

# Lifelong Learning

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From time to time, I will post comments and articles dealing with lifelong learning including postsecondary education. Here are my thoughts regarding recent conversations about post-secondary reform in Ontario:

## ***The Elusive Reality of Lifelong Learning***

Wish I had a dollar for every speech intoned by corporate leaders and politicians alike about the human capital needs of the so-called “learning society” or the “knowledge economy”. Cradle to grave learning is the key to a healthier, safer, more just and prosperous future for all of us. That’s what we’re told. And it’s all true. But public policy lags well behind the Alice in Wonderland rhetoric. “Jam yesterday, jam tomorrow but never jam today,” said Alice. Even in Ontario, with a Premier so committed to education, achieving a seamless continuum of effective learning implied by the learning society vision, remains elusive.

Premier McGuinty’s leadership in improving elementary and secondary education in Ontario has been well-documented. To date, his tenacious and focused approach has generated remarkable results including world-wide praise for our competitive results in numeracy and literacy plus increasing high school graduation rates from 68% to 81% in six years.

And his early learning initiative, aims to reduce the unacceptable rate of 28% of kids who are seriously vulnerable when they enter first grade and in turn, raise those high school graduation rates even higher.

Notwithstanding Prime Minister Harper’s scrapping of a national early learning and care program about six years ago, other provinces have followed Ontario and Quebec in acting on the early learning movement. So when it comes to the foundational cornerstone of a life of learning vision—getting the youngest of our young off to a good start—Canada’s provinces are doing pretty well and have picked up the ball that Mr. Harper dropped.

But the other book-end of formal learning—post-secondary education—is another story. When it comes to post-secondary education, Ontario has been muddling through without a clear vision for years. Marked by ad hoc ideas informed more by facile and ego-driven lobbying than a learner and learning centered vision, post-secondary education in Ontario seems to be more of a non-system than ever, arguably the “ad hoc-ness monster” of Canadian higher education.

How come students still do not have access to a fair and consistent way of receiving credit for what they already know? Students are still unable to have easy and pervasive access to programs that take advantage of an individualized mix of both college and university resources. For too many students, transferring from one post-secondary institution to another feels like a surreal game of snakes and ladders, with more snakes and few ladders. While Ontario’s higher education offerings are many, navigating beyond—and sometimes within—the institutions is not fun and not fair when it comes to the costs of time and money.

As well we still have far too much ineffective and out of date teaching going on, in particular, in universities. Class size is not the issue. Ineffective pedagogy is. Great teachers can turn a lecture-size gathering of 300 into an active and inter-active problem-solving learning environment. Poor ones lecture to a 20 student seminar for two hours. At the extreme, great ones focus on a total commitment to enabling student learning with clear learning outcomes in sight, while poor ones are one-way purveyors of content informed by an “ if they get it fine, if not, it’s not my issue” attitude.

And even though our participation rates in higher education are high in relative terms—about 60% achieve post-secondary experience—they need to be even higher for the sake of our collective prosperity. In this context, there is

a clear demand for more degreed capacity. But the issue is how best to develop this capacity and too many of the ideas floating around don't hold water.

Lately, I've been thinking about the most visionary contribution to Ontario post-secondary education in "recent" memory. For those with really good memories, it occurred on May 21, 1965 when former premier, then education minister, William G. Davis introduced the concept of our colleges of applied arts and technology intended to provide labor market ready training for an exploding baby boomer population including those who would benefit from a more inductive, inclusive and applied approach to learning.

Intended to be equal but different from universities, Mr. Davis expected these new and dynamic institutions to be instruments of social and economic progress for their communities. His was a vision of full participation of all members of our society with better health outcomes and prosperity as a result. And the colleges have more than delivered on his vision! As well, Mr. Davis presided over an expansion to the university sector.

Mr. Davis included in his legislation the notion that the colleges and universities would establish a joint committee to explore, over time, how the two different kinds of institutions would cooperate to explore how students might be able to mix and match the resources of each kind of institution. The universities ignored this idea, and the colleges all-together, until a few decades ago when a few program leaders in local colleges and universities started developing joint programs—a few years in a college, a few in a university and voila a diploma and a degree, for example.

As a result of these early one-off programs, we have had many more one-offs. But we have no systematic Province-wide plan to ensure that that students can make use of resources from both types of institutions and get full credit for what they already know and to be able to do this without having to become highly skilled wheelers and dealers. It still seems like whether a student receives full credit going from one institution to another depends on whether or not the "receiving" registrar has had a good night's sleep or not! And getting full credit—rather than the usually offered limited recognition—for knowledge already gained provides a more cost-effective deal for students. There continue to be start and stop attempts at enabling better pathways for students. Scratch the surface superficiality defines most of them.

Other provinces such as Alberta, British Columbia and Manitoba, have created more integrated and integrating movement toward systems where student transfer arrangements and institutional roles and responsibilities are clearer and easier for students to navigate for their learning and credential needs. These provinces seem to treat their post-secondary institutions as a collective.

In Ontario, we have not been wanting for reports with clear directions, even vision, about what a real post-secondary system might look like but they have been marked by poor implementation or sabotage.

A number of years back, five enlightened university presidents, with support from their senates, agreed to offer their collective degree-granting capabilities to work with all 24 colleges to develop a kind of a virtual university in which certain college programs could be integrated with university work and vice versa, resulting in new and relevant degree programs, moving beyond the local and hard to achieve one-offs.

This would have been the least expensive way to produce more trained and degreed graduates we need and build capacity with existing resources. But the rest of the university presidents ganged up and watered down the plans and the idea was stillborn.

The colleges, many with world-class programs, then had no alternative but to lobby for the right to offer their own degrees because many of their degree-less graduates were hitting a glass ceiling in the work place that made advancement difficult. And again, most of the university presidents fought against this notion, but this time, unsuccessfully.

So now colleges can offer degrees on a selective basis and some college presidents want to go further and aspire to turn their colleges into universities. Problem is that we need colleges to avoid leaving behind their important role

in enabling social and economic equity. Colleges are less costly for students than universities and far more accommodating regarding the diversity of need. I worry that too many students will be left behind in the wake of the galloping elitism that marks the current narrative.

As well, putting all of the policy eggs in highest level training basket ignores the expectations of a productive workplace where, for example, for every one university educated engineer, we need for arguments sake, ten technologists and fifty technicians trained in our colleges.

I am reminded of a former college president who once asked for permission to turn his college into a university. Why, I asked. "I just want to be a university president," he replied. Very funny....if it wasn't a true story!

More recently, several college presidents lobbied a previous Ontario government to become "polytechnic universities". One president asked for my assistance. I asked him "what do you think a polytechnic is?". His answer was jello to the wall, seemingly another example of "just because we want to be something better than we are." I pressed further and he said "Ontario needs an MIT." To which I responded, actually the United States needs a University of Waterloo! What was the government's response to this lobbying? "You can't be a university, but you can call yourselves Institutes for Training and Advanced Learning." Say what? That example of ad hoc and meaningless labeling took place about nine years ago and it is safe to say that most Ontarians, including high school graduating students, don't have a clue what an ITAL is.

Yes, we are facing a current and projected skill shortage. Surely, we need all hands on deck, even more well educated and trained people, for a more socially and economically viable future for all of us.

But the current environment is filled with too many costly solutions in search of ill-defined problems that won't lead to the additional high quality education and training results we need. There are some stellar examples of innovative Ontario delivery models such as Contact North currently providing ½ million "on-line" registrations, and the government's plans for an even broader Online Institute. But even these do not go far enough in making best use of the resources that currently exist in our post-secondary institutions.

I have often wondered what would happen if all of the universities' undergraduate education was turned over to their continuing education leaders or creative and effective on-line learning organizations like Contact North or Alberta's e-Campus run by people who seem to understand how to accommodate the needs of learners. But even on-line delivery and continuing education often suffers from the same hit and miss pedagogy in our undergraduate university classrooms because these organizations do not have total control over who is available or has the right to teach in their programs. In other words, they cannot insist on quality pedagogy.

England's Open University was successful at the start because the folks who designed the courses were instructional systems designers who worked from a learning paradigm. These learning experts ran the show; they were in charge of assuring learning quality and they used professors as content consultants rather than the reverse we see so often in Canada where the professors, untrained in pedagogy, take or leave any advice about effective teaching and learning that may or may not be available.

How genuinely interested are universities in undergraduate education? Back in the 70's largely in response to students' widespread complaints about ineffective undergraduate teaching in universities, several Ontario institutions followed Montreal's McGill University's example in the late sixties and set up offices to support the teaching efforts of its professors. The Council of Ontario Universities went one step further and set up the Ontario Universities Program for Instructional Development to provide both resources and leadership to encourage all institutions to establish support offices for teaching and learning effectiveness.

Two lessons were learned from that effort. First, the professors who signed up to work with these teaching support offices were usually the superstar pedagogues who simply wanted space to talk further about innovations to enable their students' learning.

The second lesson? Once the money available to kick-start these offices dried up, most universities shut them down. While a few of these offices remain and we have some stunningly innovative teaching professors, it is a testimony to our universities general disinterest in undergraduate learning that there is currently no significant Ontario-wide effort to support innovative modern approaches to pedagogy.

It is well passed the moment when all of our universities make a concerted effort to ensure quality undergraduate learning. It would be nice to begin by tweaking the reward system so that professors who successfully enable the learning of their undergraduates reap as much reward as they do from the learning they glean from their "labs". Colleges are ahead of the game in this regard.

And key to a successful learning revolution in universities is the need to take into account that the average student entering post-secondary nowadays is already part of the learning revolution of personal computers, the internet and social media that are driven by the DNA of inter-activity rather than the passivity that defines too many educational environments. The result of these new highly active learners coming face to face with archaic pedagogy? Holey boredom!

It is ironic that Ontario's new early learning curriculum provides an exciting play-based creative problem-solving environment for four and five year olds. The challenge in Ontario is to ensure over time that these kids don't migrate into a first grade class where a rote memory drill and kill is the norm.

The challenge for all those who endeavor to support a real life long learning paradigm is that from the beginning and throughout, the learning opportunities available must build on active learning and creative problem-solving. Imagine a four-year old at a water station observing the overflow of water as a result of her pouring liquid from a larger container into a smaller one, then adapting as a result. She's experiencing the principle of conservation of matter and other related notions of science. Her highly elastic brain is taking it all in.

At its most basic level, how different is the process of discovery of a Professor of bio chemistry experimenting in her lab? In between the opportunities of the youngest of our young to express their curiosity in an unfettered manner and the opportunities of a Professor guiding doctoral students, we need to resist pedagogy that often seems to be deliberately designed to stifle the problem-solving and creativity we so desperately need to foster.

I recently attended a very interesting symposium at OISE/University of Toronto regarding the government's political platform plan to create three more university campuses. This was an important occasion to have an adult conversation and public opportunity to discuss the merits of the government's intention. The government is absolutely correct about the need to generate more capacity to yield more degreed graduates. But three new university campuses? Be still my heartache! While there were a few remarkable contributions from some who sought to explore ways to increase easier and higher quality pathways for students by innovating with the existing institutions, too many panelists poured old wine into new bottles. Some proposed taking the easy way out by turning some universities into "colleges" or creating new institutions from scratch that just focus on teaching eschewing the important notion that university undergraduates benefit from being in the company of active researchers.

And there were a few of those college presidents still pushing for their colleges to become universities. Most of the discussion at this symposium was about increasing the diversity of our post-secondary institutions rather than discussing how to increase the diversity of opportunities for students making better use of current resources.

The examples of avoiding key questions continue to abound. So, how about we start with a genuine policy commitment to lifelong learning? And let's set aside any notion of bricks and mortar. Alberta has legislation that provides an intention to support a real system. Ontario should seize the moment and pass a "Lifelong Learning—We really mean it this time!" bill.

Simply put, learners of all ages should have better access to *all* of the resources of *all* of the current institutions in Ontario (and beyond) in a timely and cost-effective manner.

Given the virtual world in which we live, for starters, how about we have more colleges hosting university programs where necessary and appropriate. How about a way of linking all institutions who offer on line learning?

And after we do these easy things, it would be time to get serious about addressing the access agenda by committing to a system where anyone, anywhere at anytime can pursue their chosen field of study and be assured of good quality learning opportunities for their resources of time and money.

As part of a process of renewal, the government should provide incentives for establishing a more learning and learner approach to pedagogy in our classrooms and on-line, in particular, our universities. A sustained approach to improved pedagogy would be a ton cheaper and tons more effective than creating new institutions. Let's go back to the future with that program for instructional development that the universities started and then scrapped.

Ontario should adopt a simple more modern end game that would drive the changes we need within and among our colleges and universities. For example, everyone in Ontario, perhaps everyone in Canada, could have a **passport of learning** for purposes of accreditation and demonstrated accountability. Both traditional and unique degrees and diplomas would be "stamped" on the "passport" as appropriate credits are earned. Lifelong learners would receive credits from our institutions and others around the world.

And lived experience and knowledge gained, however achieved, would be properly evaluated and credited. And this system of lifelong learning would be led and adjudicated by an Institute or University Without Walls, a low cost/high impact idea first offered in the 1987 report, *Vision 2000*. Back then, this idea was designed to be a "hammer" to get the universities attention, an independent virtual degree-granting vehicle that would be implemented if the universities continued to ignore opportunities to work in a large-scale manner with our colleges to create effective lifelong learning pathways for Ontario's students. The idea was shunted aside by both university presidents and the government of the day. It is time to revisit the idea.

Mr. McGuinty has been wise to focus on the building blocks of lifelong learning, pre-school to grade 12. If we continue to work hard and smart to get that right, sure, we'll have more students going to colleges and universities with the skills and resilience to deal with our current non-system. And while learning to deal with frustrating circumstances is a useful life's lesson, surely there are enough other opportunities at large for that learning to happen.

Ontario has an array of excellent post-secondary institutions when it comes to traditional indicators of success but their collective resources are not being well-utilized. It is possible to have greater access and quality and greater capacity and avoid spending new money on the wrong things, if all institutions over time decided to do fewer things better rather than all things less well with government providing incentives to encourage this. And if students and professors alike were able to connect the best resources within and beyond organizational "borders", we could have higher quality at less cost for both students and taxpayers.

Impossible? Unequivocally maybe. For certain, "institutional autonomy" and "academic freedom" would be the traditional battle cries of inertia coming from many of my university colleagues. But government does have the ability to provide incentives to move closer, however incremental, to a big vision that holds promise for greater fairness and higher quality and better value for taxpayers.

The best way to develop cultural change on a large scale is to avoid trying to make change on a large scale...all at once. Best to catch some of our institutions doing things right, supporting those early leaders who get it and letting them pave the way.

This is a time to focus on how to change what takes place within our current institutions and between and among them rather than constructing new big boxes or moving the old ones around and changing the labels. Perhaps the economic challenges of the day will force even the most reluctant to imagine a different approach with necessity acting as the parent of inventing something genuinely transformational when it comes to lifelong learning supports

that matter.

My advice to the Premier regarding post-secondary education? Avoid doing the wrong bold things. Without question, Mr. McGuinty is the smartest and most strategic Ontario “education” premier since Mr. Davis. He should apply the same kind of smart evidence-based attention to higher education that he has been applying to elementary and secondary education.

There are plenty of dusty reports from which a coherent lifelong learning plan can be crafted with the aid of some scissors and scotch tape. No need for a commission. The time is well passed when we need to turn our system of colleges and universities into a post-secondary system.

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