

## **Growing a Region of Changemakers Through Community-Based Participatory Action Research: A Journey to Be Shared**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the vision, methods, process, and outcomes associated with a three-year Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Community College Social Innovation Fund research project, entitled Growing a Region of Changemakers. The resulting Manifesting as a Changemaker model and adjacent tools were co-created using findings from community-based participatory action research methods that involved comprehensive consultation and feedback. The research starting point adopted the changemaking skills and mindsets rigorously studied by the Ashoka Index team. Our resulting model and tool are designed to help pave the pathway to aid educators in early childhood education, K-12, and higher education to incorporate changemaking into the curriculum. The creation of the instrument and accompanying resources was informed by a Changemaker Research Circle (advisory group), data gathered in focus groups led by research analyst students, and feedback from conferences and events that included students, educators, community employers, and regional change leaders who shared insights during the process. The "Growing a Region of Changemakers" project has brought together passionate minds to shape the future of social change in our region in Central Ontario and anywhere else we can impact. By connecting key constituents and dedicated educators through practical tools and dissemination activities, this project will continue to impact our college and our broader communities through the tools and resources created in the project.

### **Authors' Note**

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## **Growing a Region of Changemakers: Preparing for the Research Journey Introduction**

Today, educators at all levels of education, from kindergarten to postsecondary, are called to embed social innovation skills and mindsets into curricula. We are currently living in a global context of rapid change that, when compared with other eras, is unprecedented. According to Dobbs et al. (2015, para. 2), “Compared with the Industrial Revolution, we estimate that... change is happening ten times faster and at 300 times the scale, or roughly 3,000 times the impact.” At the same time, researchers have noted a significant decline in the ability of students to empathize with others. Konrath (as cited in Penny, 2016, para. 3) notes that “College kids today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago, as measured by standard tests of this personality trait.” This, coupled with contemporary uncertainty, has signaled “the urgency for educational institutions to provide younger generations with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that they will need to become lifelong learners, to understand issues of global interdependence and to be active global citizens” (Council of Ministers of Education, n.d., para. 2). Notably, being responsive in this way, educational systems will assist students in meeting the varying needs of local and global social and economic economy’s (Council of Ministers of Education, n.d.).

Georgian College, proudly designated as a Changemaker Campus (since 2017) by Ashoka U, is striving to ignite social innovation in our institution and across our communities. Ashoka’s key competencies align with work in educational reform over the last decade (Balilik et al.; Council of Ministers of Education, n.d.; 2015; Fullan, 2014; Government of Ontario, 2016; Parratt et al., 2016; University of Michigan, 2010; Royal Bank of Canada, 2018). Bailik et al. (2015) note that, “facing the challenges of the 21st century requires a deliberate effort to cultivate in students personal growth and the ability to fulfill social and community responsibilities as global citizens” (p.1). The extant literature confirms that employers increasingly value these skills as well, and the answer to the current rapid need for innovation and transformation has been reflected by the shifting of educational policy to refocus from strictly curriculum related to vocation and disciplinary learning to incorporate those skills considered essential. As such, 21<sup>st</sup>-century shifts in education will need to “emphasize and develop these competencies in explicit and intentional ways through deliberate changes in curriculum design and pedagogical practice. The goal of these changes is to prepare students to solve messy, complex problems – including problems we don’t yet know about – associated with living in a competitive, globally connected, and technologically intensive world” (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 3). A sentiment reflected clearly by a call made in the recently released Skills Next 2020 report (Gyarmati et al., 2020): “There is a growing demand not only for technological skills, but also ‘soft skills,’ such as resilience, emotional stability, flexibility, and adaptability. And if skills and competencies are the new workplace ‘currency,’ we need shared approaches to understand how to define, evaluate, and develop them”.

However, evaluation of these skills is, as Devedzic et al. (2018) have pointed out, difficult. In their article, they provide a summary of measurement research initiatives to date, but have noted the limitations of these. Their funded Lifelong Learning Project (n. d.) titled the GRASS project, with a goal of developing and defining metrics for soft skills, holds promise but needs additional

validation. Encouraging students to be active changemakers requires educators to identify, support, and measure growth in skills and mindsets associated with changemaking and social innovation.

As a Changemaker Campus, some faculty have been prioritizing teaching, scaffolding, and modeling changemaker skills and mindsets, and grappling with how to do so. Although our intuitive and wholehearted approach was affirmed through student stories and anecdotal evidence, many working to inspire social change felt challenged when it came to the assessment of these skills, feeling at a loss for how to note growth and measure students' development of empathy, leadership, teamwork, and practicing changemaking, the skills identified as awakening social change (Ashoka Canada, n.d.). It was here that Sarah and Tracy found themselves three years ago, grappling with how to support changemaking in their courses and support peers in doing the same. Sarah, as a faculty member educating novice teachers in a Teacher's Education program, and Tracy, as a Faculty Developer in the College's Centre for Teaching and Learning, brought their unique experiences together to propose a collaborative and community-based research project. With an overall goal of expanding and adding to existing research about social innovation and changemaking education, while addressing the lack of evaluative tools to measure students' emergence and development of the four skills and mindsets identified and tested by Ashoka, we set out.

### **Methodology: Our Itinerary and Destination**

Georgian College (2016, 2019, 2020) has been committed to scaling changemaking skills and competencies in stakeholder communities. Georgian's Strategic Plan and initiatives from the Centre for Changemaking and Social Innovation reflect a dedication to supporting students in the development of the social innovation and changemaking skills necessary for success in the 21st century. Teaching, scaffolding, and supporting the acquisition of these skills requires diagnostic, formative, and summative evaluation tools to inform teaching and learning. Current evaluation tools to measure students' development in many of the frameworks, let alone key changemaking skills identified by Ashoka, are limited (Care et al., 2018; Devedzic, 2018). Through partnership with Ashoka, Georgian has made significant strides in areas reminiscent of Fullan and Langworthy's (2014) *Deep Learning* by offering students real opportunities to develop empathy, leadership, and collaborative skills while practicing changemaking through our numerous co-curricular opportunities. Where we hoped to impact was through the development of the missing piece of the puzzle, assessment and validation measuring tools. It was our hope that once armed with tools to validate and measure changemaking skills, educators would be empowered to incorporate changemaking into their pedagogy and thereby scale the necessary social innovation. This, in turn, can answer the call by Care et al. (2018) to "... move beyond the theoretical and conceptual toward pragmatic solutions to the teaching and assessment of twenty-first century skills that will enhance student growth" (p. 15). It should be noted that (as cited 20, p. 39), "The research clearly shows that whatever is measured matters", suggesting that measurement tools hold the power to increase the importance of skills not traditionally measured (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 39).

Together, Dr. Sarah Hunter and Tracy Mitchell-Ashley engaged multiple research students from a breadth of program areas to bring multiple perspectives. For example, a mature part-time student from the Business Administration degree was hired for their expertise in community leadership, and to bring an understanding of local community needs.

### **The Proposed Journey: Where We Started**

This study proposed a three-part methodology to achieve the following goals:

- Understand how Ashoka's social innovation competencies (empathy, shared leadership, collaborative teamwork, and changemaking in action) are understood, taught/scaffolded, enacted, and evaluated in higher education by faculty and students, and in the broader local community, including prospective alumni employers.
- Develop and validate an evaluation instrument to measure student emergent growth and development in the four key social innovation competencies.
- Work collaboratively to build educators' capacity in K-12 and post-secondary to measure student growth as social innovators to inform teaching and learning.
- Ultimately, strengthen the local and national changemaker educational ecosystem by contributing to its ability to respond to changing societal needs.

### **To achieve these goals, we completed the following:**

**Phase One:** This phase proposed working with students, faculty, industry experts, and employers to plot the acquisition of each competency (empathy, shared leadership, collaborative teamwork, and changemaking) along a developmental continuum and identify the emergence of skills that would support growth toward mastery. We decided to work with Georgian College's Research Analyst Program, engaging a group of student researchers to develop and lead multiple focus groups to explore how changemaking is understood and how the skills and mindsets are developed and nurtured in the classroom and local community. Through these focus groups, college and local community stakeholders engaged to develop an evaluation metric for the four changemaking competencies: empathy, shared leadership, collaborative teamwork, and changemaking in action. The initial goal of this phase was to yield four evaluation tools, each measuring the development of one of the four social innovation competencies. Concurrent to this phase being enacted, we struck a Research Advisory Council (RAC). The RAC consisted of students and faculty, representative of human services, business, health sciences, engineering, and technology programs. The council also consisted of local employers with an investment in the soft skills identified throughout changemaking. The RAC was established at the onset of this study to help identify and inform research priorities, goals, and guide the development of the competency evaluation framework.

**Phase Two:** This phase initially aimed to pilot the evaluation instrument constructed in Phase One with students. However, once the findings from phase one were crafted into evaluation rubrics, they were brought back to the RAC for feedback and dialogue. RAC members discussed their understanding of the development of changemaker skills and mindsets in relation to the focus group data and in relation to their own lived experiences. This dialogue and ongoing discussions with RAC members led to an evolved understanding of the fluidity of each skill's

development and subsequent manifestation. We were challenged to create evaluation tools that transcended traditional measurement tools and instead focused on tools that informed and supported educators in understanding the complexity of how changemaking is conceptualized and enacted, and to focus more on practical tools that supported this process alongside the embedding of changemaking into the classroom.

**Phase Three:** As Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) urge action researchers conducting research with teachers to stay in service to teachers and work to advocate for “teachers’ knowledge” (p. 561), this phase sought to focus efforts on the development of tools and resources in the service of educators. This phase also included meaning-making and action-taking in the form of teaching and learning communities and/or experiential workshops. Educators and community partners were invited to explore principles and understandings of the changemaker competencies and how the evaluation tools, conceptual model, and tools can be used to inform teaching and learning. The resultant model and tools will be explored below.

### **The ~~Destination~~ Journey: Where We Are and What is Next**

The learning unearthed throughout this project has affirmed, time and time again, and connection after connection that the journey toward being and becoming a changemaker is a journey, not a destination. Rather, educators require support in identifying the purpose and value of teaching, modeling, and scaffolding changemaker skills and mindsets. For those connected to the purpose and value, and those new to changemaker education, resources and tools are required beyond evaluation tools, to help educators engage in the fluid, complex, and wholehearted nature of teaching social changemaking. This requires opportunities for educators to engage in sensemaking through personal self-reflection, leaning into their own identity as a change agent, and the complexity of embedding changemaker education into and throughout their teaching, learning, and instructional practice. We witnessed this time and time again, often through the process of catalytic validity, whereby research participants would reflect on and share how the research process was igniting their own spark as a changemaker, while building their capacity, capability, and confidence to be a changemaker educator and support their students to manifest as a changemaker. The journey resulted in the development of the Manifesting As A Changemaker model and adjacent tools to be used across educational sectors (from kindergarten to postsecondary students) to nurture and measure growth in changemaking skills and mindsets with the ultimate goal of supporting educators in the process of being and becoming better able to ignite and amplify changemakers.

### **Introducing the Manifesting as a Changemaker Model**

The model (pictured below) brings to life the shifting and interconnected weavings to manifest as a changemaker. This includes embodying the “doing” of empathy, teamwork, and leadership, culminating in the practice of changemaking. The *Manifesting as a Changemaker* model helps us recognize the cyclical tendency of human nature to approach each skill and mindset with varying entry points depending on the situational context.



Figure 1: Manifesting as a Changemaker Model

Some of the key aspirations for the model include:

- Conveys movement
- Embodies fluidity
- Shows how Thinking (Head), Feeling (Heart), and Doing (Hands) are cyclical entry points into empathy, teamwork, and leadership
- Reflects that how “Doing” each of these skills/mindsets links to Practicing Changemaking
- Portrays the interconnected and woven nature of changemaking skills
- Brings to life the idea that practicing changemaking is *Manifesting as a Changemaker*.

The model is brought to life for educators through the development of practical learning and development activities. In an effort to work in the service of educators, we prioritized the development of an open-access educator resource. This practical tool walks educators through each of the skills (empathy, teamwork, shared leadership, and practicing changemaking), sharing the research findings to help them conceptualize how each skill is developed to inform their instructional practice. Further, the tool aims to support educators to consider how they can meet students where they are at, while scaffolding their development as changemakers to fully harness their potential to feel, think, and act. The educator resource was created using Pressbooks, an open-access tool to ensure a wide reach and to allow educators and changemakers to share, adapt, and modify the tool to fuel further efforts. [Click here to access our free Changemaking Toolkit](#). In addition to the educator resource, we also created conversation cards, which provide prompts for educators to use in the classroom to deepen critical self-reflection on changemaking skills and mindsets. Lastly, we created a cutout activity of the Manifesting as a Changemaker

model to encourage educators to have open dialogue with their students about how changemaking requires feeling, thinking, and acting, and the role of empathy, teamwork, shared leadership, and practicing changemaking on social transformation. The lead researchers manage an email inbox, designed to intake and respond to inquiries, allowing educators and community members to add to the practical tools, including activities, strategies, and “what’s working”. The near real-time addition of new activities and strategies allows educators to support one another in their journey to nurture changemaking. These tools prioritize practical application over theoretical knowledge and scholarship, specifically to widen our reach in the classroom. However, the research team also widely shared the research journey and findings through international conferences and networks, including the Research Innovation Scholarship & Entrepreneurship (RISE) Conferences in both 2022 and 2023, Changemaker Education Research Forum in 2023, and the International Social Innovation Research Conference (ISIRC) at the 2022 and 2023 summit.

### **Twists and Turns: The Challenges and Gifts Met Along the Research Journey**

In the spirit of supporting research work underway in this space, it is important for us to share, wholeheartedly, the gifts and challenges encountered during the research process. First, our research was some of the first at our Ontario College to use participatory methods and community-based methods to co-construct tools. Articulating the fluid and emergent nature of our proposed methodology posed challenges that required patience, reciprocal understanding, and strong articulation and communication. Second, our hope of bringing collaborators to the table was limited at times by factors beyond our influence and control, such as the pandemic and the need to host focus groups and research activities online for the first two years of this project. Online focus groups yielded a very high enrollment rate, but maintaining engagement while honoring participants’ ethical right to not participate required creativity and expert facilitation skills. Our initial hope to partner with a local school board was also challenged by the pandemic and the state of being that many organizations were navigating as a result.

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