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Adapting Postsecondary Teaching to the Needs of a New Generation

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K-12 standardized exams have influenced current college students in dysfunctional ways. The discrepancy between student life styles as digital natives compared with traditional college and university instruction creates additional discord. Many students adopt a passive learning style that fails to meet college teaching demands for higher level thinking. Faculty will profit from adopting student centered performance-based instructional strategies successfully implemented in K-12 through the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition. This systematic approach fosters student awareness and accountability through developing a shared vision, and articulating learning goals with proficiency levels. Faculty support an engaged and effective learning environment through formative assessment and differentiated instructional strategies. The approach has the added advantage of being especially appropriate for adult learner expectations. High school graduates are ill prepared for postsecondary learning. Unfortunately, this lack of preparation extends across a wide range from excellent to poor secondary schools (Wagner, 2008). Rather than blaming secondary schools, faculty should become aware of the characteristics of first year students and create an effective higher educational learning environment. Understanding incoming freshman will help faculty to create learning environments that lead to effective learning and academic success. The challenges are shared across all postsecondary institutions, whether they are community colleges in the United States, or colleges and universities in both the United States and Canada.

Almost all K-12 institutions have been profoundly affected by the "teach to the test culture". United States teachers and administrators responded to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) assessment. Similarly in Canada, as Volante (2010, p. 55) notes "the view that standards based reform and external testing are the chief ways to improve our schools has become entrenched in Canadian society. Currently, every province and territory (with the exception of Prince Edward Island) administers some form of large-scale student assessment." Given the intense pressure, many K-12 districts instituted teaching methods fostering rote recall and simplistic patterned thinking directly tied to these assessments (Wagner, 2008). Therefore, few high school graduates have sustained experience with higher level reasoning or critical thinking. Furthermore, students have been socialized as passive recipients of knowledge within a highly instructor-driven academic environment. The cumulative effect is that students have not developed an academic sense of agency in which they persevere through the challenges required to learn new academic domains and skills. Without any meaningful ownership of their own education, many students finish high school with little sense of their own academic strengths, often woefully unaware of both higher education and the world of work.

Graduating high school seniors' have been largely surrounded by a social and cultural context that is inconsistent with traditional postsecondary education. Current students have spent their entire formative years as digital natives (Prensky, 2010), surrounded by highly interactive and engaging pursuits: internet, movies, video games, instant messaging, Face book, etc. The stark contrast to

traditional academic work (such as reading books and writing term papers) challenges the inner resources of students (who are already passive unmotivated learners) within a conventional college or university.

The negative effect of this passivity is compounded by dysfunctional attributions regarding study strategies and motivational beliefs. Long before they enter a postsecondary institution, attributions are constructed by the students to psychologically justify (to themselves and others) their level of academic proficiency. A long line of research has demonstrated variable academic outcomes due to types of attributions (Pintrich & Shunk, 2002; Stipek, 2001). Students who believe their academic performance is due to "hard work" or "effort" will typically devote more time to study and search for alternative learning strategies when confronted with challenges. However, students who believe that their academic performance is due to their "innate ability", "luck" or "a difficult professor" will often give up or continue to use the same ineffective learning strategies when they confront challenges. For example, students may believe they "can't do math" or "don't like history" but research investigating attributions and faculty experience demonstrates that many high school graduates hold inaccurate beliefs about their academic strengths and weaknesses.

These rigid attributions prevent taking advantage of the first year of coursework as an opportunity to reevaluate one's skills, to start afresh to improve academic skills and encounter novel academic domains. Students enroll in courses and majors that are comfortable rather than exploring a wider range of options. The childhood-formed beliefs limit student motivation and adoption of new learning strategies, often contributing to a continuing process of academic decline.

In sum, we face the challenge of fostering a learning environment for students who lack self-awareness, have little experience with higher level thinking, approach learning as passive recipients, and experience the traditional college academic environment as foreign to their lifestyle. College and university administrators as well as individual faculty must recognize that the solutions call for systemic changes that address both the learning culture and adopt effective learning strategies.

We may learn from effective institutional and instructional practices from their K-12 school colleagues. Both K-12 and higher education confront the same essential challenge of developing a system through which teachers (professors), principals (department chairs and deans), and superintendents (provosts and presidents) support student learning. Similarly, there is growing pressure for higher educational institutions to be held accountable for demonstrating that students reach targeted outcome goals.

Several key ideas may be drawn from a highly effective K-12 program, the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition (RISC). Discussing the full range of philosophy of the RISC initiative is beyond the scope of this paper. (For more information see DeLorenzo, Battino, Schriber, Carrio, 2008; Schrieber, 2002; and RISC, 2011). The aspects of the RISC approach emphasized here are methods for faculty to build a shared vision with students through which they assume greater responsibility for learning clearly defined academic goals. The state of Maine Department of Education has adopted a student centered performance based approach for K-12 education: "With a learner-centered focus at its core, the components of shared vision, leadership, standards-based education, and continuous improvement radiate out from the core and inform all decisions made in the system."(Maine DOE, 2011). The approach may be adapted to numerous international contexts that emphasize standards based reform. Key practices that may be used by faculty to foster effective learning of passive, disaffected students are developing a shared vision, articulating well defined academic proficiency, formative assessment, and multiple instructional methods.

Shared Vision. Within each course, faculty invite their students to articulate what they expect from the professor, what students expect from themselves, and the agreed upon process when either party is

not living up to the expectations. The shared vision is a written agreement that should be revisited and discussed as the semester progresses. This process gives formal permission for both students and faculty to question and clarify if expectations are being met. The vision statement supports a process through which faculty can draw student's attention to their self-proclaimed responsibility to learn, ask questions, monitor their performance, and respond to deficient work. The shared vision becomes an enduring affirmation that both students and faculty have active responsibility for effective teaching and learning.

Articulated learning goals with proficiency levels. Whereas faculty typically identify learning objectives in their course syllabus, few spend formal class time throughout the semester to discuss precisely the learning prerequisites and demonstrable evidence to meet those goals. To assume control and responsibility for their own learning, students must "own" the learning targets. Academic performance must be understood by the students as proficiency levels that demonstrate whether students have met, or not met, the learning goal. Discussing the requisite skills and knowledge, providing examples of proficient work and addressing academic errors foster a learning environment in which students monitor and become more responsible for their own learning.

Extensive formative assessment. Formative assessment practices inform the professor and the students of their learning progress toward the final summative assessment. Formative assessment provide another means to encourage students to confront their learning proficiency and attend to the shared vision of taking responsibility (Marzano, 2010; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2012). Such attentiveness to assessment *for learning*, rather than *assessment of learning* communicates that the course goals are improvement and continual progress. Extensive formative assessment is especially important in challenging first year courses because students are unfamiliar with the typical postsecondary practice of infrequent but major summative assessments. Formative assessment emphasizes progress, an essential element for productive attributional beliefs.

Differentiated instructional methods. Clearly, students learn in different ways (Armstrong, 2011; Gardner, 1993). Faculty should develop a range of instructional methods that address the learning goals while still being aligned to course learning goals. The learning goals should remain constant, but there should be different paths to those goals. Tomlinson (1999) emphasizes that differentiated instructional approaches emphasize responding to opportunities to vary *content* (varied readings and other resources), *process* (lecture, small group, individualized, computer assisted, etc.), and *product* (paper, presentation, panel discussion, exam, etc.). Articulated learning targets and proficiency levels allow flexibility in instructional methods while maintaining rigorous course standards.

Emotional Intelligence. Students will also vary in their emotional reactions and coping strategies related to their new learning environments. Research by Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan and Majeski (2004) found that first year university students with higher emotional intelligence (EI) levels measured at the beginning of the year received higher GPA scores at the end of the year. The short form of the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i, Bar-On, 1997) subscales assessing interpersonal ability, stress management, and adaptability were significantly higher for the successful students compared to the unsuccessful students. Parker, Saklofske, Wood, Eastabrook, and Taylor (2005) also found that EQ-i: Short Scores were relatively stable across a 32 month period. In addition, mean scores for the EQ-i increased with age. Therefore, attention to EI differences may suggest a unique set of strategies to enhance student success.

Although the primary focus of this essay has addressed adaptations for traditional age college students, many postsecondary institutions have a growing number of adult learners. The student centered performance based approach is particularly well suited for the quite distinct characteristics of adult learners. Whereas traditional age students are often unfocused and passive learners, adult

students are often self-directed, willing to assume responsibility, and task motivated (Kenner & Weineman, 2011). Having well established opinions, values and beliefs as well as often severe demands on their time and energy, adult students resist curriculum or instructional methods that seem arbitrary (Wynne, 2012). The student centered performance based approach use of democratic decision making, devotion to well defined and justified academic learning targets, formative feedback and differentiated instruction address these adult learning expectations and learning styles.

It is essential to emphasize that whereas devoted individual faculty may institute these practices, truly effective change will require significant college and university leadership with support for designated resources. Leadership should consistently support opportunities for collecting evidence regarding the extent to which departmental, college and university goals are being met. Responses to unmet goals should foster building collaborative learning communities and documenting continuous progress. Faculty should have sustained faculty development opportunities with both professional instructional experts and with their colleagues. Student achievement data, especially for first year challenging courses, should be examined to identify persistently substandard academic knowledge and skills. Plans of action should respond to such academic patterns. Academic student support services should work directly with faculty to assure that students have the opportunity to acquire precisely the required knowledge and skills.

While challenges will certainly persist, the practices outlined here will directly address the current dysfunctional gap between high school and postsecondary education.

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