

Changing the Way we Think about Learning

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There has been much discussion in recent months about whether college and university graduates are adequately prepared for life and work after their time in post-secondary institutions. What are they learning, how are they learning, why don't we have a clearer sense of what works in teaching and learning? I hear the same questions across Canada, in the US, and around the world. In fact, I began writing this from a window seat above the Rockies en route to Budapest, where I helped a group of professors from former Soviet-block states look more critically at what, how and why their students are (or aren't) learning. And the Friday before that trip I was talking with administrators at Douglas College about the same thing: the importance of an evidence-based approach to learning from student learning. It's a common theme and one that is becoming increasingly important with each passing day . . . especially here in British Columbia.

During the last decade BC has become a hotbed of higher education inquiry, with faculty and administrations at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, Kwantlen University College, Malaspina University College, Thompson Rivers University, Camosun College, College of New Caledonia and Douglas College devoting time, energy and resources to building a solid base of research into student learning. From inquiry projects focusing on active learning to those grappling with the fear of word problems, these "made-in-BC" investigations are informing the work at other institutions from Halifax to Hong Kong, Calgary to Canberra, and serve as an important response to those who want to know what works and what's relevant when it comes to supporting post-secondary education in this province.

Nevertheless, we have to remember that learning from student learning is difficult - examinations and papers provide some information but don't get at the learning process, only the results (and are not always accurate indications of those). Although we live in a time and place when standardized testing and corporate surveys promise numerical scores for everything from scientific literacy to political engagement, too little is known about what one instructor has called "the black box of student learning." If we want to improve instruction in ways that matter, ways that have "legs" beyond a single classroom, we need to gather, examine, critique, and share publicly our evidence of students caught in the act of learning.

We have to commit, as individuals and as institutions, to the ways and means and outcomes of a scholarship of teaching and learning. What makes research of this kind so attractive to faculty and students is that it gets to the heart of the educational enterprise, offering real pathways to real improvement. For administrators and policymakers, this approach to classroom scholarship offers the promise of concrete evidence and on-the-ground opportunities for visible change in teaching and learning.

So why isn't more made of this kind of scholarship, why aren't all faculty engaged in research that addresses questions about student learning? When I first came to Canada I learned that most teaching and learning research occurs "off the side of the desk" . . .

for me this was a new phrase but a familiar circumstance. Despite hundreds of institutes and centres and workshops and conferences across the country, learning and teaching scholarship is not very prominent: it is rarely rewarded at the same level as other kinds of scholarship, infrequently funded at the national level (although a case could be and has been made for change in that regard), and seldom integrated fully into college and university cultures. But there are changes in the wind.

For the last five years I have been working with higher education institutions throughout Canada and the US (as well as a handful in Europe and Australasia), helping small colleges and large universities re-think questions about student learning and re-frame approaches to evidence-gathering. During that time I have learned that surveys and statistics, while certainly useful, rarely paint the whole landscape and never with sufficient color and complexity. To create a more complete picture we need an integrated approach to understanding and improving student learning, one that includes investment in classroom research and the time, resources, training, and coordinated efforts such work requires. But that investment can yield greater knowledge and deeper understanding, and it is one vital piece of the complex portrait that is student learning, one important aspect of the goal that is teaching excellence, and one defining characteristic of an institutional commitment to quality education.

Will research of this type make our students more competitive in the global marketplace and encourage them to solve problems in ways that no one else has thought of before? Perhaps it will, if we can determine better ways to tap into their creativity and ingenuity and originality. Will this kind of scholarship make them more thoughtful, ethical, compassionate citizens? Perhaps, if we can better understand the learning processes that help students recognize, acknowledge, and develop such responsibility. Will it increase student enrollments, improve student retention, and yield higher graduation rates? Not on its own. But as an integral part of an institutional commitment to learning accountability, teaching excellence, and administrative attention to student needs and outcomes . . . it might make all the difference in the world.

For me, it comes down to an articulation of and commitment to what matters most in higher education - helping our students, our children, our neighbors become better learners and more effective individuals. And anything that takes us a step closer to that goal can only be for the common good.

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