

Chapter 39

In the Nexus: Learning Pods as Learning Micro-Societies

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ABSTRACT

The higher education landscape is facing a time of unprecedented challenges, and public higher education is under pressure to provide value relative to rising costs. In this chapter, the authors discuss one strategy to respond to these trends and to meet the needs of students through the implementation of learning pods, which are small geographically oriented teams working on individual learning projects as self-directed communities of scholars. The theoretical underpinnings for learning pods come from best-practices in the communities of practice, novice to expert, self-directed learning, relational cultural theory, and mentoring literature. The learning pods approach is versatile and could be adapted for many K-20 and professional practice settings and is a good example of how the combinations of technology and in-person meetings serve the needs of 21st Century learners. Learning pods provide an environment for students to develop skills such as reflection, teamwork, and networking that are vital to success in the modern workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Public higher education is facing significant challenges. For the sixth consecutive year, the percentage of increase in average tuition and fees at public four-year institutions is greater than the increase at private nonprofit institutions (The

College Board, 2012). Likewise, student loan debt in this country recently passed \$1 trillion and now exceeds total credit card debt (Anderson, 2012). In *The Innovative University*, Christensen and Eyring (2011) argue that replication based on tradition (sustaining innovation), rather than disruption, characterized higher education in the

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past. The intent and effect of sustaining innovation is to drive up prices. Disrupting innovation drives prices down. The future of higher education will be shaped by disruptive innovation.

In light of these trends, public institutions are challenged to implement strategies to serve students in ways that are innovative, developmentally appropriate, and effective. In this chapter, the authors discuss one such innovation through the use of an approach to teaching and learning called *learning pods*. Learning pods are small geographically oriented teams of students working on individual learning projects as self-directed communities of scholars. The theoretical underpinnings for learning pods are derived from best practices in the communities of practice, novice to expert, self-directed learning, relational cultural theory, and mentoring literature. Learning pods may be included in a variety of contexts in traditional, hybrid, or online undergraduate or graduate courses. In this case, the authors include learning pods to facilitate student research in a series of interdisciplinary, hybrid graduate research courses in an applied master's degree program.

BACKGROUND

Since Malcolm Knowles popularized the notion of *andragogy* in the United States in late 1960s (Knowles, 1968), there has been an ongoing debate among scholars, theorists, and practitioners in K-12, higher, and adult education regarding the superiority of andragogy or pedagogy. Largely, the conversations have been shaped by the overly simplistic notion that the learning characteristics of children neatly fit into one category (pedagogy), while those of adults are uniformly in another category (andragogy). In recent years, an increasingly large group of voices have noted that this dichotomy, indeed, may be false and that learners may simultaneously exhibit preferences and characteristics that are both andragogical and pedagogical in nature (Delahaye, Limerick, &

Hearn, 1994; Reynolds, Laton, Davis, & Stringer, 2009; Taylor, Reynolds, Laton, & Davis, 2012).

Reynolds, Laton, Davis, and Stringer (2009) hypothesize that rather than a dichotomy (pedagogy vs. andragogy) there exists a continuum (pedagogy-mesagogy-andragogy), and that there may be elements of both pedagogy and andragogy, even in large volume, present in a learner simultaneously. The space on the continuum where both pedagogy and andragogy simultaneously exist is referred to as mesagogy. Taylor, Reynolds, Laton, and Davis (2012) discuss the development and testing of the Learning Environment Preference Inventory (LEPI), an instrument that measures "Knowles' ideas of pedagogical and andragogical learning, structure preferences, and all the space between those two polar, hypothetical constructs" (p. 63). Findings from two separate studies of community college students utilizing the LEPI suggest that learners in the mesagogy category represented between 25% and 44% of adult learners in the sample. While these are initial findings, it is important to consider that learners who require moderate amounts of support and scaffolding could constitute a significant percentage of college students.

In addition to those who advocate for mesagogy, others (Strohschen, 2009; Strohschen, 2010; Strohschen, & Elazier, 2009; Taylor, Reynolds, Laton, & Davis, 2012) advocate for "both-and" approaches to teaching and learning, such as "metagogy" and "heutagogy" (Hase & Kenyon, 2000). The origins of metagogy are borne from the blended shore theory of adult education program development and delivery, where a distinct group of international "educators examined their practice and contributed their findings" to *The Handbook of Blended Shore Education* (Strohschen, 2009, pp. 3-25). In this model, educators draw from both andragogy and pedagogy to "adopt a both-and attitude toward good practices" (Strohschen, 2009, p. xi). Likewise, heutagogy ventures beyond the realm of andragogy to not only advocate for learner self-direction, but also requiring that learners focus

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