Report on Holistic Education

How Holistic Assessment Enables True Personalized Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify how a holistic approach to assessment ensures true personalized learning to be realized for teachers, students and parents.

> **We have constantly measured the wrong things against a different paradigm—leading inevitably to an assessment of 'failure'.**
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> *Indigenous Elder, Canadian Council on Learning Workshop on Redefining Success in Indigenous Learning, 2007*

Holistic Assessment Approach

Holistic education integrates multiple learning components in its thinking, focusing on the whole learner instead of the sum of its parts. Holistic education pays significant attention to experiential learning and aims to help students reach their maximum potential.

A holistic approach to learning is rooted in Indigenous teachings and a product of research from the Canadian Council on Learning. Indigenous people in Canada have long understood the role that learning plays in building healthy, thriving communities and share a vision of learning as a holistic, lifelong process. They have described the purpose and processes of learning from their perspective through a series of Holistic Lifelong Learning Models.

In 2008, the Canadian Council on Learning worked with Indigenous Peoples across Canada to redefine how success is measured in Indigenous learning. This foundational research and work provides a crucial foundation for holistic assessment and personalized learning.

Though rooted in an Indigenous perspective on learning, a holistic approach to learning can be applied to students of all cultural backgrounds. In fact, two of the top performing education systems in the world thrive using aspects of a holistic approach to lifelong learning.[1] Nurturing a lifelong learning mindset is a trend that continues to spread globally in education systems in order for students to maintain a working competency in a fast-paced, digital world.

Sprig Learning has taken this research and defined a holistic approach to assessment that can serve as the foundation to develop learning tools. From this perspective, a holistic assessment approach integrates three key dimensions.

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1 Lee, D.H.L., Hong, H. & Niemi, H. Asia-Pacific Edu Res (2014) 23: 871. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-014-0189-y

Multiple **People**

Similarly, a holistic approach to assessment acquires information from multiple perspectives. The teacher's perspective on the student's learning is important, but must be equally valued to that of the caregiver and community leaders (i.e. Elder, librarian, athletic coach and/or extra-curricular leader). Furthermore, the perspective on learning from the student themselves, even as young as three years old, becomes an important reflection that provides a holistic understanding of a student's learning needs.

Multiple **Places**

All educational assessments measure learning that occurs within the walls of the classroom and school. A holistic approach to assessment, however, measures learning that exists beyond the classroom and allows everyone to understand the important learning that occurs at home, in the community and, of course, in the school.

Multiple **Domains**

A holistic approach goes beyond assessing a student's knowledge, performance and/or skills of a particular task. A holistic approach looks at a broader set of indicators that measure access, participation, and values in learning to provide a more comprehensive picture.

Furthermore, a holistic approach to learning reminds parents and educators that we must adapt to students current learning needs and not make the mistake of creating classrooms that prepare students for the world we grew up in – but rather create holistic and innovative learning environments that prepare students for the world they live in today.

The Six Elements of a Holistic Approach

Sprig Learning has developed a holistic approach to the development of their education technology tools that focusses on six key elements. When combined, these six elements support both an assessment and learning environment that fosters a comprehensive, 360-degree understanding of a student's learning strengths, challenges and interests.

1

Multiple Perspectives

It is important to ensure student learning is guided by the insights and perspectives of all the people that influence their life. A holistic approach ensures we assess learning beyond the school, and include perspectives from caregivers, community leaders and the student themselves. Together, the broader analysis of the learning process, provides a more comprehensive understanding of the learning needs of individual students.

2

Locally and Culturally Enabling

Educators have long advocated that custom-tailored classroom material supports student success. This is especially true for Indigenous and minority students in the classroom, who need to 'see themselves' in the curriculum, and require everyday learning to foster their cultures and languages. This becomes increasingly complex as our schools and classrooms become more diverse. Yet the underlying call to action remains and a holistic approach can enable this change.

3

Collaborative Development

A holistic approach to learning and assessment ensures one works with all educators to develop effective tools. Teachers are the individuals that best understand the learning needs of their classrooms and those tools that will be most helpful to improve learning outcomes. In developing new, innovative and holistic approaches to learning, we must first engage educators to ensure those tools have utility and benefit in the classroom.

4

Community Involvement

Equally important, especially in the early years, is the engagement of caregivers and the broader community itself. The positive impact of parental involvement has long been shown to produce higher levels of student achievement. A holistic view of the student requires an innovative approach to parental and community engagement, overcoming the barriers of time, access, culture and distance that many communities face.

5

Immediacy of Results

Education technology can provide many improvements in education and learning, but none more crucial than assessment. A holistic approach leverages off the latest mobile technology to ensure that assessment results are immediately available to educators, parents and students and ensure any learning interventions can be immediately actioned. Paper-based assessments require too much of a teacher's time inputting and processing data. Mobile technology brings the learning to the students, regardless of where they are.

6

Creating Change

In all our efforts to improve the assessment process, we must ensure that every minute taken away from instructional time for students is worth it. We must ensure that every question asked of students, caregivers, teachers and community leaders has a purpose to support and inform the learning process. Creating transformative change is difficult, but the only way to achieve this is to be grounded in data-driven decision making that's immediate and relevant.

Applying a Holistic Assessment Approach to Personalized Learning

In order for personalized learning to be effective, we require accurate and comprehensive information that defines the needs of the learner. A holistic approach to assessment enables this in two ways.

First, by broadening its scope to identify learning in the home, community, land (and of course, school), holistic assessments provide new information for teachers. New information about each learner that may have never been asked before, or identified.

Second, a holistic assessment provides more accurate information through its more natural and formative approaches. Through the provision of culturally enabling tools and implementation, holistic assessments are able to break down direct and indirect biases during the assessment This creates a more comfortable and supportive environment for students to demonstrate their learning skills and abilities.

To leverage this new and more accurate information, a holistic approach to measurement must use innovative educational technology that supports teachers to vary instructional approaches and content that respond to the learning needs of each individual student. Engaging education technologies can create accessible, meaningful and relevant learning activities that support individualized learning interventions in the school, home and community.

By designing personalized learning models based on holistic assessments, students get the necessary learning interventions that support their learning goals—exactly when they need them. This is especially important for early learners during the most transformational moments of their educational pathway. Using education technology tools empowers educators to better meet each student's needs and improves educational outcomes of all students.[2]

When used holistically, involving learning beyond the school, personalization can be an incredibly powerful model as it creates a complimentary learning stream between the school, home and community. It empowers caregivers and students to take charge of their learning. Once caregivers re-establish their roles in the learning journey, student engagement and outcomes increase. Once students take more control over their learning, they are empowered and embrace the purpose of learning.

The Future of Personalized Learning and Holistic Assessment

As we look to the future for personalized learning, we need to understand how a holistic assessment approach will support student success. At Sprig Learning, we are working with our educational partners to ask the following questions:

How can technology further drive data-driven instruction?

Technology today provides educators with new opportunities to broaden their instructional teaching practices and reach more students than ever before. However, the utility and accessibility of education technologies are limiting their widespread adoption.

We need to develop education technology tools that support timely learning interventions for students and create learning analytics that show what students have achieved and how they match up with their peers. We need to ensure the tools support 'analytics for all' and are not just designed for teachers and education administrators, but provide data for parents (and students) to support both home and self-directed learning.

How can we ensure new technologies do not overwhelm teachers?

In most school divisions, a large portion of expensive education technology is misused or neglected not because of insignificance, but because of inundation. This is no secret.

A study by McRae, Phil, Varnhagen, Stanley, & Arkison, Bradley (2011) found that "…competing demands on time are the most significant factor restricting a teacher's ability to provide instruction."[3] Many teachers are overwhelmed with the amount of new technology they are expected to use – with time being their most precious resource. Given that time is so scarce for teachers, technology needs to have a seamless integration and clear connection to the context of the classroom.

Plair (2008) presented a solution to this problem in saying, "Helping teachers comfortably reach this stage calls for the professional development available through a knowledge broker."[4]

Ideally, it is the education technology provider's responsibility to possess a combination of pedagogical and technological expertise so they can act as the knowledge broker. With this knowledge, education technology can either train educators directly or transfer their knowledge to a school's administration.

How do innovative education technologies push personalized learning to the next step?

Teachers that use technology effectively in their classrooms are more empowered and able to meet each student's needs. Through the use of innovative technologies, teachers can understand students' needs and dramatically improve learning outcomes and support students to achieve their learning goals.

Today, with technology, teachers now have new opportunities to leverage customized learning material and methods to effectively reach more students than ever before. How do we develop the educational tools that push personalized learning methods into an individual learning environment? Each learner must be able to benefit from custom-tailored learning that is built off holistic data that is informing instruction.

In our work, Sprig Learning recognizes that parents and caregivers will be key drivers in this quest for personalized learning. We must engage parents to be active in the learning process and provide them with the tools they need to support their children along their learning path.

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3 McRae, Phil, Varnhagen, Stanley, & Arkison, Bradley (June 4, 2012). Teaching any time, any place or at any pace. ATA Magazine. Retrieved from https://www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20Magazine/Volume%2092/Number-4/Pages/Teaching-any-time.aspx

4 Plair, Sandra Kay. (2008). Revamping professional development. The Clearing House, 82(2), 70-74. Retrieved from http://marianrosenberg.wiki.westga.edu/file/view/PlairSRevampingProfessional.pdf/372909202/PlairSRevampingProfessional.pdf

Conclusion: How to Include a Holistic Approach to Learning in Schools

At Sprig Learning our motto is "Nurturing the Roots of Every Student"—a motto that can be universally adopted. What this should mean to schools, school divisions, governments and broader educational systems isthe following.

'Nurturing the roots of every student' ensures we recognize and measure the influencing characteristics that each student brings with them to the classroom each and every day. These are the characteristics that are 'beneath the surface' and are often unseen or unknown by the teacher or school, but need to be nurtured to ensure that student succeeds. For example, their first language, income status, family dynamics, access to technology, and cultural identity. We need to foster a more holistic approach learning and assessment that builds an understanding of these home and community characteristics for every student, then measure their impact on the learning process.

Using a holistic approach to assessment ensures we acquire new and more accurate information about each individual student. Innovative technologies provide immediate and engaging access to that information targeted at the learning strengths and interests of every student.

Furthermore, by 'nurturing the roots of every student' personalizes the assessment and learning process and supports every individual student on their learning journey. We need to provide students with access to learning interventions, when they need them.

Teachers will not be the only driver of instruction in this new paradigm. Students, parents (and as we think holistically—community leaders) will be key players in supporting learners along their educational journey. Wider influencers will not only act independently using personalized data to define the students' needs, but will act in a complimentary manner to reinforce learning in the school, home, community and on the land.

Ultimately, a holistic approach empowers the learner, the family, community and the whole education system to effect meaningful change. Tomorrow's classroom will ensure all students have the same opportunities to flourish and demonstrate their learning potential.

A holistic approach, combined with personalized learning, has the potential to shift the current focus away from reacting to learning deficits, to one that recognizes and celebrates the strengths of every learner.

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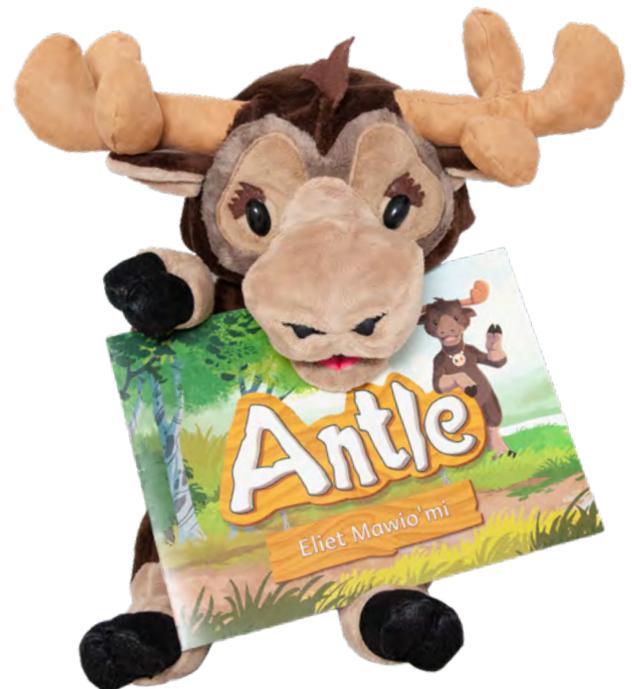
About the Author

Jarrett Laughlin, *CEO and Founder*

Jarrett comes from a family of educators and has been engaged in education research and policy development for over 15 years. He has worked for the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), Ontario Ministry of Education, and as an Education Associate for bv02. Jarrett currently works with organizations across the world developing holistic and innovative approaches to measuring success in education.

Jarrett has extensive experience working with Indigenous organizations and communities, school administrators, teachers, parents and Elders. His recent passion has involved mobilizing his research into action through socially innovative, community-based projects through Sprig Learning. When Jarrett is not working, you can find him at home in Ottawa enjoying time with his family and four children.

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www.learnwithsprig.com