

Gina L. Frieden and James O. Pawelski
Affective Development in College Students: Strategies That Promote Ethical Decision-Making and Compassionate Choice

Gina L. Frieden and James O. Pawelski, Vanderbilt University

Gina L. Frieden is Assistant Professor of Human and Organizational Development at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. Dr. Frieden received her Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from the University of Memphis in 1988. Her research interests are in the areas of adult development, life transitions and counselor training. Recent conference presentations and workshops have focused on applying constructive developmental principles in clinical practice and classroom instruction. She is also co-principal investigator of a grant evaluating the effects of a wellness program on anxiety, depression and spiritual well-being. Dr. Frieden serves as Director of the Human Development Counseling Program and teaches courses in developmental psychology, small group process and grief and loss.

James O. Pawelski is Assistant Professor of Human and Organizational Development and Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University. Having earned his Ph.D. in philosophy (Penn State, 1997), he is working chiefly on the history of philosophy (especially American philosophy) and its application to human development. He is particularly interested in theoretical issues in American pragmatism and positive psychology and in their application to character development. He is the leader of the Positive Psychology Networkâ™s Interdisciplinary Pod (a research group) and has co-authored an article with Martin Seligman on â€œPositive Psychology FAQâ€™sâ€ (forthcoming in Psychological Inquiry). He applies this theoretical work in a course he has created on the â€œFoundations of Character Developmentâ€ at Vanderbilt University.

Abstract

The learning process at its best is a dynamic, authentic, engaging enterprise that can lead to a myriad of emotional experiences as students begin to experiment with and challenge their beliefs. This presentation will address how affective mastery and interpersonal competence can be integrated into classroom learning by exploring three key levels of affective awareness and change in a departmental curriculum: the intrapersonal, the interpersonal and the communal. It will be argued that such strategies can lead to important developmental outcomes: increased capacity to think critically, relate empathically and act ethically. Examples are taken from the Core Courses in Vanderbilt Universityâ™s most popular undergraduate major: Human and Organizational Development; as well as from a new elective in the program: Foundations of Character Development.

Development should be viewed as a central rather than peripheral outcome in education (Kohlberg, 1972). The competencies needed to solve complex problems go beyond a technical analysis of information and specific expertise. Learners today need to develop a host of adaptive psychological capacities that require them to be not only technically

proficient but intellectually capable and emotionally grounded. The experience of learning does not occur in a vacuum. For learning to be effective it must generalize from the college classroom to the world of work and beyond. Living and working in diverse settings requires skills and competencies that stretch the learner's capacity to relate to individuals and communities with different values and beliefs. Skills learned today may well be obsolete ten years from now. Learning is lifelong and development continues throughout adulthood.

How do colleges and universities help students achieve the needed competencies to be effective in the 21st century? Goleman (1995) argues that success in life is most accurately predicted by emotional and social measures, a concept called emotional intelligence. He notes further that emotional intelligence goes hand in hand with education for character, for moral development, and for citizenship (p. 286). Unfortunately, higher education has tended to relegate students' social and emotional lives to the environment outside the classroom.

The need to support and challenge students in their affective development calls for methods and strategies that can support these endeavors. Curricular and program goals may be sequenced so that students learn to connect relevant concepts to their own life narratives, relate empathically to others, and acknowledge their embeddedness in a system that is interdependent and complex. Developmentally sensitive teaching should be grounded in theory that engages the student in context, with an appreciation for the full nature of learning which includes the cognitive, affective and behavioral domains.

Theoretical Foundations

The Department of Human and Organizational Development (HOD) at Vanderbilt University is committed to teaching that incorporates a view of human development as lifelong learning and that supports learners in becoming caring and competent scholars and practitioners. The core curriculum is grounded in the theories of Dewey and Piaget.

John Dewey (1959) stressed that experience is crucial for a complete education. He believed that for an individual to have a valuable learning experience, the learner needs to be actively immersed in a natural environment that offers the opportunity for reciprocal feedback. Rather than viewing experience atomistically, Dewey viewed the elements of experience as a dynamic organized system. The nature of knowing is relative to the context. The learner needs to be both acting on and responsive to the environment. Additionally, for learning to be useful, experience must be linked to reflection. The learner's ability to conceptualize what he or she knows is premised on a reciprocal process of direct experience linked to reflection and back to experience again. The learning process continues to be shaped and refined by the dialectic of action, reflection, and action that now builds on prior knowledge. An important element of the learning cycle is discerning experiences that enhance learner outcomes rather than diminish or add no value to the experience of learning. For an experience to be educative, it must add value and lead to further development.

Dewey's ideas were central to his own pedagogical methods that placed students in

real-life experiences. Students at his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago were immersed in natural environments that required them to learn by doing. David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, which has been routinely applied to classroom learning and is frequently applied in the HOD curriculum, draws on Dewey's principles (Kolb, 1984).

Jean Piaget's research (1952) on how learners construct knowledge is seminal in the field of cognitive development. His theory on how children construct and renegotiate meanings as they mature and interact with their environments is central to constructivist theories of development that acknowledge learners as active organizers of their experience. Maturation and experience lead to increasing complexity in how learners process data, and mental schemas or cognitive maps organize experience and direct behavior.

Critical to the understanding of how change takes place are the concepts of assimilation, accommodation and dissonance. The capacity to adapt to new, more complex realities is accomplished through the complimentary processes of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the process of integrating information into existing structures while accommodation is the process of modifying existing structures to incorporate new experiences. When a new reality must be negotiated, accommodation occurs as the individual adapts. Since accommodation involves a qualitative change in core ordering processes, a transition period may result as the individual renegotiates meanings and beliefs.

Dissonance is regarded as an important catalyst for promoting development. The learner's ability to take in novel experiences creates the potential for new learning. However, if the experience that creates disequilibrium is too overwhelming, the learner may experience regression. If the dissonance is temporary and relatively minor, no new change occurs and the learner returns to stasis. Moderate levels of stress or dissonance promote the possibility of transition to new more adaptive structures and of a reordering of core beliefs.

Piaget's theory has been extended into the adult years in the areas of moral development, ego development, social development and cognitive development. College and adult developmental theorists have applied Piaget's work to the field of higher education. William Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development, for example, describes how college students' views of knowledge and approach to learning change over time from less complex to more complex meaning-making (1968). As students experience increasingly diverse points of view, the possibility for dissonance increases as does the potential for accommodating new knowledge into core schemas. As the capacity for taking in new meanings evolves, the learner's role shifts from passive to active as teachers are no longer viewed as authorities who know the answers but as collaborators with specific areas of expertise. Ultimately, commitments in the areas of relationships, career and faith are understood as choices made in context and not as inflexible absolutes.

To summarize, the theories of Dewey and Piaget among others serve as frameworks for thinking about learning as holistic, contextual, generalizable, and developmental. Both Dewey and Piaget acknowledge that the experience of learning is more than an intellectual

exercise. Knowledge is viewed as holistic and it is recognized that the learner's stance toward learning and ability to take in and organize meaning in new ways is both an intellectual and an affective process which may also result in behavioral change.

Learning is contextual. Learning is not separate from the social and historical realities of the learner's day-to-day experience. The learner must be sensitive to the social and cultural conditions that have influenced his or her own development and that continue to serve as natural boundaries that can both foster and impede further development.

Learning must be generalizable. Deep learning is marked by the learner's ability to go beyond the mere memorization of facts in the use of knowledge to solve problems in the real world. Learners are encouraged to assimilate new experiences and link them to prior knowledge. Experience linked to reflection leads to transformation. Learning generalizes through introducing the student to the depth and breadth of diverse experiences influenced by a thoughtful, probing and supportive learning community. Learners test out their new insights in other contexts leading to a deeper appreciation of individual differences and to a more complex response to social dilemmas.

Learning is developmental. The developing capacity to take on and take in new meanings is central to deep learning that tests core beliefs and schemas. Developmental educators suggest that for teaching to be effective, a carefully thought-out curriculum would include methods that challenge beliefs and stimulate new ideas. Such a curriculum would support learners in their current meanings yet encourage tentative steps leading to new, more adaptive ways of knowing.

Principles of Developmental Instruction

College student development theories serve as a general framework for understanding how principles of development can best be translated into effective teaching and program design. At the heart of an effective curriculum are methods of instruction that use knowledge of development as both starting and ending points in program design. Important outcomes for guiding curricular design include: critical thinking applied to intellectual development, critical reflection that addresses social and emotional learning, and intentional action that includes ethical and generative behaviors.

Intentional experience. The role of experience cannot be overstated. Linking concepts to ongoing experiences both in and out of the classroom requires that students be exposed to diverse populations. The curriculum must be intentional in helping students make connections between the classroom and their lived experience through exposure to and acknowledgement of others' worldviews.

Habits that support affective mastery: The role of instructor. A principal goal of constructivist teaching is to help the student become more self-directed in their learning. At the same time, developmental instruction models (Knefelkamp, 1974) acknowledge that self-direction is a developmental accomplishment and that students require appropriate methods of instruction and pacing through support and challenge. As a result it is

incumbent upon the professor to continually evaluate how their teaching may facilitate or inhibit the kind of environment needed to support students' developing capacities and readiness to learn. These tasks are time-consuming, demanding and call for creativity in letting go of traditional methods of instruction as well as outworn habits and routines. The following strategies are suggested starting points for developing a curriculum that is intentional around students' affective engagement in the classroom.

1) Developing experiences that resonate

A central premise of instruction that facilitates change is meeting students where they are and encouraging experiences that test out their models of the world. Incentives should be developed that offer the student some measure of personal control and safety when sharing meaningful experiences yet also allow for discussion and refinement in community. Peer questioning and validation encourage testing of beliefs and assumptions.

2) Addressing student strengths

Exercises and facilitation should build on students' strengths. Commenting on positive assets and traits that are linked to deep rather than surface beliefs such as loyalty, commitment, sensitivity, and perseverance builds confidence as exercises become increasingly demanding. Students naturally possess these traits but rarely get to demonstrate them in classroom learning.

3) Handling negative emotions in the classroom

When old perceptions are examined and students are exposed to diversity in the classroom, they often experience discomfort which may manifest as doubt, anger or sadness. If handled appropriately and respectfully, these experiences can serve as catalysts in facilitating developmental capacity. If handled inappropriately or ignored, a transformational learning opportunity is missed. The facilitator's ability to demonstrate how even negative emotions can be useful indicators of a student's capacity to take appropriate risks and work through conflict is critical.

4) Modeling respect for students' pace, awareness and understanding of their experience

Norms must be initially established that incorporate safety, confidentiality and respect for others' beliefs. Students must be supported as they process new ideas and experiences at their own rate and must not be required to discover new perspectives (their own as well as others) within a prescribed timeline. Vital to the task of development is helping learners find their authentic voices as they engage in a critique of personal and cultural values, beliefs and assumptions. This process is ongoing and may move through several cycles of questioning and experimenting before new commitments are achieved.

Sequence and Pacing. The degree to which students are in charge of their own learning is also a function of the varying teaching styles and philosophical viewpoints of the instructors

and of differences in the readiness, experience, and age of the students. In general, students are called upon to become increasingly self-directed as learning environments become more collaborative.

Human and Organizational Development Core Courses

The theories and principles of instruction described above serve as foundations for bridging theory and practice in the Human and Organizational Development (HOD) curriculum. This curriculum seeks to integrate more fully constructivist and developmental theories in higher education practice, with the aims of developing caring and competent citizens and of creating caring and competent learning communities. Core courses in the curriculum are required of all HOD undergraduate majors. Three courses are described here that address how the curriculum builds from year to year in order to create optimal learning environments and experiences. The learning objectives and competencies listed for each class reflect the department's interest in facilitating social and emotional competencies including increased self-awareness, understanding of others and understanding of systems.

HOD 1000 Applied Human Development.

This first-year course focuses on the dynamic relationship between a person's need to maintain an individual identity and a person's need to belong to a group and develop relationships. Course objectives include exploring values around personal meaning, social responsibility, and human service; demonstrating an understanding of the dynamics of human behavior in families, groups, and organizations; and applying this knowledge to the solution of personal and social problems. Students begin to identify their own internal scripts and core beliefs that influence how they make decisions and create meaning. The lab portion of this class allows time for discussion of diverse viewpoints, increased perspective-taking and questions that are not addressed in the larger lecture.

HOD 1100 Small Group Behavior.

This course may be taken simultaneously with HOD 1000, or it may be taken the following year, as students now apply the concepts they have learned to small-group experiences. Course objectives include learning about research findings concerning the nature of small groups, particularly task groups; experiencing an ongoing group process to which theories and concepts can be applied; learning about individual behavior in groups and developing skills to be more effective group members; and learning about the effects of culture on behavior in small groups. The facilitator's role is to provide structure to the lab experience and to support norms that assure members of their psychological safety. The member's role is to participate actively and to assume increasing responsibility for structuring and taking leadership in the group. Writing reflection papers becomes a primary assignment in this class and incorporates the reflection-action cycle described earlier (Dewey, 1959; Kolb, 1984).

HOD 2900 Internship.

The internship is a capstone experience for the HOD major. The curriculum is designed to allow the student to apply learning from earlier coursework in an actual organizational setting and to demonstrate the core competencies of the HOD major. Seminar coursework is designed to support and facilitate onsite learning. The experiences at the internship site are coupled with reading, reflection, analysis and discussion to produce knowledge that is useable and applied. The seminar is organized into learning teams, allowing members to learn and grow from each other. Course objectives include demonstrating effective organizational problem-solving skills; using theories of human and organizational behavior to understand, evaluate and respond to personal work experiences; and applying self-directed learning skills in an organizational learning situation.

Innovations in Application: HOD 2690 Foundations of Character Development

This new elective (taught for the first time in the spring of 2003) seeks to apply the theories discussed above to the area of character development. William Damon (2002) points out an unfortunate rift between habit and reflection in philosophy, psychology, and consequently, in character education. In philosophy, there is an opposition between virtue theory (where ethics is understood to be a function of good habits) and justice theory (where ethics is seen as a function of continual thinking about social contracts, the conditions under which they are formed, and the consequences to which they lead). In psychology, behaviorism has championed the value of habitual conditioning, while cognitive psychology has emphasized the importance and effectiveness of reasoning and moral judgment. Damon holds these divisions in philosophy and psychology responsible for generating similar and damaging divisions in approaches to character education.

Damon hints at what John Dewey is quite clear about. The tragedy of making this division in education is not just that students need both good habits and good thinking skills, but that good habits are necessary for good thinking skills and that good thinking skills are necessary for good habits. If thinking is contextual, then it will be influenced by our somatic, affective, and cognitive habits, as well as by our environment. If habits are malleable, then critical self-reflection will be an important part of the process of choosing which habits to reinforce and which to break.

Foundations of Character Development is a course designed to address both habits and reflectionâ€”and their interaction. Following Aristotleâ€™s observation that character comes from habit, this course focuses on the theory and practice of habit formation. Interdisciplinary in nature, the course draws its theory from readings in philosophy and psychology; experiential in orientation, the course relies heavily on exercises from the field of applied human development. The course also emphasizes the importance of character in a democracy, where effective individual self-government is one of the conditions for effective collective self-government.

Designed to be intellectually rigorous, the course requires students to read some 1200 pages over the course of the semester. Readings are taken from texts in philosophy (chiefly William James), from psychology (chiefly positive psychology), and from the realm of practice. Students are also required to submit short papers on virtually every reading

assignment. Designed to be experientially rich, the course invites students to take part in a wide range of exercises that apply the reading to their own lives and then to journal about the results. The aim is for students to gain mastery over their own processes of habit formation and to apply this mastery in the cultivation of character.

One of the most important habits addressed in the course is the “classroom habit.” Students are trained, through long years of experience, to expect certain things in the classroom. They expect certain seating arrangements, they expect to be more receptive than generative, they expect their intellects (but not their emotions, and certainly not their bodies) to be engaged, and the like. In Foundations of Character Development, the classroom is set up to support the important commonalities between physical, emotional, mental, and moral development. In each of these realms, growth can be facilitated through the selection and conditioning of adaptive practices; that is, through the intentional creation of habits selected through critical self-reflection. Effective processes of habit formation are holistic. They must integrate the physiological basis of habits with cognitive strategies for their selection and affective motivation for their installation.

One of the exercises the students rate most highly is an exercise in replacing habits of belief. Students begin by reading William James’s “The Will to Believe,” where he points out that not all beliefs can be founded on objective evidence. There are some beliefs (moral beliefs involving value, for example) that go beyond the facts and must be founded subjectively, by our passionnal natures (desires, wills, interests).

Students are invited to identify subjective beliefs they have that amount to bad mental habits and that they want to change. Examples would be: “I am worthless.” “I am a bad seed.” “I can trust no one but myself.” It is clear that beliefs of this sort are not only not objectively true but also potentially quite harmful.

Without being required to tell anyone what their belief is, students are then invited to associate fully (cognitively, affectively, and somatically) to the costs of their belief. They go through a closed-eye process where they are asked to remember past losses, identify current limitations, and imagine future consequences caused by this belief. After journaling about why they absolutely must change this belief, they are asked to choose a positive alternative belief. Examples would be: “I am loved.” “I am a gift.” “Some people can be trusted.” Then students are invited to associate fully with (and then to journal about) the good consequences they imagine will follow from this new belief.

Both in this course and in the HOD Core Courses described above, the goal is to find ways of implementing both Dewey’s notions of experiential learning and Piaget’s constructivist theories of development. The desired student outcome is increased self-direction through immersion in environments where learning is holistic, contextual, generalizable, and developmental. Crucial for this outcome are courses that facilitate the integrated cognitive and affective development essential for moral growth.

References

Damon, W. (2002). Introduction. In W. Damon (Ed.), *Bringing in a new era in character education* (pp. vii-xxii). Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

Dewey, J. (1959). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: why it can matter more than I.Q.* New York: Bantam Press.

Knefelkamp, L. L. (1974). *Developmental instruction: Fostering intellectual and personal growth of students*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kohlberg, L. & Mayer, R. (1972). Development as the aim of education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 42(4), 449-496.

Perry, W. G. (1968). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York: International Universities Press.