

How Students Develop

It is easy for us as teachers to develop curriculum and teaching methods in the way we were taught. It's easy because that's our experience and "the way it's always been done." How often do we ever take into account the experiences of our audience (students)? Or where they are in their development?

As educators, we often wonder why students behave the way they do. Dr. Peggy Patterson (University of Calgary) uses the equation $B = f(P * E)$ to attempt an explanation. Behaviour, including learning behaviour, is a function of the Person interacting with their Environment. To be prepared to teach our students, we need to understand how they develop as students. A working knowledge of student development theory provides us with an understanding of the maturation and development of the students we teach and work with. This understanding provides faculty a framework in which to make informed decisions about pedagogy and a way to understand their students.

Student development is really a family of theories based on human growth and development as applied to the whole student learning experience, including in- and out-of- class personal learning experiences. Going back to our formula, student development theories examine the interactions between students and their learning environments.

There are a number of environmental factors that influence student development, including:

- Size of the Institution. As redundancy increases, development decreases.
- Curriculum, Teaching & Evaluation. When memorization is fostered, development is not. Development is fostered when choice and flexibility are offered.
- Living Arrangements. Living environments can either foster or inhibit development. How the living environment impacts and individual varies from student to student.
- Faculty & Administration. Friendly, frequent student-faculty interaction in a diversity of situations (not just the classroom) fosters development.
- Friends, Groups and Student Culture. These can amplify the impact, both positive and negative, of the above-listed factors.

When we begin to apply student development theories, we need to remember that there are some major experiences central to a student's developmental change:

1. Engagement in decision making in academic and co-curricular settings
2. Interacting with diverse individuals and ideas
3. Involvement in a variety of direct experiences
4. Solving complex social and intellectual issues without feeling compelled to conform to authority's viewpoint
5. Receiving

There are generally four categories of student development theory: psychosocial, cognitive-structural, person-environment, and humanistic existential. Regardless of the category, all share some basic assumptions. First, that the individual student be considered as a whole person. Secondly, that each student is a unique person and must be treated as such. Thirdly, the student's total environment is educational and must be used to help the student achieve full developmental potential. And lastly, the major responsibility for a student's personal and social development rests with the student and his/her personal resources.

Chickering's Psychosocial Theory of Identity Development

This is perhaps the most widely known and applied theory of student development. Chickering and Reisser based their model of psychosocial development on Eric Erikson's identity v. identity confusion stage of development. Chickering and Reisser proposed seven vectors along which traditionally aged college students develop and form identity. They emphasized that students are developmentally diverse, with some arriving on campus in the beginning phases of development, where others have developed a strong self-image. This is important when we begin to apply this theory to a diverse community of students. Remember that one of the basic premises is to treat students individually. Chickering and Reisser proposed the following seven vectors:

Vector 1: Developing Competence

- Intellectual competence (knowledge acquisition, critical thinking skills, capacity for analysis, synthesis, evaluation, creation of ideas) which is directly tied to academic programs
- Physical and manual competence (master previously unattainable skills) which may be developed through athletic & recreational activities and/or through hands-on contact with art, lab or construction materials
- Social and interpersonal competence (interactive, relational and communication skills) which may be developed through communication with individuals or groups (i.e. class group/team work, co-curricular activities/organizations)

If competence is developed, students are more willing to take risks, which spurs growth in other areas, and provides them with greater capability in managing a variety of social situations. Without gaining some maturation along this vector, maturation along subsequent vectors may be difficult.

Vector 2: Managing Emotions

- Increasing awareness of one's feelings, becoming aware of the range and variety of impulses from within and how emotions are expressed
- Integration of feelings (able to recognize & label feelings, trust one's feelings and define what will be expressed to whom)

At this stage, students are learning how to assess consequences, how to handle different feelings and to find new ways of expressing themselves. A student's limited ability to manage their emotions can be seen in a number of common concerns (roommate conflicts, sexual impulses, academic anxiety, substance abuse and aggression).

Vector 3: Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence

- Establishing emotional autonomy, which decreases the need for reassurance, affection and approval
- Goal development, including the ability to make plans, solve problems, identify resources and use systematic methods of problem solving
- Recognition of one's interdependence

Traditionally aged students typically begin to move away from a dependence on their parents and increase their reliance on peers during this stage. Students begin to adopt good coping behaviours and start to find a middle ground between individuality and conformity.

Vector 4: Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships

- Increased tolerance for and acceptance of differences between individuals
- Increased capacity for mature and intimate relationships

Students begin to develop the ability to accept individuals for who they are, respect differences (including intercultural differences), and appreciate commonalities. Experiences with relationships are a significant contributor to the development of a sense of self. Students need to develop their abilities to listen, understand and empathize with others (without the need to dominate or pass judgment) and to build relationships based on openness, trust & reciprocity.

Vector 5: Establishing Identity

- Ability to integrate many facets of one's experiences
- Negotiate realistic and stable self-image (including comfort with body and appearance, sexual orientation)
- Change is perceptual and attitudinal
- Encourages experimentation in realms where decisions are required (relationships, purpose and integrity)
- Know the kinds of experiences they prefer

This vector builds on and requires some growth in each of the four before it. It is a complex vector that is especially challenging for students forming identity based on sexual orientation, ethnicity, differing abilities, gender, etc. During this stage of development, students are clarifying personal values, selecting a moral and ethical position for themselves and answering the questions of "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?" Students will begin to develop a clear concept of self, comfort with their roles and lifestyles, self-acceptance and self-esteem, personal stability and integration.

Vector 6: Developing Purpose

- Direction for one's life through assessment and clarification of interests, educational and career options, and lifestyle preferences

Students must develop the ability to intentionally make and stay with decisions, even in the face of opposition.

Vector 7: Developing Integrity

- Humanizing values: students become aware of the relativity of values
- Personalizing values: students decide on a personally valid set of beliefs
- Developing congruence: values and actions become and authentic as self-interest is balanced by a sense of social responsibility

Students will begin to look more objectively at complex situations. They usually begin to reach this stage close to graduation, though some begin to develop this vector earlier in their educational career.

Perry's Cognitive Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development

William Perry's cognitive theory of student development traces a traditionally aged student's evolution in thinking about the nature of knowledge, truth, values, the meaning of life and responsibilities through nine positions. Perry lists steps, based on Piaget's cognitive development theory, by which students move from a simplistic, categorical view of the world, to a realization of the contingent nature of knowledge, relative values and the formation and affirmation of one's commitments. Perry sees cognitive conflict as the instigator of change. This theory is in establishing, implementing and evaluating curriculum.

There are three levels - dualism, relativism and commitment, with three positions in each level. Each position in dualism and relativism are considered to be structural stages. The three positions in commitment are affective stages, which describe the process of living through commitments.

Level 1: Dualism

Position 1: All information is either right or wrong

Position 2: All information is either right or wrong, and where uncertainty seems to exist, it is really an error committed by a wrong authority

Position 3: All information is either right or wrong, but uncertainty is acceptable in areas where experts don't know the answers yet. Someday, the right answers will be discovered

Curriculum challenges for this level include providing relative viewpoints in course content and instructional method; providing experiential learning modes; and requiring analysis of conflicting viewpoints. Students seeing the world from this perspective are best supported by highly structured instruction, a personal atmosphere in the classroom and limited degrees of freedom (2 or 3 options).

Level 2: Relativism

Position 4: Ideas have equal value and no one has "the answer." Non-absolute evidence or standards for judgment within context are not yet integrated into the structure. A few right and wrong categories may still exist.

Position 5: Knowledge is contextual. Non-absolute evidence can help a person make contextual judgments regarding what is better or worse, but not to decide between absolute right and wrong. This position also raises questions about personal values, actions and destiny.

Position 6: A person's life, especially his/her values, emerge as commitments are made. Life commitments are foreseen as one applies contextual criteria to identify issues.

Curriculum challenges for this level include relativistic, diverse content that enables commitment; vicarious experiential learning; and a low degree of instructional structure. Students at the relativism level are best supported by highly diverse content, a personal atmosphere in the classroom and a high degree of freedom.

Level 3: Commitment

Position 7: Active affirmation of self and responsibility in pluralistic world, establishing identity in process.

Position 8: Personal commitments are made out of a relativistic frame of reference, allowing for recognition of diverse personal themes.

Position 9: Understand role in pluralistic world by establishing own identity and lifestyle consistent with own personal theme.

The commitment process for students involves choices, decisions and affirmations that are made from the vantage point of relativism, so curriculum challenges will be similar to level 2 (relativism).