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"Best Practices" in Teaching and Learning: Challenging Current Paradigms and Redefining their Role in Education

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Abstract

With pervasive and persistent changes affecting education, educators are called to challenge current paradigms about best practices in instructional design and delivery and redefine how they are integrated into the curriculum. The purpose of this article is to introduce a model designed to support the new paradigm for best practices in education. The model recognizes the transformational nature of teaching and learning, and equips educators with the tools to proactively and continuously adapt to change. Implications for practice include developing curriculum that meets learner orientations and responds to labour market demands for program currency and graduate preparedness.

The term "best practices" has become standard nomenclature pervading the teaching and learning discipline. As educators, we refer to best practices as our toolkit of classroom activities, strategies, and techniques developed over years of honing our craft and sharing our expertise with colleagues. Armed with exemplary teaching practices, we strive to motivate learners and enhance the enjoyment and effectiveness of learning (PE Central, 2002). Dialoguing about best practices to discern the most effective teaching tools is a central theme at professional development conferences and around the proverbial water cooler in the workplace. We engage in the continuous exploration for and experimentation with the practices that define excellence in our profession.

The Challenge

Inherent in the term "best practices" is the assumption that once learning activities are earmarked as outstanding teaching tools, based on either personal experiences or that of colleagues, they earn the right to be embedded in our repertoire of teaching techniques. Routinely, they are resurrected into our lesson plans with the expectation that their encore appearance will once again enrich and engage our learners. The question that is ignited is whether successive use of a standard set of teaching practices continues to be the most valid means by which learning objectives are achieved? Specifically, does the recurrent use of practices retain its effectiveness in connecting learners with the learning outcomes?

The academic landscape is shroud in change, with increasingly more faculty accountability for addressing the diverse backgrounds and needs of learners; complying with government-mandated curriculum revisions; and responding to pressures and opportunities from external stakeholders for program currency and graduate preparedness for the labour market. As these pervasive and persistent changes descend on education, reliance on standard classroom practices as the magic ingredients for achieving excellence in teaching and learning is questionable. Standard curriculum practices may not be adept at meeting the demands of a fluid learning environment. According to DiBella (2001), "a practice that is valued in one setting will be valued differently in another setting where there are different constraints, limitations, and circumstances" (p. 123). DiBella (2001) advises that "how we learn and what we learn must shift as the context for learning changes" (p. 126). Draves (1997) concurs and adds that there are no best teaching techniques, only variety and experimentation as the primary tools of one's trade.

With the magnitude of change permeating the learning environment, educators are called to challenge current paradigms about best practices. The conceptual framework for best practices should stretch beyond the collection of teaching activities and embrace a macro perspective. Specifically, the new paradigm should prioritize strategies that enable educators to identify and respond to the myriad of changes that affect learning. Educators are not being asked to dismiss their portfolio of classroom activities, but to focus on factors that shape the learning climate so that even more informed decisions can be made regarding which teaching interventions best suit the learning.

New Paradigm for Best Practices

This article introduces a model designed to support the new paradigm for best practices in education. It acknowledges the transformational nature of teaching and learning, and equips educators with the tools to proactively and continuously adapt to change. Housed within this model are the following components: conducting needs analysis, encompassing academic-business partnerships and learner profiles; developing an effective feedback system; and engaging in personal reflection. Incorporating these domains into practice is intended to guide educators through the process of identifying and remaining anchored to the changing learning environment.

Figure 1:   Model for "Best Practices" in Teaching and Learning
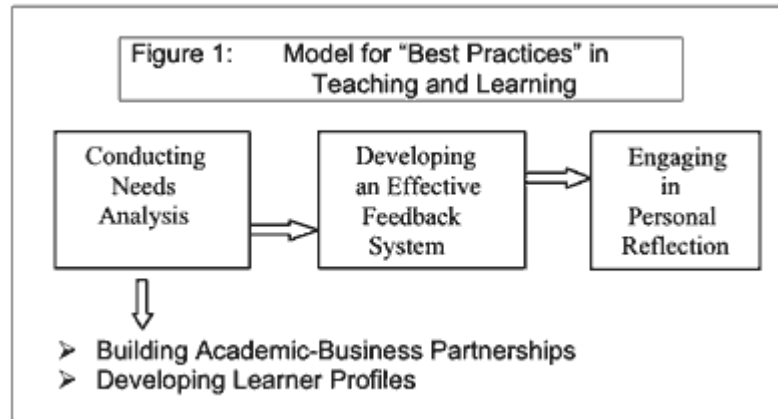
Building Academic-Business Partnerships

The cornerstone of responding to change is rooted in needs analysis, an investigative procedure that originated in the training and development field of Human Resources. In business, training practitioners skilfully use needs analysis procedures, such as focus groups, surveys, interviews, observation, and trend analyses, to ascertain the gap between employees' current level of performance and the performance standards expected by management. Understanding the full extent of the gap, sets the stage for selecting and initiating interventions to remedy the situation (Leigh, Watkins, Platt, & Kaufman, 2000).

Needs analysis, proposed in this article, is aimed at encouraging educators to initiate and sustain partnerships with external stakeholders in order to stay attuned to business. An education-based needs analysis parallels the Human Resources model, but involves assessing the current competency profile of learners and uncovering the performance standards expected by the business community. The core mission is to collect data about the business landscape and the corresponding employability skills in order to sustain currency and to tailor instructional design to meet business expectations. Decisions concerning learning outcomes, content coverage, instructional delivery, and evaluation criteria are determined and measured against this benchmark data to develop curriculum that is consistent with business and fosters competency development for graduate employment.

At a time when colleges compete to brand their identity and their landmark contributions to post-secondary education, educators who assertively pursue academic-business partnerships gain the competitive advantage. By valuing and promoting partnerships, both parties channel their resources to advance program delivery and graduate readiness for the labour market. Achieved is a reputation for excellence and leadership in preparing the next generation of community leaders.

Developing Learner Profiles

Delivering high calibre courses and preparing employable graduates also necessitates being attuned to the learners, specifically to their learning orientations. Learner profiling, a fact-finding process resulting in a biographical account of one's learners, contributes to attaining these insights. Chronicled are their needs, expectations, and preferences for a meaningful experience; their knowledge, experiences, values, and assumptions; their expectations of the educator; and that which they intend to contribute to the learning. Although there is no prescribed formula for generating this profile, a mix of formalized assessment tools, such as Kolb's Learning Style Inventory, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and True Colours; coupled with needs analysis procedures such as interviews, surveys, and icebreaker activities, are effective tools suggested as a preliminary step (Leigh et. al., 2000).

The signature importance of profiling is that it frames the learning context and serves as the backdrop against which decisions are made regarding curriculum content and delivery. The profile is fundamental to ascertaining which activities, strategies, and techniques warrant integration into the curriculum in order to excite and engage learners and, ultimately, achieve the learning outcomes. In the learner-centered approach to teaching proposed by Weimer (2002), establishing a strong learning community is predicated on how well diversity is reflected and honoured. If educators neglect to research their learners' backgrounds, Brookfield (1995) forecasts that "you risk spending a lot of time preparing lectures that are delivered at a wholly inappropriate level or which fail to show any connections between your subject and your students' concerns" (p. 200).

With each profile, a distinct composite of learners' similarities and differences emerges. Consequently, learning interventions should be consistent with the profile, reinforcing the importance of designing activities exclusively to address the uniqueness of learners and not static, fixed entities parachuted into the curriculum. It is only from the position of knowing one's learners that educators can design interventions that meet learners' needs and expectations resulting, according to Knowles (1980), in a climate that is conducive to learning.

Developing an Effective Feedback System

The second component built into the best practices model is a feedback system to assess the effectiveness of teaching interventions. Experimenting with a host of methods invites inquiry regarding how to gauge the merit of these approaches. According to Brookfield (1995), "a constant feature of your teaching should be a concerted effort to understand how students are experiencing learning" (p.200). Recommended, however, is a process that is markedly different from end of term faculty evaluations. With performance evaluations administered at the conclusion of courses, few opportunities prevail to make changes for the benefit of the learners that provided the feedback. Any modifications are usually

intended to enhance future delivery of courses, making it questionable if these changes meet the needs of subsequent groups of learners.

Therefore, the feedback system should not be a conclusionary course assessment, but a continuous process woven into the teaching-learning relationship. Magnifying its significance as a vehicle for course enhancement and faculty development, requires feedback systems to retain a prominent and constant role in the curriculum. For example, consider how debriefing sessions can be built into all class activities to measure not only content comprehension and application, but to explore the salience of the activities from the learners' perspectives. As well, prior to concluding each day's lesson, time should be scheduled for a final "check in" noting the learners' overall perceptions, insights, and observations.

Dialoguing about the process heightens educators' awareness of their success in creating a learning community and positions them appropriately to make changes. It helps open communication channels so that any emerging issues have a forum within which to be addressed. Regularly voicing concerns and working toward minimizing barriers decrease the probability of problems festering and eventually eroding satisfaction and performance (Rekar Munro & Laiken, 2004). Early detection of and response to the need for change are more manageable than attempting to navigate the change process once learners become despondent. Making changes based on learner input launches a cyclical feedback process whereby educators develop and sustain a connection with learners disclosing that which is, and isn't, contributing to learning.

In reality, educators are prone to concentrate on the dissemination of course content without equal consideration of how the process affects learners and subsequently, shapes the learning environment. Justification for this imbalance ranges from classroom time constraints to the conviction that process-related issues belong within the educator's jurisdiction and are not suitable for in-class dialogue. When educators detect that learners are disengaged, rarely do they dialogue with them about the source of the disconnect. By avoiding such discussions, educators run the risk of estranging learners from the teaching-learning relationship to the point where the learning may derail. Hence, the academic goal of advancing subject knowledge and application may be thwarted when process-related issues fail to be voiced and lead to learner apathy and indifference. As a preventative measure, regular "process checks" encourage the free exchange of insights, comments, and recommendations for change (Rekar Munro & Laiken, 2004).

Engaging in Personal Reflection

Personal reflection, the final ingredient in the best practices framework, invites educators to examine their teaching philosophy, assumptions, and practices, and to assess critically the value-added

contribution of their teaching. Palmer (1998) raises the question, "Who is the self that teaches?" and declares that knowing oneself is as integral to teaching as knowing one's learners and the content being taught. According to Hunt (1992), "to begin with ourselves is to stop and reflect, to enter into our inner life, to connect with what we feel and believe, and to set an inner foundation for continuing our life's journey" (p. 3).

Assuming educators promise more than a cursory review of who they are and what they do as professionals, personal reflection has the potential to awaken refreshingly new insights regarding one's philosophy and approach to education. Willingness to confront the efficacy of one's paradigms of teaching and learning, and the role that educators play within this framework, is the essence of professional excellence. When educators become less protective of their personal constructs and remain curious about and receptive to change, they escape the treadmill of standard practices and mindsets that keep them entrenched in the status quo and unlock their vast potential to be exploratory. Quinn (1996) advocates that, in order to achieve excellence, educators must commit to reinventing themselves, that is breaking from the status quo and engaging in ongoing experimentation, reflection, and evaluation.

As reflective practitioners, educators embark on a holistic journey whereby they explore the depth and breadth of their experiences spanning the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual domains. When educators progress beyond intellectualizing their vocation, which according to Palmer (1998) "distances self from the world and deforms our relationships with our subjects, our students, and ourselves" (p. 27), substantial advances are made in understanding and appreciating that which uniquely defines teaching and learning. Educators become cognizant of the interconnection between intellect, emotion, and spirit, and how these factors are "interwoven in the human self and in education at its best" (Palmer, 1998, p. 4).

Addressing these concerns is not intended to be an isolating experience. Personal reflection gains momentum and takes on a new dimension in conjunction with collaborative inquiry. Dialoguing with colleagues can be enlightening and revitalizing as it provides a forum for disclosing insights and experiences, and exchanging ideas. From the seasoned educators and those who are new to the profession, one is able to learn vicariously from their personal journeys. As observed by Hunt (1992), "entering into the image of another is often a valuable way to relinquish an old world view and take a fresh look at your life and work" (p. 64). In doing so, educators recognize the universality of their experiences which, in turn, mobilizes them to collectively conceptualize how to foster change in their approaches to teaching and learning. As noted by Anderson (2000), "Teachers as practitioners act as researchers as they build theory concerning the specifics of their circumstances through reflection, inquiry, and action." (p. 82). Emerging is a community of practice that values and

seeks excellence in teaching. Hence, personal reflection coupled with collaborative inquiry is a powerful force for changing the complexion of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Given the flurry of change influencing academia, it is imperative that educators develop ways to optimize design and delivery of courses to meet learner orientations and fulfil competency requirements. Best practices, in their traditional form, no longer afford the edge in achieving these outcomes, requiring educators to craft new approaches to developing and sustaining excellence in teaching. The model presented in this article provides a framework for responding to change through needs analysis, a feedback system, and personal reflection. Promoted, is the experimentation, evaluation, and reflection that are integral to creating meaningful learning experiences in the midst of constant change. Coupled with flexibility, open-mindedness, and curiosity, educators navigate the complexities of the changing academic landscape and chart new directions in instructional design and delivery.

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