Theoretical Framework

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It has been about four years since the last time I tried to articulate my philosophy of teaching. In that last version, I wrote a lot about the creative process within the classroom and how the outcomes of each class can be so very different, depending on the students and the unique gifts they each bring to the process. A lot has happened since that last writing, both personally and professionally, and so it is with new eyes and from a new perspective that I revisit this task.

Since that last writing, I have been working with faculty as an instructional designer on course design, teaching support, technology integration, and e-learning issues. What comes to mind so vividly at this time are the many conversations I’ve had with faculty over the last several years lamenting the changing student body in terms of preparation and readiness for college, attitudes, and dwindling work ethic. A recent visit to the class of one of our top developmental reading instructors brought all the issues and questions into sharp focus again.

Picture a classroom, full of freshmen, slumped in their chairs, looking bored and disinterested, too cool to care, cynical as if they’ve experienced years of disillusionment and sorrow, angry when asked to participate, daring the instructor to get them to do anything.

Suzanne, Have you been in my former classrooms? I had classes that looked just like this! This is not an urban, embattled, impoverished school. Nor is it a school accustomed historically to having students who need developmental courses. Yet, in the last several years, more and more students are arriving who are not prepared to do the work, both in their internal motivation and in their abilities. Couple this with a system in which budgets are tied to enrollment, few admissions criteria are in place, and which rewards faculty for positive student evaluations and
the inevitable starts to happen: requirements and standards start to slip and faculty morale is at an all time low. Great analysis of the present restrictions and needs in our contexts.

The questions that I hear over and over from faculty and with which I wrestle in my own classroom are numerous. Should all students be in college? What motivates students? What does effective teaching mean in today’s current classroom climate where faculty are struggling to balance student retention and grade inflation, active learning and classroom management, immature students and student responsibility? How can we help students to be more responsible and self-directed learners? What is my role as a content expert in this changing educational climate?

Returning to my recent experience in the developmental reading course: I watch the teacher in motion, unfazed (on the outside at least) by their angry or disinterested stares. She bravely goes on with the lesson, encouraging, scaffolding, embedding success strategies, weaving in connections to other courses, poking and prodding, cajoling and demonstrating, and then finally, at the end of class, the pay-off... “Miss Smith, this idea of drawing a picture (concept mapping) is really going to help me a lot! I think I can actually be successful using this!” She and I glanced at each other and smiled. She had goose bumps, and I was choked up! Maybe some headway is happening! I love it when this happens!

I asked her afterwards what she thought about the students. It seemed like so many were not interested in being there at all, and I pondered whether she thought they had a chance, given the attitudes and aptitudes I observed. She said, “They have a hard road ahead of them.” I agree. The task of learning is a difficult road, one that many students are not prepared to
travel. “Learning is a process that brings together cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing, or making changes in one’s knowledge, skills, values, and worldviews” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 277). The undergraduate years are about learning, but they also provide experiences which help students to develop towards maturity. Mezirow described one aspect of development as being understood as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action” (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 424) It seems that increasing numbers of students are not willing, ready, or able to undergo the arduous tasks of both learning and development required in college. This is an interesting idea – your last statement introduces many spaces to examine: willingness to learn, lack of cognitive development in certain college students, what is “required” in college. These are some really exciting topics that you could really reflect on and read more about.

In an article by the Carnegie Foundation on grade inflation, John Merrow reported that 57% of students name the chief benefit of a college education as increased earning power, and 37% say that they would drop out of college if they didn’t think it would hurt their job chances (2007). Wow! With these statistics, it is no wonder that we find some students unwilling to do the hard work of learning and developing! If the goal isn’t competence, excellence, and success in a future job as well as getting a good undergraduate education, but rather money to be earned from a job, then the things teachers normally do to motivate students to work hard and become engaged in their studies won’t work. College in this scenario becomes just a means to an end. It appears that some students just want to get through the process as quickly and as
painlessly as possible to get to their goal, the high-paying job. We know that that kind of “success” will be short-lived. As unprepared and underprepared students move from college to the work force, employers won’t be likely to set-up “remedial” skills sessions for them. Nor will they be willing to cajole, encourage, and prod new hires to become engaged in their work. So how do we operate in this current climate? Do we stop trying or worse become accomplices with students in the “unspoken agreement” described by George Kuh in the Merrow article as “Don’t hassle me, and I won’t ask too much of you!” (2007). Or is there another way, and what can guide us? Your paragraph really seems to be asking, “What is the main purpose of college?”

Many scholars (Hutchens, Hirsch, Bagley, Dewey, Counts, Noddings, etc.) promote certain aspects of schooling that should be central to the curriculum. Some key historical conversation about the American curriculum can be found in Kleibard’s key work: Kliebard, H. M. (2004). *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893 - 1958* (3rd edition ed.). New York: RoutledgeFalmer. Also, check out the Committee of Ten and the Cardinal Principles ([http://tmh.floonet.net/articles/cardprin.html](http://tmh.floonet.net/articles/cardprin.html)). This committee got together about 100 years ago to talk about the purpose of schooling and what future college students needed from pre-college training. Many scholars have critiqued the Cardinal principles from various curriculum standpoints. You might want to check it out.

On the surface, incompatible goals could be the reason for poor student performance, but what else might be getting in the way of student success? McClusky's Theory of Margin takes into account a person's load (things that occupy a person's time and energy, both externally and internally) versus their power (resources and energy available to tackle the load) (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 93). This concept relates directly when thinking about student
retention issues. Often our students are working a full-time job while juggling family and academic responsibilities. Without resources or support, these students can quickly become overloaded and drop out. Careful advising at the beginning of a student’s semester can help him/her to look realistically at both sides of the load/power ratio to better plan and schedule courses in a reasonable way.

Incompatible goals are one issue that gets in the way of student performance. Another issue can be the gap between high school and college which is often exposed early in the freshman year, when faculty, expecting a certain level of self-directedness from students, are bombarded (often after a failed first exam or paper) with questions and recriminations from students, not yet willing or able to take responsibility for their own success or failure. Poulton, Derrick, and Carr’s study of autonomy and self-directed learning (SDL) gives us four variables that can impact whether students exhibit autonomous behavior or not: technical skills related to the learning process; familiarity with the subject matter; sense of personal competence as learners; and commitment to learning at this point in time (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 123). Additionally, Grow’s Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSCL) model provides instructors with a way to identify the stage of SDL for students and create instructional interventions to support students in their growth in that area (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, pp. 117-118).

Based on changing student goals regarding the desired outcomes from their college education, along with the gap in preparedness for college, I come to my first underlying philosophical position: I believe in the current educational system and cultural climate, that a developmental approach is necessary, across all curricula, by faculty teaching incoming
students. As I write that statement, I realize in what kind of uphill battle I find myself. Local faculty, used to teaching content alone, may find it foreign to also teach success strategies and academic skills intertwined with their content. Yet almost every day, I find myself in a conversation with a faculty member, lamenting the sorry state of affairs with students today, and I am reminded of the words of a dear mentor, still teaching at 77 years of age. When asked what she saw as the most important thing in teaching today, she answered simply, “Meet them where they are.” I can totally relate to your experience. When teaching in the high school and college context, it seems like many faculty seemed to lean heavily on the student to adapt to their new learning context. What are some practical ways to help both groups (faculty and students) grow in their understanding of the cognitive development stage of the learner as well as the requirements of the present context (e.g. a college English class, a large lecture series, etc.)

Along the same lines, it can’t be just faculty members who have to adapt to the changes. Students also need to be held accountable and be called to growth according to the stated outcomes of their stated majors and chosen careers. This brings me to my second philosophical position: Teaching requires hopeful people who believe that change and progress can happen. The transformational approach to education, then, becomes a cornerstone of my interest and practice. Mezirow’s ideal conditions for fostering transformative learning could be used as a guide during course design (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 155). Faculty can consider:

- Providing a trusting environment for learning
- Promoting autonomy and collaboration
- Utilizing activities that “encourage exploration of alternative personal perspectives and critical reflection
• Fostering group ownership and individual agency
• Promoting value-laden course content
• Recognizing the interrelationship of critical reflection and affective learning
• Recognizing the need for time

Now imagine that we have designed a course with Mezirow’s ideal conditions in mind, met our students and assessed their level of self-directedness using Grow’s SSDL. It will be Havighurst’s idea of the teachable moment that will provide the awareness we need to bring theory into practice in our classes (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 308). This brings me to my third position: a growing sense of awareness of ourselves, of our students, of the interaction between the two, and of the process becomes critical. Cool! Can your position in the university help promote this idea? If so, how? When we understand our students, in terms of their academic needs and personal, social, and cultural dimensions, and we couple this with our already deep understanding of our content, then we are more apt to see and take advantage of those teachable moments when they happen.

Faculty members are experts in their content areas, but this can lead to another issue that can arise in the classroom: the novice/expert dichotomy described by Lajoie who suggested “Making the expertise trajectory visible to learners through models of expertise, feedback, or examples that promote the active transfer of knowledge and self-monitoring” (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 405). Again, this may take training for faculty to enable them to do this, which leads to my third philosophical position: educators should be dedicated to continuing professional development regarding their content areas, but also be open to learning more about teaching and student development issues.
From many recent conversations with faculty members about classroom issues, there seems to be a stand-off going on. They comment that students don’t seem to want to work hard; or they aren’t as prepared as they used to be; or they are more apt to question traditional authority than in previous years. On the other hand, students are saying, “Faculty members are out of touch with what we want in the classroom!” So how do we approach this divide? Kegan’s trans-system thinking can help us envision a new dynamic, while at the same time provide an avenue for mutual understanding. Nice use of the readings to address your own personal context! Kegan stated, “Parties in conflict move beyond trying to win for their position... to the win-win position”. Rather what is needed is a recognition that the other side will not go away, [and] probably should not.” (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 344). Classroom dynamics are complicated and ever-changing, but a bottom-line philosophical stance could be one that seeks to create a classroom climate that is mutually respectful, seeks understanding of different viewpoints and perspectives, and is open to change and growth.

My final point relates to the chapters on aspects of knowing outside the cognitive realm such as embodied and spiritual knowing (Merriam et al., 2007, pp. 189-216), and I applaud the authors for including this new section in the text. I see these often ignored stances to learning gaining ground in academia. Arthur Chickering’s latest text, *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (2005) and L. Dee Fink’s, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (2003), are two examples of texts specifically for higher education that support development of learning activities that reach students in a more holistic way. I will check this out! They sound fascinating! I love works that address a more holistic view of learning, growing and transforming. This leads to my final philosophical stance: If students do come to us
disinterested and cynical at such young ages, then what can we do to ignite the spirit of learning within them, to create a sense of enthusiasm and hope for the future, to help them find their passions and trust the process enough to let go of the search for the gold, and search instead for their passions? So again, this comes back to faculty openness and exposure to other ways of approaching the teaching and learning paradigm.

As I think about how my teaching philosophy has changed over the past several years, I see several new themes: 1) the need to better understand the current generation of students; This is another cool place of inquiry. Check out research done on neomillials – people born after 1981 – and their educational needs. Today’s learners are totally different, especially in their relationship to technology. 2) a willingness to meet students where they are in terms of attitudes and preparedness coupled with a developmental approach to teaching and learning across curricula; and 3) an openness to new and more holistic methods of teaching that can help students to reclaim their joy and enthusiasm for learning along with an approach to their studies that is more than simply pragmatic and superficial.
References


http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/sub.asp?key=245&subkey=576

Suzanne, I can tell that you are really wrestling with practical ideas for your own teaching/learning context. It seems like you have plenty of spaces to investigate in order to help college students be more successful in your school. I am inspired by your compassion and willingness to help others, both faculty and students alike. If any of my comments above seem like a space that you wish to look into more thoroughly, let me know. I have a few starting references for each topic!

Grade: A