication skills, instituting a collective culture – at the individual, school and district level – depends strongly on leadership. The literature fully supports the concept that distributed leadership, in particular, makes a difference in improving learning (Alberta Education, 2009; Burns, 2002; Datnow, 2011; Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2007; Leithwood et. al., 2007; Robinson, 2006; Scott & Webber, 2008; Spillane, 2010). There appears to be a multitude of perspectives as to what the actual definition of distributed leadership is, what role each of the players (the principal, the teacher, parents, alumni, community and business leaders) should take, and who is ultimately responsible and accountable for it (Elmore, 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Robinson (2006) suggests the technique of ‘backward mapping’ to ground leadership in the core business of teaching and learning – looking at how a particular teacher makes a difference to the achievement of their students, identifying the conditions that support this outcome and then selecting those that can best assist that teacher to create those conditions. An interesting model on shared leadership is presented by Hoy & Tarter (2008). The authors introduce a normative matrix for ‘participative’ decision-making which looks at the relevance of an individual’s expertise, personal commitment to student outcomes (personal stake) and the trust placed on making a decision for the best interest of the organization (versus personal gain) – to determine the type of decision ‘situation’, the degree of involvement, and the different leadership roles that can be taken on by different individuals within various structures of decision-making groups. The author’s role in this process involves continuing as a member of the School’s advancement and senior leadership team, serving as an active PLC participant and leveraging her position with alumni and community stakeholders.

4. Conclusion

Hargreaves & Shirley (2009) state that the Fourth Way is about purpose and partnership. They postulate that through an inspiring and inclusive vision, strong public engagement, achievement through investment, corporate educational responsibility, students as partners in change and mindful learning which embraces personalized learning and lively learning communities, we can move forward in ‘creating the schools that will undergird and catalyze our best values to regenerate and improve society’.

Zepeda’s (2012) concluding remarks auger well for the desired outcome to create an inclusive, effective and sustainable collaborative culture which will take higher education organizations to the next level: “[Collaboration] is not easy work. Getting to the destination is a never-ending journey …[as]…the work associated with it emphasizes continuous learning”. (p. 286). Many business schools teach the ‘kaizen’ approach to continuous improvement. It is a process identified by improvements that are based on many small changes rather than radical ones, ideas that come from the talents of an existing workforce, and the expectation that all stakeholders are expected to take ownership and continually be seeking ways to improve their own performance (Imai, 1986). Ultimately, success will be determined by the development of key performance indicators and metrics that will definitively quantify improvement in student outcomes as a result of curriculum changes that can be directly related to involvement with alumni and the cultivation of sustainable business and community stakeholder partnerships.
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