

Leadership and Learning for Higher-order Outcomes: Serve, Support and Engage

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Abstract

With the advancement of information communication technologies there are new opportunities to engage learners and provide them with learning programs that meet their differentiated learning needs. This higher order approach to learning expands the learning experience and forges new strategies for engagement. The York Region District School Board (YRDSB) is working towards a new vision of leadership and learning that engages all learners in higher order 21st century models of learning. The authors of this article discuss the research that informs the implementation of the vision that serves, supports and engages all learners. Supported by the lessons learned from the Advanced Broadband Enabled Learning (ABEL) and Learning Connections (LC) programs the strategy includes; seamless service to information, resources and tools; learning and training support; and, engaging all learners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need for success in an interconnected global world.

In April 2004 the International Reading Association published *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, the editors included a chapter that made an argument for adopting a new perspective on 21st Century literacies. Such a perspective, they thought, would recognize the wide range of skills needed to adapt to and use changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives. In that chapter Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack (2004) argue that the emergence of new media in the twenty-first century is so rapid and so continuous and the skills needed to employ that technology so complex that literacy has become a multi-faceted concept that necessitates a change in teacher roles within the new literacy classrooms of the this century.

York Region District School Board (YRDSB) acknowledges that there is a need to achieve a cultural shift in how we understand literacy and in how we engage learners (staff and students). Students, teachers and all staff must approach learning through the use of educational tools that help them experience engaging and productive learning. This prepares learners to be literate and successful in a digital, globally connected, changing world. The tools must include

current and future information communications technologies (ICT). Pedagogy must be appropriate to make effective use of the tools for learning, and system leaders must ensure that change in practice is supported, sustainable and replicable.

In response to an expanded understanding of literacy, YRDSB has revised its definition for literacy as follows:

“Literacy in the 21st Century is the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable achievement, personal well-being and full participation in an interconnected and changing world community”. (LCCI Presentation, September 2010)

This revision, developed and informed in consultation with grassroots input indicates a significant shift in thinking about what it means to be literate in this century. It challenges educators to think about the change in teaching and workplace practice that will ensure students and staff have the requisite digital literacy knowledge, skills and attitudes to actively participate in an interconnected world. Additionally, it challenges the School District to consider the new professional learning models required to ensure that effective practice is observable in classrooms and workplaces. This thinking is supported by influential change agents, such as Michael Fullan (2007) and Richard Elmore (2004) who have rejected traditional forms of staff development and called for a more efficient and effective model of professional learning that promotes innovative classroom practice, engages student in authentic learning, and ensures that they will be better prepared for citizenship in an interconnected world in which they live and will work.

Situated, job-embedded learning has the greatest impact on teacher and leader professional growth (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Delivering professional learning to the site and/or desktop of YRDSB employees requires the effective use of technology together with intelligent instructional design and learning management systems. Staff engagement in a technology mediated learning model means that they gain instructional intelligence on the effective use of technology for teaching and learning that results in an active, learner focused, technology infused classroom. The deployment of an integrated approach to training and learning that is responsible for the design, development, delivery and iterative quality control of a learning approach for students and staff will result in a collaborative environment for all learners. This means offering a higher-order/21st century approach to learning and training; a combination of face-to-face and online learning experiences that provide students and staff with

opportunities to engage in learning that support their differentiated learning needs and just in time learning.

It is imperative that any change in professional learning be informed by policy, aligned with standards for effective professional practice, informed by research, and delivered in a way that models effective practice while meeting the needs of all learners in the organization. This is a challenge for every school district in Ontario and one that the Advanced Broadband Enabled Learning (ABEL) and Learning Connections (LC) Programs have designed, developed and researched over the past ten years. Informed by the experience of these research and innovation programs, and a renewed literacy definition, YRDSB has developed its vision for higher-order/ 21st century leadership and learning that assures operational excellence to serve, support, and engage staff, students, parents and community in the use of information, resources and tools to learn and work.

ABEL/LC Program History and Lessons Learned

The ABEL program strives to improve results through knowledge sharing, collaboration and its public and private sector partnerships. Employing a research-based approach, ABEL supports the effective use of new and existing ICT to encourage innovation. This combination of networks, partnerships and a focus on research drives models for teaching, training and learning that create new educational opportunities and institutional transformation. Founded in 2002, this award-winning program is led and funded by York University and the York Region District School Board (YRDSB). Since its inception, ABEL has developed a reputation for excellence and expertise across Canada, and has established national and international credibility as a leading authority on new modes of learning that make effective use of technology.

ABEL conducts annual research and evaluation on new teaching and learning models that emerge from the program. This ongoing commitment to research is conducted by the Institute for Learning Technologies (IRLT) at York University. Some experts from ABEL research reports indicate that: *Teachers have begun implementing broadband technologies in their practice in ways that are breaking through the bounds of traditional pedagogies, offering their students more authentic and engaging learning experiences.* (Interim Research Report, June 2003), and this success has been demonstrated consistently by subsequent research reports. *“There can be little doubt that when teachers actively involve themselves in the ABEL*

program...the nature of that teaching begins to be transformed in ways that support the development of student initiative, collaborative learning, new digital literacies, and substantially heightened student engagement.” (Institute for Research on Learning Technologies, 2009)

Learning Connections (LC) is sister program to ABEL. Funded by a grant from the Literacy & Numeracy Secretariat, Ministry of Education (L & NS), LC builds upon the lessons learned from the ABEL program in order to provide educators in K – 8 schools across Ontario job-embedded professional learning that support literacy and numeracy instruction.. The LC program is available to educators in publicly funded schools in Ontario. It focuses on combining a blended approach to professional learning, with access to ICT tools and support at the district level to allow teachers to embed their learning into their practice, build capacity to sustain and replicate the learning. The LC program also engages IRLT to conduct research that measures program success with the support and delivery of L & NS initiatives and member professional learning needs while informing continuous program improvement.

Researchers Mishra & Koehler introduced the following diagram to support their research on the integration of pedagogy, content knowledge, and knowledge of specific technology skills:

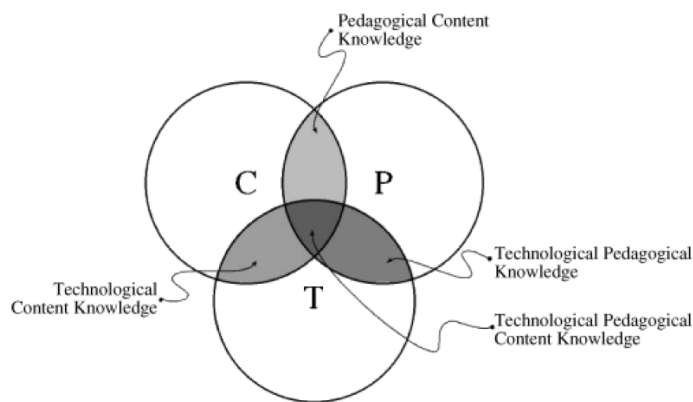


Figure 1. Pedagogical Technological Content Knowledge. The Three Circles, Content, Pedagogy, and Technology, Overlap to Lead to Four More Kinds of Interrelated Knowledge.(Mishra, P. & Koehler, M., 2006)

The ABEL and LC programs put this theory into practice by offering an approach to professional learning that strengthens and informs effective pedagogy in a digital age, delivers

content that ensures educators develop the confidence to make effective use of technological tools. This model of learning develops capacity for distributed leadership, creates a culture of reflective practice and encourages collaboration. Combining online collaborative space with real time professional development, district-based professional learning and real-time virtual meetings, ABEL/LC programs empower educators to embed the use of ICT into their daily teaching practice increasing their digital literacy, enriching their pedagogical practice and anchoring subject knowledge in real world applications that engages the learner. It is through such models of professional learning that teachers and staff experience and then apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to meet the goals of the YRDSB literacy definition.

Applying the ABEL/LC methodology to YRDSB's vision for leadership and learning that serves, supports and engages the learner means leveraging the technology infrastructure and enabling trainers, teachers and facilitators to provide quality learning opportunities that are seamlessly accessible, relevant and engaging; provide opportunity for building a culture of life-long learning. This type of progressive and long term change for learning and training means:

- Offering multiple learning objectives based on the learner needs;
- Allowing for flexible and participant-driven learning;
- Promoting reflection;
- Offering accessible just-in-time web-effective delivery;
- Modeling effective instructional practice for the 21st century learner and supports literacy;
- Developing a continuum of skills, knowledge and attitudes that prepare all our students and staff for life in an interconnected world community;
- Providing one-stop access from the learning management system (Connect2Learn and Learn Tracks) that allows for customized learning paths, informed learning plans, feedback mechanisms and achievement records;
- Providing job-embedded learning opportunities for staff;
- Allowing for continuous access to learning at a time, pace and place convenient for the learner;
- Applying research-based effective practice and quality standards;
- Evaluating and assessing learning for impact and effective delivery on a regular basis;

- Applying cost effective strategies in the use and re-use of resources to ensure operational excellence;
- Providing relevant, contemporary and rich learning experiences; and,
- Providing feedback to the learner and contributes to leadership and learning, and system results

Vision for Higher-order/21st Century Leadership and Learning

As YRDSB moves into the second decade of the 21st century with a renewed focus on student achievement and well-being, there is an urgent need to ensure students and staff are digitally literate; that student and staff experience learning that models effective learning/practice for contemporary times and that information, resources and tools are seamlessly accessible to drive operational excellence. Applying the lessons learned from the ABEL/LC programs, understanding the latest research and its application for higher-order/21st century teaching and learning, and ensuring our students are prepared for life and work in their interconnected global community, the YRDSB is moving forward to serve, support and engage all learners. Those students who acquire higher order /21st century skills will be well positioned to communicate effectively, collaborate easily, solve complex problems, contribute globally and practice life-long learning. Teachers who embrace higher order/21st century knowledge, skills and attitudes and apply them in their planning and instruction will assist students in meeting with future success and optimize their professional excellence. By leveraging a world class infrastructure (network, hardware, software etc.), and pedagogy that is relevant, authentic and engaging, the YRDSB is poised to provide learning experiences that ensure all students and staff acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they require to enable full participation in an inter-connected, ever changing world community. It is within this framework that the District has approved three strategic initiatives. They are focused on service (seamless access to resources, tools and information through the portal), support (learning and training applying a multi-layered approach) and engagement (digital literacy knowledge, skills and attitudes). It is within these initiatives, coordinated to maximize impact, that the District will; strive to meet the needs of its learners (staff and students); embrace new models for teaching and learning that make effective use of technology; and, ensure literate citizens today for tomorrow.

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