Engaging Students in Life-Changing Learning

Royal Roads University's Learning and Teaching Model in Practice - Revised Edition

Living Our Leadership Learning in Swift Current, Saskatchewan

Lidia Wesolowska
Royal Roads University

Niels Agger-Gupta
Associate Professor
Leadership Studies, Executive Education
Royal Roads University

Abstract

This case study of a MA-Leadership capstone project demonstrates three elements of Royal Roads University’s Learning and Teaching Model: 1) Experiential, authentic learning strategies; 2) Supporting integrative learning—how all elements came together; and 3) Action-oriented research as an inquiry process. RRU MA-Leadership student, Lidia Wesolowska, supported by her academic supervisor, Dr. Niels Agger-Gupta, created a community engagement process to define sustainable downtown revitalization sponsored by the City of Swift Current, Saskatchewan, a community of about 16,000 people. This challenging process involved creating an authentic dialogue complicated by community politics and high visibility. The focus of the inquiry shifted, both during the project design and through its implementation. This study demonstrates how applying the critical learning elements of LTM, combined with an intentional, multifaceted approach and a transparent leadership style, effectively engaged the community.
Introduction

The three components of the Royal Roads University (RRU) Learning and Teaching Model (LTM) applicable to this case are as follows: 1) Experiential, authentic learning strategies; 2) Supporting integrative learning—how all elements came together; and 3) Action-oriented research as a process of inquiry.

What does experiential authentic learning look like in the context of an action research Masters capstone? In this article a student in the MA-Leadership program took the RRU Learning and Teaching Model for a test run in the real world through her thesis research. This action research inquiry in Swift Current, Saskatchewan was an example of community engagement and authentic learning on multiple sides. The learning model in the School of Leadership Studies (SoLS), with its cohorts of mid-career adult students, supports an approach to learning and change that applies the scholarship of leadership to complex real world settings, an example of the LTM.

This case-study is the story of an enactment of “living our learning” (the RRU motto) in the application of the RRU LTM principles in the Leadership capstone, involving each student to engage in an action research project that leads to a process of change within a real organization. This requires each MA-Leadership student to develop a seven to nine-month project. The project builds on a relationship the student develops with a senior organizational leader as a project sponsor, who helps them shape the project to meet the organizational needs by engaging organizational stakeholders in dialogue through a variety of inquiry methods. Students also work with an academic supervisor from RRU, who supports the student’s action research strategies and inquiry methods. The student, with the sponsor and supervisor’s help, creates a collaborative inquiry that engages key stakeholders to develop agreements on innovative change, new knowledge for the organization, and sometimes even for the field.

The sponsoring organization in this capstone was the City of Swift Current, a small city in southern Saskatchewan’s wheat belt, 245 kilometres west of the capital, Regina. Swift Current (the city) was celebrating its centennial in 2014 and was eager to engage its community in a revitalization of the downtown core. This capstone project by MA-Leadership student Lidia Wesolowska brought together a broad cross-section of people from a diverse set of stakeholder constituencies in the city to develop a community engagement process that would allow the city to conduct its downtown revitalization in a way that would result in welcome and sustainable change for its citizens.

Lidia worked closely with her academic supervisor, Niels Agger-Gupta, to design all aspects of the study. Niels guided Lidia through many challenging times as the direction of the study shifted based on emerging information.
pertaining the scope of the study and specific, critical aspects within the community. Lidia’s sponsor, a senior city director, fulfilled a primary role of providing information regarding the selection of key stakeholder groups, as well as critical and on-going input regarding political implications of the inquiry process. Otherwise, the sponsor maintained a more “hands-off” posture throughout the process, keeping an open mind, and was ultimately receptive to the re-direction of the study as it evolved.

The inquiry engaged relevant and interested key stakeholders and became an opportunity for Lidia to review the applicable scholarship pertaining to the inquiry. A sampling of the scholarly topics touched on for this community engagement process included organization systems and change (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006), creating readiness for change (Armenakis et al., 2007; Rowe et al., 2013; Walinga, 2008), learning organizations (Scharmer, 2009; Senge, 2006; Senge et al., 2005), collaboration and teamwork (Getha-Taylor, 2008; Lencioni, 2005; Madsen, 2009; Raelin & Raelin, 2006; Trist, 1977), democratic engagement for change (Taris et al., 2008), and approaches to adult learning (Brookfield, 1991; Horton & Freire, 1990; Knowles et al., 2005; Raelin & Raelin, 2006; Scharmer, 2009).

Creating the Project

Exploring her options, Lidia knew she wanted to conduct her thesis inquiry outside of her field (cross-disability consulting and employment counselling in BC): she craved an Action Research process that would both challenge her and have significant, long-lasting impact. In March 2013, Lidia’s sister, a resident of Swift Current, presented her city as a potentially exciting consideration for a leadership capstone, and arranged an email introduction to the city’s chief administrative officer (CAO). During a telephone discussion with the CAO, Lidia saw possibilities: the city had a progressive vision, it would soon be celebrating its centennial, and the CAO was forward-thinking and wanted to create positive change. Lidia subsequently flew to Swift Current in April 2013 to confirm her decision and to lay the groundwork for her project. During the week-long visit, she met with a number of influential stakeholders in the community, including city staff and a few key influencers in the community. Buoyed by her prospects for an exciting project, Lidia moved to Swift Current, a community new to her, at the start of July 2013.

Shifting Focus

Initially, both the sponsor and Lidia wanted the capstone to generate concrete ideas for downtown revitalization, and thought the entire revitalization engagement process might be the capstone project. Subsequent conversations between the two authors of this article, Lidia and Niels, gave Lidia pause for reflection and reconsideration. While she and her Sponsor were invested in the original concept, Lidia came to realize and accept, through numerous conversations with Niels, that attempting a full
community revitalization initiative would not be possible within the six-month capstone; it was outside the scope of the inquiry.

The focus shifted; it was possible to engage a representative sampling of the key stakeholders (many of whom might well be involved in the future revitalization efforts) to create the plan for a successful community engagement process to define, and subsequently support, the actual revitalization. Though initially disappointed, the sponsor readily came to see how the shift in research question made sense and would engender a more effective outcome. Even this reduced scope for the inquiry had numerous challenges.

**Initial Challenges and Opportunities: Setting the Stage**

Being an outsider provided a major opportunity: Lidia had no history in the city, so it was much easier to engage in this inquiry as a neutral party than had she been a native of Swift Current. Yet the reality of Lidia’s outsider role carried the risk that the community would see her as someone who “did not belong,” or was pushing “big city” views on their small community. Since establishing credibility and building trust was critical to the success of her research, Lidia proceeded to mindfully develop relationships with key individuals within the community as well as the greater community itself.

Lidia kept her approach intentional and multi-faceted. She knew that she had to demonstrate an open leadership style that would engage and not alienate people. Though she wanted to jump right into her research project, she remembered that quiet leadership “is not about drinking champagne in Business Class…it is about rolling up your sleeves and finding out what is going on” (Mintzberg, 1999, p.30). She knew she had to be seen as a member of the community, however much of a newcomer she was. The opportunity presented itself when she spent each Saturday in the summer at Market Square—a hub of activity—where she assisted with running the community event on behalf of the city. Lidia developed relationships with Market Square vendors, event sponsors, and patrons alike. She discussed her upcoming research with anyone who seemed even moderately interested in downtown revitalization. She presented her project to various business groups (e.g. the Downtown Business Association—DBA), informing stakeholders of her upcoming research, the philosophy under which it would be conducted, and the scope of the undertaking. She attended as many community and business function as possible and generally became a networking presence in town.

Between the months of July and September, Lidia focused on demonstrating democratic engagement and using an appreciative stance (Bushnell, Bergthold, & Agger-Gupta, 2002) in all interactions. She found herself engaging in a balancing act, maintaining a neutral stance with all stakeholder groups (Stringer, 2007, p.49) in an attempt to generate interest in participating in the upcoming inquiry, while not making any promises for any particular outcomes of the revitalization effort. Lidia found maintaining
a neutral stance a challenge as it became evident the city had a history with many citizens that was not always positive, and she was now representing the city. Some interactions were challenging as not everyone she encountered responded positively.

By October, just three months after she had arrived and started meeting people, the stage was set: there was ample evidence of interest in the topic of downtown revitalization among potential participants.

**Build it Right; They Will Come**

Through continuing discussion and exploration with Niels, Lidia designed an inquiry to facilitate up to five focus groups, three to five individual interviews, up to three expert interviews (to support her research), and a World Café, bringing previous participants together after she had done the first rounds of data gathering. The World Café was planned but was held as provisional, as time permitted. Though the scope of the inquiry was now more manageable, there was still a broad section of key stakeholder groups that needed to be involved in order to pave the way for success.

Lidia completed her proposal and prepared a request for ethical review by the RRU Research Ethics Board. The inquiry needed to adhere to the RRU Research Ethics Guidelines (2011) for minimal risk research and to the Tri-Council Guidelines for Ethical Research (2010). After a thorough review, her ethics review was quickly approved and Lidia was cleared to proceed with her inquiry.

Stakeholder selection was initially identified through discussions with the Sponsor and other key people in City Hall. To ensure inclusion as well as to demonstrate the democratic engagement concept, the original set of stakeholders were confirmed and additional potential participants identified through conversations with potential stakeholders themselves. During those discussions, Lidia asked many questions about the community, something that both engaged people and allowed her to mine a vast amount of community knowledge, which in turn helped her to understand how to construct and facilitate her groups.

Expanding on her nascent community understanding connections, early in October—once the research was designed—Lidia personally contacted key representatives from each key representative group to engage them in an overview of the nature of her project, stressing its appreciative stance and ethical standards, and asked if they or someone else from their organization would be interested in participating. She also continued to probe stakeholders to identify other influential individuals that should be included on the invitation lists.

Though most people were receptive to her calls and upcoming research, a few skeptics told her, “These things never work. No one will come to your
groups.” Later, in the focus groups, several participants said it had been Lidia’s personal approach that had engaged them in the process and made them want to participate. They felt their opinions mattered to Lidia and would be valued, regardless of their point of view.

Early on in the process, Lidia learned that there were different points of view and indeed, there had recently been a discordant exchange of ideas between those who want downtown revitalized (City Hall and the DBA) and other stakeholders (including some Chamber of Commerce members and business owners located outside of the downtown core) who thought that revitalizing downtown would not serve their interests. Lidia took pains to stress to everyone with whom she spoke, from all sides of this community divide, that their input was critical in planning a process for downtown. She kept asking questions that allowed people to see that revitalization and any changes in the downtown could affect everyone in some positive way, and that their involvement and input were essential.

While the process of asking questions proved a powerful tool, Lidia also understood that the location in which she held focus groups would send a strong message to the community. Rather than holding them in council chambers at City Hall or a large downtown venue, she opted for a smaller facility in the casino located on the city’s periphery. According to the CEO of the Chamber, several people stated that they were pleased the location was not downtown; this simple choice clearly signified to them that the inquiry was truly inclusive, valuing the opinions of all stakeholders.

By the middle of October, with a secured venue, her phone calls completed, and a substantial list of invitees, Lidia sent out focus group invitations to five stakeholder groups and arranged two individual interviews with individuals who could not attend one of the group sessions. To maintain neutrality, while at the same time clearly identifying who the emails originated from, Lidia set up an e-mail account specifically for the inquiry. Of the thirty (30) people who accepted a focus group invitation, only two (2) were unable to attend (.06%).

Making it Safe: Encouraging Openness

When discussing the combination of invitees for each focus group, Lidia and Niels initially agreed that keeping major stakeholder groups separate was wise; it would provide a safe environment in which open dialogue and candour would be most likely to occur. During her dialogue with stakeholders, Lidia learned there had been a recent shift in the “distance” between the DBA and the Chamber of Commerce. She explored the concept of combining members of these two groups in a single focus group. There was no compelling ethical or philosophical reason to keep them apart. The response was quite positive: many agreed it was an opportunity to coax the two sides even closer, suggesting they had common interests and re-enforcing the theory that any changes in the downtown would affect and
benefit all business in the city. All other groups—City Hall management, protective services, and health, community, and education services—were not separated.

Promoting a safe and productive environment in the groups was critical, as among them were representatives from each major group in Swift Current. Another critical factor was sowing the seeds to spread the culture, or rules, of engagement. To that end, Lidia consistently stressed both the “appreciative” stance of her research—explaining what it meant—and the respectful, democratic aspect of the process. She talked about new ways of learning and addressing issues. By the time the focus groups started, the tone had been set: participants knew what to expect and negativity was negligent. What little there existed was usually promptly dealt with by other members of the group.

The Dialogues

The goal of the research was to answer the following question: “How can the city administration engage the community of Swift Current, Saskatchewan to plan a revitalized downtown that will appeal to and benefit the community?” Facilitating dialogue with a cross-section of community stakeholders, Lidia engaged participants in articulating the elements needed for successful community change to occur, the kind of change that would be supported, embraced, and perhaps more importantly, result in change that the community would “own” (Armenakis et al., 2007; Rowe et al., 2013).

Participants reflected on elements that were relevant to a community change process, specifically as it pertains to revitalizing the downtown. They were asked to share their thoughts regarding:

1. What is currently working well in drawing people to downtown?
2. How will a revitalized downtown benefit our community?
3. What does community engagement look like?
4. Who needs to be involved in the process and to what degree?
5. What strategies are required to engage the community to co-create a revitalized downtown?

The dialogues across all focus groups were positive and spirited. Major themes that emerged indicated the community was receptive to revitalization with certain provisos and that engaging the community in supporting such change would require major collaboration and input from all stakeholders along with shared responsibility for designing and driving the process.

Learning in Action: Surprises along the Way

There were a few key conversation elements that surprised Lidia, challenged her perceptions, or refocused the direction of the conversation. For example,
she was surprised by the strong sentiment that downtown, having already experienced some revitalization, was already somewhat vital! This observation was pivotal in sharpening Lidia’s sensitivities and altered how she perceived the downtown as well as how she discussed further revitalization with future groups.

Furthermore, participants were not unanimous in the belief that downtown was a revitalization priority for Swift Current and felt that in a [small] city of this size, “you have to develop the whole community” (Focus Group 4). This observation and subsequent spirited discussion was a game changer: it refocused the conversation, expanding the scope from planning for downtown revitalization to addressing the revitalization needs of the entire city. Through this one discussion, Lidia was able to experience how the process of change was an emergent one: getting support for change could actually redefine the nature of the change itself, sometimes profoundly so.

On a smaller but perhaps equally valuable scale, Lidia’s perceptions about what positive change for this community would look like were challenged almost from the start of the dialogues. Being from a large city herself, she anticipated wholesale excitement among participants regarding the prospect of bringing a big city atmosphere to Swift Current. Though participants truly embraced and highly valued recent changes (and concomitant benefits) that gave Swift Current a more cosmopolitan feel, Lidia was touched by the extensive and strong degree of pride and protectiveness expressed for the city’s small town aspects: safety, friendliness, openness, and connectivity. This experience made Lidia all the more aware of her own biases and she formed a sensitivity to engaging participants from a neutral, appreciative position and without saying something that might inadvertently alienate her participants.

Another surprise was not that people wanted to have a say in what happened in their communities, but the degree of passion participants felt towards total involvement in any community change process. They didn’t just want to be involved—they wanted to both define and drive the change! As one participant stressed, “It is [not] the City’s job to...tell us where we are going...it is very important that it is a collaborative process and that we all have a say...in terms of developing the vision, direction and strategies” (Focus Group 2). Indeed, many felt strongly that in order for the process to be effective, the city should only be one of many stakeholders in planning change for the town and stressed that “it is not us and them, it is just us” (Focus Group 2). Some participants wanted to see an actual change in the relationship between the city and the community that would result in a more inclusive decision-making model. This aspect of the conversations demonstrated, in a real life situation, the importance of getting the “whole system in the room” (Weisbord, 2012, p. 269).

An even greater surprise came when some participants pointed out that in addition to increasing involvement in planning for change, there was
an opportunity for the city to share the responsibility with the entire community itself and, to some degree, even the actual costs related to redevelopment. This was a strong example of unexpected ideas that emerge from learning together and was the instigator of further research, along with the introduction of the concept of co-governance in the study.

Lidia’s biggest surprise, and perhaps greatest learning, was that at the heart of the downtown revitalization process was the mechanism for true civic engagement: truly engaging the community in defining and implementing meaningful change is not just an effective way to generate sustainable physical revitalization, but it becomes the very tool that revitalizes the community itself, both in terms of how it defines itself and how it functions.

After the Dialogues: It’s a Wrap – For Now

The dialogues had refocused the main research question, expanding it from looking at downtown to addressing the revitalization needs of the entire city. Of equal significance, people wanted to be involved in the process to a much higher degree than expected. This interest suggested a literature review into new governance models based on co-leadership, a new concept, not only for Swift Current, but for communities everywhere. In discussions and exploration with Niels, these two areas crystallized for Lidia the realization that promoting democratic civic engagement was itself an opportunity for the city to support a process that could change how the community relates to itself and the greater world: community revitalization from the inside out. In discussing the findings and conclusions of the study with the sponsor, it was these two areas that proved to be the most interesting.

Initially the sponsor was surprised by the shift in focus of the inquiry, a shift that encompassed identifying the revitalization needs of the entire city, not just downtown. Though a focus on downtown in many respects would more quickly and readily demonstrate visible change, a discussion about the benefits of taking a longer term view, and how including the entire city would engender greater support from all residents, opened the doors to considering new approaches that the city might take.

The shift in inquiry focus was perhaps eclipsed by the degree of involvement that participants stated they wanted in terms of defining and implementing change in the city. This was seen as incongruent with the current perceived apathy; existing channels for community involvement to influence change were not being utilized. This response from the sponsor led to a discussion that explored the differences between attending DBA meetings to effect change regarding how downtown merchants conduct business versus involvement with sharing decision-making for the entire community—decisions that would impact all citizens for many years to come.

The recommendations to the sponsor for a pilot for potential broader change
were drawn from a global perspective and an exploration of what could be. These recommendations included requesting the city to:

1. Collaboratively host a series of community conversations or dialogues—the civic engagement process for the revitalization of Swift Current.
2. Prepare to play a leadership role in facilitating and supporting a collaborative community change process.
3. Host a World Café or similar large group learning space to formally launch the vitalization of Swift Current.
4. Enact and support a collaborative steering committee to drive the planning and subsequent engagement process.

Lidia presented the above process as an opportunity for the city to engage the community to learn new ways of working together, consider possibilities for the future, and learn how this experience might impact relationships both within the city and between the city and the community. She positioned the process as one that could ultimately provide the city and its residents with the opportunity to learn whether a more collaborative model might be beneficial for implementation in certain aspects of civic governance. Though generally favourable, the reaction to the study and its recommendations ultimately lacked a sense of immediacy.

Subsequent to her presentations to the sponsor, Lidia realized that there would be some challenges in implementing the recommendations from the study. Basically, three key factors had eclipsed the inquiry and its outcomes:

1. Though she had learned much about the community in her early days in Swift Current, as a recent arrival Lidia did not have the insider knowledge of everything that the city was dealing with.
2. There were many things that required immediate attention and eclipsed the study: planning and organizing a series of major 100 Year Anniversary celebrations to be held through 2014; the introduction of a radical new budget with a significant increase in civic taxes; a new strategic plan; an extensive economic revitalization study; and the implementation of a new garbage collection system, to name a few.
3. Lidia would not be staying in Swift Current to keep the recommendations alive.

Nine months after the completion of her thesis, and five months after graduating with her MA-Leadership, Lidia was still exploring creative ways to make the inquiry come alive in the minds of the city leaders. In the MA-Leadership program, it is sometimes difficult for the sponsor to implement the changes that such an engagement process suggests, but in this case, it was also clear that the city would create more of a community-supported revitalization initiative if they were to implement the recommendations of the study.
Conclusion

Truly, this hands-on action research project in the community afforded Lidia an opportunity to experience first-hand much of what she learned in her RRU Leadership training. The RRU LTM elements of Experiential, authentic learning strategies, Supporting integrative learning, and Action-oriented research as a process of inquiry formed a substantial component in helping Lidia consolidate her new leadership skills as an organizational consultant. Its very nature dictated that in order to be successful, this study had to be grounded in experiential, integrative learning throughout its entire evolution. Conducting research in a community that she had not previously known meant that Lidia's inquiry design, indeed her entire research process and her understanding of the project, had to be constantly refined according to daily observations and experiences. Much of the success of the study can be attributed to its democratic nature which allowed participants to feel safe, valued, and consequently engaged—salient elements of the action research process that in this study were critical aspects of establishing credibility and building trust. Consequently, these very components also helped the City of Swift Current, Saskatchewan to develop an inclusive approach for implementing their revitalization engagement process. In large part because of her work on this project, Lidia received the Founder's Award at the RRU Convocation for her cohort.

References


Government of Canada, Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics, Canadian Institutes of Health, Research, National Science Research Council, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. (2010). *Interagency advisory panel on research ethics (Tri-Council guidelines).*


