

The Challenge of Change in Creating Learning Communities

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I work in an institution that states its mission in the following way:

Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design is a learning community devoted to excellence and innovation in Visual Arts, Media Arts and Design.

Clearly, the phrase “learning community” is suggestive of many things. It has become a catch-all for a variety of initiatives that link the learning experience to a notion of community. What is that notion? And why has it become so crucial for educational institutions? If we are to answer the question of what are the key processes involved in building a learning society, then we need to examine the underlying notions of community that have encouraged people to build institutions of learning in the first place.

The challenges of building Emily Carr (which is an institute devoted to the practice of art, media and design) into a learning community are an excellent example of what I am talking about. For the most part, teachers at Emily Carr still want to create conditions of learning that do not account for what students bring to the experiences of learning. Students introduce and communicate an enormous amount of knowledge to the schooling environment and we need structures that will account for and value what the students have to contribute. Consequently, one of the first steps in developing a learning community is the recognition and construction of processes to encourage more equality between teachers and students. This is not only a matter of democracy, but is fundamental to a new spirit that schools need to build. That new spirit will locate the importance of learning in a shared dialogue between partners and not in a monologue that is based on power. This is a lesson that needs to be learned in developing and industrialized countries — a lesson in the development of skills for both teachers and students that permit sharing and encourage openness in institutional procedures and practices.

A community can be many things to many people. It can be the set of boundaries that a particular culture uses to distinguish itself from others and these boundaries can be physical and symbolic, as well as psychological. It can be a certain identity that has been gained over time through historical, social and cultural processes that symbolically unite different peoples, in a shared sense of connection and interdependence. At its most basic, community stands for common interest. But, it is not the purpose of this short piece to define the meaning of community. Rather, what is most important here, is the relationship between community and the symbols that communities use to define their activities. For example, a farming community is largely defined by a shared economic activity that is underpinned by social and cultural interaction. The people in the community don't have to tell themselves what they share; they know what unites and divides them by virtue of their everyday lives. On a smaller scale, a kinship system brings diverse people together under the heading of family and together they form a community of interest. Some families use religion as a unifying force, as do some communities. Others may use a shared historical experience, a traumatic event or even music to bring meaning to what connects them.

In other words, every social formation has a variety of communities within it and an often-unpredictable way of portraying the ways in which those communities operate. The best way to understand community is to examine people's experiences within the communities that they share. And one of the most important activities that communities concern themselves with is learning. It doesn't really matter what form that learning takes, or whether it is formal or informal. The important point is that learning is seen as a central activity. It is also seen as a crucial example of whether the community has the vision and organization to communicate its historical, technical and cultural knowledge to its members. I would strongly argue that

even in those communities with highly developed formal educational institutions, learning takes place in so many different venues, that it would be wise to examine this context with great care.

How then does learning take place within a community? The most obvious example is the school system. But how does one build, nurture and sustain learning experiences that are both growth-oriented and community-based? For the most part, even traditional schools make a valiant effort to 'teach' their students. Is the notion of 'learning community' all that different in intention from what communities have tried to do when creating their own schools and funding them? I ask this question because it is all too easy to dismiss the heritage of the last one hundred and fifty years of experimentation in education. Although it is true that education as a system has been run by central governments in most countries, it is also important to recognize that without local help and local commitment, it is unlikely that a school could survive. Even in those countries with the most highly developed and centralized curriculums, it is not easy, and may even be perilous, to ignore the needs of the community. My own experience with Emily Carr is that the local community abandoned the institution for some years because the institute disconnected itself from community's needs. The result was isolation and lack of support. It has taken us four years to rebuild links that should have been one of the foundations for the institution and its functioning. So, we need to extend the definition of learning community to include the broader social context within which learning institutions operate and this brings us closer and closer to the idea of learning society.

There is a simple definition of learning community available at <http://www.eecs.umich.edu/mathscience/learningcommunities/whatis.html> that says, "This phrase describes a vision and model where a community's stakeholders come together and share resources." Another definition is, "a 'learning community' is a deliberate restructuring of the curriculum to build a community of learners among students and faculty. Learning communities generally structure the curriculum so that students are actively engaged in a sustained academic relationship with other students and faculty over a longer period of their time than is possible in traditional courses" (<http://lists.ctt.bc.ca/lo/learningcommunities.html>).

When one asks the question, "how can a learning community be built?", there is the potential that the question will not deal with the reality that learning is one of the most unpredictable activities that human beings engage in. This issue exceeds the boundaries and mandate of this article. But, anyone who has examined the vast plethora of informal learning contexts that people in communities create for themselves knows that the rules for learning cannot be predefined. This is why most high schools remain an oppressive experience for most teenagers. They are at an age when they are actively involved in creating and participating in their communities of interest. High school often becomes an impediment to learning and trivializes the vast amount of interactions that goes on outside of its walls. This process is so unpredictable and the influences are so broad, that the question of how learning takes place cannot be reduced to locality or even community and especially to school itself.

So, we have a paradox here that defies simplification. The desire to create a learning community is very much about the need to create an institutional context for learning. We are talking here, in the most fundamental of ways, about the process of building formal strategies for the learning process. The difficulty is that building an institutional context for learning means redefining what we mean by 'students', and it is not enough to just transform 'student' to 'learner'. It also means redefining what we mean by 'community' since it is likely that any

school is really made up of communities of learners. Some of these learners may be connected to each other and many may not be connected. The complexity of social interactions within a school far exceeds the complexity of the classroom, which is itself barely manageable as a learning environment. This is an issue we have been examining in great detail at Emily Carr, and we do not, after four years, have a simple solution in sight. This means that the notion of 'learning community' needs to be deepened through an analysis of institutions and how they function.

If we are going to create a new model for learning, then it will have to stand the test of both organizational restructuring as well as disciplinary redefinition. The latter will not be accomplished unless we take a long and hard look at the informal learning that is a part of everyone's daily existence. The disciplines that have been the bedrock of education must incorporate the lessons of the informal into their purview. For example, the study of language and composition should not take place outside of the experience of popular culture. The study of the sciences cannot be divorced from ethical and philosophical issues.

If we are to take the effort seriously, then the creation of new learning communities will bring with it a transformation of what we mean by disciplines. For better or for worse, the very nature of disciplines, their function and their role within and outside of institutions has changed. The context for this change is not just the individual nature or history of one or other discipline. Rather, the social and cultural conditions for the creation and communication of ideas, artifacts, knowledge and information have been completely altered. From my point of view, this transformation has been extremely positive. It has resulted in the formation of new disciplines and new approaches to comprehending the very complex nature of Western and non-Western societies. We are still a long way from developing a holistic understanding of the implications of this transformation.

It is an irony that one of the most important of the physical sciences relating to the brain, neuroscience, has become a combination of anatomy, physiology, chemistry, biology, pharmacology and genetics with a profound concern for culture, ethics and social context. Genetics itself makes use of many different disciplines to achieve its aims. To survive in the 21st century the neurosciences will have to link all of their parts even further and bring genetics, the environment, and the socio-cultural context together in order to develop more complex models of mind. It may well be the case that no amount of research will produce a grand theory. But, as the great neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran (1998) has suggested, the most puzzling aspect of our existence is that we can ask questions about the physical and psychological nature of the brain and the mind. And we do this as if we can somehow step outside of the parameters of our own physiology and see into consciousness. Whatever the merits of this type of research, it cannot avoid the necessity of integration.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for many of the disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Although there has been an explosion of research and writing in the conjoining areas of Cultural Studies, Communications and Information Technologies, the various specializations that underlie these areas remain limited in their approach to the challenges of interdisciplinarity and learning. The reasons for this are complex. Among the most important, is the orientation that some of these disciplines follow and that is to develop their own language and culture of research and practical applications. The difficulty is that, as they grow more specialized, they cease to see or even envisage the potential connections that they have to other areas. They also disconnect themselves from the educational context that is after all a context of communications and exchange.

Most importantly, the research agendas in all disciplines will have to incorporate new approaches to culture and to the fundamental importance of popular and traditional cultures in creating the terrain for learning at all levels. This will be a huge challenge, but it is the most basic one if we are to create the conditions for learning communities and learning societies.

REFERENCES

V.S. Ramachandran, Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1998.

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