Preparing Graduates for Future Knowledge Practices

I was in several meetings last month with groups of higher education Vice-Presidents with oversight for teaching and learning, where the topics of discussion included the increasingly dynamic knowledge environment which our graduates are facing. The capsule summary of the workplace knowledge dynamics from one of these meetings was daunting: *"We expect most of our graduates will enter work contexts where they will soon face the following new challenges:*

- *working with knowledge that doesn't yet exist…*

- *using practices that don't yet exist…*

- *in jobs that don't yet exist."*

All these executives were from institutions focused on Practice-Based Education and they already have full agendas in advancing student preparation for current professional and vocational practice (both in subject-specific outcomes and in more generic graduate attributes). But these groups rose to the challenge of thinking forward: how can we better prepare graduates to engage with future learning and knowledge practices?

Amongst the discussion of curricular changes, skill development and supportive mindsets, a common central theme began to emerge: let's treat our teaching and learning environments as model workplaces, full of experiential learning opportunities for reflective practice on changing knowledge work, practices and roles.

An Example: Learning Trajectories for Entry-Level Nurses

Here's one scenario we came up with for what such a teaching and learning environment might look like, using a Nursing program as an illustration. We know our entering Nursing students, whether from secondary schools or transfer programs, bring with them more than the explicit knowledge they have developed from past experiences – they also bring a set of skills and expectations for learning. Each of our practice-based educational programs – including the Liberal Arts (!) – has to build on those skills and expectations to get them ready for the workplace (and for their other roles as community members and global citizens).

Nursing programs are a particularly lucid illustration, in part because there are explicit statements for the professional learning capabilities expected of entry-level graduates and for the environments in which they begin their careers as nurses. For example, *"Entry-level registered nurses will…*

- *Realize the importance of identifying what they know and do not know, what their learning gaps are, and know how and where to access available resources…*

- *Demonstrate critical inquiry in relation to new knowledge and technologies that change, enhance, or support nursing practice…*

- *Seek out and critique nursing and health-related research reports to inform practice….*

- *Assess personal practice to identify learning needs…develop a learning plan using a variety of sources and… evaluate the effectiveness of a personal learning plan.*

In each successive year of their program, we need to challenge and support our students in adapting their learning practices to be closer to expectations for professional Nursing workplaces. We haven't explicitly quantified that across the program – "we've got four years for their learning practices to move from point A to point B, so let's work on 25% of that distance each year" – but implicitly we have some such trajectory in mind.

Learning Trajectories as an Example of Changes in Workplace Practice

In our new scenario, such changes in our learning and teaching "workplaces" also become opportunities to develop

students' capability as knowledgeable 'critical friends' of innovations in work roles, processes and expectations That would include introducing students to a conceptual framework for understanding Workplace Innovation, encouraging them to reflect on their own skills and mindsets relative to such changes and helping them to describe those experiences in ways that would make sense to an employer as demonstrations of deliberate practice (inspired in part by recent research on *Educating the Deliberate Professional: Preparing for Future Practice*).

In addition to this macro level of preparing for future knowledge practices at the program level, we can also design learning activities at a more micro level in individual courses. Here's a simple illustration of making teachable moments out of changes in learning practices. Most of our instructors can easily cite examples when they introduced a new learning practice only to have students respond with a mix of skepticism and apprehension. The most memorable instance for me was introducing group work in 2nd year and then pushing further by requiring peer review of assignments in 3rd year. Inevitably, there would be lots of body language to indicate opposition, either to the specifics of the change or the overall notion of changing rules just when the students felt they had adjusted to the previous practices.

What if, instead of glossing over students' concerns, we treated them as instances of natural reactions to workplace innovations. We could ask students to flag their memory of their reaction, so that when the tables are turned and they are the ones introducing change to a workplace group they can appreciate where the negative body language is coming from. We could refer them to the 4th of Scott Berkun's Ten Myths of Innovation – the myth that *People Love New Ideas* – and to his precept that *"Ideas are rarely rejected on their merits; they're rejected because of how they make people feel"*. Can we ask our students to later reflect with us on how we as instructors could have introduced the ideas for new practices more effectively, or been more convincing on how the risks of the innovation would be managed and mitigated to protect them?

***Quality practice environments* for Teaching and Learning**
Reframing the learning environment and the progressive trajectory of learning practices could thus provide our graduates with opportunities to develop capability in both professional learning <u>and</u> in dealing with innovation in workplace practices. The latter capability is also a stated professional expectation for our entry-level Nursing grads:

- *Collaborates with the health care team to respond to changes in the health care system by:*

- *Recognizing and analysing changes that affect practice and client care;*

- *Developing strategies to manage changes affecting practice and client care;*

- *Implementing changes when appropriate; and*

- *Evaluating effectiveness of strategies implemented to change nursing practice*

And that same specification document for professional practice also describes the requirements for a *Quality Practice Environment* for those entry-level Nurses, which provides them with the support they need in their evaluation as new professionals. What if we measured our Teaching and Learning Environment by those expectations, especially where they require effective mentorship on changes in practice?

Ultimately, we'll have to tackle the need for faculty members – and our other educators – to be effective models as 'critical friends' of changes in workplace practices. More on that challenge in a follow-up post. (Hint: there's an intriguing example here of faculty modelling capability development by "eating our own dogfood", through serving as their own test audience on a new outcomes rubric:)).

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