

EDUCATION AND WORK NARRATIVE

Roberta Graham

Durham College, School of Business, IT & Management

Part 1: Education Narrative

When I started high school I had recently moved from a very small town near Kingston, Ontario to the city of Mississauga. My primary school had a total of 80 students and I was now attending a high school with over 1,500 students. Already a somewhat shy child, I found the size of my new school intimidating. As the result of being shy and feeling overwhelmed, I rarely outwardly participated in class activities but was very engaged in the learning.

I continue to make a distinction between participation and engagement and recognize that students have different comfort levels when it comes to speaking in class. As such, I make every effort to ensure that there are a variety of learning activities that encourage student engagement and recognize that participation, or speaking in class, is not the sole measure of engagement.

My favourite subject in high school was history. My history teacher, a very imposing man who happened to also be the high school football coach, would conclude most lessons with an exercise which involved reading an article from a current publication, such as “Time” magazine, and then writing a brief summary of the piece. He wanted us to learn how to extract the essence or meaning of the work – I can still vividly recall his loud, booming voice saying “I want the significance!”

As an instructor I encourage my students to look for significance. To develop the skills to synthesize information and concisely articulate the message/key points.

For my undergraduate degree I attended the University of Western Ontario (now Western University) and majored in English and History. My recollection of this time was that I loved learning but didn’t get much out of attending class as the classes were extremely large (hundreds of students) and took place in auditoriums. I had always been an avid reader and was fortunate to both read quickly and retain knowledge, as such, the lack of professor “attention” did not hinder my success. However, a close friend of mine was really struggling with the transition from high school to university and I spent time assisting her with the material. She was, and is, extremely intelligent, but for her to maximize her learning she needed additional support and would have benefited from instruction that went beyond reading a textbook.

As an instructor I am cognizant that to maximize student learning, material should be presented in more than one way. Students may differ in their abilities to read and retain knowledge, but these differences should not be confused with intelligence or motivation to learn. As an

instructor I am responsible for delivering content in multiple ways, with a variety of practice & learning activities to aid in comprehension.

When my career became focused on Human Resources I went back to school and attended Seneca College to obtain my Graduate Management Certificate in Human Resources. As I was working full-time and travelling frequently for my job, I elected to take their on-line degree. I found the material interesting, the textbooks helpful but cannot recall a single professor from this program!

As an instructor teaching a variety of hybrid courses, I am working to enhance opportunities for student-student, student-content and/or student-teacher interaction during the online portion of my classes. I don't want the fourth hour of instruction per week to be "lost" or unmemorable.

In the spring of 2013 I enrolled in the Masters of Education program at Athabasca University. At the time I was working as the Vice-President of Human Resources for an exploration company. One of the initiatives I was working on was how to deliver training to a dispersed population of employees. I had been thinking about going back to school for some time, simply because I love learning, and thought that this would be an ideal opportunity to further my education and gain the knowledge necessary to embark on creating online training modules. During the pursuit of my degree I experienced many "ah-ha" moments that altered the way that I view teaching and learning, two of which particularly stand out. The first relates to technology and the value of collaboration. I should begin by saying that at the time I begin taking the "Survey of Current Educational Technology Applications" course I wasn't looking forward to it – I am not "technical" by nature and had little knowledge or interest in technological applications. One of the assignments in the course was a group project whereby we had to prepare a presentation on an educational technology that was of interest to us. Hearing about how my fellow students applied technology to the classroom challenged me to reconsider my own application of technological tools. I learned so much from my group members! This course also required us to write a blog – in one of my posts entitled "How do they know that?" I speak about the wealth of knowledge available through participation. I learned to be part of the conversation – that professional growth requires exposure to new perspectives.

As an instructor I actively seek out conversations regarding educational tools and technologies. Through these conversations I have learned about applications that have become my "go-to's" in the classroom (such as Kahoot, Quizlet and Padlet).

The second "ah-ha" moment occurred while taking my first elective course which was about instruction within distance education. Having just started at Durham College and teaching hybrid courses, I was incredibly motivated to learn strategies that I could employ to support learning. The instructor for this course, in my opinion, was superb – thoughtful, challenging and supportive. I was struck by how her written communication (both to me and the class at large), which can be quite one dimensional, conveyed so much warmth. The course was designed to provide significant choice and flexibility for students. For example, both major

assignments allowed students to pick from a wide range of topics and even then, students were permitted to propose an alternate activity should they wish. For my assignment I chose to discuss the concept of interaction in online education. Since beginning the MEd program I had struggled with the concept of interaction – although at times I found value interacting with content, peers and instructors, I also found that interaction in itself does not necessarily equate with learning. I wanted to investigate the circumstances in which interaction was more apt to advance knowledge. Recognizing that the objective of interaction is to increase understanding and master learning goals, I argued that by utilizing Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as a model to create the educational environment in which interaction takes place, interaction is better situated to advance learning. Specifically, if we associate the desired outcome of interaction, understanding and the mastery of learning goals, with the top of Maslow’s pyramid, self-actualization and wisdom, it follows that to achieve understanding we must first ensure that the environment in which interaction is instituted satisfies basic human needs. This involves selecting purposeful, user-friendly and well supported interactive and communication technologies to satisfy physiological and safety needs; providing opportunities for social connectedness and the building of communities of learning to satisfy the need for belonging; and creating a sustained teaching presence to provide students with achievement and recognition (esteem needs). My paper argued that when these conditions are met within the online learning environment, interaction amongst students, with content and instructors is better positioned to enhance learning.

Drawing connections between Maslow’s theory of motivation and the environment in which interaction takes place made me realize the importance of creating a safe, supportive and inclusive learning environment. As an instructor I am keenly aware of how my presence and communication style can impact students - I ensure to employ user-friendly technology with plenty of support and I strive to incorporate choice when it comes to assignments so students can draw stronger connections to the content. I am cognizant of how my written communication can impact my students and try my best to write in a manner that is professional, personable and warm.

Part 2: Work Narrative

My first significant job was working as a Branch Manager for CIBC. At the time, I was the youngest manager in Canada. I had significant financial and back office experience but this was my first foray into actually managing people. I was accountable for the day-to-day operations of the bank including achieving customer service and sales targets and providing coaching and leadership to all branch employees. What strikes me regarding this early point in my career is my approach to learning about the position. I was incredibly keen and full of curiosity. I ended up drafting a proposal for a formalized branch manager training program which was accepted and implemented. I had no thoughts at this time to change career directors towards Human Resources or Training, I simply was curious about the training process and ways to make it more efficient and effective.

As an instructor I continue to approach teaching and learning with curiosity. I am constantly challenging myself to explore new and potentially more effective ways to design and deliver my courses.

After CIBC, I moved to the telecommunication industry working for a company that provided call centre support for various organizations. Here I rose quickly through the ranks from an operations manager, to a site manager and then took on the responsibility of managing the company's largest client acquisition, Verizon, and moved to Newport News, Virginia. A year into my time in Virginia I was asked by my manager, the EVP of Operations, what I attributed my success to. I told him that you needed to focus on your people – hiring the right people, at the right time, training them well and treating them well. To my surprise he asked me to step in and lead the recruitment & training functions for the entire company. This was a major turning point in my career – my focus switched from operations to Human Resources.

There are numerous synergies between being an HR professional and an educator. An HR professional must be in tune with the business as all HR initiatives must support the achievement of company objectives. Similarly, as an educator, my initiatives (course design, development and delivery) must be in tune with program objectives and support students in achieving their learning and essential employability skill outcomes.

After leaving the communications industry I worked for an organization called Embanet which serves the not-for-profit online higher education market by providing instructional design, marketing, recruitment, and retention services (now part of Pearson). It was here that I furthered my HR skills and in the span of four years was promoted from Associate Director of Training & Recruitment, to Director of Human Resources and finally to Vice-President of Human Resources reporting directly to the CEO and responsible for the company's three locations (Toronto, Orlando & Chicago). One of the key initiatives I worked on was a merger and how best to bring two companies together with different cultures.

As an instructor, I am cognizant that people have different experiences, life histories and perspectives and that it takes time for disparate groups to come together and work effectively and efficiently. As such, when introducing group work I make time to talk about team dynamics and the stages of team development and best practices that can be employed to achieve success in group work.

While at Embanet I was approached by a start-up exploration company called Gedex which was developing technology to aid in resource discovery. Wanting to travel less and excited about the opportunity, I took a position as their Vice-President of Human Resources. Reporting to the CEO, my role was to establish the framework for all human capital activities and plan for the company's transition from technology development to commercialization. What was unique about this position was the personnel. I was working with a group of highly educated scientists and engineers who had a skepticism regarding both change and human resources. I really had to "sell" HR and explain what I was doing and why, and how it would benefit them.

As an instructor, I practice adult learning principles. I advise students not only about what they are learning, but why the content is important to them and their future careers. I make every attempt to be practical and use real-world examples. Students have a great deal of knowledge and experience that they bring to class and I try to uncover these experiences and incorporate them into discussions to help connect the students with the content.

After Gedex was downsized I began consulting and took some time to figure out what I wanted to do next. I was in the midst of completing my Masters in Education and thought I would like to try teaching. I submitted my resume to Durham College and a few weeks later I was teaching part-time! I loved it from the beginning and feel so fortunate to have found this profession.

Until writing this narrative I hadn't realized how much my past education and work experiences have impacted the way I view teaching and learning! I feel that the lesson here is to constantly reflect on what we do and why we do it – perhaps look for hidden biases and agendas in the way that we approach teaching and reflect on these areas.