Idea Champions in the Twenty-first Century: Students as Collaborators about Learning

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Abstract

Urban university students bring multiple assets to learning and the study of learning. As partners with faculty in the scholarship of teaching and learning, they have life circumstances opportune for study of impacts on learning of technology, cultural diversity, lifelong learning, assumption of social responsibility, and self-direction.

In the May 2006 issue of *Carnegie Perspectives*, Ted Marchese, former vice president of the American Association for Higher Education and editor of *Change* magazine, looks at the current state of higher education. Attempting to find what stokes vitality today, he concludes, "I fear we are not asking hard, new questions about undergraduate teaching and learning, producing new intellectual capital, and hatching new idea champions" (Marchese 2006).

As executive vice chancellor and dean of faculties at IUPUI, William M. Plater demonstrated that he knew how to ask hard questions, produce the capital in question, and support idea champions. During his tenure as vice chancellor and dean of faculties, Plater encouraged innovation, defined not only by novel initiatives but also by adaptability and further development, as faculty and administrators learned from and contributed to the national scene, adjusting to and extending practices from the context of their Indianapolis campus. The spirit of entrepreneurship—in its best sense of spearheading new ventures—yielded advances in areas such as civic engagement, service learning, formative assessment, and interdisciplinary research. This article is undergirded by the spirit of experimentation and the discipline of implementation that marked and continues to distinguish so many advances at IUPUI. It is dedicated to a thinker, administrator, and person who has contributed significantly to his metropolitan university and to the wider context of higher education.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

A movement that speaks to Marchese's worries—by prompting new questions about undergraduate teaching and learning and producing new intellectual capital around those questions—is the scholarship of teaching and learning. Existing much before but spurred by the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the 1990s and continuing robustly into this new century, this scholarly work in all disciplines focuses on the ways in which people learn in a particular subject area and the educational conditions that support that learning. Scholars in biology, history,

sociology, chemistry, nursing, psychology, pharmacy, English, law, linguistics, and many other areas have realized that studying the ways that novice and veteran learners enter into the epistemology of their disciplines is essential for the continuation of the discipline and the generation of new knowledge. The encouraging news is the extent and depth of this movement as evidenced by the example of the International Society of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning where research and practice reported at annual conferences reveals not only new knowledge but a new set of partners who can be idea champions.

Studying teaching and learning involves new partners in scholarship. Different from traditional educational research, the scholarship of teaching and learning considers students not as objects of inquiry but co-investigators about their own learning. Particularly because of the rapid changes in societal expectations, economic realities, global connections, and social norms, students are more different than ever from their teachers. Students come from more diverse backgrounds, face futures impossible to describe, and have access through the Internet to more information than anyone in the past. To understand the ways students learn, faculty members and students must enter into partnerships of scholarly inquiry.

Western Washington University offers a case in point. Early in their faculty members' scholarship about teaching and learning efforts across their campus, faculty determined that they needed students to help them form research questions, develop means to answer the questions, and apply research results. As part of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Western Washington State faculty members incorporated students into their research teams, brought students to meetings with other universities, and determined the university's scholarly work on teaching and learning collaboratively. In addition to a seminar for faculty, the university devised a credit-bearing course for students to do research about how specific kinds of learning occur in their college classes. Having evolved in various ways, the course now focuses on communication, a timely subject linked to new modes and genres facilitated by new technologies.

Student Assets for Inquiry into Learning/Technology in Lifewide Learning

Because students are primarily digital natives and faculty members are primarily digital immigrants, undergraduate students often can lead the way in asking pertinent questions about learning via new technologies. For example, students who use their blogs multiple times a day to get immediate feedback from friends can be seen as avoiding their studies or regarded as using feedback strategies that faculty members laud in collaborative learning activities in classrooms. The syntax, vocabulary, and content of blogs are being studied to discover how they enact certain kinds of learning and how they can contribute to advancing students' depth of understanding within different areas of study. Pioneers in this new form of communication and representation of meaning, students can lead the way in examining the medium that

claims their attention and use. Students themselves can be idea champions for investigating in systematic ways new modes of learning.

The metropolitan university is a particularly rich source for students as partners in learning and scholarship about learning with technology. For example, three features of students at urban universities can be viewed not as liabilities, as they often are, but as assets in doing the scholarship of teaching and learning. First, many students at metropolitan universities work full- or part-time jobs where they use technologies of many kinds. They have computers for taking orders and writing memos at work, cell phones to keep in touch with their children and families while they are at work, and iPods for listening to music while commuting to work. They can do research on how composing texts is different off and on the computer, ways in which cell phones can be used for collecting visual data, and the veracity of claims that the millennials' multitasking, including listening to music while studying, does or does not contribute to learning. Students who have family and work responsibilities that keep them away from labs on campus can conduct scholarly inquiries into how they and others learn in different contexts. This inquiry can be as rigorous as any other scholarship and contribute more to the social good of engaging more learners in finishing college than many other subjects researched by students and faculty in the university. This point should not be taken lightly as the low rate of college graduation is a critical problem with dire consequences for individuals and for the nation.

Studying the ways in which students learn via technology offers new ways to use their lifewide circumstances in a positive way. As one starting point, Educause offers a vehicle for adding to understanding between digital natives and digital immigrants. ELI Discovery Tools: The Net Generation is designed to help better understand learner experiences and expectations and balance those with academic requirements, faculty experience, and long-term goals. The tools identify "points of convergence and divergence between faculty and student views on teaching, learning, and technology" (info@educause.edu). When identified, those points of convergence and divergence become rich fields of inquiry.

Cultural Diversity

Second, students at metropolitan universities represent an extraordinary range of cultures. Sometimes students entering urban universities come with lack of preparation for college, apprehension because they are the first in their families to attend college, and little confidence in their identity as learners. Because students at urban community colleges often exhibit the same characteristics, metropolitan universities and urban community colleges can benefit from sharing experiences with supporting students' induction into and retention through their undergraduate educations. A case in point is the innovative means for identity formation and learning at LaGuardia Community College in New York City.

As it began an electronic portfolio component of its curriculum to strengthen learning among its students, LaGuardia wanted to engage students in their own learning

through also incorporating creativity and career components. At LaGuardia students personalize their eportfolios through design, image, poetry, music, video, and personal statement, all chosen according to the particular purpose of the portfolio at a given time. For example, students gain confidence in presenting themselves to potential employers. Enabling students to feel more confident about finding employment increases their knowledge of their own capabilities and desire to finish their degrees. As LaGuardia reports (2006, 3), "Formative surveys conducted with students have repeatedly revealed that they value both the expressive and career development elements of the eportfolio." In 2005-06, for instance, evaluations by students of influence of the eportfolio on the development of career goals had a mean score of 3.84 on a Likert scale with 1 signaling strongly disagree and 5 signaling strongly agree. Students also value sharing their eportfolios with families, including those family members who have little sense of what the college experience entails and who influence whether students will finish their formal education (3.98 was the mean score in answer to a question about showing eportfolios to family and friends). Through their evaluations of the uses and values of eportfolios, students signaled what they value as undergraduates.

In a major finding during research on the effects of eportfolio use, LaGuardia concluded (2006, 3) that "Eportfolio helps high risk students engage more deeply and effectively in the learning process, leading to measurable improvement in student learning outcomes." Like many metropolitan universities that use the National Survey of Student Engagement, LaGuardia uses the Community College Survey of Student Engagement and also analyzes other information, such as qualitative data from students and faculty, and data on pass rates and course completion. "CCSSE data showed major gains for eportfolio on virtually every count" (LaGuardia Community College 2006, 4). Even more importantly for consideration of students as guides to improving the learning environment, student reflections signal reasons for the increased engagement, "including the ways that eportfolio helps students become more aware of themselves as learners, linking classroom work to their changing identities" (LaGuardia Community College 2006, 4). A student who started in ESL at LaGuardia and went on to be a psychology major at Hunter College in NYC wrote, "The different sections of my eportfolio made me realize important things about how I see myself starting at LaGuardia, how I see myself now, and how I see my future. My experience with eportfolio at LaGuardia has made me see more of who I want to be" (LaGuardia Community College 2006, 4).

Because students are in control of the contents of their portfolios and reflect on how various artifacts influence them as persons and learners, students guide the direction of eportfolios. As LaGuardia researchers state (2006, 6), "Eportfolio takes you places that you didn't expect to go." Students keep coming up with new and unanticipated uses for eportfolios, teaching themselves and their instructors who the students are, how they learn, and how they bring their own backgrounds into the new environment of the university. They are idea champions about what conditions and practices shape learners who bring diverse backgrounds and conditions of life to our colleges and universities.

Lifelong Active Learning

Thirdly, the average age of students at urban universities is often older than students at residential campuses, either at research universities or liberal arts colleges. Further into their lives, these students, by being in college, are exhibiting life-long learning practices essential for economic viability in a society where people often need to change jobs multiple times in their careers. Students who have dropped out or stopped out from previous academic work can, more closely than anyone else, study their own adult learning practices. If universities actually believe their own rhetoric about supporting life-long learning, they can turn to adult students to investigate with faculty in various disciplines the kinds of scaffolding appropriate for older learners.

Students themselves take ownership of their own learning as they represent the elements that influence the progress of that learning. Faculty members at urban institutions in the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research link with students to study how what the students are discovering about their own learning has implications for what the institution can do to support learning for all students. For example, at IUPUI students were asked to reflect on their learning as they determined their progress on institutionally-designated principles of undergraduate education. Students wrote reflections at developmental stages of understanding about such principles as critical thinking, written and oral communication, and diversity. Assessors of the reflective statements noted, however, that students did not demonstrate how to support their reflections with evidence that backed up points being made. Consequently, scaffolding about reflection was built into the system. For instance, students in the capstone course in English Studies studied their own reflections to help identify what students needed to know to reflect in a way that convinced readers of their eportfolios that they understood their own level of progress around a particular principle. They were co-inquirers in research about reflection.

Students in every age range can benefit from learning environments that extend beyond the campus. For example, like many metropolitan universities, yet much advanced in its programs and practices, IUPUI offers service learning opportunities and courses in which students lead the way in serving the community while discovering their life goals and learning their academic subjects. In a recent publication of IUPUI's Center for Service & Learning, in which IUPUI's 2006 national Presidential Award for the outreach of students, faculty, and staff members is highlighted, a feature focuses on student Lygia Vernon. The title of the feature is "Student Spotlight: Turning Scholarship into Lifestyle." Vernon explains that her opportunity to volunteer in the community led to her awareness of social problems and her choice of a career helping local agencies fulfill their missions. As students report and reflect in thoughtful and analytical ways on their experiences, they help the university know where and how to offer similar experiences to other students.

Research has confirmed that active learning and interdisciplinary learning both contribute to deep learning. Civic engagement can support both application of concepts and discovery of concepts through specific projects to aid community groups. Because

problems in the world are often not effectively addressed by only one discipline, interdisciplinary projects can effect needed change. For example, at IUPUI from 2006-07 internal grants linked students and faculty in schools of education, liberal arts, engineering and technology, art and design, social work, and education to community partners like the Indianapolis Public Schools, the Indiana Civil Liberties Union, Clarian Health Partners, the Indianapolis Fire Department, the Boys and Girls Club, the Urban League, and the Indiana Coalition for Housing and Homeless Issues. The influential Carnegie classification system generated by the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching has added a voluntary classification for community engagement, a classification proudly claimed by IUPUI. Carnegie and IUPUI acknowledge that student involvement in the community, with scholarly linkage to their academic learning, enables students to lead the way in enriching and deepening their learning.

Social Responsibility

A different kind of partnership in educational goal setting and practice constitutes the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (http://www.21stcenturyskills.org). At the 21st Century Literacies Impact Conference in February 2007, businesses and foundations in the Partnership teamed with subject area associations to generate action steps that would support K-12 students' acquisition of a list of twenty-first century skills devised by the Partnership. Although some learning outcomes on the list are familiar, such as critical thinking, communication skills, and information and media literacy, others challenge thinking about pedagogies and systems to foster them. For example, social responsibility includes "acting responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind."

In addition to scholarly work associated with service learning, scholarship of teaching and learning devoted to K-12 education is another venue for exhibiting social responsibility. Urban and metropolitan universities co-exist with some of the most dysfunctional school systems in the United States. Some universities reach out to school districts to provide professional development, but few universities have developed scholarly partnerships between undergraduates and K-12 students. One such scholarly connection, however, has been implemented by Professor Heidi Elmendorf at Georgetown University. Believing that biology students can learn their discipline in teaching as well as in the laboratory, Elmendorf offers senior biology majors the opportunity to teach and study their teaching in public schools in Washington, D.C. (http://www.cfkeep.org/html/snapshot.php?id=710). The National Science Foundation has affirmed that students in middle and high school must be engaged in science much before they reach undergraduate school so that they are prepared with appropriate coursework and have a lively interest in science and occupations that rely on science. By doing scholarly work in schools, Georgetown biology majors are learning their discipline (they do as well or better on tests than students who do alternative work in labs) and serving the public good through enlivening younger students' interest and skill in science. The United States needs many more undergraduates to major in mathematics and science to maintain its levels of creativity and accomplishment in

scientific fields. Undergraduate students can be partners in this teaching and learning endeavor through their own practice and scholarship.

Self-Direction

Another of the skills listed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills is self-direction. Self-direction includes "monitoring one's own understanding and learning needs." Assessing when one needs to acquire new data or skills is essential with the acceleration of information and access to information and the variety of current and emergent jobs in so many fields. Many under-graduate students at urban universities turn or return to formal education when they realize that they need additional workplace skills. But all undergraduate students benefit from practice in self-assessment of their learning, whether for the workplace or their personal lives as citizens, family members, and educated individuals.

In the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, colleges and universities are studying the ways in which students can practice studying and documenting their own progress toward learning outcomes. At the University of Wolverhampton in the UK, for example, students develop Personal Development Plans, or PDPs. In fact, students across England are now required to plan their learning journeys as they progress throughout their degree programs. A primary means of doing this planning in a more meaningful way than simply listing courses taken or benchmarks accomplished is the electronic portfolio that enables students to select artifacts and design spaces for monitoring and exhibiting their learning. Students who have practice in presenting evidence about progress toward goals like information and media literacy; problem identification, formulation, and solution; and creativity and intellectual curiosity realize the necessity of being specific about their assets and deficits. They grow to know how to monitor their own progress and to seek additional experience and education when needed.

When he was chief research scientist at the Xerox Corporation, John Seely Brown brought fifteen-year-olds to the laboratories each summer. The ideas of these young people were solicited and immediately put into production; Seely Brown was convinced that listening to students would yield innovation. How could mature scientists know as well the conditions of young lives, how young people viewed the world, ways they were learning, and ideas that they were hatching? This source of idea champions for industry is also a source for education. Students need the opportunity to ask and answer serious questions; apply their thinking with others to actual implementation, whether in the classroom, community, or laboratory; study the effect of that implementation through scholarly inquiry; and ask emergent questions with the real possibility of having influence on answers. Students who become idea champions during their years in school are likely to become lifelong learners for their own benefit and for the common good.

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