

Growing Understanding – Transforming Learning

In Ontario, we have clear outcomes and goals in mind that now include the integration of modern competencies using a variety of learning models. As the Ministry report on Phase One - 21st Century Competencies (Winter, 2016 Edition) reinforced – cognitive competencies such as critical thinking, analysis and problem solving are important but no longer touted as the only prominent indicators for success (p. 10). Interpersonal and intrapersonal growth are now being recognized as just as important as growth in the cognitive domain and the fundamental domain of being able to communicate well. Increasingly, we know it is important for adults to have strong people skills as well as reliable working skills. An important question in teaching this generation of students is how can we nurture and capture the impact of emerging ‘softer skills’ in student learning? As well, in what ways can we integrate social, emotional and academic learning authentically so that learning can be assessed as a part of our evolving understanding of student success?

Building success in school on social, emotional and academic learning is not a new concept. Research on the social nature of learning was well received in the mid 1990’s through the work of Daniel Goleman and his concept of emotional intelligence (1995) and the work of Maurice Elias and colleagues (1997) and their work through the Collaboration for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This important research reinforced the social nature of learning (Elias et al, 1997) and that much learning is relational and impacted by relationships (Zins et al, 2004). A great deal is now known about the impact of a safe, supportive learning environment on student success. As well, the ability of adults in a learning environment to work well together in the service of students also impacts student outcomes.

Present efforts to integrate an inquiry stance in curricular implementation support what research has already illuminated – that self-motivated learning is possible in contexts that provide for choice and control (McCombs, 2004). As McCombs wrote:

When students have choice and are allowed to control major aspects of their learning (such as what topics to pursue, how and when to study, and the outcomes they want to achieve) they are more likely to achieve self-regulation of thinking and learning processes (2004, p. 25).

This is a vital understanding for us as educators as the outcome of student alienation is linked to the failure to provide supports to address the motivational needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness. These needs in turn impact commitment, effort and quality of student work (McCombs, 2004, p. 26).

Presently, we are also making explicit links between developing social and emotional competencies and the concept of well-being. Well-being is now a defined goal of public education in Ontario (Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario, 2014). And yet, there are challenges evident in the implementation of Social, Emotional Learning (SEL) as a construct with sustainability of effort being a realistic concern in environments top-heavy with curricular and academic demands. Teachers continue to feel the pressure of parental and provincial mandates and much of our emphasis in professional learning is based on clearly evident concerns about student achievement in subjects like mathematics. How can we integrate and sustain learning priorities more effectively for adult and student learners is a relevant and timely leadership question. This question also aligns with a *Learning Forward* Standard – that of **Implementation**:

“Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results in educator effectiveness and results in changes for all students applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long term change” (JSD – The Learning Forward Journal, Feb. 2016, p. 11)

In my opinion, it is a recipe for scattered implementation results if concepts about SEL or as used in some settings, SEAL (Social, Emotional and Academic Learning) are seen as “programs to deliver”. What might be helpful is to reframe our understanding of how to integrate SEAL more authentically by using clear language that we can all recognize as vital and which links emotional and cognitive well-being to every subject at every grade level. At the core of this work, I contend that we have the task of ‘*growing understanding*’ for the individual learner and between and among all learners – *understanding of the learning or work at hand and understanding for our work and learning together*.

As well, I suggest these two dimensions of ‘*growing understanding*’ need to be employed hand in hand and underpin how we can better engage all learners. We need to become explicit in engaging young people in making connections to both the cognitive demands within learning

activities as well as the relational aspects which enrich the learning. We need to engage learners in transformative learning that builds a sense of connection and engages our ‘heads, hearts and hands’ (Singleton, 2015). Engaging ‘heads, hearts and hands’ of students also involves addressing issues of diversity, inclusion and equity as well as the impact of culture and context on student learning.

I don’t mean to diminish wonderful programs and projects available to schools which focus on specific skill building such as Tribes training or the use of Restorative approaches. My intention is rather to say that just as inquiry is as much of a philosophical stance to learning as it is a pedagogical choice, ‘growing understanding’ is an approach to building relationships as much as an element of effective teaching and learning.

What does ‘*growing understanding*’ really mean? We have been comfortable with several different streams of meaning for the definition of understanding in our educational contexts for many years. As an on-line version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary reports – the meaning of understanding includes a mental grasp or comprehension of concepts, a friendly harmonious relationship as well as an interpretation of something (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/understanding>). For example, we are comfortable using the word in the following ways – “We have a thorough understanding of a concept” or “We have an understanding as to how to divide our work load” or “We have a relationship based on treating each other with kindness and understanding”. Our grasp of understanding as a term includes our acquisition of knowledge and the building of intellectual and emotional capacity. We also appreciate, perceive and grasp deeper meanings through developed understanding and I would add- the special ingredient of empathy. Understanding is at the core of cognition and metacognition as we think about our own thinking and our own knowing. Metacognition influences how we plan, monitor and evaluate our own progress and influences the development of self-regulation.

The National Research Council issued a very interesting report in 2002 entitled “Learning with Understanding: Seven Principles”. While the report was aimed at improving the study of mathematics and science in high schools, the concepts are broad and I believe apply to every discipline. They also add depth to the concept of ‘*growing understanding*’:

- (1) Learning with understanding is facilitated when new and existing knowledge is structured around the major concepts and principles of a discipline.
- (2) Learners use what they already know to construct new understandings
- (3) Learning is facilitated through the use of metacognitive strategies that identify, monitor and regulate cognitive processes
- (4) Learners have different strategies, approaches, patterns of abilities and learning styles
- (5) Learners' motivation to learn and sense of self affects what is learned, how much is learned, and how much effort will be put into the learning process.
- (6) The practices and activities in which people engage while learning shape what is learned.
- (7) Learning is enhanced through socially supported interactions.

It is clear that if students learn many disconnected pieces of content, we have engaged them in rather poor pedagogy. Students must make sense or 'grow understanding of' the big ideas in each content or disciplinary area to be able to move from subject knowledge to application and refinement. Certainly, if we want students to understand cross-disciplinary connections, this must involve intentional planning on our part as educators. This is why we spend time on activating prior knowledge to connect to new and evolving knowledge. This is why we test our assumptions about what students have understood versus retained. We use concept maps to help students see and find connections and we engage students in academic discourse and conversation to make the abstract more compelling and use realistic models whenever possible.

What affects a student's sense of self is the involvement of emotion – linked to confidence, motivation, curiosity, relationships, safety and trust. Emotion is evoked every time students join other students at a table or task. Students may be anxious, encouraged, humoured or wary of the expectations inherent in working together. Staff experiences collaborating together mirrors student experience. There are conscious and unconscious needs at work in any group situation for student and staff learners. As Daniel Goleman's work highlights, we all want to belong, to have a sense of control and to be engaged in team work that develops shared understanding. Thus, we need to develop '*understanding for*' each other as we learn together.

For those of you who are fans of Twitter, Thom Markham recently wrote a very thought provoking posting for Mindshift (Nov. 16, 2016), where he suggests that empathy holds the key for transforming 21st Century learning. As he writes:

“What if we discovered one unifying factor that brought all of this confusion under one roof and gave us a coherent sense of how to stimulate the intellect, teach children to engage in collaborative problem solving and creative challenge, and foster social-emotional balance and stability – one factor, if we got right, would change the equation for learning in the same way that confirming the existence of a fundamental particle informs a grand theory of the universe? That factor exists: It’s called empathy”

ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2016/11/16/why-empathy-holds-the-key-to-transforming-21st-century-learning/

Markham suggests that empathy provides ‘the emotional sustenance for outstanding human performance’. It includes ‘the feeling of being able to understand and share another’s experience and emotions’. He goes on to write about seven ‘dots’ or concepts which connect the importance of empathy to what I will call ‘*growing understanding for*’ *each other* and *the work or learning we do together*. The ‘dots’ are summarized:

1. Empathy underlies collaboration – as today’s students will work together within workplaces and across cultures
2. Empathy is healthy – as well-being, health, relationships and personal strengths are impacted by our ability to be empathetic
3. Empathy promotes whole-child learning – as empathy activates the heart as well as its 40,000 neurons that travel from the heart to the brain. Gratitude and appreciation, cousins of empathy, show positive effects on brain function
4. Empathy ‘opens’ us up – as being ‘in flow’ states helps us to function at peak levels
5. Empathy powers up inquiry – developing cultures of care makes open-ended questions safe and encourages caring about learning
6. Empathy triggers creativity – as it is often the first step used in design processes in crafting new software – ‘sinking into the mind of another’ so to speak
7. Empathy unites – a key emotion critical for billions of people to live in harmony and co-operation.

Adapted from ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2016/11/16/why-empathy-holds-the-key-to-transforming-21st-century-learning/

As a recent 2012, OECD *Practitioner Guide: The 'Nature of Learning'* contends – emotions are the primary gatekeepers to learning. Emotions and cognition operate together and guide our learning. The report also suggests that the ultimate goal of learning and associated teaching in different subjects is to acquire '*adaptive expertise*' – the ability to apply learned knowledge and skills flexibly and creatively in different situations. Thus, I would suggest we order deeper learning efforts to be involving “hearts first” then heads and hands.

Three broad pedagogical approaches are seen as important to acquiring adaptive expertise: **guided learning** – in which the teacher takes an active role in determining learning goals, measuring outcomes and involved in giving feedback; **action learning** – in which learners take a more hands on role in determining the objectives of learning and where learners also become more involved in self-organization and planning and **experiential learning** – where the learning is not controlled by teachers and goals are not predetermined but determined by context, motivation, discoveries and collaborations with others. Experiential learning is sometimes seen as a by-product of the activities (p. 3). These approaches need balance and intentional integration to be effective. It is clear that these kinds of approaches also impact students ‘hearts, heads and hands’ – a great formula for deeper learning. Emotions influence the development of motivation – both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and provide diagnostic information to teachers in terms of revealing student commitment to learning as well as their concerns.

Recognizing the role that emotions play in learning can help us to '*grow student understanding*' - understanding of the demands of the curriculum while helping students grow understanding for each other as well as the role support plays in the learning process itself. We are co-learners in the process and do this through facilitated classroom discourse and activity, through professional learning and through leadership team work. Specific SEL or SEAL programs can certainly support this quest but I believe it needs to begin with adults modelling how we grow understanding of our own work while being empathetic and caring about each other as professionals and colleagues at the same time. Our students need to see us as learners as much as teachers. We need to be explicit in modelling how we come to understand concepts and to co-

construct meaning with each other and with our students. The value of collaborative inquiry in Ontario as a learning vehicle brings this point home. Deeper forms of co-learning involve our emotions, our reflections, our experiences and shine a light on the value of collaborative learning efforts (Sharratt & Planche, 2016).

Jack Mezirow would call our challenge a quest for *transformative learning* (1997, p. 5) – where we consider a frame of learning which encompasses cognitive, conative and emotional components. In transformative learning, we seek to become aware and reflective of our own assumptions as well as that of others. Discourse is necessary to validate what and how one understands or arrives at best judgments. Becoming critically reflective is fundamental to effective collaborative problem posing and solving (p. 9). Learning contracts, group projects, role play, case studies and simulations are learning designs that are associated with education that is considered transformative (p.10). Learning is a social process and discourse becomes central to our ability to make meaning of our work and learning (p 10).

I am hopeful there are many who see the value in drilling learning down to core concepts and engaging together and with our students in learning more about how to *grow understanding or comprehension capacities* while we *grow our understanding and our ability to empathetic for and supportive of each other's efforts*. If we can frame our public education goals in ways that are truly recognizable and relatable to all stakeholders, we can find authentic ways to integrate worthy educational goals as a part of moving towards transformative learning – learning which helps us to develop empathetic problem solvers as well as autonomous thinkers as well as transformative learning which develops staff professional capacity as a supportive members of vibrant professional communities of learning.

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