Student Responsibility and Self-Directed Learning: An Interview with Christine McPhail

By D. Patrick Saxon

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D. Patrick Saxon (D.P.S.): The field is getting a lot of attention these days from policy makers and philanthropic organizations who want to adapt and change the way developmental education is delivered, and many seem to be looking for a "silver bullet" or single solution. At the heart of this is accelerating the delivery of developmental education (Edgecombe, 2011). Perhaps one of the more relevant messages that professionals can send to those interested in changing developmental education practice is: Do not view student instruction and support as "one size fits all." Do you agree?

Christine McPhail (C.M.): I believe that many community college educators need to drastically change their attitudes about developmental education. Some critics of developmental education seem to be advocating a "one-size-fits all" approach to offering developmental education in community colleges without taking into consideration the full scope of developmental education. Traditionally, developmental education has included such activities as remedial/developmental courses, tutoring, learning laboratories, and various forms of individualized instruction (Ignash, 1997). This variety in programming highlights one of the most essential questions in the developmental education debate: Can one standard apply to all community colleges? Rather than focusing on any one standard, I prefer to focus on a very simple concept: scalability, capacity, and culture. For example, colleges typically size something up or down to make it fit the populations served. Any level of developmental education offered at the college must be weighed against the level of success experienced by the students. Thus, it is not all about the access and delivery; it is about the outcomes, too. If the majority of the first-time college students need remedial courses and the college only offers a miniscule slate of remedial courses, the college has the beginning of a potential disaster.

There is another aspect of scalability that must be included in the developmental equation narrative: data-informed decision-making and the culture of the organization. If a college doesn't know what its needs are, then that college will not know what its capacity is. If you know what your capacity is, and it is inconsistent with your need and the culture of the organization , then you either have over-kill or under-kill. Do colleges really assess the needs of students and evaluate their resources and organizational culture to make sure that they are equitable and balanced and not just based on some arbitrarily, one-size-fits-all mentality? Is there evidence to prove that there is a need for offered programs and services? How does the college measure its capacity to deal with the needs of students and provide services to address those needs?

Consider this: Do remedial instructors need professional development? What kind of professional development do they need? What kind of professional development is available? What kind of professional development has the college adopted into the strategic plan for the college? There is another question that needs to be asked about classroom practices: Is there any difference between pedagogical practices and what students actually need in remedial courses? We cannot make decisions in a vacuum. The essential message to send to the critics is that what keeps community colleges unique is that their students are diverse and need different classroom experiences. When we put a brighter light on the "students" inside our classroom, we will recognize that.

D.P.S.: As part of the process of defining teacher/student relationships and setting classroom expectations, you have expressed the need for teachers to discuss their "first impressions" about students

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with them. Why is this important and how can these types of conversations improve the student/teacher relationship?

C.M.: It has been said that we do not get a second chance to make first impressions, a statement with which I cannot fully agree. In building teacher/student relationships in a college setting, there are many opportunities to make an "evolved impression," one that gets stronger with each class session and with each interaction between the teacher and the student. How often do we take the time to examine what is going on in our lives that shapes our impressions of students? How often do we stop to think about what is going on in our students' lives that may be impacting the image they present to us? Teachers can make a huge impact on our relationships with students, the learning environment, and, I believe, student retention with simple awareness of what is happening to our students.

Earlier, I mentioned the term "evolved impressions," and I want to pursue that a little further. For example, the first contact with a student may be on the phone, via e-mail, or during the first class session. I believe that it is the teacher's responsibility to make that contact count! The teacher has the opportunity to demonstrate what is important about his or her class and how the class can add value to the student's program of study and his or her education in general. I strongly believe that every teacher should have an "elevator speech" about his or her class. The goal is to foster a first experience that will "connect" the student to you and the class. Try to give students the impression that their presence counts. Now, let's evolve to the first class session. The teacher is in control of the first session. The teacher must create an environment that expresses who he or she is as a teacher and explain what matters in the class. It is equally important to discover what is important to the students. For example, I like for students to leave my first class session with a feeling that they are valued and welcomed, an understanding that the class will add value to their educational pursuits, clear expectations and knowledge of outcomes for the class, and the knowledge that for the remainder of this course, I am a "champion" for their individual success.

D.P.S.: You also urged teachers to demand excellence and respect from the student. As they are the primary stakeholders in their learning, this is indeed in their best interests. What are some of the ways excellence and respect may be promoted by teachers in the classroom?

C.M.: The first thing that comes to mind is to make your expectations clear to all the students early. Excellence is the expectation. I am talking about the very first session. Then create an environment to help them meet those expectations. From my perspective, this may mean working with them on an individual basis and then in groups to get certain concepts communicated. I am a huge fan of offering frequent feedback to students, and I think it is essential to make comments when grading student papers or projects. Students need to hear what the instructor thinks about that paper. For example, if the student's paper is done poorly, the instructor must explain exactly what is done poorly and also describe how it could have been done better. On the other hand, when the student's paper or project is done well, it is important to tell the student something like, "This is brilliant—keep it up!" Always grade consistently and fairly. If the statement was wrong for John, when the teacher reads the same misstatement on Jamal's paper, it should be wrong there, too. Personally, I like to meet with the student to discuss the problem face-to-face. No student should have to guess how he or she is doing in a class. Keep students informed about their progress. If a student is not performing, send him or her a text or e-mail alert that says something like, "You really need to see me about this paper. I can help." Let the students know that you expect them to succeed.

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One of the most engaging and challenging aspects of teaching is "staying in the game." Staying fully charged every day is not easy. But if we don't, students will know and their interest may fade, too. Teachers cannot fall asleep at the wheel. I believe that each class session is an opportunity to connect with the students in order to facilitate the best possible learning experience for the learners in the room. We need to meet and exceed their expectations. After all, it is the present experience (this moment—not the first one) that will make them want to come back to the next session, and then the next.

D.P.S.: Knowles (1975) describes an imperative in which adult learners are increasingly self-directed and ultimately take responsibility for their own learning. At your recent address delivered to the membership of the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE), your message aligned with Knowles' assumptions, focusing on encouraging students to work faster and become a partner in their own learning. How can teachers facilitate the development of these characteristics in students?

C.M.: The major responsibility for facilitating learning is for the teacher to create a learning environment in which students may develop to their fullest potential to perform the work required for their class. Note that I did not say that all students had to develop the same way. As a teacher, I am compelled to observe and assess the individual student to determine how that student learns what I am trying to teach. I must attempt to find ways to address the needs of the individual student. I will be one of the first to admit that this is not an easy task. However, I am ultimately responsible for facilitating the academic success and achievement of my students. For example, drawing upon Knowles' work, I believe it is essential to assess the learner's prior knowledge of the subject matter for my class. I will also ask the students about how they learn. It is important for the teacher to know what works and what does not work for the student.

I take the knowledge and prior experience of the students into account in my teaching methods. This approach allows me to acknowledge the strengths and interests of the learners while accommodating for their weaknesses as I work with them to construct new understanding of the topics in class. This approach also requires one to make careful analysis of what students should learn and be able to do—yes, learning outcomes. I want my students to have the knowledge and aptitude to apply and transfer their understanding in settings beyond my classroom. Teachers are powerful tools in influencing student success—we must be "champions" for students to learn. I see the classroom as a place to build a culture of success. Performance in a particular class begins with me—the teacher. I have to ask myself, "Does my classroom inspire students to learn?" As a classroom teacher, I am constantly searching for ways to place the spotlight on student success.

D.P.S.: Just as vision and mission statements guide institutional priorities, you emphasized the need for teachers to develop a personal philosophy on their beliefs about their practice. Why is this important? What sorts of questions and areas of inquiry may be helpful in this self-development process?

C.M.: The current debate about the effectiveness of developmental education typically focuses on the measurable impact of remedial courses. What if this focus was expanded to include an examination of related teaching philosophies? Since teaching philosophies generally include a description of applied teaching strategies and methods, looking at the philosophy of a teacher could reveal information about what is going on inside the classroom. It is increasingly clear to me that, if significant change is to take place in the results of remedial education, we have to change classroom practices to reach

the students who need the help the most. So why a teaching philosophy? I fundamentally believe that all educators have personal philosophies about teaching and learning, whether they openly talk about them or not. The process of identifying a personal philosophy of teaching and continuously assessing, articulating, and testing that philosophy against the way one teaches can lead to remarkable changes in classroom practices and, in the long run, facilitate growth as a teacher.

I do not always get agreement when I say that teachers need a teaching philosophy, but I keep talking about it anyway because it is time to put a brighter spotlight on teaching and attempt to change the narrative. Building upon the notion that each teacher should have his or her own personal philosophy of teaching, the narrative will include statements about "why I teach the way that I teach." It will include a brief reflective statement about personal teaching goals and a description of how one teaches. Goodyear and Allchin (1998) stated that a clear teaching philosophy provides stability, continuity, and long-term guidance. A teaching philosophy provides a blueprint for the learning environment in the classroom. It provides a way for the teacher to personally "own" that learning environment. As the instructor, I make the choices as to the best teaching methods to get my content across to my students.

D.P.S.: In the spirit of developing commonly accepted classroom behaviors and shared responsibility, you advocate the need for teachers to develop rules of engagement in the classroom. Please discuss the importance of and suggest a process for engaging in this activity.

C.M.: I believe that educators can do a lot more to help students take ownership of their personal learning. The rules of engagement empower students to collaborate with the instructor to plan and assess their learning. As an instructor, it is my responsibility to provide ways for the students to become active partners in such activities as identifying their preferred methods of learning, articulating their educational goals, and discovering resources that they may need to be successful in the class. Teachers can also engage students in dialogue about different strategies for responding to their learning needs.

O'Banion (1997) championed the notion that it is important to engage learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices. A student at Los Angeles Trade Technical College recently affirmed to me that teachers need to involve learners in the diagnosis of their own learning needs. The rules of engagement would require teachers and students to collaborate with each other about how learning takes place in the classroom. According to this student, most of his instructors seem to assume that students know how they assess what is being learned in the class. However, in reality, I am quite aware that this is not always the case. Engaging learners in the process will assist in developing teaching strategies that enable learning to take place. Ultimately, the parameters for building a learning environment must reflect an honest accounting of what the teachers and students bring into the classroom and how they use these resources to productively and collaboratively engage in the teaching and learning process.

D.P.S.: The Delta Cost Project (Desrochers & Wellman, 2011) reported that state and local appropriations for higher education are at a 10-year low as the economy has taken its toll on municipalities. In these challenging times of higher education budget cuts and resulting resource shortfalls, you encourage professionals to "build on what is already there." Please describe this notion further and offer examples of resources that we can more effectively leverage for increased effectiveness.

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C.M.: It is increasingly clear that community colleges have to work more effectively within the constraints of existing resources to facilitate major changes in programs and services. This need not be a "curse" or the end of the road if educators consider—more deeply—the question of reallocating existing resources carefully prior to launching solutions and strategies for new programs. In general, there never seems to be "enough" money for new and innovative programs. However, an in-depth assessment should be made of all the resources that are already available in a college's infrastructure. That assessment usually includes the ways in which available resources are allocated and can assist, or their absence hinder, the mission of the college.

There are a number of specific areas administrators will want to consider as they gather information about the institution. An assessment and careful understanding of the institution will include basic information about student demographics and an inventory of the college's human resources, programs, and services. It will also include an analysis of the curriculum to identify whether there are existing gaps in facilities, educational materials, and teaching and learning competencies needed as well as a study of internal and external communications in order to provide an analysis of available means of communications and their effectiveness. This communication review may identify what messages are communicated to constituent groups, such as underserved populations for example.

In addition to the obvious importance of resources, people, and money, community college leaders must consider what else the college has to offer in terms of infrastructure and social capital. In many community colleges, the culture of the institution may pose one of the biggest challenges to implementing reallocation of resources and changes in policies and practices, especially with respect to changes in curriculum and instructional practices. There may also be considerable disagreement about who is responsible for implementing change. In some instances the culture of the college may require faculty to initiate change. In other cases, it is top-down. Whatever the driver of change, community colleges need to more aggressively assess existing resources prior to launching new projects and programs. Once an assessment has been made of available resources, it may be found that there are sufficient resources to head in new directions with programs and services.

D.P.S.: Practitioners work in a "helping" profession that has the potential to change lives. To measure results, we must collect data that in your words "has a face on it." What is this and why is it important? How can educators make teaching and research efforts more personal?

C.M.: The short response is that education professionals need to know and be able to articulate what standards and indicators we want our students to learn. The right data in the hands of instructors can be a powerful tool to improve outcomes for all students. The use of data can be particularly helpful when institutions are struggling to raise awareness of completion rates and success for all students, especially those who are disproportionately impacted. For example, when institutions disaggregate data by factors such as race and ethnicity, income levels, age, and gender, it is possible to learn how to better serve students who are lagging behind other learners. In other words, use data to design policies and practices to improve the quality of instruction. Teachers use data all the time. We routinely and consistently assess the effectiveness of curriculum and teaching using classroom assessments (quizzes, tests, papers, projects) to identify areas of strengths and need. From the college's perspective, the use of disaggregated data is essential to document and observe patterns and gaps in student learning and performance of individual students and groups of students.

I am convinced that all stakeholders can use data to make their work more meaningful. For example, inside the classroom lies the opportunity to observe patterns and gaps in student learning and the performance of individuals and groups of students. These data are necessary to examine and challenge assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs about students and their learning capabilities.

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And when we get to know our students—know something about them—they stop being numbers and start to be real people with faces. When things get this personal, we can use the information about the people we serve to change the way we respond to them. We can and must use the data about students to change the way we teach, the way students learn, and our institutional practices and policies.

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