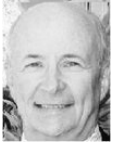


# Four ways PSE can treat the classroom as an innovative workplace — Academica Forum

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Higher education's approach to fostering students' innovation potential has focused mostly on developing innovation leadership among a select cadre of students, originally in entrepreneurship and more recently in social sector innovation. But what about the rest of our graduates: what capability do all our graduates need if they're going to engage effectively with innovation in the workplace? Can elements of this capability be adapted to enhance their roles as community members and global citizens as well?

In order to develop the capability for workplace innovation in *all* our students, we're going to have to begin tackling the challenge in the space where all of them already participate – within our teaching and learning environments.

## The Classroom IS a workplace

Simply put, the methods we currently use to foster innovation leadership, such as social innovation incubators and entrepreneurship boot camps, aren't going to easily scale up to allow all our students to become engaged participants in workplace innovation. All of our higher ed institutions want to increase student opportunities for work-integrated learning experiences in authentic workplaces, but we can scale our efforts exponentially further if we treat our teaching and learning environments themselves as authentic workplaces. In these spaces, the work is learning; students apply a set of work practices for learning, and changes in those practices can be treated as instances of workplace innovation.

Here are a few initial scenarios—some still thought experiments, some already emerging into practice—to illustrate how we might make "teachable innovation moments" out of changes in work practices within our teaching and learning environments:

**1. At the activity level:** Most of our instructors can easily cite examples where they have introduced a new learning practice only to have students respond with a mix of skepticism and apprehension. The most memorable instance for me was introducing group work in the 2nd year of a program and then pushing further by requiring peer review of assignments in 3rd year. Inevitably, these changes provoked lots of "closed" body language from students, which showed their opposition either to the specifics of the change or to the overall notion of changing the rules just when students felt like they had mastered the previous expected practices.

What if, instead of glossing over students' concerns, we treated them as examples of natural responses to workplace innovation? We could ask them to reflect on these reactions and remember them going forward, so that when the tables are turned and they are the ones introducing change to a workplace, they can appreciate where negative body language might be coming from. We could refer them to the 4th of Scott Berkun's [Ten Myths of Innovation](#) – the myth that *People Love New Ideas* – and ask them later to reflect on how their instructor could have introduced a new idea more effectively, or have been more convincing on how the risks of the innovation would be managed and mitigated.

**2. At the course level:** as noted above, we will want our graduates to have conceptual frameworks for understanding workplace innovation from multiple perspectives: social, technical, economic, ethical, epistemic, etc.

For example, we could add a reflection component for one of the Massive Open Online Courses targeting

Innovation, whether with a broad view (e.g., [Understand what innovation means and consider the history and developments of innovations that are important in our daily lives](#)) or with a more narrow focus (e.g., [Becoming a ChangeMaker: Introduction to Social Innovation](#)). The reflection component could give students an opportunity to apply and extend their workplace innovation capability in ways that make them what I call a "critical friend" of workplace innovation—meaning that they are knowledgeable, skillful, and committed to this goal.

**3. At the program level:** we want to design our programs to move students from the learning practices they bring with them on entry (e.g., from secondary schools) to those they will be expected to apply within their future workplaces. Nursing programs offer a good example in this regard, because the learning practices required of entry-level nurses are [detailed by the profession](#) and programs are assessed on how well students have developed and demonstrated those capabilities. Explicitly or implicitly, the program structure is designed to move students step-by-step toward the goal of workplace learning.

In a new scenario, these changes in our teaching and learning "workplace" could become opportunities for students to develop their capability as critical friends of innovation. Such a situation would allow us to ask how we can challenge and support our students, in each year of their program, to approach change in the way they ideally would in a future workplace.

**4. In our culture for teaching and learning:** all the above scenarios require a commitment by faculty to engage effectively with innovations in teaching and learning, and to serve as living examples of Workplace Innovation in a sufficiently enterprising culture to make the challenges and rewards a part of everyday student life. One way to support the expansion and institutionalization of this role is to more directly connect students with faculty who choose to widen and deepen the impacts of their teaching in this way.

We're already starting to see more involvement of students in such innovation projects to improve teaching and learning, which can further develop the students' innovation capability and ease the resource constraints that might otherwise block our progress. There are promising examples of such endeavours in England (where, for example, [Birmingham City University](#) aims to engage every student as Partner – not a Consumer) and in Scotland (where [Students as Partners in Quality Scotland](#) provides a national network of support and resources).

Canadian institutions are also leading the way: e.g., McMaster has an extensive [Student Partners](#) program and hosts an annual [Institute](#) to share expertise. To move these efforts further, we could explore new scenarios such as the following:

- We could reframe student activities to emphasize the potential transfer of workplace innovation capability from school projects to other workplace contexts. For example, while many of these partnerships are labelled as *Students as Partners in Teaching and Learning*, reframing this concept to treat *Students as Partners in Knowledge, Learning and Innovation* could be more helpful to highlight the transferability to other domains (both for the students and for their future employers).
- As in the scenarios above, we could link these projects more explicitly with curriculum resources and assessments of Innovation Capability (Some of these scenarios are expanded further in a related blog post on [Preparing Graduates for Future Knowledge Practices](#)).
- Supporting innovation experiences and innovation capability development for students, treating them as connectors, coaches and catalysts, can strengthen and extend the "critical friend" capability for senior students and further expand their impact.

In summary, we believe Canada can become an international leader in developing *all our graduates* – the "top 100%" – in their ability to engage effectively with innovation and change in the workplace. As we plan a national Innovation Agenda, let's make sure that we incorporate some distinctive innovations in our own higher ed workplaces so that our teaching and learning environments become beacons of innovation that provide enduring

value.

Notes:

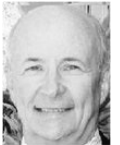
Many colleagues have helped shape these ideas: the "we" mentioned above includes Robert Luke (OCADU) and Andrew Maxwell (York University), along with others in Ontario (at Humber, Ryerson, Sheridan, UOIT, Waterloo and WLU), B.C. (at BCIT, ECU, JIBC, [KMIC](#), KPU, TRU, UFV and VIU) and Alberta (at Calgary and Mt Royal).

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