

Understanding Workplace Essential Skills: A Student's Perspective

Alex Cocco, B.P.H.E.

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate
Studies in Education

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Faculty of Education, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

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Abstract

An instrumental case study was conducted to explore the perspective of recent graduates from a Greater Toronto Area community college experience in relation to Workplace Essential Skills (WES). Five participants who graduated from a business school within the last 4 years were interviewed twice over a 4-month period to gain a deeper understanding of this relationship. This qualitative approach used semi-structured interviews to elicit stories about their experiences, their relationships in school, and the development of skills that were useful in the workplace. The analysis of data involved the 3-step coding process of open, axial, and selective coding consistent with the approach used by Neuman (2006). The analysis revealed that the overall experience of attending college contributed to the learning that took place. The participants gave greater significance to the life experience in learning WES and the networks associated with learning than the formal aspects of education. It is also important to acknowledge that the research identified a significant opportunity for educators' to positively impact the learning experience.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Using the instrumental case study approach, this thesis explores the relationship between attending college and the development of workplace skills. In 2005, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) called for a Pan-Canadian workforce agenda to ensure that Canada has the resources to build a highly skilled and adaptable workforce. Given the cost of pursuing higher education, it would seem important that, at the completion of community college, graduates would be able to tackle the challenges of the workplace. Workplace Essential Skills (WES) is a popular term that speaks to a range of skills that are needed to excel in the workplace and that have received a fair amount of attention in the knowledge economy (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada [HRSDC], 2005). This mandate has influenced the college agenda, which has given rise to both positive and critical viewpoints on the subject.

Colleges in North America were first established in the early 1960s and 1970s (Skolnik, 2010). In Ontario, colleges were intended to concentrate on technical education programs. While a combined technical and general education design existed in other provinces, Ontario's system has remained largely intact over the years. A strong vocational education focus has been the hallmark of Ontario colleges that has both helped them stay relevant but limited the transferability of education to university level programs. According to Skolnik, the separation of colleges and universities has implications on social equity. Statistics show that families earning more than \$100,000 are more likely to have university-bound children. Over time, colleges have established general arts and sciences programs in part to fill the equity gap and enable lower-income

groups to the baccalaureate (Skolnik, 2010, p. 13). This has implications on WES as it potentially stands to benefit from the general education model.

Canada along with many nations declared its commitment to becoming a knowledge economy as a response to the changing global and national landscapes (Government of Canada 2002a, 2002b). In today's economic climate an emphasis on knowledge and resources identifies people as the most important asset to a successful economy. Initially, the decline of manufacturing resulted in changes in the labour market related to decreasing reliance on goods production which was offset by increasing demand on various fronts, namely: information, technology, and communications sectors. This new economy is commonly referred to as the knowledge economy.

With the evolution of the knowledge economy, innovation has increased the scope of influence of the "knowledge worker." Such knowledge workers can be described as individuals who contribute to their work through their talent, skills, ideas, and innovations. Throughout this evolution, a review of federal policies shows that areas related to lifelong learning, employment, and training and skills upgrading are part of a government strategy in establishing a knowledge economy (Gibb & Walker, 2011). While this strategy and the policies highlight the importance of this topic, it is important to keep in mind that there are challenges to become a knowledge economy. Gibb and Walker (2011) describe the changing labour market as a complex and changing landscape in which exists a contradiction in federal policies that undermine Canada's ability to achieve its strategic intent.

Speaking from my own experiences, I chose to go to university believing that a university degree would lead me directly to a job instead of a college program. I believed

that after a 4-year degree, finding a good job upon graduation would be simple. I also believed that what I studied at school and what I would do in my career would not necessarily be linked, as it seemed that many people I knew had careers in fields unrelated to their education. However, I learned that the content of my education became increasingly important as I neared graduation. I began to doubt my choice of going to university, as it seemed that the college route led more directly to employment. As a new graduate seeking employment, entering the workforce was daunting. I soon realized that I knew little about what it would take to be successful at work. Over time, I learned how to navigate the labour market and find meaningful employment, but it was not without its challenges.

As I experienced the labour market, it led me to reflect on my personal choices in education and the kind of work experiences I sought as a student. When I applied to university, I was more concerned with the prospect of getting accepted than I was with the program itself or the career path my degree would eventually lead me. My part-time jobs growing up were simply easy ways of making money to buy a car, pay for school, and socialize. I was never really coached or consulted on the significance of these decisions, nor did I have an opportunity to gain a broad perspective of the workplace from which to base my choices. Time became an issue as the deadline for applying to university came and ultimately reinforced my belief that any degree would do just fine; I simply chose the path that seemed simplest. A degree in Physical and Health Education seemed to be a fit with my passion for sport and so this is the route I took.

It was not until my fourth and final year that the inevitability of leaving school and doing something else finally pushed me to think about my career options. By this time,

however, I understood what it was to be a “good” student, and was confident it would transfer into becoming a competent worker. When I started working it was clear that these two did not correlate. I was feeling most challenged in areas that had absolutely no basis in school, such as working in teams, being innovative, and managing difficult relationships. For me to be successful at work required a different mindset than that of a student.

As I overcame these challenges, I felt responsible to help others avoid some of the stumbling blocks I faced in making career and educational choices. It was not a coincidence that I spent time working in the career services sector and teaching at the postsecondary level. While these experiences have given me the opportunity to help others, I cannot help but wonder how many others have and will continue to struggle to bring their educational and career aspirations into alignment. Is it the educational system itself that creates this separation of goals, or do students hold an unrealistic set of expectations about the postsecondary system? I had many questions and it was this personal journey that inspired me to pursue a master’s degree in education. It has also motivated me to conduct this study to understand the connection between workplace skills and education. It is this objective of understanding students’ needs and desires as they relate to employment and the relationship to education that drives me to research the connection between WES and education.

After leaving university, I was surprised to see how few of my friends and acquaintances worked in fields related to their choice of study. I began to wonder why this was happening and found myself questioning the value of a then \$20,000 fee for education when it did not seem to impact employment options or choices. This disconnect seemed to validate my assumptions that people went to school and believed a job was waiting for

them when they graduated. It was only after going back to school as a mature student and having experienced teaching at a college that I began to evolve my thinking and understanding of what circumstances could potentially create this impression. It is with this in mind that I pursue a deeper understanding of the connection between school and work.

The workplace, as I have come to understand it, is complex and requires a range of skills that go beyond the scope of the job. Working in teams and embracing different personalities and work styles and dealing with conflict are just a few such skills that come to mind in trying to capture some of this complexity. Work is a necessary component of life; what you do in your job and how you feel about what you do has an incredible impact on your life. Choosing and excelling in a career is not just about knowledge and skills. Success in the workplace is multifaceted and can mean many things to different people. The work done by the ACCC (2003) demonstrates that employers typically look for certain skills as part of the requisite qualifications to any job. Understanding what these skills are and how they are developed is helpful in learning how to create a productive working society (ACCC, 2003). By better understanding the relationship between college and work from the perspective of students, there is an opportunity to more fully contextualize teaching and the learning environment to improve social and economic well-being. By keeping in mind that it is the students' interest that motivates this research, educators who better understand what is important to students are better able to deliver on those expectations.

Background of the Problem

It can be argued that the primary purpose of community college is to develop individuals and facilitate their active membership in society. A part of this membership

would include employment, and it is with this in mind that the primary focus for this research is to explore how colleges develop individuals to be successful in the workplace. My working assumption is that schools are not doing enough to help students become productive members of society with respect to employability. This research identifies where improvements to the educational experience may be possible.

Essential Employability Skills (EES) is a term developed by the federal government to recognize the skills that employers have identified as being in demand (ACCC, 2003). This concept grew out of complaints from industry representatives that colleges and universities were not providing people with the right skills at the right level for the knowledge economy. Some examples of the original set of skills or Essential Skills are: reading, writing, thinking, computer literacy, and numeracy (HRSDC, 2005). These have since evolved, but the concept of Essential Skills is still linked to the needs of employers and the development of key skills. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2001) report on human and social capital illustrates the importance of developing new skills (referred to here as Workplace Essential Skills) for the knowledge economy. The OECD report signalled a shift in the philosophy of education shifting towards the same WES discourse that has since impacted Canadian colleges in several ways. This philosophy has led to increased scrutiny and evaluation of the return on investments made in human capital. This has created discussion and research on the ways in which WES are developed and their importance to national economic success (OECD, 2001). While attention to skill development has generated research in a number of areas related to WES, there appears to be a lack of research that describes the process by which these skills are developed. If

Canada is to be successful in preparing students to contribute to a strong national economy, educators and researchers must better understand how community college develops these WES in preparation for life and work.

However, what if the drivers of WES, such as market value and globalization, do not have the same meaning to individuals as they do to companies? To what degree do those factors influence a student's decision on schools and/or a program? Without clear answers, one could question the benefit of a community college education that is geared to producing workers.

Exploring the global and political forces at play allows us to reflect on students' interests and gain insight on issues of power, fairness, and equity. How does the development of WES benefit students immediately or in the long term? If acquiring these skills is truly a benefit to local, community, and national economies, then should these skills be explicit in curriculum and should our postsecondary schools be responsible for ensuring that students acquire them? Canadian community colleges use key performance indicators and governments use global economic indicators and institutional performance rating systems to measure their effectiveness, but do these accurately capture students success? It seems reasonable to suggest that unless we build our understanding of student experiences in relation to WES, we may not fully understand the impact of these policies.

Criticisms of WES policies and directives suggest that in the development of the knowledge worker, we must take notice of the potential consequences related to overcredentialing and underutilizing skilled workers (Livingstone, 2000). Furthermore, the relationship that businesses have in driving learning objectives can be seen both in the influence on institutions themselves, but also in informal ways in the relationships people

have with their superiors in the workplace. Understanding relationships in the workplace can add insight into understanding how behaviours and skills are shaped. Further to this, it is important to reflect on teaching and learning practices and how they relate to WES. Educators can play a significant role in one's education and what is seen as valuable in transitioning from school to work. Understanding that relationship and how educators support the development of WES will help to identify possibilities going forward in a way that is learner focused.

Statement of the Problem

The report of the Advanced Skills Project Steering Committee (ACCC, 2003) supports the notion that students entering the workforce lack specific skills that are important to the economic viability of companies, which has implications for the economic stability and progress of Canada. Cotton (2001) found that while employers may be satisfied in the general level of technical skills possessed by new graduates, they are not satisfied with their competency in the soft skills, which in this case refers to a broad spectrum of nontechnical abilities such as: problem solving, decision making, positive attitude, cooperativeness, and other affective skills and traits. This popular view has the potential to lead to changes in the way in which classes are structured and learning is achieved in our postsecondary institutions. It is important to also consider the impact of those same skills on each individual's well-being, otherwise it is possible to create a power dynamic in which businesses hold more control over individual needs and interest. Rather than focusing solely on employment outcomes, consideration to personal success and well-being is explored.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the connection between WES and the experiences of students in Greater Toronto Area (GTA) colleges. Specifically, this research will explore how Ontario colleges develop WES from the students' perspective. By exploring how students perceive the application of their studies in the workplace, educators, administrators can better understand how to enhance the quality of the school experience to support student success. This study seeks to contribute to this objective by interviewing recent college graduates as they transition towards the workforce. Exploring their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes both about school and work can yield a deeper understanding of the learning process as it relates to WES.

Based on a review of the literature, the importance of this inquiry is underscored by the lack of information with regard to student attitudes and perceptions in current WES research. This perspective is important in helping to develop a balanced understanding of the WES. In the absence of student perspectives, we have an incomplete picture of how to pursue the development of a skilled workforce. Using adult learning theory as a lens to understand the experience of students can provide clues and insight into ways in which the student experience can be enhanced.

Research Questions

The broad questions central to this research relate to the intersection between WES, the GTA college education system, and how this association affects the experiences of the learner. These questions are summarized below:

- What is the relationship between how students characterize the workplace and what it takes to be successful at work?

- What do students feel they need from a college education and what is the relationship between their expectations and their experience?
- What do students actually learn about WES and its relationship to success at work?
- How do students define success in community college and do they feel they have achieved success? How do they define success in future work?

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective applied in this study stems from Illeris's (2002) *The Three Dimensions of Learning*. Arriving at this theoretical model of adult learning proved to be difficult particularly because so much has been written about adult learning theories. As opposed to applying a disparate range of individual learning theories, the Illeris model offers a fuller view of learning and a more versatile lens of analysis; its use and implications will be contextualized and explored, followed by a description of the three dimensions of learning.

Illeris (2003a) defines learning as “a very complex process involving both biologically founded psychological and societally founded social elements which follow different sets of logic and work together in a complex interaction” (p. 398). This model has two assumptions:

1. All learning includes external and internal processes.
2. There are three dimensions to learning: the cognitive dimension of knowledge and skills; the emotional dimension of feelings and motivation; and the social dimension of communication and cooperation.

This theory was chosen for two reasons; first, it places the student at the centre of learning, which is crucial to understanding learning WES from a student perspective, and secondly, the theory encompasses motivation and identity as components of learning. This is important because it may provide clues for educators to better understand the motivation of the adult learner in WES.

The ACCC (2003) has stated that learning is a co-managed process, which is supported by learning theories. This sentiment acknowledges that the learning process is not complete when students leave school; instead, the learning is viewed as a continuum extending throughout a person's life. This view is aligned with the notion of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning seems simple enough, but how can we reasonably support this notion when the concept of learning remains nebulous?

It is necessary to examine lifelong learning to better understand what it means and how it affects both teacher and learner. When industry claims that required skills are not being met satisfactorily, it raises questions regarding the value of the formal schooling and/or the current approaches to skill development at colleges. If we are to believe in what Levin (2000) stated, that learning is the fundamental element of schooling, what are we to make of the implied policy of lifelong learning? Lifelong learning was intended to do more; it was intended to create a learning society and according to Edwards, Ranson, and Strain, (2002), a policy on lifelong learning will not achieve this goal because it has an inadequate notion of change, lacks understanding of the diversity of learning practices and considers learning to be cumulative rather than reflexive (p. 530). In summary, a comprehensive model for learning would help frame our understanding of WES by recognizing both the individual and collective processes of knowledge transfer.

Importance of the Study

Torjman (2002) wrote, “The nature of work is evolving as a result of globalization, increased competition, the development of new technologies and other changes in the business environment” (p.7). These changes to our workforce have impacted the demands on workers by requiring different skills and abilities and have raised questions about the skills being taught in our institutions. American scholar Kathleen Cotton (2001) stated that the demand for basic, high-order, and affective employability skills (or WES) reflects profound changes in the American workforce. Policy makers in Canada have made similar calls for action, as detailed in the Public Policy Forum’s 2007 report titled *Improving Canada’s Business Environment and Competitiveness*. The report identifies five central strategies, which amount to a rethinking of the workforce in several important ways, including a renewed focus on education and skills training. In addressing Canada’s human resource challenges, the report states the goal to improve the educational system to produce more people with better skills.

The Public Policy Forum (2007) identified that “our economy’s greatest deficiency is our inability to come to terms with the transformative changes that have occurred within the global marketplace” (p. 1). The Public Policy Forum called on the government to increase its education investment to ensure a highly skilled workforce. This call to action reinforces the need to ensure the skills of workers are keeping pace with changes in the economy.

In response to growing demands from Canadian employers, the Corporate Council on Education (1997) published and released the *Employability Skills Profile*

through a National Business and Education Centre, Conference Board of Canada program. This profile provides a framework for identifying the skills required to be successful in the new workforce. Krahn, Lowe, and Lehmann (2002) describe the ever-changing workplace as the impetus for seeking WES development, suggesting that the outcome of education should reflect these areas.

While these directives and actions have positive implications for our national economy, they also imply personal benefits to the educated worker. If WES were a priority, then it would follow that postsecondary institutions should ensure that these skills are developed to the level required by our economy. But how do we know these priorities are actually translating into practice? Exploring student perspectives about WES will help to understand the WES discourse from the lived experience.

Understanding the experience from a student perspective will also help educators and administrators understand the ways in which education may be enhanced in light of changing labour market pressures. Education is a powerful vehicle for social mobilization, provided that it delivers on its promise to employ and affect the lives of its participants. It is for this reason that we should explore ways to help people increase their social and economic well-being and so aim to better understand the student experience.

It is important to recognize that while the WES discourse has the potential to positively impact student outcomes in terms of social and economic well-being, it is not without criticism. The criticisms relate to questions about the purpose and role of WES in improving not only business goals but also personal well-being. The fact that much literature supporting WES has been written from the industry perspective is problematic. In addition, there are implications that the acceptance of lifelong learning as a common

practice has the potential to create new stressors in the employment ranks as seen through what Livingstone calls underemployment (2000). Though there are concerns related to WES, the potential to positively impact individual well-being suggests that this exploration is worthwhile.

The literature review on this topic brings together several related but distinct areas of research. It requires an exploration into the WES discourse as well as educational issues and adult learning theory. This broad-based literature review provides a depth of understanding from which we can view the relationship between WES and the community college experience. By understanding this view, we can enhance our understanding of the issues, barriers, and successes of today's adult learner in transitioning from school to work.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Essential Employability Skills (referred to as Workplace Essential Skills or WES) is a term that has been used to describe the skills that employers look for in recent graduate hires. While this concept is not new, there is work to do to understand the role of employers, schools, educators, and students in the development of these skills. Gibb and Walker (2011) characterized the current Canadian labour market as being bifurcated, so that there is a high demand for low skilled labour and a smaller pool of high-skilled workers (p. 384); Metcalfe and Fenwick (2009) also supported this view. The government approach that has led to this has emphasized: innovation, through research and development, and knowledge through skills upgrading and training. The lack of student voice and general public opinion further reinforces the need to explore WES from a student perspective.

To gain a deeper understanding of WES and bring forward new ideas to better enable students reach their employment and educational objectives, the following themes are explored in the literature review: the Workplace Essential Skill discourse; the Canadian community colleges context; educational reform; and, adult learning theories. These areas bring to light many important perspectives and challenges in the development of WES and have implications for Ontario colleges and how they prepare students for school-to-work transitions.

Workplace Essential Skills Discourse

As a result of technological changes, globalization, and changes in consumer behaviours, many companies have changed the way they operate. Among the changes are flatter management structures and an increased need for effective communication

(Torjman, 2002). As a result, the skills required for success have changed and resulted in the development of a new framework for understanding workplace skills (Public Policy Forum, 2007). In an attempt to create a common language and framework for discussing these skills, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada [HRSDC] created an inventory of Employability Skills in demand. This list has gone through several iterations over the past 13 years to include the work of the Conference Board of Canada in developing the Essential Skills Profile, and the work of the Ontario Ministry of Education to create the Essential Employability Skills (EES). The model of Advanced Essential Skills was created through funding by the government of Canada and the collaborative efforts of: the Canadian Alliance of Education and Training Organizations (CAETO), the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), and the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) (ACCC, 2003). It is now referred to as simply Essential Skills (Conference Board of Canada 2012a). For the purpose of this research, the term WES will refer to the Employability Skills 2000+ (Conference Board of Canada, 2012b), which describes:

1. Fundamental Skills: the ability to communicate, manage information and use numbers; and to think critically and solve problems.
2. Personal Management Skills: the attitudes and behaviours that drive one's potential for growth; which includes being responsible and adaptable.
3. Teamwork Skills: the skills and attributes needed to contribute productively; and require the individual to work with others and participate effectively in projects and tasks.

The categorization of these workplace skills is meant to illustrate important areas for development.

The WES aim to provide clarity as to the ways by which educators and students may address the perceived gap in understanding what it takes to be successful at work. Given the growing competitiveness of the global economy, it is important to highlight that the development of workplace skills is positioned as essential for attracting and maintaining investment in Canada. Despite concerns of the over-credentialing of individuals, it is reasonable to suggest that supporting our local businesses is important to the degree that they may employ people and support the economic and social fabric of our communities. In doing so, we should also consider the needs of business for capable and competent workers. At the same time, individual success should not be compromised by the objectives of business— both the employee and organization must thrive. To accomplish these goals, community colleges are often considered as providing a foundation for workplace success.

Most written publications on WES iterate that workers' skills are lacking in areas that businesses need for economic growth and success. This has implications for the education of new workers and the viability of businesses. To understand how WES affects social-economic outcomes for students, the discourse was examined in light of the (a) purpose and historical roots of WES, (b) the factors that influence the current research into WES, and (c) the criticisms of the WES practice. This context provides the basis for moving beyond the WES discourse and into learning.

Since success in Ontario colleges is typically reflected through employment outcomes (Jarvis, 2002), by extension, learning WES could also be seen as an important

goal of education. However, it must be recognized that personal success is not the primary concern of WES. The focus for WES is more accurately related to the productivity of workers who enter the workforce, which raises questions about what education means in relation to WES and what the impact is on individuals (Fenwick, 2006). This detail is important because it provides clarity to the WES concept and adds value to the position being taken in this study. To be able to move forward and support the development of WES, it is important to understand the position and actions set out by government through policy and the effect it has on the well-being of individuals.

As Jarvis (2002) discusses, there have been several influential policy papers that identified the need for workplace skills, including: the 1995 European White Paper, OECD's 1996 report, Conference Board of Canada's 1997 Employability Skills report, and the 1998 British government report the Learning Age. Jarvis concludes that the sum of these policies equates education attainment with employability and binds economic outcomes with learning. He views this perspective as flawed, because he feels that concern for people has been replaced by a greater concern for corporations and individual gain, which leads him to advocate for an approach which better meets the needs of students. This critique of the globalized economic market identifies a problem within the discourse, which shows a need for a greater student perspective in the literature.

The Canadian employability skills discourse, as it was first termed, gained attention during the 1990s when the Conference Board of Canada brought forward the concerns of Canadian employers about their perceptions of a lack of skilled workers entering the workforce. Thereafter, the Essential Skills Profile was officially launched in April 2003 by the Canadian government (Fenwick, 2006), which has a stated purpose of

creating a more productive workforce and attracting and retaining highly qualified people to fuel Canada's innovative performance (HRSDC, 2005).

To further illustrate what has happened in Canada, Gibb and Walker (2011) conducted a sketch of the federal policy in Education and Training and analyzed 10 policies in the areas of lifelong learning, employment and training, and skills upgrading. Their work identified the federal government's current commitment to the development of a knowledge economy and the policies that support and limit its pursuit of that goal. In summary, they found that while the intent of the policy is to develop a highly skilled labour market, practices that have been implemented have resulted in a small pool of highly skilled workers and a large pool of low-skilled jobs. The overall trajectory to the development of a knowledge economy is being shaped by a dual approach that emphasizes research and development (that supports the smaller pool of highly skilled workers) in addition to skills upgrading (which are mostly aimed at lower-skilled jobs).

While these policy directions demonstrate a commitment from the Canadian government to develop WES, it is important to understand how this has evolved. Since 1992, the Conference Board of Canada has been integral in the WES discourse as it was their work that resulted in the release of the Employability Skills Profile that year (Bloom & Kitagawa, 1999). The Conference Board of Canada's (2012) current mission "builds leadership capacity ... by creating and sharing insights on economic trends, public policy, and organizational performance" (Our Mission, para. 1); it has a strong interest in education and business partnerships that foster learning excellence to ensure that Canada is successful and competitive in the global economy. It has been this prevailing notion of

global success that has driven many of the discussions about the purpose and value for WES.

As cited in Torjman (2002), the OECD has taken the position that we are living in a knowledge economy. According to the OECD, this economy requires considerable investment in human capital or more specifically, “the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being” (p. 18). The knowledge economy and globalization forces have been central themes used to legitimate the notion of WES, a view that is strongly supported by influential organizations such as the OECD and HRSDC. While the popular view is such, authors like Fenwick, Livingstone, and Jarvis contribute different and important perspectives.

Fenwick (2006), for instance, explores the notions of lifelong learning, the skills discourse, as well as the issue of teaching and student outcomes. Fenwick’s (2001) work brings together many of the issues related to the practice and approach to WES, such as the purpose and role of higher learning in meeting industry needs. She suggests the need to develop a critical human resource field that challenges corporate dynamics and power towards a practice that is just, fair, and equitable. Her critical stance on the human resource development field, tests the nature of student outcomes and learning because, in her view, current practice fails to challenge oppressive organizational structures and the process of knowledge legitimization. In large part, Fenwick’s (2006) work represents a holistic and comprehensive critique of the WES, in essence questioning the legitimacy of the skills discourse in terms of what knowledge is and the equity in terms of outcomes that this public policy creates. Her work is relevant in bringing forward the questions and

issues related to the effect of WES on the individual and relevancy to the forefront of education and learning. It is not enough to learn for the sake of working; it is necessary to learn to be better people and to improve society.

Livingstone (2000) argues that employees face the issue of underemployment. Specifically, his view counters the skills gap discourse, noting that people use only a portion of their knowledge, skills, and abilities in their jobs. People with higher levels of education are employed in less challenging roles, and therefore, their overall contribution is less than what it could be. This creates challenges for the individual in terms of engagement in their work and corresponds to decreased productivity for the employer. As a potential solution to this problem, Livingstone suggests economic reform in the way that businesses are structured is needed and that the creation of informal learning practices will improve institutional learning (Livingstone, 2000; Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2001, 2005). Livingstone in particular raises the issue of structural unemployment which is relevant in understanding what motivates individuals with respect to educational choices and learning activities.

Jarvis's (2000) work explores these issues from a historical and global perspective. In his work, the notion of lifelong learning is related to the perception of individual responsibility and the relationship that students have with their educational providers. When exploring students' experience, it is worth noting how the policy and practice of lifelong learning is perceived and applied in their view. Jarvis discusses changes in the learning discourse in the last decade and explores the reasons behind those changes. He examines the notion of lifelong learning both in terms of policy and the individual needs and responsibilities of the learner. His critique focuses on the

application of learning as a policy and practice, which he asserts tends to reproduce the dominant culture. Jarvis (2000) challenges educators to understand students from a broad, diverse community perspective and to incorporate an inclusive approach to creating a global learning society.

While these critical perspectives are well supported, it has not diminished the strength of the popular view that we live in a knowledge economy supported by the skills and knowledge of individuals, and it is these WES that are needed in order to meet global market demands (OECD, 2001). This perspective can be seen as largely driven by business, and is aligned with the idea of consumerism and a market economy culture in which business is able to impose market values on education (Hyslop-Margison, 2000). This power dynamic raises questions about the value and potential impact of the WES policies on individual well-being.

This research explores WES in relation to formal learning experiences and how it is linked to the pursuit of workplace success. While governments and industries claim this connection is critical for healthy businesses and a healthy economy, student perceptions are relatively unknown. Students' understandings, perceptions, and experiences may provide a valuable perspective about the role of WES in learning. Students' voices could provide a deeper understanding of issues faced by students embarking on their journey to be part of working society. Before we can step forward and evaluate the impact of the WES strategy, it is necessary to better understand student learning as a whole and to probe into student expectations regarding their investment in higher learning. It is also important to explore the social implications of these perspectives.

Canadian Community Colleges Context

In a 2005 pre-budget submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee, the ACCC presented its views on the national human resources strategy in support of Canada's economic and social future. In that presentation, the ACCC argued:

Canadian society is undergoing a significant transformation, largely in response to the forces of globalization and the development of the knowledge/information economy. For Canada, the key to economic and social well being of its communities lays in the knowledge-and-skills base of our citizens i.e. our human capital infrastructure. Canada must design policies and programs, which give Canadians entry to the skills-based economy and then help them remain active participants. (2005, p. 3)

Finding the right adjective to describe the current context for Canadian community colleges is not easy. Complex, controversial, and hopeful are just some words that could describe changes that are underway. The changes are related to the growth of colleges and their role in furthering our national agenda. Through this growth and expansion of purpose, the role of colleges in providing skilled workers in a knowledge-based economy becomes more important.

The ACCC's (2005) call for a Pan-Canadian workforce development agenda took the position that Canada needs a national strategy to ensure it has the resources in place to build a highly skilled and adaptable workforce, both of which are needed to compete globally and provide Canadians with the tools to become lifelong learners. The ACCC's belief is that training and skills development are critical for an economy that is human

capital/knowledge-based, and that colleges have a central role in a national strategy to advance the skills of our workforce.

In its report, the ACCC (2005) stressed the importance of colleges and institutes in meeting the human capital needs of Canada. Using HRSDC data, the ACCC described the challenge for colleges in strengthening economic and labour market alignment through the delivery of new programs in areas of future growth. It implied that the current programming, infrastructure, and existing tools are inadequate for future labour market requirements. HRSDC predicted that some form of postsecondary education would be required for 72% of the 1.3 million new jobs created. Recommendations to meet this need include the creation of an Infrastructure Enhancement Fund, and a College & Community Innovation Program pilot to better prepare colleges to produce a more qualified and properly trained workforce.

Community colleges continue to be seen as the place to go to gain necessary skills, yet determining just how colleges do so is still not well understood. In a submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee pre-budget consultations, the ACCC (2008) suggested that a 30% increase in college enrolment is needed to meet the demand for advanced skills (p. 3). In order to maintain and support this change, an investment of about \$7.4 billion was said to be required. The explanation provided for this investment stems from the supposed growing skills crisis. According to the ACCC, the linkages to the labour market, employer-responsive curricula, and entrepreneurial instincts that colleges provide are the answer to current labour market shortages.

Colleges continue to be pressured to meet the demand for skilled workers (ACCC, 2010). The current system is characterized by long waiting lists, aging infrastructure,

antiquated teaching equipment, and an impending shortage of faculty. Despite these challenges, colleges and institutes of technology taxpayers see a 15.9% rate of return on investment (Robinson, Christophersen, 2008, p49). This rate of return suggests that further investments in education should be made. The recommendation made by the ACCC is that the federal government should allocate an additional \$3.7 billion over 5 years for the recapitalization of Canada's community colleges, institutes of technology, polytechnics, cegeps, and university colleges (ACCC, 2010, p. 4).

This position is consistent with the literature on global trends in education (Jarvis, 2002). Within the Canadian context, there are several factors that have the potential to affect Canadian students in significant way. The Canadian Council on Learning (2010) dealt with a number of challenges specifically related to student experiences and the choices they make in postsecondary education. In this article, the Council recommends a change in the classification of postsecondary education institutions to help provide clarity for students making decisions about careers. The challenges that students face relate to the wide variety of school options, areas of study, and proliferation of postsecondary school types, all of which make the system difficult to navigate and create potential barriers in finding a career path. By developing a framework that differentiates qualifications and expected learning outcomes, the risk of making uninformed choices is decreased. The council identified that a clearer understanding of future directions and top priorities of postsecondary schools would contribute to greater transparency and improved outcomes.

The Public Policy Forum (2008) addressed the skills issue in its recent work. The Public Policy Forum described the issue as a lack of national data about labour market

supply and demand. It suggested that the rigid curriculums of colleges and universities do not meet the needs of the market and of the Canadian population. The disconnect between educational institutions and labour market needs was identified as the biggest concern, which led to suggestions that institutions and business structures should be aligned to make them more responsive to current market conditions. The Public Policy Forum (2008) was also concerned by the competition for international talent and suggested moving away from the conventional classroom to becoming more flexible, fluid, adaptable, and customized. In summary, it viewed Essential Skills as an important foundation to employability, and identified that curriculums need to package Essential Skills with an employability focus.

The number one priority of the ACCC 2009-2012 Strategic Plan is to promote the excellence of members as the primary providers of advanced skills and applied research for social and economic development (ACCC, 2010, p. 1). The expansion of institutional mandates is one of the first steps in building college capacities and preparing them to meet the needs of a growing population with skills needs. Over the past 3 years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of companies partnering with schools in research. This clearly positions colleges as key players in Canada's innovation system and federal science and technology strategy (ACCC, 2010, p. 24). This position shows how important colleges are in helping businesses succeed. This may be achieved by building the skills of employees aimed at improving the productivity and the competitiveness of local businesses.

All of these recent publications by important policy and institutional actors suggest an important role for WES. Within this discourse, one change has seen the

separation of Essential Skills and Advanced Skills, with the former referring to basic employability skills aimed at the secondary school level and the latter referring to those skills learned at the postsecondary level of education. Among the significant changes are increased funds to research, corporate training, and enrolment. For instance, Fenwick (2008) explores informal practices as they relate to learning and raise questions about the role of WES and offers alternative views on the role of educators and pedagogical practices. Livingstone's (1999) view is critical with respect to the development of skills in the knowledge economy; he asserts that the major source of pressure is not the development of skills but the structural underemployment that exists. These views relate to Jarvis's (2002) stance against the reproduction of the dominant culture in which educators and learners are subjects of a larger superstructure that controls their interests. These authors contrast the views held by the Conference Board of Canada, ACCC, Public Policy Forum, and OECD. Given these contrasting views on the purpose of education, the role of schools and educators, it is important to contextualize the participants' experiences to add a further dimension to this discussion. By recognizing these multiple views, the students' perspective can help shed light on how policies and actions of those within the education system influence the experiences of students in the changing educational landscape.

Skolnik's (2009) work on the evolution of the community college baccalaureate presents three theoretical perspectives to help explain the apparent shift in the college mandate. Searching for theoretical models to explain this change led to the use of (a) the Consumer-Choice model, (b) the Business-Domination model, and (c) the Institutional model. The models not only helped to describe the processes which led to the

development of baccalaureate programs, but also to identify problems associated with them. For the purposes of this study, these models were used to help identify with the experiences of the participants within the case.

The Consumer-Choice model assumes that students decide what type of postsecondary education to pursue on the basis of their expected earnings. So in the case of trades programs, applications to those programs would be based on the perception of current salaries of trade workers. The three problems identified with this model are: the question of what students actually expect in terms of economic return, the timing of the shift towards vocational programs in relation to labour market trends, and the number of spots available within the academic and vocational programs. While these serve to better understand the decisions of program choice, it leaves many questions that relate to the students' motivation and their understanding of the labour market.

In contrast, the Business-Domination model explains the rise of vocational education as a result of the active intervention of businesses. The goal of the businesses is to shape workers around their specific needs. The dilemma with this view is that the vocational education environment can lead to developing a docile workforce that readily accepts the hierarchal structure of that typical workplace (Skolnik, 2009, p. 130). This view reinforces issues related to power interests in the development of students, which may ignore their general well-being in an effort to develop productive workers.

The last model that Skolnik (2009) presents is the Institutional model. In this model, it is believed that the institutions act according to their own interests. In this case, schools would respond to groups within their environment and act on the needs and interests of the actors within and around the institution. To fully integrate this

understanding, it is necessary to look at the competing interests of students, employers, as well as faculty and administrators. Issues concerning this view relate to the perception and realities of the power dynamics that shape school behaviour. To appreciate this, there is a need to explore the apparent and legitimate power held by administrators and faculty in meeting government, industry and student interests.

Skolnik (2010) examined the debate on the design of Ontario's community colleges that took place when they were founded and its implications on the present. His view of the evolution of the baccalaureate college offers a lens on the complex nature of the Canadian community college, which provides a fuller understanding of the role of institutions in the development of WES. In this research, the relationship of WES and colleges is explored in Canada's largest metropolitan area. Though each province has its own mandate, the skills strategy is common on a national and global level. Exploring this in the Toronto area provides a good viewpoint for this research, as it is a strong business and educational centre for Canada.

Education Reform

While there are a number of factors that contribute to educational success, education, and in particular postsecondary attainment, is viewed as the most important factor of personal economic success and intergenerational mobility—more important than race, health, and socio-economic status, although these factors influence education and therefore cannot be ignored (Bosworth, 2008). Even though the focus of WES has been on the development of personal skills, it appears they are intended for meeting organizational needs and business ends, not personal development. Also missing from WES are the important themes of social well-being and social justice. The expected end-

result of education is employability (Jarvis, 2002), but what does this really mean if the interest of education is not about personal and social well-being, but rather industry competitiveness and success?

The working assumption of the WES discourse is that our colleges have developed an underproductive workforce. In order to have a vibrant and healthy economy, the consistent message has been to invest in education, but our current economy suggests that we need the workforce to evolve and respond to new markets, new technologies, and new business needs (Torjman, 2002). What is not clear is how to influence the workforce or individuals so that they can be responsive and innovative in difficult economic times.

Canadian scholar Hyslop-Margison (2000) takes a critical stance on the WES discourse and outlines what he defines as the hidden curriculum. He suggests that in order to meet new and emerging needs, an evaluation of the hidden curriculum should be included. Corporate attitudes, values, and beliefs are dominant in the WES curricula, but virtually absent from evaluation. This critique is supported by Arvast, (2006), who argues that the transformation of schools, specifically Canadian colleges, has been influenced by the commodification of teaching and learning which has created a disproportionate influence on schools by the interrelationships of governance and marketplace.

As well, this market pressure on schools (in this case, Ontario community college) is reinforced by the way that colleges have been measured against performance-based criteria that emphasize measurable outputs. While some scholars advocate for improved social outcomes (Fenwick, 2006; Hyslop-Margison, 2000), the discourse presented by

government and industry representatives is clearly biased towards marketability as the key outcome of education and learning (Arvast, 2006).

Marketability can be described as having skills that employers need or want. In the face of a changing economy that has seen an increasing number of part-time, casual, and service-oriented jobs, how confident can one be that qualities deemed “marketable” are the answer to our current economic issues? Is our notion of marketability relevant or meaningful in that context? Being marketable in this labour market does not mean that you can change the way businesses operate or lead, or innovate new ways to create and produce. It may simply reinforce a working class structure that inhibits peoples’ social and economic mobility, a view supported by Hyslop-Margison’s (2000) criticism of CAPP and the WES discourse. To move away from this paradigm requires a change in attitude and approach. While WES emphasizes skill development, there is little to suggest that it will lead us out of economic hardship and improve the social and economic well-being of individuals, families, and communities. As Arvast (2006) contends:

The core-periphery structure of our global economy and national labour markets is closely paralleled in emerging educational policies and perspectives. These are the very perspectives which we argue that education is essentially about ensuring that our economy is maintained by the workers we educators train to operate within it, and certainly this argument about “skills training” is firmly ensconced in the collective consciousness of the CAAT; the new college charter with its emphasis on free market and public choice finds its place solidly here. (p. 15)

It is the collective consciousness of Canadian community colleges and emphasis on meeting business needs that pose a risk to the well-being of students. The risk of

putting business needs ahead of personal and social needs warrants an exploration of this relationship and its consequences for students. Educational reform in this context is about finding out what works best both in teaching and learning. It may be that the benefits of achieving business goals link to student success in the workplace, but we should not assume that this is the case.

Learning appears to have taken a backseat in the discourse of WES. Policy implications have affected the administration of schools as funding for Canadian community colleges has been tied to performance across key indicators linked to employment and industry outcomes (Arvast, 2006). This convergence of economic and educational objectives raises questions about the purpose and value of education as it appears to place colleges as subordinate to industry needs. Though this may or may not be intentional, it provides an opportunity to examine what the relationship should be. Through the changing landscape of college education in Canada, and specifically in Ontario, we have seen a proliferation of business-education partnerships (Hyslop-Margison, 2000). While this development signifies progress towards creating positive employment outcomes, the degree to which WES is being developed through these relationships is not clear. It does, however, reinforce the notion that education in college is linked to industry needs, but again, raises the question as to what degree industry should be driving this link. There is a need to look critically at this dynamic and the resultant effect for students to truly determine the benefit of these relationships on skill development.

HRSDC (2005), the federal department responsible for labour market development in Canada, has claimed that the workplace skills strategy is about

developing the right skills for a changing world. But how do we know what the right skills are? At the heart of this skills strategy, industry representatives have held the strongest voice and have played a key role in the design and development of skills categories. Within the Canadian context, we have seen several changes to the naming of these essential skills, the latest of which is the advanced essential skills concept developed by the ACCC (2003).

This latest version identifies higher order thinking, creativity, and leadership as competencies that should be developed through postsecondary education. This is a change from previous models in that these skills are higher ordered skills than the original Essential Skills model. The inclusion of “leadership” and “creativity” implies greater opportunity for personal growth, individual success, and social change. This idea is supported by ACCC’s (2003) position that a universal need in the Canadian workforce is to develop leaders and success for our economy; in its vision, ACCC has assumed the responsibility to equip students for a constantly changing world.

Consider that businesses have become keenly interested in workplace learning in recent decades, examining processes through which groups develop, share, and store knowledge, improve practices, and solve problems (Fenwick, 2008, p. 18). This type of learning emphasizes the informal practices in which learning is treated as a process and not necessarily an outcome of change. Informal practices of learning help to explain how individuals can learn workplace skills through participation. In this context, the responsibility of success is shifted to the student and to a large degree has moved the learning to more informal settings (Fenwick, 2008),

Analysis of the literature shows that the WES discourse has less to do with individual success than it does with the interests of business. Through the efforts of the Conference Board of Canada, HRDC, and the ACCC, this movement has impacted curriculum and the nature of schools, and has given rise to new notions of what is important to learn for work and transferred the responsibility for learning to the learner. Based on a review of the literature, the success of integrating WES in colleges is evident in at least three ways: (a) the way that business language has become the language of education, (b) the way that the role of certain postsecondary schools has changed to respond to these demands, and finally (c) the impact of these changes. The result is that business interests have laid the foundation for educational reform, and it is important to view educational reform critically to ensure that the interests of students and society are not lost in this equation.

The changing language of colleges is evident in the use of common business terms to define the goals and functions of education. Business language is the language of productivity, performance, and outputs. These concepts have become the norm in the New College Charter and have been imbedded into educational policy (Arvast, 2006). Transposing the language of education into these business concepts changes the purpose of education and replaces educational outcomes with business outputs. Rightly or wrongly, the end result is that the basis for evaluation for Canadian community colleges has become the measure of the individual's potential for productive work.

Colleges are viewed as places where people go to learn, and consequently learning is a fundamental element of schooling (Levin, 2000). However, it is not entirely clear what we mean by learning. It is the development of our understanding of *what*

learning is that has the potential to reform the methods used in teaching. In the context of the underproductive workforce, Livingstone (1999) suggests it is the utilization rather than the productivity of the workforce that may be the problem. His research supports the view that the knowledge society is actually much larger than the knowledge economy, meaning that people are better educated than the workforce requires. The problem with this contradiction is that the most popular response to underemployment is to seek more education and training, leading to the creation of a “credential society” (Levin, 2000, p. 181). Furthermore, the cycle of seeking and attaining more education without resulting work changes is creating a deeper underutilization of skills, where a significant proportion of workers are better skilled and more knowledgeable than what is required in their jobs. Levin concludes that “the shortage of adequate paid work is a far more profound problem than most political leaders are yet prepared to admit publicly” (p.181).

The shortage of adequate paid work is problematic and highlights the precarious economic stability of individuals (Fenwick 2006). Having more skilled workers earning less pay places increased pressure on society. This leads colleges to produce even more highly skilled workers, but further increasing the level of skills is not necessarily going to address the issues identified. The effect of increasing credentials could impact on the colleges by creating more emphasis on education. By creating more emphasis on education without addressing the real problem is one reason why businesses need to explore economic reform, as Livingstone has advocated: “Education is the superstructure that responds to the needs of the corresponding infrastructure, and so forced to change according to the demands of markets” (as cited in Jarvis, 2000, p 344). In this scenario, the educational value of schools is placed at risk as it raises concerns over the amount of

investments made in a system that seems to lack the ability to develop a skilled workforce. Despite this contradiction, postsecondary education continues to be the main vehicle for career mobility, and it would appear that enrolment in colleges would continue to be strong. However, this growth may place greater pressure on educators and administrators to improve on the outcomes of education despite recognition of the deeper issues at hand.

It is not simple to implement the changes that are needed in order to achieve the educational goals set out by both individuals and businesses. To be effective, educational reform needs to be informed by a broad understanding of different perspectives to arrive at common goals. The literature can help provide insight into the key issues and potentially help shape a framework for education and learning. Jarvis (2000) suggests that education is not economically productive enough for the investment made in it, and is not responding sufficiently to the needs of industry. If education has not provided the answers that employers are looking for, why then is further education being raised as a solution? An unintended consequence of this paradoxical relationship is the development of a credential society, which has many underlying issues, one of which is the concept of underemployment, an issue with many complexities and dimensions.

It is important to understand the dimensions of underemployment as they provide insight into problems within the workforce and our concept of learning. It is also important to recognize that underemployment highlights a power imbalance between employers and employees, resulting in diminished earning power for workers (Livingstone, 1999). The dimensions of underemployment as discussed by Livingstone are: the talent gap, structural employment, involuntary reduced employment, credential

gap, performance gap, and subjective underemployment. In sum, these describe the ways people are excluded from full participation in the labour market, which affects their health and social well-being (Livingstone, 1999). According to Livingstone (1999, 2000), the solutions to the problem of structural underemployment draw on two general strategies: the need for economic reform, which is his primary focus, and the utilization of different strategies in adult education.

Illeris's Three Dimensions of Learning

While educational reform may take on various forms, the focus for this research is on learning in the context of WES. A review of the literature shows that to understand learning, students must be at the centre of the process.

Illeris's (2002) work on learning is drawn from a number of accepted and traditional learning theories. The culmination of his work provides a comprehensive model that integrates the cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of learning to create a framework that provides a strong starting point for this study. Illeris's model takes into account:

- experience,
- critical reflection,
- personal and collective processes of meaning making, and
- relationships that form the basis of understanding power, formality, and culture.

This model is appealing because it addresses a range of complex factors that are necessary to understand a multiplicity of learning styles and contexts. By focusing on the learner, this theoretical framework can add insight to an area of research that is sorely lacking (Levin, 2000).

The model is comprised of three dimensions that have distinct characteristics, yet work in a dynamic balance to achieve knowledge, abilities, emotions, and sociality (Illeris, 2002). The theory is developed from a fundamentally constructivist position with roots in Piaget's constructivist approach. While Illeris acknowledges the distinction between tacit and institutional learning, he states that "learning is decisively influenced by the situation in which it occurs... and so by the external framework of the situation, and ultimately by the overall societal conditions that determine this framework" (2002, p. 177).

Because postsecondary learning is voluntary and intentional, Illeris's comment illustrates the importance of the school (in this case college) in the learning process and why what happens at school is important to understand. Illeris goes on to mention:

The fundamental motif in a modern capitalistic society that the provision of a qualified workforce is the responsibility of the state, and the work sector cannot to any great extent take upon itself the provision of training activities that are not directly related to the particular needs of an individual business. (2002, p. 184)

Illeris (2002) also suggests that students are rewarded for specific behaviours in school that are different than those generally favoured at work (p. 190). This, Illeris explains, is the difference between the meritocracy of school and the capitalistic structures in society, which manifests itself as "practice shock." This occurs because society is fundamentally different than what has been learned throughout the education system; so when students try to practice the behaviours they have learned, they are surprised to see that they do not work. This creates tension that Illeris describes as the shock. The result is tension between learned behaviours and those required for success in the workplace. For example, in school obedience might be rewarded more than showing

initiative (which may be misunderstood as being rebellious) or, when working on a team task, doing the actual work will likely be seen as more favourable by a teacher in contrast to someone who delegates to others, which may be seen as a sign of leadership in the workplace. As a result, transformation from good student to good worker may be less direct than one might expect. These concepts present relevant and viable lenses by which to explore student experience at college, where the main focus is typically preparation for work.

The process of learning, according to Illeris (2002) unites the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions as a whole; this happens through interactive processes that take raw material(s) in a single event to create meaning (p. 227). These raw materials are things that are felt, seen, or heard, and through the psychodynamic process of accumulation, assimilation, and accommodation are given meaning and create knowledge. Illeris (2002) defines knowledge creation or learning as an integrated process consisting of two connected parts, which mutually influence each other (p. 16). This interdependence creates a tension between the cognitive and social dimensions.

Illeris describes emotions as structures and schemes from the cognitive sphere. Essentially, he suggests that learning is motivated by an intense biological desire, and what really changes is not the nature of one's emotions, but an alteration of strength and direction from an intrinsic human characteristic. This process of alteration or "toning" is responsible for the dynamics from which motivation and emotional responses are derived, which is in constant tension with psychological and social dimensions.

In the social dimension, it is explicit that the learning event is one that begins through perception, followed by transmission, experience, imitation, and participation. These form the elements of internalization, thereby initiating the process of meaning making, altering emotional schemes, and changing behaviour. In summary, this outlines the major details of Illeris's theory and how the three dimensions are both interdependent and in constant tension.

Teaching in Illeris's model is important because the theory has pedagogical implications on how a teacher may be able to use the dimensions to bring about change in thinking, knowledge, and behaviour. Illeris points to problem solving and organizing teaching in goal directed ways that combine academic or vocational qualifications with opportunities to expand the participant's motivation to develop understanding, personality, and identity (2002, p. 90).

In conclusion, Illeris's theory is rooted in a number of prominent learning theories, but diverges from them in one important way: the integration and interdependence of the three dimensions. This theory incorporates important and useful concepts in the workplace skills discourse with respect to the learning process and event, the location of the learning event, the motivation and identity formation of the learner, and the socializing of behaviours through learning events. For the purpose of this study, it will be used as a lens to understand how learning WES may occur from the learner perspective.

Restating the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experience of students who are leaving the college system with the hopes of securing meaningful employment and

how this relates to WES. By engaging students in conversation about their experiences, and their goals, I hope to better understand how their needs relate to the WES discourse. Understanding their experiences can help educators, career counsellors, and administrations to improve student chances for success in their pursuit of meaningful careers. A case study approach is used as a way of improving the understanding of the attitudes, perceptions, and needs of students. The voice of students in the WES discourse is lacking and could provide new insights to enable educators, career counsellors, administrative leaders, corporations, and ultimately the learners to positively impact their educational experience.

Employers have described recent graduates as lacking specific soft skills, specifically WES (Cotton, 2001). These skills are believed to be important to the success of businesses and individuals. As a result, educators and administrators of our community colleges may pay too much attention to this need and look beyond current teaching practices under the pretext of continuous improvement. While WES is being promoted throughout Canadian colleges, it is important to evaluate the results to ensure that students are developing the skills that will ultimately improve their likelihood of success.

The literature illustrates two key and distinct viewpoints, one that endorses the development of WES in order to build productive workers and another that questions the value of that strategy. The pro WES literature is written from the industry and government perspective, while a growing group of scholars with different viewpoints suggest a higher and more holistic purpose for higher education.

When I began this research, I believed that WES was an essential driver for

success. This was strongly influenced by my experience in school and work in career services. Developing these skills in my view provided individuals with opportunities that were not otherwise available. It was with this perspective that I began this inquiry but through critical reflection and delving deeper in the issues presented by the literature review, I began to have a clearer and more critical understanding of this discourse.

By asking questions about how WES impacts the college experience, I explore adult learning (at the college level) and its orientation towards workplace effectiveness. As skills and knowledge gained at college are relevant to success in the workplace, this study will bring light to how successful WES has been from the student perspective.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The instrumental case study approach (Stake, 1995) was chosen to guide this study, which will explore WES through a reflective and learner-centred method. Given the lack of student voice in the WES discourse, the case study method could provide insight about the student, their experience in college and how the learning experience facilitated their search of and success with work. This qualitative method was chosen to deepen the understanding of the student experience for this purpose.

Using the instrumental case study approach, it is important to define the case to be able to identify with the participants stories in a way that could be useful. This case was defined as recent graduates (in the last 4 years) of a business school from a college in the GTA. The business school was chosen for its link to industry, which is well represented in the WES discourse. The relationships discovered in the analysis of the data provided useful information that will be presented in chapter four.

This study involves a small group of students who have recently graduated from a business school at a college in the GTA. This study is bounded by the experiences of a group who have taken similar courses and may share educators and be exposed to similar teaching methods, but may have different expectations and experiences in relation to how they feel about schooling and the workplace. A qualitative approach is used to deepen the understanding the participants' perspectives about the relationship between going to college and the development of workplace skills.

Five participants were recruited through referrals and a snowballing technique. Three of the participants were female and were graduates of Human Resources through the Business Faculty (or department) from two different Ontario colleges. Participants are

referred to by pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality; the female participants are: Cindy, Stacey, and Sandra. The male participants are referred to as Luke and Brian.

Reflections on student experiences help to understand how learning at school is connected to WES. Exploring this relationship at the individual student level was helpful in contextualizing the WES discourse from a learner-centred perspective. In order to maximize our learning of the student experience, the instrumental case study approach was chosen as it supported a level of interaction with the participants that led to a greater understanding of an area neglected in the literature.

Canadian colleges, and specifically those in the Greater Toronto area, are different from universities in many ways, including their relationship to employment skills. A quick Internet review of local college websites (e.g., George Brown, Sheridan, and Humber) shows that workplace learning is a key part of their external communications, which are used to attract potential students. While employment outcomes are typically perceived as important for any investment in education, it seems that the relevance of the WES and its connection to college learning is highly politicized. Though it would not be feasible to generalize the experience of students between different programs, students who are part of the same program and graduating at roughly the same time may be bound by similar experiences. Ideally, experiences that stem from having gone through the same curriculum, with the same educators using similar teaching styles, and in the same setting provide an overarching basis for comparability. The lack of student perspective in the current literature supported the use of the instrumental case study as it situated personal stories in education.

In trying to understand the relationship between students, community college, and WES, the study emphasizes the connection between what students learn in school and their perceptions of future social and economic success. The case study approach sought to understand these complex, variable stories in a way that allows us to reflect on what we assume to know about learning. In the context of WES, the research was meant to explore how formal postsecondary learning occurs in relation to the skills defined by the WES discourse. As I experienced early in my education, there is the potential that the individual or college system or both are somehow disconnected from the outcomes expected by institutions and industry. To learn about this connection and the potential impact on learning, it is important to explore the possibilities that the case study approach offers.

This approach suits this research topic because of the following two reasons: the lack of student voice and the focus of WES in our public policy. That the student voice is lacking in current research points to the need to gain the type of perspective that can be obtained through a qualitative approach. The potential advantages of using the case study approach are based on providing students a voice by which to explore the development of specific skills and learning in the context of gaining employment.

Reflecting on my own story reminded me that this issue is complex and encompasses a number of factors. Employment outcomes are not simply a result of school or learning; a host of factors help or hinder a person's employment achievement upon graduation. It is clear is that the employment rate of college graduates exceed those who graduated from university, and one could expect that it may be related to the attention that colleges place on achieving industry needs (ACCC, 2008).

What is not clear from the employment figures is to what extent these jobs are related to the students' field of study, and to what extent they have an opportunity for upward mobility. This is a critical aspect of the case which was examined through exploration of its meaning and impact with the participants who are directly affected. Exploring recent research with an adult education and workplace skills focus produced several examples in which a case study approach was used. While these studies varied in size, scope, and research tools, they provide support for the use of this approach.

To illustrate how this approach was helpful in learning more about the connection between college students and WES, five examples are highlighted. These examples provide clarity into the role of the researcher, the value of specific learner experience and depth of insight. These examples show how a bounded system can be beneficial in gaining a deeper appreciation for the issues, problems and opportunities presented by this study.

One example is that of an employment partnership program in Wichita, Kansas between the local area college and the Chamber of Commerce (Kelly, 1998). The Chamber identified a challenge in finding entry-level employees who had the skills to be "trainable" for manufacturing jobs. The skills targeted program was based on the employers' needs and was bounded by a specific context. The case study approach allowed a deeper understanding of the program, issues, and successes within it, which lends itself to this study.

In a study by Mandell and Lee (2008), the association between access and new learning was explored through two specific student/mentor relationships. In both cases, it is clear that the singularity of the cases allowed for insight that would not have been made possible if not for the closeness to the subjects. Insights were gained about the way

that students felt and how they were able to access their mentor and develop their learning. A significant point of their research was examining changes in the relationship between mentor and student. This observation was made possible by using the case study approach and was key in developing a greater understanding of how access impacted individual learning. The fact that the authors were able to focus on the relationship seemed to create opportunities for understanding and reflection within the study. This level of insight is important if we are to attempt to understand learning in the context of developing workers.

As another example, O'Toole and Ferres (2008) conducted a case study to examine the use of a specific professional development methodology to measure the gap in performance for staff in a social welfare organization. What made this case relevant is how the study was able to provide insight around a specific organizational need. This improved their understanding about employee performance and enabled them to develop a strategy aligned with the organizational goals from a "learner/user" perspective. This study is helpful in that it attempted to understand the users' (i.e., staff's) needs and in that way is similar to this case in exploring the student perspective.

Another study conducted by Sampson and Betters-Reed (2008) looked at the assurance of learning outcomes and how it applies in a Marketing curriculum in an internationally accredited school. It shows that learning outcomes are important and reinforce the relationship with external stakeholders, which are aligned with industry needs and workplace outcomes. The learning goals or traits being developed are conceptually similar to WES, which provides insight on how this could be used for this study. This study was successful because of how the participants told their stories. The

authors shared the faculties' feelings and behaviours in a way that led to a deeper understanding of how learning experiences can be evaluated. This study is also helpful because the context is relevant to the research focus here, and provides direction in terms of learning outcomes and the application of new insights.

The last example is a case study conducted by Weaver (2006). In this study, Weaver explored the impact of a building designed with student learning in mind, and how this affected learning. This case was bound by the school chosen for this study and the experiences of the students within that school. The result was a deepened understanding of the student experience. The apparent challenge in using this approach seemed to be the volume of ideas and interpretations produced from the different people and experiences. Through reflection, the researcher was able to determine that the approach and philosophy embraced by the school had significantly improved the quality of the school's business program as a whole. It created awareness on the part of the instructors and administrators, which could further enhance opportunities presented at the school. In summary, the case study approach used in this example enabled the researcher to identify and relate personal experiences in a way that led to a greater understanding of how learning environments impact learning. Weaver maintained that:

The key to remaining a relevant and effective protagonist in the student experience of the future will depend on the alignment of individuals' career aspirations with educationalist perspectives, having an in-depth understanding what meta-learners require and being able to work confidently with academic, technical and support staff across organizational structures. (p. 121)

This type of reflective observation and understanding is the intended objective in pursuing the research topic in this study. The understanding at the individual student level is helpful in contextualizing the WES discourse from a learner-centred perspective and articulates the needs and complex issues students face. It also supports and identifies ways that educators and administrators can better meet the needs of learners.

The method of data gathering included two semi-structured interviews with each participant. The flexibility in a semi-structured interview allowed for greater discussion and helped to create the opportunity to bring new concepts to light in relation to WES. Asking how WES relates to student experiences provided guidance that enabled the second interviews to address issues in greater depth.

Research Questions

The goal of this research is to explore the relationship between WES and the college experience. This research will explore the questions set forth below:

- What is the relationship between how students characterize the workplace and what it takes to be successful at work?
- What do students feel they need from a college education and what is the relationship between their expectations and their experience?
- What do students actually learn about WES and its relationship to success at work?
- How do students define success in college and do they feel they have achieved success? How do they define success in future work?

Through student experiences, we may be able to better understand the relationship between college and work preparation in the context of WES. Using Illeris's three dimensions of learning as a lens to explore this relationship may help educators to

understand how students learn WES, which could result in better approaches for preparing students to be successful at work. Upon reviewing the transcripts from the first set of interviews, questions were developed that related to each of Illeris's dimensions of learning. The questions were derived in large part through that reflection. (See Appendix A for the list of questions.)

Research Design

Interviews were used in this research to elicit personal stories and experiences from the student perspective. These were one-to-one in-depth interviews of up to 1 hour in length, followed by second interviews of a similar duration. Interviews were semi-structured and emphasized open-ended questions. Interviews were audio recorded for transcription and playback. The interview questions are shown in the Appendix.

Site and Participant Selection

For the purpose of developing a greater understanding of the relationship between WES and students' experience, participants were selected from those who attended a community college in the GTA. In order to ensure the cases were as similar as possible, the criteria for selection included students who graduated from a program within a business school. Business is the program of choice as business schools have the greatest number of applicants and graduates and relates to the purpose of this study (Allen & Vaillancourt, 2004, Table A2). For this study, five participants were interviewed at neutral locations, such as cafés.

In order to participate in the study, students must have attended a college in the GTA and graduated from a business program within the last 4 years. This ensured that the students' experiences were similar enough in terms of the program, curriculum,

educators, and school life in order to delve deeper into the WES relationship and school experience.

Recruitment

The recruitment of participants included setting up posters at local library centres and coffee shops and through snowball sampling. In the snowball, potential participants were asked to contact me directly to discuss their participation. As part of the recruitment strategy, I offered to provide participants one-to-one coaching for résumé development and job search advice (for up to 2 hours) or a \$40 iTunes gift card as an incentive for participation.

Data Collection

Individual interviews conducted and were audio recorded in accordance to Research Ethic Board guidelines (File 10-216-TABER). Notes were taken throughout and audio was transcribed. All notes and any discussions were recorded and documented for analysis.

Data Analysis

The transcriptions of interviews and discussions were analyzed based on Strauss' grounded theory of qualitative data coding, using open, axial, and selective coding (as cited in Neuman, 2006). The first review of data involved open coding which identified initial codes to condense the data into themes as prescribed by Neuman. On the basis of the issues identified in the literature review, the themes were then used to develop a second set of questions. The questions were derived from exploring the data and the ideas that surfaced in relation to Illeris's model for learning.

The follow-up interviews helped to provide a basis for a fuller understanding of key ideas presented in the original interview, and also provided another opportunity to verify assumptions or interpretations made by the researcher. The data were examined in relation to the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions to identify missing areas as well as areas that could highlight new insights on the relationship between college and the development of WES. The entire data set was then regrouped by questions, themes, and context using the axial coding method. These data were then cross-referenced, grouped, and analyzed for identification of themes and/or consistent messages. Once the data were coded and grouped by categories, a cross-tabulation was done to identify patterns and links. The data were then interpreted for meaning and complex ideas were coded for further analysis using selective coding. The final analysis emphasized categorical aggregation and selective coding (Neuman, 2006; Stake, 1995).

Methodological Assumptions

The goal of this research is to explore the relationship between WES and college. From the literature review it is clear that WES is important from both industry and educational perspectives. This study was meant to understand what students know about work and what it takes to be successful, and the role that colleges play in preparing them. This study was done from the participants' perspective.

An instrumental case study approach was used to explore the experiences of the participants in a way to understand the relationship between WES and college. This methodology provided a systematic approach to this broad topic to shed light on the participants' experiences. It was believed that through this qualitative approach, the

experiences of students validated, strengthened, and challenged findings within the WES discourse.

Limitations

The small sample size and the personal nature of the data drawn from the participants limited the ability to draw conclusions or make generalizations. The goal of this study was to explore the relationship between the broad topic of WES and college. As the research in this area is still relatively new, there may be new insights and issues raised that were not identified in the literature review. The ability to gain insight from this research is limited by case criteria and how it relates to the literature review, which in this example is largely missing and so might not have had application outside of this case. The participants' experiences may be interpreted in different ways, which may also limit the findings of this study.

The participants of this study were all gainfully employed which in of itself represents a unique perspective. It could be that their employment may have indicated a bias towards the positive achievement of WES. There is no telling how different the conversations and consequently the findings of this research would have been if the participants had not been able to secure employment so soon after graduating.

Conclusion

The instrumental case study method was chosen for this research study as a way of exploring the relationship between college education and WES, providing a method to systematically look at the experiences of recent graduates to help understand how college has prepared them for work. The analysis and interpretation of events will help to contextualize the impact of the WES strategy on the lives of recent college graduates.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between WES and the college experience from the perspective of students. By exploring student experiences, we can gain insight into how Ontario colleges help develop WES and how educators support students in preparation for work. This perspective could reinforce good practices and support effective styles of learning and teaching. By expanding our view of the learning environment beyond the classroom, and by exploring the experiences of five students during their time in college, we may also learn more about how students view the college experience in pursuit of a job and or a career.

Data Collection Strategies

Semi-structured interviews were used to draw personal experiences from the participants. Initial interviews were conducted. These consisted of 10 open-ended questions that took approximately an hour to complete. The interviews were conducted at various locations with the five participants and were audio recorded for transcription. During the interviews, a notebook was kept to record any thoughts, questions, and ideas generated through the discussion.

The data taken from the first set of interviews were analyzed and used to generate a list of common themes, which were compared against the literature review to develop a second set of questions. The additional eight questions were then used in second interviews with each participant. These interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. In total, the 10 interviews were completed over a 5-month period and generated approximately 7 hours of audio recordings, and 54 pages of notes.

Study Participants

Cindy graduated in 2009 and has since completed a Bachelor's degree. Stacey also graduated in 2009, and had previously graduated from university with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Sandra graduated in 2008 and received her Human Resources diploma after she too had completed a Bachelor of Arts degree. At the time of this study all three were working in the field of Human Resources.

Of the two males recruited, Luke graduated from a Business Management program in 2010; Brian graduated from an E-Commerce Management program in 2008 from the same Ontario college. In addition to the E-Commerce Management program, Brian also achieved a Bachelor's degree in Business. Both are currently working, with Luke in a management role and Brian as a Business Associate. It is worthwhile noting that all five participants were gainfully employed in their field of interest at the time of the interviews.

Method of Analysis

The purpose of this study is to understand the connection between WES and the experiences of students in a GTA college. The analysis used the multi-step approach described by Neuman and based on Strauss' grounded approach which outlined a process by which to gain insight and interpret the data (as cited in Neuman, 2006). The analysis began with open coding to condense the data and identify initial themes. This led to axial coding which helped to further develop ideas and determine causes, conditions, and processes that could provide insight into the experiences of the learner. In total, 41 codes were identified, defined, and checked against the entire data set several times to ensure consistency and accuracy. These codes were grouped by common theme and analyzed for

frequency and relationship to other codes. This analysis produced summaries for each theme that show which codes were most commonly mentioned, and their relationship to other codes. The final analysis was done using selective coding to highlight themes and identify relationships within the data that provided clues to understanding the learner experience. To forge a stronger understanding of the data, research memos written during and after the interviews were compared and reviewed against the findings to ensure coherency and consistency of the interpretation of findings.

The reviews of the data began in broad strokes and became more refined with each turn. Through selective coding, three categories were identified in the data that related to:

1. The general sense of satisfaction with the college experience;
2. The relationship between school, life experience, and skill development at college; and
3. An appreciation of what it took to succeed in the workplace and its relation to WES.

In addition to these categories, the underlying concept of teaching and learning will be discussed as it appeared in the data. Together these themes summarize the learnings that emerged in participants' stories, and helped to create greater understanding of the student experience.

Theme 1: Satisfaction With College

The five participants described a general sense of satisfaction in the college experience. From cross-referencing data, the following factors were identified as they relate to participant satisfaction with the college experience: having their expectations of

community college met; the relationship between college and work; and the relative ease of college. Combined, these factors contributed to a positive college experience as expressed by the five participants.

Expectations of school were actually quite similar between participants.

Participants described community college as a stepping-stone to their field of interest. In that regard, it seemed to hit the mark with four of the five participants. These are their comments.

- Going to school, the point was to get the skills needed to be good at whatever you're doing or at least the fundamentals to give you the ability to be good at your job. I figured it would give me the framework to do that. (Luke)
- I definitely got what I went in expecting to get... a lot of my reason for going to school was to get a job. (Luke)
- I really think I got a lot from college. (Cindy)
- Overall I had a pretty positive experience... in recruitment [where I work now]; it's interesting to look back because I can remember reading it [recruitment] in college. Especially in the field of HR it helps to have that experience, I'd recommend it. (Cindy)
- I remember someone asked me about my job and going to school and whether it was worth it and I said absolutely... I wanted a program that was a Coles Notes version of the field. I wanted to know more about the areas that I really liked and get more exposure of the things that I didn't know about and did that. (Stacey)
- I think college gave me the tools that I need to be a strong practitioner. (Sandra)

Stacey already had a degree so perhaps she did not feel that she needed more than employability from her community college education. It is possible that she saw this as a reflection of what she saw in the business world but there could be many ways in which she could arrive at this conclusion. One interpretation is that she felt that college was meant to serve a business need. However, this interpretation does not answer the question of whether or not that is good enough socially given investment in education and the criticisms of college education and WES. From these examples, it seems that community college met participant expectations as they relate to preparing them for work.

The relationship between college and work seemed to be clear for the participants. The data showed that all five participants, in varying degrees, shared the belief that college provided them with the tools necessary to work in their field of choice at an entry level position. To describe what they felt they achieved through their community college program, the words *practical*, *basic*, and *fundamental skills* were frequently used.

- Going to school, the point of it was to get the skills needed to be good at whatever you're doing or at least the fundamentals to give you the ability to be good at your job. (Luke)
- For me that [school] gave me base knowledge. (Stacey)
- What I felt was really helpful was that it was practical skills. (Sandra)
- Mostly practical skills that I got out of the program. (Brian)

From these comments, it appears that community college had successfully introduced and prepared these students for their jobs. Several participants commented that community college was not very challenging.

- When you think about college and you [think] it's not very serious. (Cindy)

- There wasn't much challenging about college. (Luke)
- It wasn't that the work was difficult; it was finding the time to do all of it that I found most challenging. (Sandra)
- Nothing else [but motivating myself] was quite challenging. (Brian)

Sandra mentioned that maybe it was easy as a result of being in the right program, where her interest matched her abilities. Four of the participants made reference to college being easy, but this did not seem to negatively impact the learning experience. So although participants found that community college was not challenging for them, their sense of satisfaction and the positive impact it had on their readiness for work seemed to overshadow those feelings. Overall it would appear that community colleges provided a positive environment in which participants were able to achieve the goals they set out in preparing for work:

Going to school, the point of it was to get the skills needed to be good at whatever you're doing or at least the fundamentals to give you the ability to be good at your job, I figured it would give me the framework to do that. (Luke)

Motivation is difficult to understand and it is not clear what motivated these participants to pursue college. It seems too obvious to expect that employment was their only goal, but perhaps it is fair to view it as a primary objective. If so, it raises the question that if they had educational goals beyond getting a job, then how would that affect their level of satisfaction? It is worth noting that while Fenwick (2003) would probably argue that a WES curriculum is too narrow of a focus for college, the comments made by these participants suggest that it could be what these individuals were seeking.

Theme 2: School, Life Experiences, and Skill Development

In terms of preparation for a job and career, it was interesting to learn what the participants felt was important in their development and their pursuit of success. In this theme, it is apparent how various elements came together to develop skills essential for the workplace. These elements include: WES, confidence, practical and work experience. Confidence in one's ability was clearly important to participants and there seemed to be various factors that contributed to a feeling of confidence. Confidence related to both real work experience and schoolwork that directly related to work. Gaining confidence was related to understanding what skills were important, which could have been a result of knowing what the workplace was like and having the practical experiences in college to support their development. The process of learning during their community college experience provided an important basis for the development of the required skills and knowledge for participants to be successful.

- It's not as much about the future; it's about finding out who you are, finding out what you like, going and living on your own. (Cindy)
- School is a fundamental base for moving up and learning more. (Luke)
- The experiences that college gives you, the ability of having a task and completing it... getting them done successfully... [now] that I have that level I can just build on it. (Luke)
- It [college] gave me a base knowledge and prepared me with some of the stuff that I'll need... I definitely wouldn't be where I am without it. (Stacey)

- I think college gave me the tools that I need to be a strong practitioner, which would help me in the overall leadership picture, but there's so much more to it than school. (Sandra)
- I think about it as a stepping-stone to get more education... at the time I didn't realize it was. (Brian)

Exposure to the workplace seemed to benefit the participants in finding and succeeding at work. Cindy for instance had previously worked in the same field, so she was able to find a job with a comparable company when she finished her college program. Stacey's employment came at the end of her co-operative placement with the same company, and Luke's experience running his own company helped him to decide what sector and what program would help him best: "A lot of what we were taught at college was very hands on and actually applied to what I was already doing [starting my own business]." Several participants mentioned co-operative learning and internships as either the best experience in college or an important aspect of their experience. Cindy suggested that the only reason she was employed was because of the work experience she gained before graduation. All five participants had work experience before graduating from college and their understanding of what skills are required to meet their career aspirations seemed to be influenced by their time in the labour market prior to graduation. Skills such as communication, time management, teamwork, interpersonal skills, decision-making, and being able to prioritize were mentioned as factors for success in the workplace.

Communication and Teamwork

- Teamwork for sure, you're forced to work on teams... you're working with people with different backgrounds, different education, and experience, so I think teamwork is critical. You need your communication skills on a variety of levels to talk to people face to face, to email people. (Cindy)
- The group work itself is teaching you, it's teaching you how to deal with conflict, teaching you how to deal with the guy who doesn't want to work or the guy who doesn't show up. (Luke)
- There was a business-writing component that I wasn't really exposed to before. (Stacey)
- It should be business type of communication, like business writing class which a lot of interns don't seem to have. (Sandra)
- Communication is massive; if you can't communicate with managers you can't do your work properly. (Brian)

Time Management and Decision Making

- You have to balance, you prioritize... it teaches you to balance all your different courses... I think having all those classes, as exhausting as it is, helps. (Cindy)
- Organizational skills and time management skills for sure. (Luke)
- Hands on work was very valuable... they were experiences that I had that allowed me to remember these subconsciously when I'm making decisions. (Luke)
- Interpersonal skills, teamwork, time management, the ability to deliver and meet deadlines and deliver quality work. (Stacey)

- I view [my experiences during college] positive because I had to learn how to multitask, how to manage my time better; it made me more efficient because I had to manage not only what I was trying to do at school but what I was trying to do at work and in my personal life. (Sandra)
- Because of the college experience and the fact that that's what I'm doing as a career, it gave me the technical skills which has given me confidence in my decision making and thought process. (Sandra)
- Time management was huge... in college you have exercises in time management... balancing that with sports and social events and family definitely employed time management skills. (Brian)

These expressed skills line up well against the Conference Board of Canada (2012b) profile of: fundamental, personal management, and teamwork skills. By describing these skills as important to their own success, it seems fair to compare these to the profile used by the Ministry of Education. The comparison shows that the skills identified by the Ministry of Education are similarly recognized by students as important. This supports the WES definition that has been used for this study though it does not explain why or how this came to be.

Upon cross-referencing the data, comments showed that all five participants shared similar views on the importance of communication and time management skills, although this was expressed in different ways. For instance, when describing communication, some related it to presenting to groups while others referred to speaking confidently in meetings. Teamwork and interpersonal skills were also mentioned and related to communicating with others. Clearly, communication was seen as an important

skill and one that was developed in many ways. Presentations and group assignments were critical to developing this in college, although it may not have appeared obvious at the time.

- So the two things that were the most helpful are people skills, the confidence in being able to present and working with groups and individuals on teams. (Cindy)
- Presentations, we did some mock interviews, so you really got that experience. That was the best way that I learned and college definitely did that. (Sandra)
- “I’d say presentation skills because of what I was thrown into was huge. It gave me the confidence to go in the workplace and feel comfortable and confident. (Brian)

Time management was mentioned as a key workplace skill by all participants and was related to balancing a number of demands and being effective. When discussing their most challenging college experiences, they referred to balancing work, personal life, and school. In meeting these demands, participants believed they gained the skills needed to be successful in the workplace. In discussing these skills further, participants suggested that these were not only workplace skills, but also life skills.

- Time management, organization... how to communicate to people on many different levels... I think a lot of school on a personal level helps with the social. (Cindy)
- Even in my personal life, it [skills learned at college] pertains to everything. Keeping and managing friendships. (Luke)
- I view it now positive because I had to learn how to multitask, how to manage my time better, it made me more efficient because I had to manage not only what I

was trying to do at school but what I was trying to do at work and in my personal life. (Sandra)

- Some of the things I learned for work, like, project management, time management, prioritization, those are all things that have helped me on a personal level as well and I can relate to just with managing my own life. (Sandra)

Other life skills such as prioritizing and decision-making, working with teams, and interpersonal skills were mentioned by at least four participants. The participants viewed these skills as being of high value in the workplace, and suggested that these skills were not directly tied to content, but were a result of the general process of education. For instance, group assignments or projects were mentioned frequently as the way in which those skills were developed. Participants all commented that the content itself provided the “basics” of the field of work, but those were stepping-stones into understanding the business world. To be successful, learning WES through class assignments seemed to be more important than the lectures.

- They’re [WES] not taught... but they’re definitely ingrained within the content, you’re learning them whether you think you are or not. (Luke)
- I felt college education helped with the hands on... having those real life experiences, it’s easier to apply what you learned. So when you go to a plant to do a health and safety inspection, you can do it. (Cindy)
- We had to come up with an employee orientation package... you learned what to put into something like that and what to leave out... assignments like that were really effective. (Stacey)

- I think what the college education gave me was some practical and technical tools and abilities, it's like a little briefcase or arsenal you can take out and even look back at all the assignments you do. (Sandra)

From these conversations it was clear that the participants had a strong understanding of the workplace, which likely stemmed from their work experience; both from internships or co-ops and from work prior to or during their time they were in college. This seemed to help them distinguish their learning in two ways, the information they needed to know and the skills needed to do the work. Through the practical, often referred to as “hands-on” experience in college, participants commented that they gained confidence in their ability to apply the subject to work in their field. This notion of confidence was strongly represented in the data. All participants referred to how practical assignments, group presentations, and teacher encouragement were helpful in building confidence in their college experience.

- With supportive professors and a curriculum that can bend... you can be more creative... educators if they are more open and willing to hear you out and for you to think outside the box, then you're more comfortable being creative. (Cindy)
- At the beginning [of presentations] you're nervous, but the more you do it, the better off you'll be. I found that to be a huge factor of where I am now. (Luke)
- They [college professors] give you the scenario based training to do that... i.e., mock role interviews, you would constantly do presentations, so they give you the ability to learn how to speak confidently in front of people which is really important because, especially in HR you're dealing with more senior management more often than you're dealing with junior staff. (Sandra)

- We did a lot of presentations, which I found very useful and we got a lot of feedback which I found very useful as well. In my past job I was thrown into the mix doing presentations in front of more senior people and people from different companies so it took the edge off a bit, having the experience and getting feedback. (Brian)

So while they recognized certain skills were required to be successful, they acknowledged that their college experience helped to build their confidence and achieve a level of skill to be good at their job. Stacey referred to completing an orientation program for class that she was able to use at her job. The project itself and the confidence that she could do it seemed help her in her job.

Achieving a level of confidence appeared to be related to a number of factors, such as: achieving good grades, receiving feedback and practical experience, and educators who were willing to let students to express themselves. There was some discussion on the part of all five participants that personality traits also seemed to be advantageous if they matched the attributes that employers were seeking. Participants seemed to feel that personality traits sometimes override the importance of what you learn as they determine your leadership ability. So while they felt that they were prepared and equipped to do their job because of their community college preparation, they seemed to believe that personal drive to succeed and personal motivation were more important and not necessarily influenced by school. These were attributes they associated with personality traits.

- There is a lot of effort that you have to put in then just going to school is going to give you, it's your attitude towards work, your passion, and your dedication... I don't think school provides you with that. (Stacey)
- You have to be a certain type of person, you have to be charismatic, and you have to believe in the business; it's not just college. (Sandra)

Clearly success in the workplace is what these participants seek and they recognize that there are a number of factors that will help them to achieve their goals. In their view community college was a necessary part of the process of becoming a good worker.

Through perhaps a lack of awareness the participants seemed unfazed by the suggestion that school is subordinate to employers where ultimately they (employers) shape and prioritize the value of education around their own needs and goals. Fenwick (2008) would be critical of this relationship that participants and employers have as suggested by these comments. Jarvis (2000) would also be critical with respect to what he sees as the responsibility of education to help individuals in their personal development. It is possible that these participants tacitly accept the current state of affairs and are happy to be reproduced in a corporate image. However, as pointed out here, this could be problematic, as it seems plausible that the participants' intent in taking the college program was simply employment.

Theme 3: Preparing for Success in the Workplace

Building on the theme of School, Life Experience and Skill Development, it is important to note what the participants expressed as necessary preparation for success in the workplace. Participants expressed a belief that college was a necessary first step to succeed in the workplace. As a first step, they felt they needed to achieve a certain level

of knowledge and particular skill set. In understanding the connection between college and WES, they were asked what skills were most important and in what way they gained those skills. To succeed in the workplace the participants shared their feelings on the importance of furthering their education and the value of having a specific career focus in school. The five participants seemed intent on managing their own careers and demonstrated a desire to continue their learning while working on the way to a successful career.

The workplace was not new to the participants as they all worked before entering college, which may have contributed to having similar ideas about what skills they felt were needed to be successful. The participants seem to believe that the college provided them the basic knowledge they needed to help them get them a job, despite the competitiveness of the labour market. The skills mentioned include: working effectively on teams, completing tasks, and strong communication skills. According to the participants, skills were developed implicitly through life situations and class assignments. These were the skills they felt were required to move ahead in their career and be successful.

While college was described as easy by four of the five participants, their time in college did present each participant a different life challenge. For some the challenge related to balancing school with the rest of their life. Brian, Cindy, Sandra, and Luke commented on how busy they were in and out of school. For Cindy there were extenuating circumstances that challenged her time and ability to complete her educational goals, which was to finish in 2 years and work. For Brian, his original choice in program was not a good fit as he struggled with the course work and found that it was

not what he thought it would be. He went through a year of transition before settling on a program that would meet his needs.

The challenge of balancing life demands seemed to be an important aspect of the participants' college experience. For Cindy and Brian, these challenges prevented them from becoming more engaged outside the classroom. This was important because the participants seemed to place a high value on social settings as a learning experience. Brian for instance felt that sports and social settings provided better opportunities to learn the skills most important in the workplace. Other participants who also felt that life skills were gained outside of the curriculum echoed Brian's observation.

- You have to balance, you prioritize... it teaches you to balance all your different courses... I think having all those classes as exhausting as it is helps. (Cindy)
- It comes with the whole school thing. You got your timetables, you're always managing your time, it helps to train your mind on how you're going to manage to get things done... letting things happen yourself is more of a learning experience. (Luke)
- Looking back on it I think it was a positive challenge... managing the course load and work. (Sandra)
- Time management came into play at the end of semester, when you have exams and have all these final projects due. (Brian)

While the development of these skills occurred during their college experience, it did not seem to come from exercises aimed at specific skill development. Their reflections highlighted how these other experiences contributed to their preparation for work.

Brian for instance felt it was mainly through his life experiences that he learned how to manage relationships, balance priorities, and ultimately learn skills that would help him in the workplace. Sandra, Luke, Stacey, and Cindy acknowledged that WES was enhanced implicitly through the activities assigned by their teacher in such things as group projects and presentations. Elements of WES may not have been the primary focus of the exercise, but emerged throughout the process by which the exercise was completed.

- I think one of the best things in college is they don't teach you people skills, but since it's so hands-on they do it for you. (Cindy)
- They don't really tell you, make sure your personable; make sure you really try hard as a team. They don't flat out tell you that, maybe through group exercises, they're promoting it in a way and they're teaching you how to do it. (Cindy)
- They're [workplace skills] not taught... but they're definitely ingrained within the content. You're learning them whether you think you are or not. (Luke)
- In terms of assignments... that definitely happens every day at work, so knowing how to work in groups effectively and how to manage group members that might not be contributing effectively... I think the group work was a real life scenario, I think that helps. (Stacey)
- I view it now positively because I had to learn how to multitask, how to manage my time better. It made me more efficient because I had to manage not only what I was trying to do at school but what I was trying to do at work and in my personal life. (Sandra)

These comments seem to confirm that participants viewed these as important life skills that were facilitated through the college experience often times indirectly.

Participants shared stories of how they viewed success and leadership and what it would take to be a leader and further their careers. These stories revealed how they perceived their abilities and potential barriers to success. Through their in-class discussions and through their work experience, the participants seemed to have a different appreciation of what businesses wanted and/or needed. Part of this realization came from their experience with people they worked with who modeled a specific and common set of workplace values. Such things such as working late and asking clarifying questions, and showing initiative were driven in part from their leaders behaviours:

- I think work ethic is so key to success. When I worked with the CEO, I was working till midnight some nights... I think work ethic, having the drive to do well and to get the work done is huge, because if you try and that's what my boss always said, he'd rather you try and be wrong than ask a 100 questions and be gone right at 5:00 p.m. (Cindy)
- People skills, the willingness to learn is something that I found all senior management likes and wants. (Luke)
- I went in thinking that training and development would be the answer to a lot of organization's problems and training and development is definitely not always the answer... because it's outrageously expensive, because you don't have managers' buy in... you have to prove your return on investment. (Stacey)

- You have to validate yourself and show why they're paying you, especially when you're in an entry level role. Your boss asks you what you've done and you only produce what looks like 4 hours of work in a week. (Brian)

These participants demonstrated ambition and the willingness to work and develop skills to further their careers. Their comments showed that they felt that both time, in terms of experience, and further education were required to further their careers. They acknowledged that the competitiveness of the labour market drove them to seek more qualifications and seemed practical about their options. Here are some of their comments that show what they thought they needed to do to further develop their careers.

- I'm finding more and more especially where I work, we care about experience. Education is great but nobody wants a grad with education and no experience, why would they? (Cindy)
- The experiences that college gives you, the ability of having a task and completing it... [now] that I have that level I can just build on it. It's like a stepping-stone for me. Now it's just further learning. (Luke)
- I found my program to be an introduction to the field, if I wanted to excel in my field I think I'd need to study further and gain experience. (Stacey)
- I think college makes you a well-rounded person. They offer you the opportunities for learning the knowledge, the structure and the support to further your education and develop yourself. (Sandra)
- I think about it [college] as a stepping-stone to get more education. (Brian)

In working towards their career goals, participants felt that to some degree, personality traits and individual characteristics were important in overcoming perceived

barriers. The participants' described people and personal skills as important factors that enabled them to do well in the workplace. These seemed to fall outside the realm of college and were attributed to a trait they either had or didn't have. For example:

- I think as an HR professional, some of the skills that are most associated with career success would be one of dedication and two, compassion. (Sandra)
- You have to have your own self-drive, my work experience is the best thing that I could've done for myself, that's how I got my current job. (Cindy)
- I think that people have innate qualities that you can't just pick up in a college course, you have the opportunity to explore and develop it, but I don't think you're necessarily going to be a leader because of what you did at college because it's a combination of being given the opportunities to practice those skills. (Stacey)

When it comes to these traits as being important factors of success, it is worth noting how these traits are developed. With respect to these participants, they clearly feel that success to a degree is related to a predisposition of character. However, this seems to be an oversimplification. It's likely that the participants' discussion of nature versus nurture could be relevant, and given that possibility, it may suggest that success as it relates to certain traits could be learned socially over time. This notion does however give hope that if schooling involved socializing certain behaviours, the chances for success could be better.

Another barrier raised by participants was their ability or inability dealing with people because of a preference or style in which they were used to interacting with others. Both Stacey and Luke expressed a need to change the way they view work and work relationships to grow in their fields of work. For Luke it was a matter of being too

nice for management. He felt conflicted because he wanted to be friends with the people he worked with and found it difficult to be a manager and have to give constructive feedback. This was something he acknowledged he needed to work on for his professional development. Stacey meanwhile said that she was too employee focused and acknowledged she needed to continue learning about the business value of HR. She mentioned that through a combination of her in-class discussions at college and her work experience, she has become much more aware of the business needs of a company. Although all participants felt confident in their ability to achieve professional success, they all acknowledged that, in part, personality traits were just as important to career success.

Through the discussions, it was clear that the participants were influenced at least in part by the values and behaviours they saw in the workplace. Observation of one's supervisor had a direct impact on understanding how to be successful at work. For instance, Cindy spoke of her supervisor in several ways that showed the importance of this relationship in understanding the workplace.

- I think work ethic is so key to success... when I worked with the CEO I was working till midnight. (Cindy)
- My boss recently said to me you're kind of quiet and I thought to myself "uh oh"... so for the last 2 weeks I've been spitting out ideas. (Cindy)

In addition to Cindy, Luke and Stacey had these comments.

- People skills, the willingness to learn is something that I found all senior management likes and wants. (Luke)

- I look at my manager who has a master in industrial relations in HR and I think she... knowledge-wise, she's so much further ahead. (Stacey)

These comments show that the participants look towards the leadership in their company to learn about workplace success and may emulate or develop skills that their leaders exhibit. These examples suggest a strong relationship between what the leaders of a company believe to be important to workplace success and what the participants feel is important. These comments again reinforce the notion that the workplace has greater importance and power over the education, which Fenwick (2006) raised as problematic and is reinforced by Skolnik's (2009) depiction of the Business-Domination model explaining the evolution of Canadian community colleges.

When describing how they chose their program, participants had different stories. The common thread was that attending college would translate into a job and a career. The more specific the educational goals were, the easier their college experience seemed to be. For instance, Brian had a broad goal of working in business, and selected a program that he believed had a good future. Realizing that the courses he was taking were not of interest to him and did not play to his strengths, he decided to make a change. This is what Brian had to say.

After getting in the program I realized that wasn't exactly what I wanted to do.

I found when I first got there and saw what we were doing, like java programming and things like that, I was like oh my god... how do I do this.

Meanwhile, Luke had a very clear idea of what he wanted and selected a program that has since helped him to make significant strides in his career in relatively short time.

- When I was deciding where I was going to school I went to college for a year... after that I really wanted to go into business and wanted a broader understanding, but then I was still working at the time. I was starting a business and I wanted to know how to manage a business, this course [program] came up and it had good reviews, this fits perfect. (Luke)
- I was accepted in the first year business program... but after getting in the program I realized that wasn't exactly what I wanted to do... the more I thought about things, the more I'd come at it differently. I think college is a useful stepping-stone if it's very specific. College business degree is not specific. I don't think employers are looking for a college business degree. (Brian)

In comparison, two of the women interviewed, Stacey and Sandra, both had university degrees before beginning their college experience. They had more time to reflect on their career choices and opportunities and developed a stronger focus on their career paths. Their goals were very clear and they experienced success in school and in work. Cindy was also motivated by her previous work experience. She too had a very specific goal in mind as she chose HR as her path. She believed that her prior work was a major reason for her success in getting a job in a field she liked, and having opportunities for growth and development.

Making program decisions was not easy for Luke, Stacey, and Sandra. Despite their ability to find a program they enjoyed and were generally satisfied with, they seemed to get by without a lot of direction or counsel from high school or college faculty. Even though the participants received little career supports from guidance counselors and the like, most commented that having those supports could have been useful in making

decisions about school. It seems that for some period in time, either before college or during, the majority of the participants struggled in finding a path that they wanted to pursue. The college experience seemed to help the participants find their way and develop a career track that has benefitted and enabled them to be successful. The comments made by participants suggest that it was not necessarily college itself that helped them to be successful but rather success came from understanding employer needs and demonstrating the willingness to do what employers want them to do. This interpretation further highlights a problem that both Illeris and Fenwick (2003) raise with respect to the purpose of education. Illeris (2003b) states, “Adult education can very often be characterized as the compulsion to develop without a clear perspective” (p. 17). Fenwick (2008) implicates other issues with respect to the purpose of college and raises concerns about whether or not employability should be the primary and/or sole purpose of college education.

Theme 4: The Importance of Teaching and Learning

The participants shared stories about how positive teaching experiences impacted them and how this affected their employment success. When asked about the interaction and relationship they had with their educators, each participant referred to a small number of college instructors that left a significant impression on them. Their interaction with educators in general seemed to enhance their satisfaction with college. Some of the comments that described these educators related to: demonstrating a genuine care for them as they encouraged them in their pursuit of a career; passion about teaching in their field of expertise; and helping to instill confidence in their abilities. The relationship

between student and teacher was clearly impactful on all participants and reinforced the importance of the teacher-student relationship.

These educators got more involved with students and went beyond the normal expectations of a teacher's role, which students interpreted as a genuine interest in their success. For instance, Cindy described the relationship she had with one of her educators as follows.

He was willing to help you in other courses and provide advice on things... you learn more, you wanted to learn more because you like them... those that go above and beyond I found had a very positive impact on my learning and they made the courses more interesting and the materials more interesting.

Each participant had something similar to say, such as.

- It brought that much more to class when you have someone that's actually teaching you that cares. Cares about actioning what you're learning rather than just being up there and throwing their knowledge at you. (Luke)
- The classes were smaller and so you really get to know the educators personally and for the most part I felt the educators were invested in us. They cared about what we were doing and they tried to make it fun. (Stacey)
- When I started my first year, I wasn't too focused and my grades were pretty bad... they [educators] saw an improvement and they wanted to help and see it through to the end... one of them was pushing towards professional designations and saying how important it is to get one... and making yourself more marketable for employers. They were very supportive about that. (Brian)

From these comments, it seemed that there were a few educators that put significant effort to help to create a positive learning environment. This relationship seemed to energize and motivate students to take responsibility for their career. Fenwick (2008) raises questions about what makes a good teacher. Her view on workplace learning is that it deals with the interconnections of humans and their actions with such things as: rules, tools, texts, and cultural and material environments. According to Fenwick's interpretation of what a good teacher is, it is important that educators demonstrated knowledge and expertise in the field that they were teaching in. As Sandra noted, "They're in the industry, they care and know what's going on and they're doing the stuff on a day-to-day basis, they're reading the magazines too."

The participants had confidence in these few educators that went above and beyond the normal effort, in part because they were experienced and knowledgeable in the field they were teaching. This translated very well to the participants' ability to produce practical meaning from lectures and transfer the content to knowledge of the workplace. Comments reinforced that they generally perceived educators in their college experience as field experts who encouraged ongoing development. For example:

- They strongly encouraged professional memberships and stuff like that so you had access to that kind of information. (Stacey)
- One of my college classes, they worked towards a professional designation... they were pushing professional development and things like that I found beneficial. (Brian)
- I had good relationships with two of my educators, one I still speak with... is an amazing teacher, lots of connections, lots of good things to say and was

passionate... that was where my best marks came from. (Luke)

From these and other statements, participants seemed to view their educators as experts and that these experiences were helpful in preparing them for the workplace. Educators were important actors in helping to succeed in community college and understand the workplace. In general, educators who helped to instil confidence had a positive impact on the participants' work success; for instance, Cindy noted that "Going to college made me a lot more confident" and "with supportive professors and a curriculum that can bend... educators if they are more open and more willing to hear you out and for you to think outside the box then you're more comfortable being creative."

Other comments were:

- There was a lot of presentations, at the beginning [for presentations] you're nervous, but the more you do it, the better off you'll be. I found that to be a huge factor of where I am now. (Luke)
- They give you the scenario-based training to do that... i.e., mock role interviews, you would constantly do presentations, so they did give you the ability to learn how to speak confidently in front of people which is really important because especially in HR you're dealing with more senior management more often than you're dealing with junior staff. (Sandra)
- I'd say presentation skills because of what I was thrown into was huge. It gave me the confidence to go in to the workplace and feel comfortable and confident. (Brian)

The participants also shared their thoughts on how to make the college experience better, which included: emphasizing the holistic experience of college, including social,

sports aspects (Brian); providing more structured internships or co-operative learning opportunities (Sandra); and enhancing the career services provided (Sandra, Brian). So while these suggestions are useful, the general sense of satisfaction and the comments overwhelmingly supported a positive view of the college experience.

- For me it was one of the best experiences of my life. I had so much fun and met so many people... it's not as much about the future, it's about finding out who you are, finding out what you like, going and living on your own. (Cindy)
- The relation to what I learned and what is real in real business was probably the biggest thing and that's what I was expecting. (Luke)
- I have pretty much the attention of the teacher; it was very good that way. (Brian)

Conclusion

From the data analyzed from the interviews, it would appear that the following factors contributed to the positive feeling about the college experience: confidence in their (participants') own abilities, understanding the fundamentals of their field, and feeling as though they received expert advice. Community college in general seemed to be a positive experience that was influenced by caring educators, and was made relevant by life challenges. Students' understanding of their field of work and having a sense of what they wanted to achieve contributed to a greater sense of focus on their college path. These discussions brought to light various topics that seemed to resonate for most if not all of the participants of this case. These insights could prove valuable learning on how to improve the experience for new students seeking WES, as well as reinforcing the importance of good teaching practices.

Two themes will be explored in the analysis, relating the participants' experiences to the literature supporting WES. The themes are: the way in which school and life in general relate to skill development, and how educators impacted the participants' learning process. In doing so, Illeris's dimensions of learning is useful in interpreting the stories to better understand the learning experience, which could be used to better understand how WES were developed by the participants. Further, understanding the learning process helps to inform teaching practices which are clearly important in the experiences of these participants. Illeris's dimensional learning model shows how the dimensions exist in a dynamic tension, and are inseparable. Understanding how the participants' experiences occur in those three dimensions illustrates how important that concept is to the learning process and also how important the whole college experience is in the learning process.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The general problem that led to the development of this study was the desire to understand the experiences of students as relates to the connections between the workplace, specifically WES, and community college. Community colleges are tasked primarily with the development of skilled workers to meet the needs of industry. In order to understand the student perspective, participants were asked what they learned at college and how that would help them in the workplace. Their comments were explored to understand what skills were learned, how they were developed, and what it meant to their personal success in their job and career.

Seeking students' perspectives on this topic was important because of the lack of student voice in the discourse. Exploring this topic from their view could enhance our understanding of how learning in college facilitates the development of workplace skills. Seeking the personal stories of various individuals bounded by set criteria enabled the research to look into those experiences consistent with Stake's (1995) instrumental case study method. The stories would provide a deeper understanding of their experience, which could provide insight into future research directions. As the perspective of the student is new in the research, the case was defined in such a way as to explore initial criteria and start the exploration. The criteria were set as recent graduates from the business schools of colleges within the GTA. Personal stories that linked participants were analyzed and triangulated to get a sense of how WES were being developed and what, if any, implications there were to the current discourse.

Summary of Study

The research process consisted of recruiting and interviewing five participants that fit the case criteria. These individuals were interviewed twice to explore the connection between WES and college. In total, 10 interviews were conducted over a 5-month period, which resulted in more than 7 hours of audio and more than 50 pages of transcribed notes. These notes were reviewed at length using the axial coding method to develop themes, which produced a set of factors that were cross-referenced to explore connections. In effect, the data were reviewed to examine what relationships existed and interpreted to produce meaning and insight from these personal stories.

Analysis began with broad strokes in generating possible themes from the first set of interviews. The theoretical framework and literature review were used as a lens to create a list of second interview questions, which delved more deeply into issues that were identified in the first interviews (as well as to identify potential issues that were not raised in the initial interviews). The entire data set was reviewed multiple times to create new themes, which were then categorized into smaller topics that were coded and related to one another. This process created a smaller set of complex ideas that were explored in some detail in chapter four.

Discussion

The lived experiences in this case study have validated and expanded on the literature review in terms of informal learning and some of the issues related to institutional learning. Their stories also highlight the role of the educator, and have implications on pedagogical practices that support a comprehensive and dynamic educator role. Also, the stories connect the various actors in a community college setting

and provide meaningful insight to the learning experience. In all, the stories of the five participants and the relationship between what is learned and how it applies to the workplace is a valuable exploration that provides direction for future research in the areas of teaching and learning.

The link between college and work is strong in the view of the participants. It is this relationship that they seek and feel they have achieved through their college experience. How this happens is not a direct reflection of the formal aspects of college. The stories shared suggested that the strongest connection between the workplace and school is mostly related to the informal aspects of learning—not from classroom instruction or from reading the text, but from discussions, practical assignments, and working in groups. The data from this case provide clues to better understand how participants view the connection between community college and WES for students seeking career success.

To explore the connection between community college and WES further, Illeris's dimensional learning model, Fenwick's informal learning practices (2008) and Jarvis's (2006) criticism of institutional learning were used to reflect on insights gained from this case study. This exploration validates the importance of informal learning and the link between college and WES.

The data suggest that college was a positive experience that helped participants find work and become successful in their current job. The participants felt confident in their ability to find work and were generally satisfied in how college prepared them for their role. Educators who cared and had in-field experience seem to have brought the most value to the learning experience.

Participants expressed that only a relatively small number of educators made the in-class experience truly impactful. This insight could present an opportunity to learn what those educators did differently in order to build on and enhance students' experience. As impactful as these few educators were, it is important to remember that the participants largely felt that the in-class portion was not the place where workplace skills were developed. They felt that the workplace skills were developed through assignments, group projects, and social situations. The content or knowledge seemed to be separate and not as important to the participants.

The distinction between the content and the skill development raises questions about the value of the curriculum. By Evers, Rush and Berdrow's definition, competency represents a set of skills and the level of ability on the skills within the set (as cited in ACCC, 2003, p.8). In this case, the participants seem to believe that skill development was more important than the knowledge gained from content, and although the content was necessary, it simply provided the first step to getting the job. If skill development was of greater importance in the workplace and the degree to which that was developed in college seemed to be short of expectation, why would students feel that college provided them what they expected? Could and should in-class instruction provide skill development? Furthermore, how do colleges develop competent professionals when there seems to be a gap between what is needed and what is actually learned?

Illeris's (2002) model of learning describes relationships between the three dimensions as constant tension. Let us examine how these dynamics were expressed in this case. First, we explore the cognitive dimension where, in Illeris's view, cognitive structures are always emotionally charged. This means that knowledge must be connected

to some feelings, attitudes, or emotions that make it important to the individual. Conversely, emotional patterns are always affected by cognitive influences, so that feelings are associated with what the individual already knows. Looking at the experiences of these participants, you could see that knowledge and the way it was presented to them did relate to them on a personal level, and that they showed interest and passion for it. Comments were made about the way that teaching inspired passion and interest in the content and thus illustrating how the cognitive dimension is connected to the emotional dimension. I would suggest that based on this case, educators have the potential to evoke the emotional connection to content; how they do so is a pedagogical implication that both Fenwick (2008) and Illeris (2002) discuss.

Another important implication of Illeris's model is how motivation and emotions regulate and mobilize what he describes as psychological energy to both the cognitive and emotional dimensions. This is helpful in understanding the directed effort that students may put towards a class, as well as how a teacher may be able to generate engagement in a topic. For instance, both Cindy and Stacey shared in their interviews that they had experienced a class they did not enjoy and how that related to the level of interaction and engagement that occurred. This was mainly due to the teaching style of the instructor who seemed to rely more on formal presentation and limited social interaction with students. It was also made clear by all participants that the social element of the learning was critical in being able to learn and become confident in applying the skills they saw as important in the workplace. In essence, the experiences shared by these participants reinforced the three-dimensional model of learning.

Contemporary authors such as Fenwick (2008) can be drawn on to shed light on the findings of this study with respect to informal learning. For instance, Fenwick's (2008) work on workplace learning provides an understanding of how informal practices of learning enables worker learning. In this case, the Human Resources profession can apply the experiences of the educators in the field of HR which is critical in teaching the ins and outs of the profession. The participants held those "expert" educators (educators who have expertise in their field) in high regard. The stories that the educators shared, their experiences working in the field, and their encouragement and support to further career growth by joining associations were all parts that the participants felt contributed most to their learning. It could be argued that within their class group they were using informal practices to learn about the world of HR work through assignments and group projects.

The tasks they completed in their assignments provided the participants with real tools that could be used in everyday work. Participants shared stories about using the tools they developed through school at work and how relevant these assignments were. This use of tools supports the possibility that either by coincidence or by design, the classroom may have been transformed into a simulation of the work environment. If we consider how integrate informal to learning practices into the classroom it would be possible that behaviours and interactions within the group (led by the expert or teacher) may be more apt to reflect an actual workplace, which would more closely approximate the goals of WES. Learning the skills necessary to succeed could happen through less formal practices of teaching and learning—not by the lecturing of course content, but through an active process of engaging students in group discussions and activities, as well

as through the use of constructive feedback. Furthermore, the assembly of relevant and ready to use tools enhanced the preparation of students.

Another relevant aspect of the literature review to this case is Jarvis's (2006) critique of the learning society. Jarvis claimed that "the future depends on the way we as people learn and respond to the out-workings of the substructures of society" (p. 201). He saw a direct relationship between the world of education and the world of work. This view was validated in the participants' stories in which they described the importance of learning from those with significant experience in the field. Jarvis describes human learning as:

A combination of processes whereby the whole person experiences a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively, or practically and integrated into person's individual biography resulting in a changed person. (p. 206)

It would seem from the discussions with all participants that this description of learning could explain how they felt they learned WES during their community college experience. The participants talked about their challenges and the ways in which life situations impacted their learning in pursuit of a job and career. They shared stories about how work experience and school prepared them to succeed in the workplace and they talked about the need to gain more experience on their chosen path. Their stories reflect learning that extends beyond the classroom and beyond institutional learning, which supports the literature discussed above. This is not to say that institutional learning is completely ineffective, as the participants indicate that educators who can contextualize

content in a way that is directly relevant to the workplace are valuable and may better prepare students for the workplace.

To elaborate on this critique of institutional learning, it is important to note that with the exception of a small number of educators and classes, the participants did not see the majority of class instruction as impactful. At the same time, the participants suggest that the more meaningful skills for the workplace were developed outside the classroom through assignments and social interactions. This raises questions about the importance of the in-class component of institutional learning. Jarvis's (2002) work on globalization and education brings to light several such issues with institutional learning. He sees institutional learning as a system that socially and culturally perpetuates a certain social order. He is critical of an educational system in which the end result is merely employability and advocates for a democratic purpose resulting in greater active citizenry. Jarvis goes on to cast doubt on the ability of the educational system ability to serve more than a function of the superstructure (in this case industry). It is noteworthy that there were no complaints about the college instruction among the participants. Though they feel unchallenged by it, they seem to accept the idea that they just have to go through the motions to complete the necessary requirements. They accept their role in classroom and by extension society and do not question the value of their college education or the return on their investment. Rather, they seem to have bought into the idea that they alone hold the key to their success and that community college is a necessary vehicle to help on their journey.

It's not to say that this perspective is correct or incorrect, but it does call into question the relative importance of college in changing the workplace for the better. If it

continues to provide workers who do not challenge the current state of education (in this case community college education), then how does college ever become more than a subordinate to industry needs? Perhaps more importantly, how does it transform industry when our current economic condition suggests that industry reform is needed? In this case, it does not explain how college enables fuller citizenship, which is necessary to sustain and grow our economy and society at large. Surely if we are concerned with the future of our industry and economy, there would be a need for critical thinking skills, yet this is not the focus of WES nor does it seem to be part of the mandate of Ontario colleges. Perhaps in the development of a skilled workforce, we are forgetting other important skills that speak to a greater purpose than fulfilling the technical requirements for a job.

To address these issues and to enhance the individual's active citizenship, Jarvis's (2002) call to action is for: more emphases on collaborative learning, the use of democratic teaching styles and methods, practical education on the issues of citizenship, and strategies on developing people to live in society (as well as making them employable).

Perhaps such methods were on display by those exemplary educators. While comments reflect some of those ideals, there was not enough data to suggest if this was intentional or consistent in the examples provided. It is possible that some of those educators, knowingly or intuitively, demonstrated those principles in their practice. The participants did not seem to be disappointed or frustrated by the lack of many impactful educators. Having a few educators who made a big impact seemed to be more of a surprise than an expectation. Furthermore, it did not seem to matter that when they left

school they were indoctrinated into the workplace as subordinates within an established system or structure in the workplace. It is not to suggest that new graduates are business leaders right away, but by putting them in positions of lesser power, they may not exercise critical thinking or higher order skills, which are necessary to challenge the status quo and transform businesses. If not for effective leaders fostering their development so that they may grow and excel, how would they learn to be leaders? None of the participants seemed to be bothered by the structures that exist in the workplace; most spoke to having good leaders as supervisors and believed they would be supported in advancing their career. So despite potential challenges, they all seemed to believe that it would be a matter of time before they could achieve their ultimate career goal.

These sentiments raise questions about the importance and nuances of education, training, and development of the individual. Fenwick (2008) sees the power of informal learning and raises concerns with how power is expressed in relationships at work. This is further reinforced in connection to Jarvis's (2002) critique of education in reproducing the dominant culture. That our understanding of leadership is based on the knowledge of others, and is somehow seen as a trait as opposed to a skill, suggests that the participants believe that not everyone can be a leader, or if you extend leadership to mean success, not everyone can be successful in the workplace. This is not to suggest that everyone will succeed, but to believe that only some will creates an ethical dilemma. I feel it is important to understand that as educators and administrators, there is a responsibility to provide the opportunity for everyone to be a leader and to be successful, and if there are those that do not we have to explore ways in which we can create better opportunities.

Participants expressed a strong belief that they could find a job to match their personal interests and needs despite the increasingly competitive labour market. Though their confidence would appear to be helpful in their pursuit of job and career, it is uncertain if they understood the complexity of challenges that await them. Perhaps finding the right fit for work may be more difficult than they imagined, and if they could not find their ideal match, how would the participants recognize their full participation in society? How would they know if they achieved it or not? What would happen if they hit their career ceiling, which would likely take some time before that could be realized? And what if their goals are too high or too low for their ability? What then?

Clearly, those problems are complex and could not be addressed in this study; however, these individuals attending different community colleges in the GTA all felt that their diploma had given them the basis for having a job and a career. To go beyond their initial job and advance their career, the participants spoke about innate ability, personality, and drive as the requisites that they need to advancing further. The participants would agree that education on its own is not enough. Education is necessary but not an exclusive determinant in valuing a person's abilities, especially when school is viewed as a transactional activity. To grow professionally, the participants felt it was a combination of experience, talent, and some education, though not necessarily college. Reflecting back on Jarvis's work, could it be that the participants have a narrower view of college than expected by academia? Clearly college was important, but how important was it to their career success? If it is seen as a first step, is that enough for the investment made? To describe the participants' comments, you could summarize them as a belief

that a college diploma in combination with lived experiences may lead to success at work, provided the individual has the right attitude and personality to make it work.

Community college seems to work despite several challenges. It works despite participant statements that only a minority of educators show the kind of enthusiasm and the passion about the subject matter to inspire students. It works despite a less than relevant in-class experience. It works because students learn workplace skills outside the classroom with their classmates and their colleagues. The participants' stories clearly support the literature in terms of the value of informal learning in skill development albeit structured by educators. Their stories also bring forward questions about institutional learning, as Jarvis raised. These former students seem to accept college as a way to enter the labour market. So as imperfect as it may be, it seems to work at least in the case of these five participants. However, there is potential in these stories that indicate ways in which it could work better. Perhaps we as a society should expect more and put more pressure on colleges to provide a more meaningful experience. It could be argued that the effect would be increased productivity and competitiveness of our workforce, which supports Livingstone's (1999) argument of the credentialed society.

By questioning the efficacy of the in-class component of community college, it is important to focus on the teacher's role in facilitating student success. The role of the educator is obvious during class time, and considering the amount of class time that students must attend, it does have a significant impact on the learning experience. The participants talked at some length about the educators who positively impacted them. Understanding how particular educators influenced them could help increase our understanding of how to enhance the experience from a learner-centered view. By

looking at Illeris's model of learning and Fenwick's (2006) ideal educator, we may be able to better understand the ways in which educators have and can enhance learning in college.

Using Illeris's model of learning as a lens to view the participants' experience is helpful to bring together the various components of the learning experience:

Education that is to strengthen general qualification in a goal-directed way must neither be pure instruction, learning of skills or rote learning, nor pure personal development or therapy. It must on the contrary be organized in such a way that it combines a concrete, typical vocational or academic qualification with opportunities for expanding the participants' motivation to develop understanding, personality and identity. (Illeris, Andersen, Kjaersgaard, Larsen, Olesen, & Ulriksen, 1995, p.188)

Illeris's model of learning integrates three dimensions to explain the learning process; these are the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. While the cognitive dimension was not discussed in great detail, it is assumed that without this dimension, the process of learning simply cannot exist. The experiences shared by the participants generally reinforced the emotional and social dimensions and illustrated how they existed in practice. An example of this is how often the participants expressed that the value of college learning was in the practical knowledge that they gained. This comment also reflects the social element of learning. The participants felt that they could and would apply their college education in the workplace given their practical understanding of how to apply the information they gained.

In order to understand how the information would apply to their work, they must have an understanding of what the workplace is. Prior work, or information that educators shared, could lead to students making certain assumptions about the workplace. Illeris's (2002) model helps to understand what assumptions may be made about the workplace and why learning in college may be effective in preparing students for work. In Illeris's view, experience is defined as "an overriding concept that in a total and subjective way embraces the cognitive, emotional and social-societal dimensions of learning, the internal psychological acquisition processes and the social interaction process" (p. 157). The participants' stories helped to validate the connection between the three dimensions by the way they described that their learning was driven by the social context in which they were able to apply it. The comments regarding assignments and social experiences reinforces how socially dependent learning is.

The emotional dimension of Illeris's (2002) model speaks to the desire of a person in the learning process. The emotion is a complex interaction between the feelings and intentions of a person and their environment, which speaks to the decisions made and the actions that result. It is noteworthy that the participants spoke about how they decided upon their program and how it matched their interests and skills. It is reasonable to suggest that the participants were motivated in their choice of study and this interest shows the link to the emotional dimension. By making the decision to pursue community college and the attachment they had to that field of work is evidence of the emotional dimension's importance. As reflected in their stories, some participants changed programs part way through, and sought further education, which leads me to believe that finding a program that best suited their interests was a motivating factor within their field

of study. The stories reflect the way in which the Illeris dimensions impact the learning experiences.

Understanding the learning experience is important to understanding how educators impact students. A connection to the literature review can be seen through Fenwick's (2008) work. She challenged adult educators to solve workplace problems through learning and to better understand how particular groups of workers learn. Her discussions on teaching and learning suggest that our notion of pedagogy needs to change from something you do to become something you are as a way of practice. She prescribes a pedagogy that is simpler and more powerful that lives in ethical action. She raises the need for ecological relation, which underlines the importance of interconnection in teaching and learning. When you consider these concepts you find the stories in the case study support her ideas for pedagogical practices. Her suggestions on how to enhance pedagogical practices can be summarized as:

- Critique of self (teacher) and of methods and devices used for pedagogical practice;
- Action-oriented to enable emergence and ethical action through open-ended design; and lastly,
- Leading, questioning, responding, and drawing forth with a view to engaging learners in the immediate.

In these suggestions, Fenwick has defined the role of teacher beyond that as a giver of information to an active participant and embedded the role in the learning process.

Fenwick's ideal teacher may be described as: active and changing, aware and facilitative, and flexible so that students can receive what they need in the moment.

Doing so would be to sacrifice traditional practice and standardization for individualization and customization. In many ways, the educators who inspired the students in this study reinforce these practices in ways that were expressed as caring, encouraging, and supportive. The participants also spoke about how these educators adapted the course content to ensure relevancy and seemed to find ways to peak their interest. Passionate and engaging were also used to describe these educators.

From the stories shared by the participants, it can be understood by the importance placed on social situations that many actors influence the social dimension of learning; these may include: friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and classmates. This is relevant because it reinforces the informal learning practices that Fenwick (2008) describes. The learning process may be a result of experience whereby information is made practical through the socialization, thereby transforming information and ideas to knowledge and skills. Through application and positive reinforcement, these participants were able to achieve their educational goals as they relate to community college. This seems to have facilitated a sense of confidence to do their jobs and share optimism for their career and future in the labour market.

Educators were important but not to the degree that one may expect to the overall experience that the participants had in college. From participant stories, it was easy to identify a number of potential actors who influenced the learning experience; colleagues, friends, and others certainly played a role. For the purpose of exploring these relationships, consider the following roles in relation to how it influenced the learning process: the role of the participant, the role of teacher, the administrator, colleagues and friends, and superiors in the workplace.

According to the participants, in order to succeed students need to be motivated. They also need to be self-aware to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and understand how their interests and dislikes can match jobs to make effective career choices. To that end, individuals who see their career choices clearly and experiment to find the right match will more likely be successful in their job and in their career. These are some of the traits that participants described as requirements for success. These participants came across as very mature and very confident in the manner in which they presented themselves and answered the questions, and in their expression of interest in participating in this study. These individuals displayed strong professional awareness and were highly motivated in their career goals, so it was not a coincidence that they felt these traits were important as they demonstrated what they believed would help them be successful.

The relationship that the student had with some educators could be described as caring. The participants felt that some educators showed they really cared about them and even got to know them. Some participants described the relationship as more than teacher-student, and rather almost as a friend. These educators' influence was felt in the way they helped to make the class more interesting, the content more relevant, and build the participants' confidence. Clearly, the teacher in this idealized way plays a pivotal role in the development of a skilled workforce that is competent and confident in their work.

Trust in the teacher comes from the manner in which they show their care for a student and through the expertise that they share. A teacher with field experience and an ability to connect on a personal level can make a significant difference in the experience

of a student. It is easy to see that these educators have the opportunity to shape and change the workforce through the influence they have on their students.

The role of the college administration cannot be ignored in helping students make decisions about their education and providing supports to help them towards graduation. They are also responsible for ensuring that educators are able to meet student-learning needs. And while only one person mentioned meeting his administrator, it is worthwhile looking at this role in future research to understand how it can provide support to the individual.

From the participant' stories, it would appear that one of the most influential relationships in learning WES comes from their immediate supervisor in the workplace. The influence that supervisors had on participants was obvious and served to reinforce the importance of informal learning. Supervisors' feedback and support seemed to influence participants and directly shape their behaviour. This was shown by comments related to work ethic, and how the supervisor advised them on advancing their careers and furthering education. The power that the supervisor has is obvious; however, it is not clear how beneficial it is in the medium- to long-term career prospects of the participant. What is clear is that superiors in a workplace played a key role in the experiences of these participants in demonstrating what it will take to succeed at work. Though this seems obvious, it is important to recognize that there are potential risks associated with this power dynamic, such as: the possibility that the supervisors' notion of success is outdated, that the nuances of leadership vary among companies, that the cultural practices within companies may vary significantly, and obviously what works for one company may be entirely different in another. This view relates to Skolnik's (2009) comment on

the Business-Domination theory around the development of a docile workforce, where people do not question the hierarchal structure of the typical workplace.

The interviews provided context to help understand how college is related to the development of WES. From the interviews with the five participants, several key themes arose that gave insight to the experiences that helped, challenged, and gave them a better understanding of how to be successful in the workplace. The three dimensions model of learning by Illeris provides a framework to contextualize the college experience and explain why it would work despite several challenges.

Community colleges appear to have met the educational goals for these participants in part by helping students to build a network of colleagues that fostered competency and instilled confidence in the learner. This view supports the Consumer-Choice model that Skolnik (2009) describes as students engaging in programs that they believe will meet their economic return expectation. Understanding what the participants saw as requisites for success speaks to their ability to navigate their careers and take from different relationships to learn and to succeed. It is those relationships that we must define and shape in new ways, heeding to Fenwick's call of the idealized teacher to promote the well-being of learners and for the industries that will employ them.

The literature has clearly outlined the position of government and industry as the main drivers for WES. Their efforts have given a focal point to the community colleges in terms of purpose which ignores the holistic needs of the student. Their objective of educating for the purpose of developing productive workers is both politically motivated and dangerous. However, the participants do not express any issues with such plans. They seemed to have accepted the role of community college in creating a skilled worker

for the knowledge economy. However, the data also showed that the participants are expressing a need for skills that go beyond WES, more so in line with life skills.

Looking beneath the obvious, the data reveals an untapped potential in the community colleges. It is in this vein that I believe we must explore the value of community college and its' purpose for greater effect. In elevating community college's purpose beyond current labour market needs, I believe we stand a better chance of creating a better society and more fully developed citizens.

Unless we begin to explore new ways of working and challenge the dogma of institutional learning, we will likely stay stuck in the cycle of wanting and needing more from our educational institutions, but lacking the foresight to make it happen. Despite the efforts, it is quite possible that we may continue to see the rise of structural unemployment or underemployment. Students may graduate with a diploma but still lack experience and it will not matter because those with experience and with the right social networks will have access to opportunities that others will not even know about. Jarvis (2002) would probably suggest that we need to abolish WES in order to improve learner outcomes, Fenwick (2006) would suggest we do it differently. I would suggest that there is enough room to have WES exist in the community colleges and still create active citizens who challenge the status quo and strive to achieve greater things. The balance between developing workers for the sake of business and developing good people who are also more active citizens needs to be kept in check so that we can manage our economic and social needs.

Implications for Practice

The practice of teaching and learning is one that is central to understanding how students develop WES. It has been identified through the experiences of these five participants that practical knowledge and experience through informal practices may give rise to the development of skills essential for workplace success. Understanding how this happens has important implications for the practice of teaching and learning.

To further support the development of productive and engaged workers, learners need content that is current. Having experienced professionals as educators, and having continuously updated information and practices, seem to be requirements of ensuring relevancy for colleges.

Practical knowledge suggests that the content that is learned is made relevant and accessible in its use. The information has to convey meaning in a way that can be used in real life and in work. This is important for educators to consider in explaining information as well as for the students to contextualize meaning from ideas in the classroom. The practice of applying information is therefore important for ensuring meaning and relevancy for the student, which is suggested in the examples in this case.

To understand how learning occurs, it is important that we take time to understand the participants' experience in the classroom. In preparing students for work, should we consider whether or not the experience in the classroom is different from work and if so, how different? Alternatively, could it be an extension of work? If so, what does that mean and what could that look like?

Experiential learning, using concepts from the curriculum, should serve to reinforce new knowledge and skill development. Through in-class assignments, co-

operative learning assignments, group work, and presentations, students gain experience in tasks that are similar to those performed in the workplace. When it is supported from a network of trusted colleagues and professionals (educators), it can have greater impact on the learning experience of the student.

The way in which knowledge is applied, and the experience that students' gain are seen through informal methods. This informal learning process is important in that it provides alternatives to the institutional learning problems identified by Jarvis. The key to informal learning is that it provides greater access to knowledge and expertise through sharing and through peer relationships. Using this as a practice can potentially redefine the role of teacher in the classroom. It also changes the notion of classroom, which could be more reflective of adult learning needs.

Within Illeris's three dimensions of learning, space is a consideration that can be challenging within the institutional learning experience. Since institutional learning happens in a traditional classroom, it has formal connotations that may hinder learning styles. If it is set up as pods or as workspaces, can it foster discussion and sharing? Furthermore, if you change the space, how does this affect roles and what possibilities does this create for learning? Let us consider the role of a teacher becoming like the role of a manager and the role of the student as employee. This scenario moves away from traditional teaching practices because it places the students in charge of their learning which is clearly more self-directed. This change allows individuals to use whatever practices that work for them. It would also make way for informal practices, albeit in a structured manner, which provides an alternative to the traditional approach of teaching. In doing so it is important to recognize that education and work would be further aligned

in a manner that places workplace learning above general education and development. Authors such as Fenwick (2003) and Jarvis (2002) would likely challenge this view as it could be seen as undermining the value of personal growth and ignoring the holistic development of a student.

While this perspective is one view on how the community college experience could strengthen its development of WES, the examples in this case show that there are ways in which this is already taking place such as in the stories of those few exemplary educators. It would not be so radical to extend this metaphor and hold students accountable as if they were at work. There are intriguing possibilities if you consider that the experiences of these five participants shared common views on the importance of skills, how they were developed, and the role of the educator in that classroom setting.

It would be important to be aware of the vulnerabilities that exist in considering such a proposal. As Fenwick (2008) warns, consideration should be given to the political purpose and the power dynamics that exist in this metaphor. Participants acknowledged that their superiors at work carry weight on what they see as important, both in terms of education and professional development, as well as in behaviours and values. How would that translate in the classroom and what gains does this type of role modeling bring?

Fenwick's pedagogical stance creates possibilities into the way in which students learn and educators teach. Her work raises questions in practical terms as it changes the scope of teaching as a prescribed method which provides hope and bears some risk. There is a risk to traditional practices and expectations that may exist. Though changes seem inevitable, changes that foster and individualization, attunement, and ecological relations challenge the standards of practice and risk the safe and rigid approaches we

know work even if to a lesser degree. If we are to explore this idealized pedagogy, let us examine also the implications.

If educators are to be self-critical and constantly adapting to their classrooms, what will this do to the practice of teaching? Or to the standards and key performance measures that indicate quality and success? What will pedagogy look like? Do we need to look for new answers, or do we simply redefine what we call pedagogy? If so, does it mirror the workplace even more? Should educators view themselves as managers? Would that change expectations and outcomes? Does orientation of this kind mean anything? The convergence of work and school seems risky, and requires analysis of both pros and cons. One cannot help but question the impact it may have on the learning practices and how it could impact humanistic approaches to education. Who gains from this approach and would student interests become compromised? There are lots of questions that rise from this case. The case study shows that these are plausible directions; however, consideration must also be given to what was not said? Do students view themselves as critical agents, capable of leading and reforming the world of work? Do they see their potential beyond that of what their superiors tell them? Are they perhaps limited by a social structure that leads them to believe that their duty is to obey and to complete tasks as good subordinates? There are warnings of this in the literature and further convergence to the workplace will undoubtedly raise more concern about these issues. It is at least worth considering the ways in which school imitates work and the workplace experience that educators bring to the classroom.

Having educators who are considered passionate and caring experts, and who can incorporate informal practices into their teaching practices, carry value that enhances the

colleges' ability to facilitate the development of WES. Following Fenwick's ideal teacher and pedagogical suggestions is one such way that the practices could be enhanced to better deliver on the expectations that these five participants held.

Implications for Theory

The analysis of data produced several findings that validated the theoretical basis used in this study. The three dimensional model of learning (Illeris, 2002) could be used to explain and understand how these participants produced meaning and applied learning in their experiences. The ways in which they described their learning supports informal practices as suggested by Fenwick (2008), and helps explain how colleges satisfy the learning needs of students. The suggested practices from Fenwick and Illeris provide alternatives to the existing challenges within institutional learning. The implication is that informal learning methods can form a basis for enhancing teaching methods.

Illeris's (2002) three-dimensional model of learning describes how the cognitive, emotive, and social dimensions exist as a whole. These dimensions exist in a dynamic tension with distinct yet interdependent functions. What is most obvious in the stories of the participants is how they described learning in ways that connected and were applied to their social context, as well as how their interests and motivations were factors in what they chose to study. Having an instructor who piqued their interest significantly affected their learning experience. The way in which participants described their learning fundamentally supported this theoretical framework.

The part of the learning process that seemed to have the greatest affect on participants came from informal learning practices. This has implications on teaching practices in that traditional methods rely on formal methods of instruction. The educators

who had a significant impact on these participants seemed to utilize less formal methods. These exemplary educators used practices less consistent with traditional pedagogy and were in line with the idealized teacher described by Fenwick.

When Fenwick (2006) asked what difference pedagogy makes, she reflected on how adults use informal practices to share knowledge and develop skills in the workplace. She discussed various ways in which to view pedagogy, and in doing so, cautioned us in accepting lifelong learning as a policy without exploration. While the participants themselves see education as an ongoing process, they showed no hesitation or concern for the system or structures that support our current development of workers.

From all the literature on the issues related to the development of skilled workers, there did not seem to be much in the way of experience that the participants viewed as negative. The challenges within institutional learning seemed to be consistent with Jarvis's (2000, 2002) work. Although Jarvis focuses more on the development of the student in a broader sense, his idealized teaching style provides alternative approaches that are complementary to Fenwick's idealized teacher. More significant perhaps is the lack of criticism from the participants of what Jarvis (2000) argues is a lack of greater purpose in higher education.

Although the participants' stories suggest that the in-class component was less relevant than assignments, group work, and social interactions in the development of WES, their comments reflected mostly positive experiences. The absence of criticism could be interpreted in different ways. It could be seen that some of the criticisms levelled at lifelong learning, the subordination of college, and the challenges of institutional learning could be irrelevant to the student. Or, perhaps it shows a blind spot

in the awareness and/or the education of students, or maybe it signifies a change in attitude towards the value and purpose of education, at least in the eyes of the student.

Also noticeably absent from the case were issues related to generational differences. While there has been much written about generational differences, Wong, Gardiner, Lang, and Coulon's (2008) work examines these potential differences in relation to personality and motivation and the implications to the workplace. In response to what Wong et al. refer to as "popular" literature, which suggests that different approaches are needed to work with the different generations, their work found few meaningful differences between the generations. This was reinforced in this case as there were no observable differences to share when comparing generation X to generation Y millennial participants, although the sample was too small to be indicative of larger study trends.

That these five participants chose to be part of this study could reflect some inherent bias in their responses. Recruitment was challenging and there may have been a recruitment bias that may have impacted the results. Some bias may be at play in terms of individuals' interest and commitment to participating in this study, which could skew the type of stories and the meanings interpreted from those experiences. One possibility is that the participants were more willing to discuss their experiences because they had a more positive overall experience with college. Their positive view of the college experience may also have been influenced by their ability to transition successfully into the labour market.

Implications for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to better understand the connection between college and WES. The data and analysis of data gave meaning and purpose to the experience of the five participants. Their experiences supported, reinforced, and gave new perspectives to the learning process of college students. This was helpful in understanding the importance of educators and informal practices in the development of skills for the workplace.

Changes to the recruitment process could provide greater insight by focusing on a particular school and/or class. In addition, classroom observations and greater emphasis on teaching and learning could provide information that is beneficial to understanding the informal practices that support learning in college. Furthermore, greater emphasis on these informal practices could provide better understanding of how to impact pedagogy.

Additional research could add to the depth of understanding how the teaching and learning practices of college students affect their progress and success in the workplace. Further research could provide greater understanding of how to promote the concept of the idealized teacher as proposed by Fenwick, and discover new teaching methods, which could support different teaching practices. Looking within a particular class or college could provide more in-depth discussion on the various informal practices, which serve students best. By conducting interviews with a narrower focus on informal learning, and by observing classrooms with that same purpose, we could add to our understanding of how informal learning practices could be modeled in the college experience. Taking a closer look at these aspects of teaching and learning could enhance our understanding of these practices and provide solutions to some of the challenges of institutional learning.

Power dynamics in the college environment as well as within the various relationships in a college setting could also be explored. Participants discussed the need to build networks and engage in professional associations to gain knowledge of and access to the professional communities. These activities reinforce relationships in the workplace that are based on power and influence, which can affect students' ability to establish networks to support their learning and professional development. It would also be worthwhile to explore how the social experience in college can be used to open the door to different possibilities in learning. While some factors were raised and discussed in this study, those could be a focus for further understanding.

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the college experience and the development of WES. It is clear that in the case of the participants of this study, community college prepares you for work in following ways:

1. by providing the basics and necessary first step for employment;
2. by providing practical and relevant information; and
3. by requiring students to complete assignments (individually or in groups) that are similar to work and reinforce WES.

Further research in the area of WES could explore the teaching and learning practices of students in college and would benefit from having groups of students within the same program, school and year. In conjunction with classroom observations, this information could provide inform the development of teaching practices and ways of building on informal learning.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Interview 1:

1. Prior to starting your college program, to what extent did you believe that school would help you in: finding a job, having a career, being good at your job, excelling in your career, seeking advancement/promotion in your job/and or career?
2. What do you remember about your college education/experience that you found were most helpful in your work endeavours and why?
3. During your college education/experience, what skills did you learn?
4. What skills do you feel are most associated with job/career success and why?
5. What skills do you think are required in the workplace?
6. To what degree are the skills you feel are important at work emphasized during your college education/experience?
7. What do you believe will benefit you the most about having a college education?
8. What do you feel you need to overcome to become successful in your job/career?
9. To what degree do you feel you can overcome those challenges?
10. To what degree do you feel you are better prepared to overcome those challenges because of your college education/experience?

Interview 2:

1. Describe the relationship you had with your college professor/educators. How did they affect your learning?
2. What experience do you remember as the most challenging (while being in college) and how did it affect your college experience?
3. What's the one thing you wish you could've done in college that would've benefitted your job/career/life success?
4. Describe the way in which you best learn? How did you learn in your college experience?
5. Can you discuss how the skills you learned for work relate to you in your college experience?
6. How do you feel about productivity at work?
7. What is the relationship between your personal and professional needs and interest with the company's interests and needs?
8. How/did your college experience prepare you to be a leader in business?

Appendix B
Glossary of Terms

ACCC: Association of Canadian Community Colleges

CAAT: Canadian Adult Achievement Test

CAPP: Curriculum, Advising and Program Planning

CAETO: Canadian Alliance of Education and Training Organizations

CAUCE: Canadian Association for University Continuing Education

EES: Essential Employability Skills

GTA: Greater Toronto Area

HRSDC: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

HRDC: Human Resources Development Canada

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

WES: Workplace Essential Skills