

Creating Significant Learning Environments: Reimagining Educator Professional Development in Surgical Technology

Introduction

In *A New Culture of Learning*, Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2011) propose that learning in today's rapidly evolving world must move beyond the rigid structures of traditional instruction toward environments that nurture curiosity, collaboration, and imagination. For professional educators, especially those transitioning from clinical to academic roles, this means shifting from compliance-driven training to an immersive, community-based model of professional growth. My innovation plan, developed in EDLD 5305, proposes a structured onboarding and development program for surgical technology educators that embodies this transformation.

Why Significant Learning Environments Matter

Creating a significant learning environment (SLE) enhances learning because it connects knowledge, experience, and reflection in ways that empower educators to take ownership of their growth. Fink (2013) defines significant learning as learning that changes the learner in lasting, meaningful ways, emotionally, intellectually, and behaviorally. Within my innovation plan, the SLE framework enables new educators to explore ideas through mentorship, simulation, and collaboration, rather than merely receive information through orientation lectures.

Thomas and Brown (2011) emphasize that learning flourishes in environments of play, inquiry, and collective participation. Similarly, the onboarding modules in my plan, covering leadership, curriculum design, clinical coordination, and simulation pedagogy, are structured as experiential communities of practice. Educators learn by doing, experimenting, and reflecting together, which aligns with the COVA (Choice, Ownership, Voice, and Agency) model used throughout my ADL coursework.

Addressing Problems and Enhancing the Innovation Plan

Current challenges in surgical technology education include high educator turnover, inconsistent instructional quality, and limited pedagogical preparation (Vaughn, 2025). Traditional reform efforts, short workshops or static onboarding, fail to address these systemic issues. By implementing SLE principles, the innovation plan transforms onboarding into continuous, contextualized professional learning.

This approach directly addresses two critical problems:

1. **Turnover and burnout:** By giving educators autonomy and mentorship, the program increases job satisfaction and retention (Bureau et al., 2022).
2. **Fragmented professional growth:** Through collaborative reflection and peer networks, learning becomes collective and self-sustaining (Thomas & Brown, 2011).

In short, this shift moves professional learning from episodic events to a living culture of continuous improvement.

Key Ideas from *A New Culture of Learning*

1. **Learning through Play:** Educators engage with real scenarios (e.g., How to complete the ARC/STSA annual report) that encourage experimentation without fear of failure.
2. **Learning through Inquiry:** Participants identify problems from their own experiences and co-develop solutions with peers and mentors.
3. **Learning through Collective Participation:** New and experienced educators form cross-program communities that share tools, resources, and strategies for improvement.

These ideas align with the constructivist foundation of the innovation plan, knowledge emerges through experience and interaction rather than passive reception (Brown & Thomas, 2011).

Implementing an SLE-based program presents challenges, including:

- **Resistance to change:** Some educators accustomed to traditional models may resist learner-driven formats.
Solution: Introduce incremental change through blended professional development, pairing experienced mentors with new participants to model the process.
- **Time and resource constraints:** Limited faculty time for collaborative work may hinder participation.
Solution: Integrate reflection and mentorship into existing meeting structures and accreditation cycles, making learning part of normal operations.

Impact on the Organization

The innovation plan's SLE framework will strengthen program quality, consistency, and accreditation readiness across institutions. As educators become more skilled and confident, student engagement and retention improve, creating a ripple effect that enhances patient safety and workforce readiness. Moreover, this approach supports the goals of accrediting agencies such as ARC/STSA by fostering sustainable program leadership and high-quality instruction.

Encouraging Broad, Holistic Thinking

Beyond technical skills, this revolution promotes broad, holistic thinking by helping educators view their roles as transformative rather than transactional. They move from "What do I need to teach today?" to "How do I create an environment where learning thrives?" Encouraging metacognitive reflection and peer dialogue helps educators connect classroom experiences to broader professional and ethical contexts.

Conclusion

Creating significant learning environments revolutionizes professional development by transforming educators from recipients of training into active participants in a culture of learning.

Drawing from *A New Culture of Learning*, the innovation plan fosters autonomy, collaboration, and creativity, qualities essential for 21st-century education. This shift is more than reform; it is a reinvention of how learning communities grow, adapt, and sustain excellence over time.

References

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