

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 journey – background, vision, methods, challenges, and outcomes -- associated with a three-year Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), Community College Social Innovation Fund (CCSIF) research project entitled Growing a Region of Changemakers. The resulting *Manifesting As A Changemaker Model* and adjacent open-access tools were co-created based on 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 Impact and Evidence Team. Our resulting model and tools 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 by facilitating connection to purpose and value and offering tools that support growth and measurement. The creation of the model 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 fuel the future of social change in our region by supporting educators and community partners involved in education. By connecting dedicated educators with practical tools and dissemination activities, we believe this project will continue to impact our college and our broader communities.

Authors' Note

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Introduction

Educators at all levels, from kindergarten to post-secondary, are increasingly being tasked with integrating social innovation skills and mindsets into their 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, p.1), “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.” Ironically and frighteningly, over the decades from the 1980s through the early 2000s,

researchers noted a 40% decline in the ability of students to empathize (Konrath cited in Swanbrow, 2010, para. 3).

These facts, coupled with contemporary uncertainty, have 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). Bialik 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). As such, the Government of Ontario, where our college is situated, is calling on education institutions “... 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).

As an Ashoka-designated Changemaker Campus since 2017, Georgian College has committed to bolstering the “Everyone a Changemaker Movement.” Georgian’s Strategic Plan 2022-24 (p.3) and Academic Plans reflect a dedication to supporting students in the development of the social innovation and changemaking skills necessary for success in the 21st century. Our focus owes its genesis to Ashoka’s pivotal, scientifically validated research in the Ashoka Changemaker Index™ (2024). We have adopted a starting point based on this research: empathy, teamwork leadership, and practicing changemaking are essential to changemaking.

Encouraging students to be active changemakers requires educators to align teaching and learning activities and measure growth in these skills and mindsets associated with changemaking and social innovation. Teaching, scaffolding, and supporting the acquisition of these skills requires diagnostic, formative, and summative evaluation tools. In the Skills Next 2020 report, Gyarmati et al. (2020) note, “If skills and competencies are the new workplace ‘currency,’ we need shared approaches to understand how to define, evaluate and develop them.” Evaluation of these types of skills is difficult, as Devedzic et al. (2018) point out.

This is problematic as we work within an educational reality where “The research clearly shows that whatever is measured matters” (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 39).

Vision: What We Intended

In our project, it was our hope that, empowered with measurement tools, educators could better scaffold and increase the educational support of students in developing skills not traditionally measured but that clearly matter. As a Changemaker Campus and through association with Ashoka, Georgian has made significant strides in offering students real opportunities to develop empathy, leadership, and collaborative skills while practicing changemaking in numerous co-curricular opportunities. However, we have witnessed, in general, educators reluctant or struggling with how to incorporate changemaking skills and mindsets into courses where vocational learning outcomes are their priority. We have grappled with weaving changemaking skills into our curriculum. Although the intuitive and wholehearted approaches many of us have taken to changemaking pedagogy were affirmed through student stories and anecdotal evidence, many of us working to inspire social change for students 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.).

Four years ago, Sarah, as a faculty member educating teachers in a Teacher's Education program, and Tracy, as a Faculty Developer in Georgian College's Centre for Teaching and Learning, brought their unique experiences together to propose a collaborative and community-based research project. Where we hoped to impact teaching and learning was through the development of the missing piece of the puzzle, assessment, and measuring tools to measure changemaking skills. It was our anticipation that with tools to validate and measure these skills, educators would be empowered to incorporate changemaking into their pedagogy and thereby scale social innovation. We would, in essence, answer the call 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" (Care et al., 2018, p. 15).

With an overall vision 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 on our research journey.

Methodology: Our Itinerary

We undertook the project with the following overarching goals in mind:

- 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 phases in our project:

Phase One: In this phase, we established our core research team. The research team, once established, framed our participatory approach to the project and set out on our first mission, to create a Research Advisory Council. The Research Advisory Council (RAC) was strategically designed to include students and educators from various faculty (for example, Business, Engineering, and Health). The advisory also sought to include a representative mix of members from community organizations that represent diverse local non-profits and for-profits. Members were invited to the advisory. During our inaugural meeting, members were invited to consider who was missing, and new members were invited to join in as a result. The RAC also quickly renamed itself, becoming the Changemaking Research Circle (CRC). The advisory group met

several times per year, a mix between longer in-person meetings (2-4 hours in length) and briefer online checkpoints (1 hour). The CRC was established at the onset of this study to help identify and inform research priorities and goals and guide the development of the competency evaluation framework.

Phase one also included 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 chose 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 the local community. Together, we engaged multiple research students from a breadth of program areas to bring multiple perspectives. For example, a mature part-time student in Business Administration (degree in Management and Leadership) was hired for their expertise in community leadership and to bring an understanding of local community needs.

The research team engaged students from the Research Analyst Program and posed the research problem of how changemaker skills and competencies are measured and evaluated. They also worked to liaise between the student research team and the CRC to design the focus group instrument. Participants were recruited for focus groups through multiple means, including invitations posted to student and faculty online channels; these invitations were widely shared by members of our college community, creating a snowball method of recruitment. Invitations were also extended to the community through the Changemaking Research Circle. There were no criteria for exclusion as we sought to hear from multiple perspectives and valued the various ways our participants' lived experiences intersected changemaking.

Through these online and in-person 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 focus group engaged participants in smaller breakout rooms. The dialogue was transcribed, and participants were invited to use online collaborative whiteboard software to share ideas in real-time and build off the ideas shared by others. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, and the themes were presented back to the CRC for sense-making and meaning-making. The initial goal of this phase was to yield four evaluation tools, each measuring the development of one of the four social innovation competencies.

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 CRC for feedback and dialogue. CRC 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 CRC 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 create something 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 service of educators. This phase also included meaning-making and action-taking in the form of teaching and learning communities and 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 has not been validated, and subsequent applied research will explore how it resonates and supports educators in understanding how changemaking skills and mindsets evolve and develop over time. Our model and tools will be explored below.

Discussion: Unpacking our changemaking research journey process and outcomes

We set out on our project with the intention of providing tools to fill a gap we had noticed in our own practice, namely, the lack of evaluative and measurement tools. However, during the project, as noted in our methodology above, our direction shifted. The learning unearthed throughout the Growing a Region of Changemakers project affirmed, time after time and connection after connection, that being and becoming a changemaker is a journey, not a destination. Educators require support identifying the purpose and value of teaching, modelling and scaffolding changemaker skills and mindsets, tools to help along the journey rather than those only to measure the result. We have come to understand that the lack of measurement tools is not the only barrier to adopting changemaking pedagogies.

For those who are connected to the purpose and value of changemaker education, as well as those new to it, resources and tools, in addition to evaluation methods, are essential to help educators engage in the fluid, complex, and wholehearted nature of teaching that nurtures and develops students' capacity for changemaking. This requires opportunities for educators to engage in sensemaking through personal self-reflection, leaning into their own identities as change agents, and the complexity of embedding changemaker education into and throughout their teaching, learning, and instructional practice. Evaluation tools are meaningless without connection to purpose and value.

In our project, we repeatedly witnessed catalytic validity, the expansive nature of the research project to imprint upon the participants, expanding their understanding of and commitment to changemaking. Newton et al. (2008) describe catalytic validity as “...the ability of the research process to transform the participants, deepen the understanding of the participants, and motivate participants to further social action” (p.26). We found that participants would reflect on and share how the research process was igniting their own spark as changemakers while building their capacity, capability, and confidence to be changemaker educators. This project began to prove that the engagement process deepened educator understanding more than the product may be able to. Our research experience demonstrated that engagement in the research process may impact educators even more than our results would.

In terms of the intended goals of our project, as mentioned in our methodology above, in Phase Three of our project, our team set about creating scaffolded rubrics that would offer educators the opportunity to measure or evaluate growth in the changemaking skills of their students. We adapted growth milestones from the Teacher Leadership Institute from the National Education Association (NEA, n.d.) who use Emerging – Developing – Performing – Transforming. We preferred this approach to demonstrating growth rather than mastery. Table 1 demonstrates an example of our early attempts at creating a rubric for empathy based on our data.

Table 1. Draft of competency statements and criteria from focus group research data.

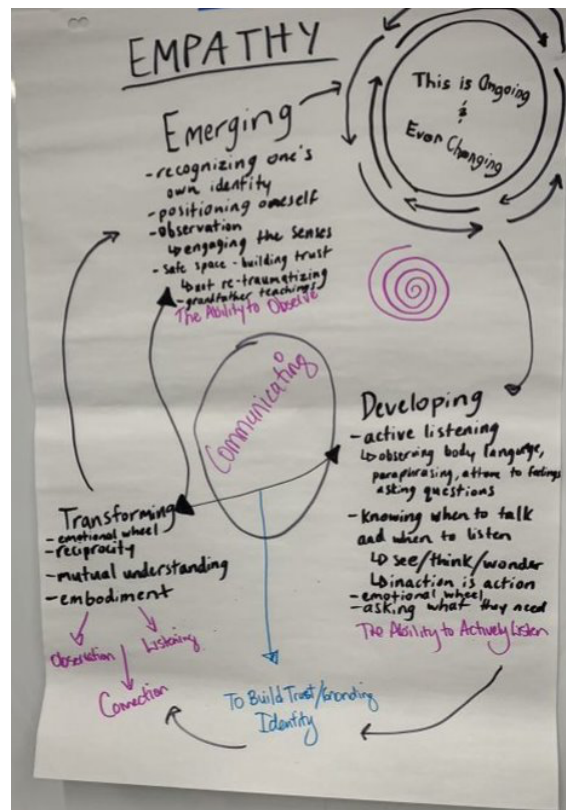
| Conscious Empathy | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|-------|
| Competency Overview: Conscious Empathy is the ability to feel and connect with someone's emotions, and act with their feelings in mind. | | | | |
| Importance: [Why this competency is important/valuable] | | | | |
| Further Reading: [Location where educators can find additional information about the competency in the educational resource] | | | | |
| Competence Criteria | Emerging (1) | Developing/ Performing (2) | Transforming (3) | Score |
| Criteria 1 Understanding someone else's emotions Taking another person's perspective (Thinking) | [Description of criteria 1 in the emerging stage] Acknowledging someone else's emotions and considering their perspective. "I understand how you are feeling, and I am thinking about your perspective." Translation to their developmental level needs to happen in the faculty supports. How to do this is in the faculty. | [Description of criteria 1 in the developing / performing stage] Acknowledging someone else's emotions and tuning into what they might be feeling. "I understand how you are feeling and am considering your perspective." | [Description of criteria 1 in the transforming stage] Acknowledging someone else's emotions and tuning into what they might be feeling and clarifying what you are hearing by asking questions and seeking to more deeply understand their experience, while suspending judgment and staying curious. "I understand how you are feeling, and I am deepening my understanding of your experience by asking questions from a place of open-mindedness." | |

On presentation of our early rubric drafts to our Changemaking Research Circle, we were re-directed onto a new path by their honest feedback: they shared that traditional measurement tools (rubrics) were not "the answer" nor the appropriate direction given our focus group data which demonstrated a wide range of understanding of the Ashoka Changemaking skills. Here we

acknowledge intrigue and agreed that creating tools that help infuse purpose and value and help scaffold changemaking skills were the necessary precursor to measurement and validation. The data affirmed this evolution, revealing the many ways in which changemaker skills are first conceptualized (thinking), followed by embodiment and action. The data also affirmed that thinking, although a precursor to action, is not enough to fully realize the skills and mindsets associated with changemaking.

Our focus shifted. In one Changemaking Research Circle meeting, collaborators offered an alternative to our rubric; they shared a cyclical model (see Figure 2) that honours the reality that we don't always "show up" as empaths, collaborators or leaders. Rather, we are "Ever Changing" in various contexts as part of human nature. Rather than measuring, their diagram spoke to growing. As they made sense of the ways in which we had presented the data, their understanding of a cyclical evolution layered in to expand on what was known and deepen what was unearthed. The value of this type of approach became increasingly apparent.

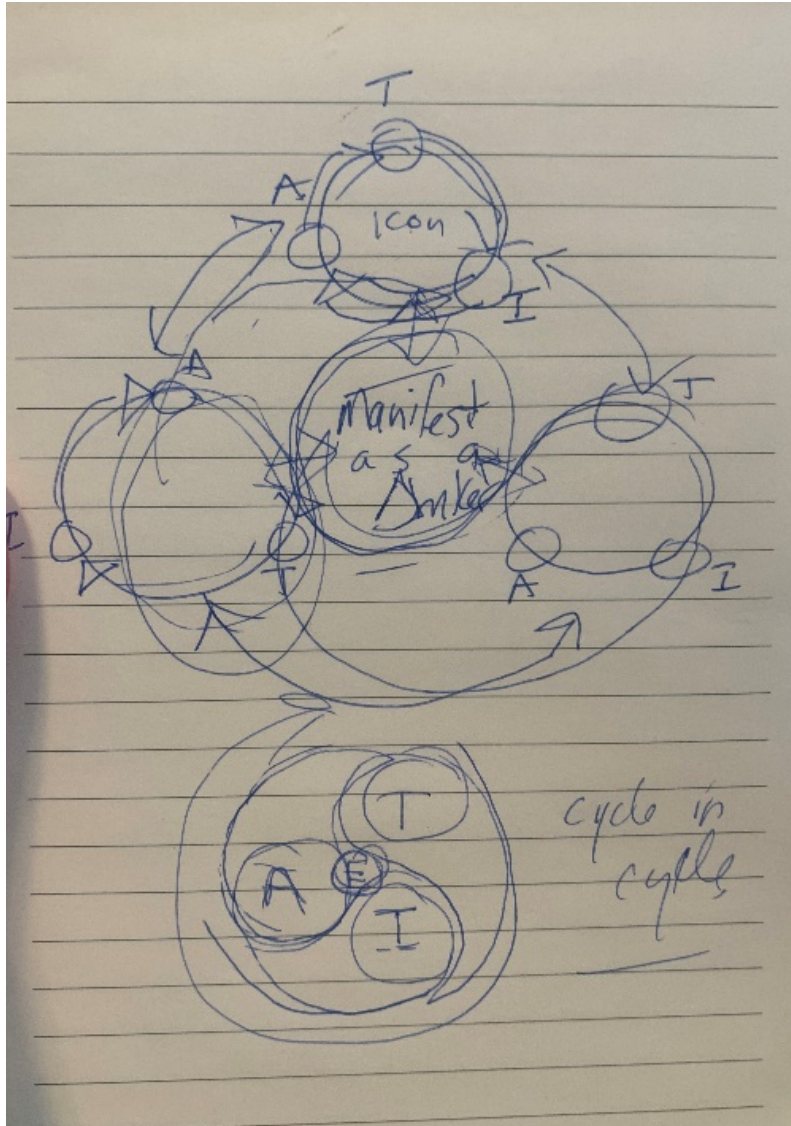
Figure 2: Renderings of an approach to recognizing the cyclical nature of empathy for individuals by members of our Changemaking Research Circle.



In our conversations and through several curriculum consultations and feedback sessions, we became increasingly convinced of the need to offer a model/tool that recognized the cyclical nature of skills and mindsets associated with changemaking. Our CRC challenged us to stretch and rethink; they inspired us to consider different ways of measuring growth that could impact

the growth of changemaker competencies. Figure 3 represents our early grappling with how a model might be conceived.

Figure 3: Our first attempt at building our *Manifesting As A Changemaker Model*.



We believe that our Changemaking Research Circle was on the right path. Research supports the fluid and in-flux nature of changemaking skills and mindsets. Our collaborative community-based 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) and in the community 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. [You can access the toolkit here.](#)

We see the *Manifesting As A Changemaker Model* (pictured below) as an additional inroad on the journey of supporting the “Everyone a Changemaker movement.” The model brings to life the shifting and interconnected weavings of skills and mindsets necessary to manifest as a changemaker, including the necessity of “doing” empathy, teamwork, and leadership, to practice changemaking and manifest as a changemaker.



Figure 1: *Manifesting As A Changemaker Model*

Some of the key aspirations for the model include the following:

- It conveys movement and embodies fluidity;
- It acknowledges how Thinking (Head), Feeling (Heart), and Doing (Hands) are cyclical entry points into empathy, teamwork, and leadership;
- It reflects that “doing” each of these skills/mindsets links to one’s ability to practice changemaking and, subsequently, manifest as a changemaker;
- It confirms that we are not always actively changemaking but rather may vary in our changemaking capacity in different contexts;
- It portrays the interconnected and woven nature of changemaking skills and
- It brings to life the idea that practicing changemaking is a precursor to *Manifesting as a Changemaker*.

The model reflects the cyclical tendency of human nature to approach each skill and mindset with varying entry points depending on the situational context. It also is meant to remind us that

how we approach a situation is not consistent. Like any muscle, we can be weaker or stronger at any given time. For example, in one situation, we may embody “doing” empathy – acting in a truly empathic way – while in another, we may not. This is affirmed by the focus group data, where participants shared how contextual the expression of each skill and mindset was.

This model is not meant to compete with, replace, challenge, or detract from other models of changemaking. Rather, it is meant to make sense and meaning of the Ashoka framework and add to the landscape so that as educators and community partners explore their own unique journeys, they may access and choose a tour that works for them and their constituents. It is meant to entice would-be travelers to consider the journey. It is meant to honour that we all have different journeys and destinations in mind.

In an effort to work in service of educators and to answer the gap in the preparedness of educators to support the growth of and then measure skills related to changemaking, 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) to help them conceptualize how each skill is developed and informs their instructional practice. Further, the tool aims to support educators in considering how they can meet students where they are while scaffolding their development as changemakers to fully harness their potential to feel, think, and act. The 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 to access the [Manifesting As A Changemaker Toolkit \(2024\)](#).

As we have noted in the toolkit, we have woven three interconnected frameworks:

- Head, Heart, Hand (Orr, 1992; Sipos et al., 2008)
- I, We, Us
- Thinking, Feeling, Doing

We share the following rationale:

The Head, Heart, and Hand model was first proposed by David Orr (1992) and later expanded upon by Sipos et al. (2008) as a way to understand “the all encompassing nature of transformative experience and ties relational knowing and involvement to the cognitive (Head) and affective (Heart) domains. Additionally, it connects critical reflection with the psychomotor (Hands) and emotional (Heart) domains” (Islam et al., 2022).

Our research, however, revealed additional adjacent layers that we felt naturally partnered with the Head, Heart, and Hand model, which we have woven together to provide the conceptual framing to help us understand and support educators plan for and design teaching and learning opportunities that centre changemaking:

We believe that these additional layers of framing complement each other and demonstrate the uniqueness of our research and model. Together, we believe this trio of frameworks works to

reflect the complicated (and sometimes blurred) intersections of changemaking. ([Manifesting As A Changemaker, Guiding Framework, 2024](#))

We believe that our model and tool kit respond to the expressed needs of our participants and collaborators to create supportive tools for educators to guide curricular and instructional approaches to teaching and scaffolding changemaking.

In addition to the educator resource, we have created conversation cards that 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 thinking, feeling, and acting in the skills of empathy, teamwork, shared leadership, and practicing changemaking. These are available on request and are embedded in the toolkit.

The lead researchers manage an email inbox designed to intake and respond to inquiries; we hope that educators may be encouraged to contribute to the growing resource by adding practical tools, including activities and strategies, and sharing “what’s working” and “what’s not.” You may email us at cmtoolkit@georgiancollege.ca. Our hope is to encourage educators to support one another in their journey to nurture changemaking by continuing to grow the *Manifesting As A Changemaker* Pressbook.

The tools found within the guide 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.

Conclusion: Lessons to Share from Our Journey

At the outset of our research journey, we anticipated creating measurement tools for educators in the kindergarten through post-secondary sectors to support the notion of “value” related to changemaking, which, in turn, would help educators “see” why it is so important to weave changemaking skills and mindsets into their pedagogy. Our vision shifted as we gathered research, consulted with partners, and engaged with our Changemaking Research Circle and with members of our community in focus groups and curriculum feedback and contribution sessions.

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 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.

Our ability to collaborate with Ashoka was a gift from the start. The Ashoka Changemaker Index™ and the defined changemaking skills and mindsets provided a validated starting point to springboard this work. Where have we landed? We have come to recognize that educators and community partners need tools to help them identify purpose and value in pulling changemaking skills and mindsets into their curriculum and pedagogy. They need time to find themselves in changemaking. Community members, students, faculty, and other constituents still need to work on strengthening their own changemaking muscles. Gaps exist not only in measurement tools for skills and mindsets related to changemaking but in the readiness to be measured.

We hope that our model and related toolkit help inspire and empower educators at all levels of education and any interested community partners to prioritize supporting the growth of skills and mindsets necessary to solving contemporary, troubling problems as an essential ingredient before attempting to measure the growth.

We invite you to visit our toolkit, consider our model, and share your insights. You may email us at cmtokit@georgiancollege.ca at any time.

We would like to offer our immense gratitude to our partner, Ashoka Canada, and especially Charmaine Lyn and Rebecca Klaassen for their wisdom and support. We are grateful to the Ashoka Impact and Evidence Team for our starting point. We are so thankful to our Changemaking Research Circle for their willingness to challenge us and nudge the research in the way it needed to go and to our numerous research peers who have joined us on the journey. We thank the tri-council for the CCSIF funding, without which this project and the resulting model and toolkit would be impossible.

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