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RESEARCH SUCCESS STORY

Transforming Business Education at Sheridan

Is there a better way to teach business? Sheridan thinks so, and with a research grant from the Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, Sheridan is exploring new teaching techniques that could produce truly creative business leaders.

The traditional classroom setting can be dull. Students become uninspired simply listening to lectures or watching presentations. Such an environment doesn't offer much to encourage new ideas and innovations.

To better motivate and engage students, Sheridan Business School professors Dr. Ginger Grant and Golnaz Golnaraghi used the Ministry's $250,000 Productivity and Innovation Fund grant to explore a shift in teaching – one that moves away from lectures to a more interactive environment where the students do the intellectual heavy lifting and rely more on their personal experiences.

"We want to move from the 'sage on a stage' classroom to the 'guide on the side' so that we're collaborating with students instead of instructing them," said Ginger.

The two professors, with involvement from other Faculty of Business colleagues and a Faculty Librarian, developed a transformational learning model drawn from an extensive review of teaching methods used around the world. They then injected this model into two business courses: Leadership and Development, and Creativity and Innovation in Business. More than 400 students learned using this transformational model over a 14-week period.

Professors Grant and Golnaraghi (centre) with the student research team

One of the elements of this model, explained Golnaz, was challenging students to solve real-world problems. For added authenticity, industry experts were invited to voice their challenges. The students had to find solutions, present recommendations and defend their findings to a company's top executives.

Another element of this model was an emphasis on self-reflection – encouraging students to think about who they were, their experiences, their talents, their passions and how those could be applied to their course work.

"When students reflect on their experiences, it allows them to deepen their learning," said Ginger. "Their own experiences are a source of creativity for problem solving and new thinking."

To assess the students' reaction to this model, the two professors and their research team conducted an extensive literature review. They also administered a survey and held focus groups to gage the students' experiences. The survey results painted a very clear picture. One student responded, "This is the first course I've ever taken where I've not learned from a textbook, I've learned from my life."

Sumayya Daghar, one of the student research assistants, benefitted from this project in multiple ways. She helped the professors gather information with her focus being self-reflective practices. "It was a great experience, working as a team, as an equal with your professors," said Sumayya, who enjoyed the flexibility she was given to find creative ways to collect and present information. She also feels she is now much stronger at retrieving information, even when there appears to be dead ends.

Sumayya also took the classes where this transformational teaching model was tested and found learning this way was unlike anything she had experienced before. "Having that real world involvement in the classroom was so empowering," she said. "You're moving away from text and theory to practical experience."

Sumayya, who graduated from Sheridan's project management program, loved how the instructors in this program were more mentors than professors. "You have to figure it out, because they're not going to give you the answers," she said. "It was a challenge to think on your own and take ownership of your decisions."

She also found the self-reflection component invaluable. "When you're aware of who you are, what your values are, you're more authentic and when you do that you're more confident," she said.

With this transformational learning model validated, it's now being embedded into Sheridan's five new Bachelor of Business Administration degree programs which launched in September 2014. Ginger and Golnaz are pursuing other grant opportunities to continue exploring the transformational learning model.

"The grant support was just the beginning," stressed Grant. "We're creating a classroom experience that engages the student emotionally as well as intellectually."

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