T. Mengel – Values and Voices at Renaissance College: The Story of the Vision Quest and Learning Journey at UNB’s Leadership School

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Abstract

Developing a vision and mission statement can help to focus the educational efforts and increase the accountability of colleges and universities (Collins & Porras, 1997; Steward & Carpenter-Hubin, 2001). At the same time, engaging students and including community representatives in this process further increases the potential of learning about the process significantly; through process checks, in-class discussions, and reflection papers these experiences become the case-in-point of individual, organizational, and community learning (Senge, 1990; Heifetz, 1994; Parks, 2005).

This paper tells the story of how faculty, staff, students, and community leaders in and around Renaissance College in 2005-06 discovered their shared values, identified a joint mission, and developed their strategic objectives for future learning and teaching at the College. First, it will set the stage and present the development of the script by discussing the background, the need for focus, the opportunities of joint learning, and the resulting process design. Second, it will demonstrate how the script was implemented by investigating how the voices were united, how the learning was facilitated, and how the vision was created. Finally, it will present and critically review the results and lessons learned and discuss how a voices-to-vision-process can focus and enrich the experience and culture of learning and teaching in institutions of higher education.

Developing the Script

The script for the story to be told is based on Renaissance College’s particular background and the resulting challenges, the College’s need to focus, the opportunities of joint learning, and the resulting design of the process.
Background

Three specific features will help to understand the unique background and challenges of RC: The nature of its leadership degree program, RC’s comprehensive set of learning outcomes, and its collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

In 2000, Renaissance College (RC) accepted its first students as the University of New Brunswick's (UNB) leadership college. Being the first – and still only – Canadian institution offering an undergraduate degree program in interdisciplinary leadership studies, RC each year accepts 25 highly capable learners of various backgrounds. The selection process for this intensive program is based on a carefully balanced set of criteria including academic performance, demonstrated leadership potential, volunteer and community service, diversity of backgrounds and skills in areas of arts, music, athletics or culture. Focusing on emerging leaders, UNB and RC continue “to mobilize its intellectual resources to help students make a positive difference in the world” (Renaissance College, 2005b).

Graduating from this RC program, students will have received a Bachelor of Philosophy (B.Phil.) degree in interdisciplinary leadership studies with a UNB minor and will have been exposed to a multitude of perspectives and experiences. The curriculum consists of a variety of courses from different academic disciplines as well as of national and global internships and community research and leadership projects. The learning processes are facilitated by faculty “integrators” (three full-time and ten part-time) from the College, the larger UNB campus, and beyond and evaluated by both students and faculty.

In particular, students complete 132 credit hours, 87 credit hours in RC courses around worldviews, problem solving, science, citizenship, wellness, public policy, integrative forum, learning portfolio, and leadership – including a national and international internship – as well as 45 credit hours in various electives from a UNB minor.

The following has been adapted from Mengel (2006) and Zundel et al. (2006).
In addition to the content related learning objectives of each course, the interdisciplinary program is designed such that students will have demonstrated their level of mastery of the following learning outcomes upon completion (RC Council, 2005):

- Knowing oneself and others
- Personal wellbeing
- Multi literacy
- Social interaction
- Problem solving
- Effective citizenship

These outcomes “are intended to serve as a set of interactive standards by which an experience of progress can be assessed throughout the phases of a Renaissance College education” (RC Council, 2005, p. 4). They also, in an integrative way, feed into the students’ ability to be and act as effective leaders.

At RC collaboration is a way of life. Faculty and staff have jointly developed outcomes based learning and crafted the overall structure. Often together with students they continuously facilitate, review, and improve the learning process. One of many examples of collaborative design and delivery is the Learning Portfolio process used to assess student growth and competency in the learning outcomes. All RC faculty members assess graduating students’ portfolios and attend public presentations held to have external assessors provide feedback to students on their portfolios. The integrators’ workshop held each spring evaluates the portfolio work and proposes modifications and improvements.

**The Need for Focus**

All three components presented above – the comprehensive and interdisciplinary character of this program, its integrated outcome-based approach, and its particularly collaborative design and delivery – contribute to the highly energized and labour intensive learning environment at RC. On the other hand RC’s acknowledgement of the importance of educating well-balanced personalities and its emphasis on the personal well-being of both students and faculty call for continuously refocusing its efforts.
Furthermore, a university leadership school – as every organization – has ample opportunities to progress and grow. Its development can go in various directions (e.g., business leadership, educational leadership, community leadership etc.) and be based on different educational paradigms (e.g., higher education, professional development, skills training etc.). As a matter of fact, through RC’s engagement in the university community and beyond a variety of further opportunities of involvement are being presented to the College and its members. However, given the limited existing resources and the challenges universities in Canada and beyond are currently facing, choices need to be made. While the founders of RC had laid the ground work by creating and implementing the College’s first vision, mission, and purpose, changes in the constituencies and environment of the College throughout the first five years of its existence have called for revisiting the original vision as it was no longer sufficiently “present” as a helpful guideline within the decision making processes. In addition, UNB’s efforts to redefine its strategy in the light of increasing financial constraints (McLaughlin, 2006; Betts & MacDonald, 2006) needed to be considered and taken into account.

Finally, the leadership literature agrees that “one of the most important practices of leadership is giving life and work a sense of meaning and purpose by offering an exciting vision” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 112; Mengel, in print; Thomas, 2000). Hence, it was obvious that the college community was in need of a clear and jointly developed vision and strategy to guide its day to day decisions and actions.

**The Opportunities of Joint Learning**

Given RC’s mandate and self-perception as “leadership school”, RC needed to review its own values and vision as basis of its leadership behaviour and in order to effectively teach students about that. Modeling the way and talking the talk as a major element of effective leadership became of crucial importance (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

Furthermore, engaging in that process together would not only create a framework that could help guide the actions of the College, but it would at the same time engage all involved in learning about the many facets of such a
process. Initiating, planning, executing, controlling and closing a vision-strategy project could accommodate both, the need to create a valuable product – values, vision and strategy – as well as engaging into meaningful leadership and learning processes based on a real-life project.

Hence, this project could serve as the “case-in-point” (Heifetz, 1994; Parks, 2005) of leadership education by creating the shared experience that could be utilized to facilitate the learning about adaptive organizations and the development of adaptive skills. Finally, this project could initiate a process of continuous organizational learning at the College and beyond by introducing students, faculty, and staff into “the art and practice of the learning organization” (Senge, 1990).

The Resulting Process Design

Based on its unique background and the resulting need to focus as well as on the learning opportunities and objectives identified, faculty and staff members started the dialogue in November 2005. After reviewing and discussing various approaches, they suggested adapting models of vision-strategy development as introduced by Collins and Porras (1997) and Steward and Carpenter-Hubin (2001) as well as creating a core project team (“The Core Team”) consisting of two faculty members (including the dean of the College), three staff members, and four students representing all cohorts of the B.Phil. program. The RC Council – the College’s executive body – approved the suggestion in January 2006, initiated the project and served as its steering committee. The Core Team’s mandate was to review the existing vision, mission, and priorities of RC in order to jointly develop a set of current values, a shared vision and a well understood mission, and an integrated strategy to be implemented in 2006. Furthermore, the suggested process was to provide various constituents with several opportunities to engage and consisted of the following main steps:

1. Review existing documentation and consult with constituents to gather ideas for an updated values-vision-mission statement (01-02/2006)

2 For details see Appendix A: RC Vision Strategy Process
2. Update/create a values-vision-mission statement and identify core areas for a strategy (02-03/2006)

3. Develop an integrated strategy for the College with detailed objectives for all areas (03-04/2006)

4. Implement an ongoing vision-strategy review process allowing for continuous improvement and update (05/2006)

Several opportunities were built in to allow a variety of constituents to fully contribute to and decisively influence this process:

- Students, staff, and faculty were represented by members of the core project team, they would be consulted early on in the process, and they are also represented in RC council. Furthermore, they would participate in the major vision/strategy workshop. Finally, all would be able to contribute to developing and implementing the detailed strategy and objectives; in addition, students were encouraged to take on directed studies courses related to this activity and to choose assignment topics in relationship to this process;

- Alumni would be consulted early on in the process and were invited to participate in the major vision/strategy workshop;

- UNB management and members of the larger community (parents, sponsors, and friends of RC) would be consulted early on in the process and would participate as members of an advisory board.

**Implementation of the Script**

This section will describe how the steps towards achieving the three major objectives were implemented. First, the steps and approaches taken to consider and integrate the various stakeholders will be demonstrated. Second, it will be explained how opportunities of joint learning were explicitly built in and utilized. Finally, the vision-building itself will be outlined and described.
**Uniting the Voices**

Based on its original plan, in January 2006 the Core Team created a stakeholder matrix that identified ten different groups and described how, what, and when these would contribute to the process and its envisioned results. A major objective was to be as inclusive as possible and thus to go beyond the immediate stakeholders of faculty, staff, and current students of the B.Phil. undergraduate program. In addition, RC founders, the UNB administration and leadership, community partners, the greater public, alumni, graduate students and other undergraduate students associated with the College were invited to participate. The whole process was controlled by the RC Council.

In January and February 2006, the Core Team conducted interviews and consultations with various representatives of different stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, RC founders, UNB leaders and administrators, community partners, and greater public), invited participation through email communication, and consolidated the results of this consultation process. Furthermore, these results were enriched by collecting and making publicly available the (process) documentation that had been developed in the first five years of the College’s existence and that would ensure consistency with the voices of “the past”.

All stakeholders were invited to participate in an externally facilitated two day vision development workshop in mid-February and to contribute to a virtual open space that was allowing to browse through existing documentation and to engage in an open dialogue around the visioning process from January through to the end of the project. Again, it was the Core Team’s responsibility to consolidate the results of the workshop as well as of the online dialogue and to feed these back to the larger stakeholder communities for their comment.

**Facilitating the Learning**

Innovative and experiential learning were cornerstones of RC’s mandate to contribute to transforming education since its proposal stage (Renaissance

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3 The online space was made available through WebCT, UNB’s online education platform
College, 1998, 2005, 2005b). Learning based on projects conducted in internships, research, and in regular coursework play a major role in RC’s educational framework. Through jointly responding to needs identified in communities that are part of or related to UNB and RC and by developing and implementing a solution for the problem(s) defined, the RC learning community not only creates and interprets knowledge, but it also helps integrating the knowledge creation process into a process of meaningful community development.

Hence, the challenge and opportunity of this process was to integrate learning “about” values, purpose, and strategy and their significance for leadership processes and leadership education while at the same time learning “how to” lead and manage a process of values, purpose, and strategy creation. This challenge was responded to by putting increased emphasis on studying models of creating a vision and strategy and on reflecting about the process while engaging in it. Furthermore, this objective provided yet another rationale for engaging the learning community of RC comprehensively in that process and in the reflection about the process.

The Core Team provided students, faculty, and staff with the opportunity to more intensively study models of creating a vision and of project management. Furthermore, it also put extra effort in not just communicating results of all steps back to the various stakeholders but also in engaging in dialogue about the process and the respective lessons learned. Thus, this process became the “case-in-point” (Heifetz, 1994; Parks, 2005) of many project meetings as well as classroom discussions and reflections in student assignments. Students, faculty, and staff were discussing the challenges and necessary changes of the process. Furthermore, they lived through these experiences and understood that they had to live with the results. Hence, they created knowledge about and feeling for as well as meaningful products and results of the process. By being immersed in the systems they studied as well as re-created and by withdrawing from them in reflective dialogue, students and faculty alike developed the “art of seeing the forests and the trees” and of “rewriting the code” (Senge, 1990). As one student member of the Core Team put it: “I learned so much about the process and its project management by being a part of the team: it changed my level of
awareness and my mastery of skills as well as my way of thinking!” (Personal communication, December 2006).

Finally, the concluding learning highlight of the project was the lessons learned activity conducted at the last Core Team meeting that will be fed back into similar processes in the future. In addition, the implementation of a Strategy Assessment Team that will continuously monitor the implementation process and provide feedback to the RC Council, will contribute to the continuation of the learning process.

Creating the Vision

Based on the broader discussions at the workshop as well as the online dialogue and the consolidation of its results, the Core Team worked on creating values and purpose statements as well as on their translation into two strategic objectives for 2011 and 2013 and into six strategic areas and respective goals for the College. In an iterative process these were presented to stakeholders and the RC council, further refined and finally approved by the RC council in April 2006.

Finally, the Core Team, together with faculty and staff involved with the operational activities and decision making of the College, developed an implementation framework that did spell out the details for implementing the strategic goals and objectives over the next two to three years. Again, this last step and its results were approved by the RC council on November 28th and thereby the jointly created vision, purpose, and strategic plan was implemented and the respective project concluded; while this happened later than originally anticipated, the project still met the objective of getting implemented in 2006. The successful completion of the project was celebrated by the whole RC community on November 30th, 2006, at one of the traditional “common meals” (Roderick et al., 2005).

Results of the Vision Quest and Learning Journey

The core result of the described process was the Vision and Strategy of Renaissance College (Renaissance College, 2006). Furthermore, in addition to
initiating an ongoing process of organizational learning this project rendered some lessons learned that were harvested at the end of the project to be fed back into the College and its core processes.

**RC’s Vision and Strategy: Values, Purpose, and Strategic Areas**

The first and foremost result of the College’s vision-strategy process was the creation of the values and purpose of the College and its strategic objectives, areas and goals as well as its implementation plan as approved by the RC Council in April 2006 and in November 2006 respectively.

In particular, Renaissance College values

- active, holistic, and interdisciplinary learning culture,
- leadership,
- community,
- mindful openness,
- excellence, and
- congruence.

Based on its values, the College has identified the following main reasons of its existence:

- Our primary purpose is to nurture and develop leadership potential and engaged citizenship through the liberal education of our students.
- We are a learning community focused on experimenting with and modeling highly effective, innovative teaching and learning practices; citizenship; and leadership.
- We improve post-secondary education by engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

In a next step, the values and purpose have been translated into two strategic objectives around achieving excellence in providing liberal undergraduate education and in contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning in

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4 For details see Appendix B, RC Values. These can also be accessed online at http://www.unb.ca/renaissance/academic/RCPurposeValues.php.
leadership and liberal education within the next five to ten years as well as into the following strategic areas of involvement and further development for the College:

- RC program,
- RC curricula,
- scholarship,
- community life and involvement,
- communication with the communities, and
- monitoring and feedback.

Finally, the strategic areas have been further broken down into detailed goals for each of the areas and the resulting strategy has been translated into an implementation framework and plan focusing on concrete steps for the next two to three years. While the first five strategic areas are concerned with specifying and developing the rather traditional areas of scholarly activities – teaching, research, and service\(^5\) – the last strategic area listed enforces an element that often gets overlooked in strategic initiatives: the need to continuously initiate and adapt to changes by monitoring the implementation of the plan, by analyzing any “deviations” in regards to the existing framework – values, purpose, strategy, and strategy implementation within the larger environmental context – and by feeding back the results of the monitoring activities into the strategic organizational processes. This will be the College’s opportunity to stay true to its values and to keep the vision alive by incorporating and considering them in their decision making processes, by continuously improving the status quo, and by leading necessary changes.

**Reviewing the Journey: Lessons Learned**

The last but by no means least opportunity of organizational learning within any given project is to critically reflect on what went well, what didn’t go well, what should be changed next time around, and on what needs to be acted on immediately (Mengel, 2005). In its final meeting for this project, the Core Team reviewed the “Expectations and Concerns” expressed at the beginning of the

\(^5\) In more recent terms: the scholarship of discovery, integration, teaching, and application; Boyer, 1990.
process and conducted a “Lessons Learned” activity based on the above mentioned questions\(^6\).

In spite of the great satisfaction of the Core Team members with their involvement in the project, with the project results, and with their overall project management, the experience of this particular process appeared to have again demonstrated the validity of two project management principles: one can never communicate enough and one can never be sufficiently inclusive (Mengel, 2006b). In spite of its efforts to communicate with all stakeholders in order to inspire their participation and to keep them “in the loop”, the Core Team felt that the objective of broad participation beyond the students of the B.Phil. program was not as successfully met as the other goals of the project. The implementation of the project results and the continuous process of monitoring and feedback will have to put special emphasis both on broadening the basis for participation and feedback as well as on catching and effectively responding to early signs of missing out on significant stakeholders in the implementation of the project results and in the further development of the process.

References


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\(^6\) For details see Appendix C: RC Vision-Strategy Process – Lessons Learned


Appendix A

RC Vision Strategy Process – 1

Start

Preparation

Implement Advisory Board

Implement Core Team

Consultation RC staff

Consultation RC faculty

Present Process to Advisory Board

Suggested changes?

Apply changes to process

Present Process to RC Council for acceptance

Accepted?

Apply changes to process

Consultation RC Students

Consultation RC Alumni

Consultation Community

Consultation UNB Management

Consolidate consultation & prepare vision/ strategy workshop

Vision/strategy workshop - update vision - identify core strategy areas

End

Timeline:
- 11/2005
- 11-12/2005
- 04/12/2005
- 12/2005
- 12/2005
- 01/2006
- 01/2006
- 01/2006
- 01/2006
- 01/2006
- 01/2006
- 02/2006
Appendix A

RC Vision Strategy Process – 2

- Define long term objectives
- Identify Performance Measures
- Identify relevant processes, structures & people in RC

- Communicate and link to process, structures and people in RC
- Develop and link micro goals
- Develop strategies for micro goals

- Present complete RC strategy to Advisory Board
- Suggested changes?
  - yes
  - no

- Present complete RC strategy to RC Council for acceptance
- Accepted?
  - yes
  - no

- Allocate resources and implement

02/2006
03/2006
04/2006
05/2006
Appendix B
RC Values

Renaissance College values the following:

1. **Active, holistic, and interdisciplinary learning culture**
   We practice experiential, outcome-based learning, in an interdisciplinary setting. We value holistic and integrated learning which engages learners in all their capabilities to find and process information and gain knowledge, and grows the whole person. Experiential learning is the application and interpretation of lessons learned in concrete activity to the academic realm and the subsequent expansion of these ideas, incorporating them into one’s own worldview. We value the diversity of experiences, values, and talents of our community as a rich resource for personal growth.

2. **Leadership**
   We are committed to enriching people’s leadership capabilities intentionally through the study, practice, and demonstration of leadership in all aspects of society and in a variety of cultures. Renaissance College inspires its students and faculty to explore leadership opportunities within and outside the Renaissance College community.

3. **Community**
   We feel a sense of responsibility for building a just, good, and civil society, at all levels. We commit to engaging in local, national, and global communities through critical thought, inclusive dialogue, and direct action. Through community events and social interaction we forge meaningful interpersonal relationships. These relationships create a support network that guides students through their academic and experiential endeavours.

4. **Mindful openness**
   We believe in a continuously developing consciousness of self, others, and environment. We recognize the role of big ideas in the decisions and phenomena of everyday life. We are intellectual explorers, seeking out new ideas while engaging in critical analysis of them.
5. **Excellence**
We seek high achievement in all we do. We understand that it is through diligently striving to do our best that we achieve personal and community growth. Therefore, we commit to continuously challenging each other to seek the highest standards of teaching, learning, leadership, and citizenship.

6. **Congruence**
We strive to live by our community values and model the College’s learning outcomes in our academic and co-curricular work. We will iteratively evaluate these values and our actions, to bring them into ever closer agreement.
Appendix C
RC Vision-Strategy Process – Lessons Learned

1. What went well?
   - Overall: Good direction → need to focus on monitoring
   - Workshop: turnout, engaged, well organized
   - Team and teamwork, contribution by student members
   - Way students were trusted, accepted into, and involved in activities, and how input was taken into account
   - Good project management
   - Good learning for students and everybody else about the process
   - External consultant for workshop
   - Online platform got input that would not otherwise have been gathered

2. What didn’t go well?
   - Too many curricular details
   - Not enough communication
   - Lack of contribution from community (leaders) unless we went there and got it
   - Online platform: Very low participation
   - Overall: Very low participation from BIS- and MPhil-students, alumni, and external stakeholders
   - Some students did not feel encouraged (looking for action right away)

3. What would we change next time?
   - Raise student representation in Core Team and other activities
   - More introductory information to get students on board
   - Clarify expectations and objectives: Be more explicit
   - More information on an ongoing basis to stakeholders outside of Core Team

4. What do we need to act on?
   - Bring closure to advisory board communication
   - Archive information on RC network drive
   - Work hard on keeping alive (joint responsibility of RC executive and legislative bodies)
   - Review level of communication and involvement of BIS- and MPhil-students, and alumni (joint responsibility of RC executive and legislative bodies)