Contextual Learning: A Comprehensive, Developmental Model

Background and Introduction

As the national dialogue around moral and civic learning intensifies, there are increasing efforts to embed these concepts into the warp and woof of the undergraduate curriculum. In an essay on the topic, Colby & Ehrlich note a variety of curricular venues used to promote moral and civic development including required ethics courses, seminars for first-year students, and capstone courses. Such courses are typically offered in traditional classroom settings. Many are delivered as “curricular sequences that aim to help students shape their lives and life work in socially and morally committed directions” (Colby & Ehrlich, 1999, p. 1).

Learning about moral character and civic responsibility in classroom settings comes with its own unique set of possibilities and challenges. Classrooms work particularly well in solidifying the foundations for a liberal education. It is also in the classroom where students can receive the content and disciplinary knowledge so necessary for effective moral and civic engagement (Colby & Ehrlich, 1999, p. 3). Along with these strengths, however, classroom settings come with certain inherent limitations. One is the relative distance between the content knowledge being mastered, and its relevance and application to authentic, real-world settings.

At Messiah College we have strengthened our resolve in recent years to augment the traditional classroom curriculum in moral and civic learning with a growing corpus of experiential and contextual learning opportunities. This has been accompanied by a growing commitment to see more of our students benefit from opportunities such as service-learning, internships, urban engagement and international education.
Several years ago Messiah made an institutional decision to consolidate its academic programs delivered with “one leg off the Grantham campus.” It was hoped that by bringing these programs together administratively that their synergy and visibility would be enhanced. As of Fall 1997, the following were brought together under the umbrella of “External Programs:”

- Agapé Center for Service and Learning
- Career Center
- International Programs & the EpiCenter
- Internship Center
- Latino Partnership
- Messiah’s Philadelphia Campus at Temple University (as of Fall 2000)

While a gravitational pull toward territoriality is often strong in the academy, we have found this new integration of programming has not compromised the identity, autonomy, integrity or viability of individual programs. Much of the visioning, student recruitment and program delivery continues to happen out of individual offices.

However, our administrative ties have enabled us to collaborate in ways that strengthen the coherence of our programs. In addition, these collaborations have further enhanced our visibility on campus. Examples of recent joint initiatives include:

- Development of a common mission statement and introductory brochure,
- Annual hosting of a campus-wide *World’s Fare* showcasing our programs,
- Production of *Heard on the Streets*, an electronic newsletter featuring program updates and information,
- Initiating an annual faculty development workshop highlighting aspects of experiential learning theory and application,
- Coordination of shared data bases with off-campus partner contact information,
- Campus-wide distribution of an integrated annual report.

These initiatives combined with the ongoing efforts of each individual program have resulted in rapidly increasing rates of student participation. For example, last year
Messiah students participated in over 70,000 hours of local, national, and international community service. Student involvement in internship programs has increased by over 25%. It has also been gratifying to see our name finally appear among the top 20 bachelor’s institutions sending students abroad (“Study Abroad by U.S. Students,” 2000). Rather than a zero sum game, we have found that as one program thrives, we all thrive.

**A Proposed Conceptual Model for Enhancing Student Learning**

After establishing some preliminary foundations for our comprehensive model of experiential education it became clear that a more intentional, cohesive and systematically-conceived paradigm was needed to guide our work. For almost two years, our staff of 19 worked to construct an integrative, developmental model for student learning that is grounded in shared theoretical frameworks and which articulates concrete program strategies, student learning outcomes and assessment plans for each program area. The evolving model incorporates the following characteristics:

**Integrative Dimensions of the Model**

The model is integrative in that, despite strong individual program identities, there is overarching cohesion and integration in the way programming is conceived and delivered. Many theoretical frameworks that inform our work are commonly embraced between and among our programs (i.e.: Boyer, 1996; Ewell, 1997; Fowler, 1981; Kolb, 1984; Walsh & Middleton, 1984). There is also a conscious effort to integrate the model with existing college documents regarding institutional mission and identity, foundational values and the college-wide educational objectives.
Developmental Nature of the Model

The conceptual model is also loosely developmental in nature. Each External Program area has a plan for working with students over their four years at Messiah College. For example, targeted initiatives for first year students include the following:

C Recruitment begins before matriculation has ever taken place. During their first campus visit, prospective students regularly tour our program areas and chat informally with staff.

C Within the first week of students’ arrival on campus, the Agape Center for Service and Learning coordinates an orientation event called Into the Streets. This event takes every student off the Grantham campus and into service settings in the Greater Harrisburg Community. The goal is not only to extend campus boundaries in students’ minds, but to begin cultivating a lifestyle of service and civic engagement.

C Outreach to students continues in earnest through early September with sign-up sheets and displays at the annual Opportunities Fair.

C By late September a campus-wide World’s Fare hosted by External Programs celebrates the menu of experiential opportunities available to all Messiah students.

C Throughout the fall semester the EpiCenter Coordinator (student information center for off-campus programs) makes presentations in First Year Seminars. Students are encouraged to plan early for incorporating experiential and contextual learning into their four-year plan of study.

C Messiah’s Philadelphia Campus serves as a resource to First Year Seminar faculty coordinating field trips to social and cultural events in Philadelphia that augment course themes and readings. This brief exposure to the urban setting helps plant early seeds in students’ minds about the potential for an urban semester at the Messiah/Temple campus.

C During their first year students are offered the opportunity to enroll in the Career Planning and Decision Making class where they evaluate their personal interests and gifts in light of the range of vocational opportunities. Through this course Career Center staff assist as students create a career portfolio and begin reflecting on a career plan for the next four years and beyond.

C Also available to first year students is the Contextual Learning Network (CLN). Coordinated through the Internship Center, this network links students to early immersion opportunities in the workplace. Information interviews in the first year are followed by a variety of job shadowing and externship options with graduated levels of intensity. These enable students to “test the vocational waters” before enrolling in a full-blown internship toward the end of their college career.
While the above examples illustrate the developmental nature of our conceptual model, we also recognize that students come to us at varied maturity levels and stages of readiness. Any developmental model must thus be flexible and perhaps more circular in nature. This would enable students to enter a program and be accommodated at levels appropriate to their personal needs and development.

Five Key Components of the Model

In addition to being integrative and developmental, the newly constructed model is comprised of five component parts: foundational world view, contextual learning, awareness of self, knowledge of the world, and decision and action (see Figure 1). One might view the components as visually nested inside each other. For each of the five component parts, relevant program strategies, student learning outcomes and assessment plans have been articulated.

![Figure 1. Messiah’s Integrative Developmental Model for Contextual Learning](image-url)
C **Foundational World View:** Basic Beliefs and Assumptions

Recognizing that world view inevitably influences one’s á priori assumptions about the world, and the values and perspectives brought to one’s work (Walsh & Middleton, 1984), we asked ourselves the question: “What distinctives do these programs have by virtue of our identity as a faith-based institution?” For example, do our roots in an historic peace tradition emphasizing justice, peacemaking, reconciliation, and service in any way provide a lens or filter for students’ experiences? One of five core values embraced by the college is that of “service and reconciliation.” In what ways might an urban immersion in Philadelphia, an internship placement with a Fortune 500 company, or a service-learning assignment with Mayan families in Belize be tempered and mediated by our foundational world view?

It would further be hoped that as students move toward the stage of young adulthood, that they will progress in their developmental trajectory toward an Individuative-Reflective Faith (Fowler, 1981). According to Fowler, this stage of faith development is characterized by serious examination of such issues as social responsibility, commitment, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes.

C **Contextual Learning:** Experiential Learning in Authentic Settings

A unique benefit of experiential learning programs is that they are often delivered in a context close to the subject under study. Specifically, for many of our External Programs, learning occurs in contexts similar to
those in which the learning will be used and in which students will work and serve following graduation. Learning here is best viewed as a process; a continuous process grounded in experience. Contextual learning inevitably engages more than just the mind. It is a holistic process. “To learn is not the special province of a single realm of human functioning such as cognition or perception. It involves the integrated functioning of the total organism—thinking, feeling perceiving, and behaving” (Kolb, 1984, p. 31).

How does one maintain quality control and maximize learning in such “real world,” authentic settings? What is the theory that should guide such learning? Boyer (1990, 1994, 1996) has observed that academic scholarship includes four dimensions: discovery, teaching, application, and integration. Contextual learning practices all four of Boyer’s dimensions with particular emphasis on the scholarships of application and integration.

Furthermore, in experiential and contextual learning students are not passive receptacles of knowledge, but create learning actively and uniquely. Their direct experiences, especially in the context of a compelling “presenting problem,” decisively shape understanding (Ewell, 1997).

How might we best prepare and guide students through this learning process? In active learning it is imperative that best practices in experiential education be employed. Special attention is given, for
example, to the “Principles of Best Practice” identified by the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) which include intention, authenticity, planning, clarity, orientation and training, monitoring and assessment, reflection, continuous improvement, evaluation and acknowledgment (NSEE Foundations of Experiential Education, 1998).

C Awareness of Self: Discovering Who I Am

The final three overlapping components relate to specific areas of student growth and development. The first is a growing awareness of self. It has been observed that during the ages of 14-25, growth and exploration typically focus on development of self-concept, formation of values and multiple life roles (Super, 1990). Chickering’s (1977) seven vectors suggest that there is a progression in developing identity, interdependence, vocational purpose and social responsibility.

The most effective learning in off-campus contexts incorporates elements of reflection whereby students come to identify personal gifts and talents. Such programs also tend to involve students in groups and learning communities which include intentional components of self-reflection and reflective group interaction. With time students come to more clearly acknowledge and understand their unique personality traits. Holland (1997) has suggested that each personality type has a corresponding work environment, and that individuals tend to gravitate toward work environments that are congruent with their personality type.
Many External Programs provide evaluation, feedback and reflection around these issues.

It is hoped here that as students immerse themselves in authentic “real world” settings that they will be better able to test their vocational giftedness and calling, as well as gain self-confidence in dealing with new and unfamiliar social settings. Additional student learning outcomes in this area might relate to students’ heightened awareness of their own ethnocentrism, growing ability to separate themselves from what is familiar and comfortable, enhanced skills and self-reliance in navigating complex urban and international environments, increased appreciation for the need to identify with ethnic groups and cultures other than their own, and their abilities to become self-directed learners. By expanding former boundaries of personal and cultural identity, students are typically empowered to tackle new challenges and life goals.

Knowledge of the World: Exploring the World, Its Needs and Opportunities

Contextual learning opportunities not only enhance a student’s awareness of self, but their knowledge of the world. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory is useful here in visualizing the multiple contexts of human development. These contexts or ecological systems might be viewed as concentric circles fanning out from the student to their families, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and cultures. The understanding here is that human development is most adequately understood as embedded in its socio-cultural context(s).
Perhaps the most effective way to appreciate the complexities of life beyond a traditional college campus is to become immersed in the world beyond its gates. The extensive network of programs and partnerships available through External Programs exposes students to a multiplicity of opportunities designed to expand their awareness and knowledge of the world. In many cases, programs include orientation to and discussion of social, religious, political, and economic issues encountered in the learning environment.

Messiah’s programs take students into areas they would not normally encounter and encourage them to meet people they would not normally meet. They study and work in inner cities like Philadelphia and New York, rural areas like Appalachia, international settings like London, Moscow and Nairobi, and interact with people very different from themselves. A further example might be that in a year when 369 Messiah students earned academic credit abroad, 74% did so in non-European settings (“Study Abroad by U.S. Students,” 2000).

A variety of learning objectives emanate from students’ growing knowledge of and structured immersion in “the world.” These include goals that students might develop an increased understanding of and appreciation for cultural traditions significantly different from their own, that they develop a growing awareness of how “personal troubles” might be related to social structures, and that they have a growing ability to appreciate and critically examine their own culture.
Structured and reflective learning aids students in better understanding and responding to needs and opportunities outside their comfort zones. It is hoped that with time, students will develop a heightened sensitivity to the needs of the world, as well as to the social, cultural, political, and historical forces at work in it.

C **Decision and Action:** Clarifying and Acting on a Sense of Vocational Calling, Service, and Social Responsibility

The final component of the integrative, developmental model is Decision and Action. Linking students to off-campus contexts is not primarily for the purpose of résumé building, adventure, or academic tourism. Increased understanding and exposure without consequent action and behavior change is of limited value.

As stated earlier, the overarching goal of External Programs is student learning, growth and development. Chickering (1977) has offered a helpful paradigm in conceptualizing the seven vectors or tasks that are critical to the undergraduate years. In addition to a focus on developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, and establishing identity, these are critical years for developing purpose and developing integrity. In the first case, the student does not simply choose a career so much as seek to integrate and synthesize their educational experiences along with aspects of personal identity and giftedness in charting a life course. In developing integrity, students strive to bring personal actions and decisions in line with their stated values and beliefs.
According to Chickering & Reisser (1993), colleges play a key role in character education through their “catalyzing intellectual, cultural, and social experiences, in fostering principled moral reasoning, in helping students define goodness, truth, and quality, and in encouraging them to actualize their highest ideals” (p. 264). Consistent with this observation, External Programs staff seek to encourage and call students to make decisions that reflect their learning. Programs provide students with appropriate strategies and tools for decision making, and are structured to facilitate the decision making process. Students are encouraged and helped to examine personal values and commitments, to choose an academic major and vocation, and to find faith-based and other supportive communities which will help translate what they learn into life decisions and actions—both while they are in college and throughout their lives.

Student learning outcomes that relate to this component include making decisions that reflect a service ethic; examining vocational “fit” with awareness of self, knowledge of the world, and stewardship of abilities; strengthening one’s sense of personal responsibility to “go back” and “give back” to one’s community, and reflecting critically upon issues of lifestyle and vocation in order to live out faith commitments and foster social responsibility.

To recap here, the desire is to see learning translated into tangible action. It is hoped that as a result of students’ opportunities to volunteer with a local Latino social service agency, to live and serve in an inner-city
Philadelphia neighborhood, or to study at a major European university will help crystalize their sense of vocational purpose. It is also hoped that their learning will result in an active service ethic and a corollary commitment to moral and civic engagement.

It is too soon to tell how useful this integrative, contextual model will prove to be. The model has only recently been completed, and is in many ways still evolving. While our plans for assessing student learning outcomes are still being refined, the paradigm has prodded us to become more intentional, self-reflective and accountable for our work. It has also introduced new levels of continuity and cohesion between parallel programs across our campus. It is our hope that public dialogue and idea sharing will continue among those universities who are moving toward similar comprehensive program models of experiential and contextual learning. Such models reinforce at multiple levels our shared vision to see students become active citizens of the world and persons of high moral and ethical character.
References


