TOWARD A DEVELOPMENTAL PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

I have worked with students at-risk for the greater majority of my career. The term has a number of meanings. Officially, it means they are at-risk of failing, but often the risks are much greater. At one extreme they are at-risk of losing their lives to substance abuse or suicide. Less drastically they are at-risk of making their way through the criminal justice system, being institutionalized or living desperate lives. One thing they had in common was a difficulty in having healthy social interactions especially in moments of conflict. The problem was to address these developmental needs while fulfilling mandated curriculum requirements.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

I had begun working alone. I was aware that many of my colleagues ran programs for students that addressed wellness issues such as preparing and providing healthy food, holding discussions on various topics from drug use to bullying, and having guest speakers come in and talk about the social dynamics of healthy relationships. I also ran similar programs, but it took time out of student academic achievement. One of the often stated goals of having them come to our school was to increase credit accumulation in order that they could catch up to where they should be had they not missed so many classes. The attendance problems of these students were symptoms of more personal issues.

Through informal interviews with students to discover the reasons for their not attending their classes a pattern of responses began to appear. Students would complain about the relationship between themselves and the teacher, themselves and other kids in the class, and/or their relationship with the school administration. The complaints about the teachers often centred on the teachers insistence that they arrive on time, be able to comprehend and complete the assignments, and address them in a respectful tone. Some students complained that teachers did not offer them help when they needed it, and at least one student complained that the classes were not challenging or that the teacher didn’t
bother teaching. The problems with other students often had to do with the fact that they were engaged in some kind of conflict with one or more of the students, often over a boyfriend or girlfriend; sometimes due to bullying, and on many occasions because they were in a lower grade level from having to repeat a course. This latter problem was often addressed at their home school by placing students in a more appropriate class. Problems with administration often arose out of the issues with staff or students, or problems they had with authority of any kind.

I began to see that at the core of all of these issues was an inability to interact in an environment in which there was some form of real or perceived conflict. There was also a more developmentally important challenge to socialization skills because they were unable to reflect on and understand the points of view of others. As a consequence of this a common problem was that our students were challenged by social interactions, were not able to easily adjust to unfamiliar social situations, and did not have the capacity to negotiate respectfully with people who placed demands on them that did not align with their own perspectives on life. My problem was how to work with the students on these issues and get them through the courses they needed to graduate from secondary school. The expectation of increasing credit accumulation and graduation numbers has been identified as the primary goal both by the Ministry and through Board and school improvement plans.

It is necessary to understand that the students in my class are working on individual credits from various disciplines and at various grade levels. I began to develop a complex plan to blend different disciplines in such a way as to meet the curriculum requirements of each course through projects based on a central concept or theme. I called this a “multiple discipline model”. I was pouring through curriculum documents to find places where the concepts of one course were similar to another, or where I might be able to meet the requirements of two or more courses through one assignment. Eventually I looked up “multiple discipline” on line and discovered the work of James Beane (1997) on curriculum integration. Then I discovered the work of Susan Drake (2007) on creating standards-based integrated curriculum. Needless to say, I was ecstatic. Beane’s work was of particular interest as his focus was on the development of social awareness, amongst other things. I now had historical theory to back up my work.

Adding to this was the revelation, at the start of the next school year, that many of my colleagues had identified the same issue as something that needed to be addressed. They had also identified the problem of being able to address these more pressing developmental issues while fulfilling our roles in having students meet the curriculum requirements. My colleagues, like myself, had been working on ways to have the students work as a community of learners. Their solutions were a good deal less complex than mine and did not require fundamental shifts in the pedagogical paradigm. They proposed to put all the students into a course that had the social aspects as a component of the required learning. Not as adventurous, but much simpler to implement. I decided to take on their model while liking very much the implications of mine.
**Process**
The first step was to gain a better awareness of student need. To do this I had students fill out a number of surveys. The multiple intelligence (MI) survey I used was from Jeannie Gibbs and Teri Ushijima’s TRIBES Learning Communities book (2008). The VAK (visual, audio, kinesthetic) Assessment I used was from Karen Hume’s book *Start Where They Are* (2008). I also used an interest survey from Karen Hume’s book. I used these three surveys in order to check the accuracy of each survey by cross referencing the results. When the values given by the MI survey for Linguistic and Musical were high and the value for the Audio modality was high I could be certain of the accuracy of the measures. A similar correlation could be made between Bodily-Kinesthetic and Spatial measures on the MI scale and the Kinesthetic values on the VAK assessment. Interests listed on the interest survey could also be related to different aspects of the other assessments.

I followed the completion of the surveys with a student interview during which I discussed the results of each survey and checked them against the student’s perception of themselves. I could also see from a correlation of the three surveys if the surveys agreed and therefore, if the student had an accurate idea about their own interests and abilities. The conversation with the students in the context of checking the surveys gave a more objective feel to the process and I was able to get much more information. In the past there had been occasions when a savvy student would either offer as little information as possible or provide an entire litany of woes from years gone by. The discussion around the surveys kept the conversation focussed.

In order to build a stronger sense of community I implemented many of the practices from TRIBES. I also amalgamated ideas from Beane with ideas on self-directed learning from Maurice Gibbons (2002). I designed curriculum related activities around a student identify concept, Power and Control, and had them plan and prepare a presentation. Through collaborative negotiation we developed schedules for completion methods for student assessment. As many of the students were not accustomed to being asked to participate in such decision making processes they tended to default to acquiescence and let staff decide. One of the biggest concerns became the necessity of finishing the course within the schedule dictated by the school calendar. As a consequence I found myself pulling ideas from the students and manipulating those ideas to fit with desired goals. The reflective meetings, during which we gathered in a circle in the centre of the room, were most difficult as many of the students had difficulty expressing ideas. This was particularly true of the male students who informed us that they did not like talking about
their feelings in a group or with strangers. The strangers were the guest speakers we had invited in to help generate discussions of feelings.

**Figure 2: Peer and Staff Assessment Tools for Mock Interviews**

Together with a teacher candidate, Jessica Reilly, I developed assessment methods that took into consideration the various modalities of the students. We also wanted the products that were being assessed to allow for success while challenging the knowledge of concepts. I felt fortunate to have a student teacher who had a background in Fine Arts. Many of our students showed strengths in visual and kinesthetic learning modalities. Of
note, then, is the assignment on communication road blocks. The student teacher and I came up with a way for students to delve into their visual acuity by having them think of visual representations of the identified road blocks which they then drew onto white poster board stop signs (Figure 1).

The assessment for understanding (Figure 1) was devised by the student teacher. She prepared statements that pertained to each road block and printed them on coloured paper. There was one colour for each student. Students were expected to place the appropriate statement on the appropriate stop sign. The stop signs were posted around the room. None of the statements were the same so students were not able to compare what other students had placed on the stop signs. Although there were specific places where each statement ought to have gone, students were given the opportunity to argue the reasons for the placement of each statement. They were given points for well-reasoned arguments. So it was that they had a bi-level test that involved communication, but that did not feel like a test. It engaged their visual sense with the colours and their kinesthetic sense as they had to move around the room to complete the task.

We developed peer assessment measures (Figure 2) that were used in combination with staff assessments to calculate marks. I was initially concerned about whether the students would assess their peers with a bias – either toward a fellow student or against someone they may have had an issue with. There was no need for concern. Students made fair assessments within the criteria given and the marks achieved for each student were consistent with the numbers derived through other assessment methods.

I also developed reflective assessments (Figures 3) designed to test listening and communication skills coming out of the various sessions with guest speakers. Students were given criteria ahead of time so that they were aware of what would be expected during and after the presentations. The quality of reflection was prevalent through any and all of the learning processes as it is known to be most effective in consolidating learning.

We have two groups of students. There is a morning and afternoon group. I did not use the same teaching techniques with the afternoon students. The method I used in the afternoon was similar to the method I had been using prior to the recognized need for change. Students came in, were given booklets to work out of and assistance was provided when needed. No formal lessons or group activities were used with the afternoon students. As the afternoon students and the morning students had similar social characteristics the afternoon group was used as a control group to determine if the intervention had any effect. There were seven students involved in the group activity class in the morning and five students in the afternoon.

**Events and Results**

Through the use of three surveys and the follow up interview I was able to determine that the information from the surveys was accurate. The relaxed quality of the interview and the focus on student interests developed a rapport between me and each student. I am usually quite good at developing a good rapport with my students, but found that the
interview process decreased the time for that relationship to develop. Knowing where each student’s strengths and challenges were also allowed me more ready access to ideas on how to communicate course concepts when students came across difficulties in class.

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**Reflective Assessment**

**Name:**

**Date:**

Identify three main issues from the discussion:

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Which of the issues discussed had most meaning for you?

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What was it about that issue that meant the most to you?

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Make relationships between the discussion and the theme of power and control:

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<tr>
<th>Topic from Conversation</th>
<th>Issue of power and control</th>
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Where do you see these same issues occurring within your community? (2 – 4 examples)

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We began each day with a community circle which either involved discussion about what students had been up to or some activity which got them moving and talking with each other. We found that after such activities students were more able to concentrate on getting work done either in the group assignments or on their individual courses. Through activities such as tossing a ball or stuffed toy around and having to call out the name of the person to whom you were tossing, students got to know each other and were more willing to work in their groups. There was an increased level of social cohesion and communal identity.

One student in particular, who had been unwilling to talk with anyone other than myself and the E.A., began to discover his voice when working on the Power and Control presentation. His two partners both had their strengths. One was very artistic and was able to draw their ideas in colourful representations. The other had a neat sense of humour. Neither was taking the assignment too seriously. They had come up with a name for their group, part of a group building activity that was based on some kind of food. The student I am writing about seemed uncomfortable. I coaxed him to find out what was wrong. Finally
he blurted out: “It’s kinda dumb. It has nothing to do with the topic.” None of his partners was offended. They knew the truth and were not going to argue with it. The boy then took over the lead when before he had been content to sit back and just take some credit.

The final assignment of the Power and Control issue was a presentation on someone with power. We thought that this might be a difficult sell. We had divided the topics into sections: the life of the person, the work the person did and what others thought of the person. The students decided who would do what in each group. The structure ensured that if anyone failed to complete their research or did not show up on the day of the presentation then the others would be able to continue and get graded. One of the girls in one group was very protective of her team mates. She wanted to know if they would lose marks if anyone of them did not do their part. We were able to praise her for her loyalty and her courage in speaking up for her group. It was a side of her we had not seen.

When it came to the presentations one member of each group of three was absent. The two remaining members each presented their bits. We watched some students who would have otherwise skipped out on presentation day get up and do the best that they could. Their classmates evaluated them on clarity of speech, amount of eye contact, and the knowledge that they presented. As mentioned, their assessments coincided with those of staff. The one boy I spoke of before had been terrified of standing up in front of everyone to speak, but he did an excellent job. He did ask if they would have to do any more presentations and was relieved to hear me say no. He was not happy later to learn of the mock interviews, which I explained were not presentations. He was ready for them and showed improvement on all of the points of evaluation that coincided with the presentation.

Another notable change was in another boy who had been a student with us for some time. He was prone to keeping to himself and not really talking at all. His participation in the community circle and group activities was the least it could possibly be. When asked a question about a specific topic he would often use his right to pass or simply claim: “I got nothing”. This boy, though, started to linger. He would hang around when class was over and talk about various things. He talked about what was going on in his life and some of the plans he had for the future. He wasn’t willing to share things in class, but he seemed to come out of himself all the same and talk with the people he trusted.

We had invited two guests in to talk about relationships and conflict. One guest used a community circle and introduced issues for discussion. This was the style in which the boys found it most difficult. As a consequence the conversation became concentrated on issues with which girls related most. Often this was problems that they had with boys. Efforts were made by our guests to introduce a wider variety of issues but they were there for a limited time and the boys required more patience and coaxing than that time would allow. The other guest used an activity based model followed by reflections on how the activities introduced certain feelings into the group dynamic. One activity was drawing a robot. Each member of a group took a turn adding a part and if the pencil left the page then the turn was over. The discussion afterward was about the kinds of expectations we all had going in about what a robot looked like. We also talked about the kinds of things people did to try to
influence others, even though we were not allowed to talk: hums and haws, grimacing, or keeping that pencil down and drawing for a very long time. (That was my tactic).

Both of the guests spoke to us about how happy they were to see us involved. They noted that often the teacher is busy marking, or sometimes exits the room. I thought it would be more effective if the staff were also a part of the play and, more so, of the conversations. It was possible for me to introduce thoughts and opinions that might connect with the students. I was also able to model expected behaviour by talking about my own feelings and reactions without giving too much of myself away. In a myriad of converging factors this one was very important.

CONCLUSIONS AND STEPS FOR THE FUTURE

In comparison with the afternoon students the morning kids were much more involved in their work. For one thing we had changed expectations. As noted, prior to these changes the expectation was to come in and work independently on courses and get individual assistance as needed. There was no real sense of a class or group expectation. Each student worked on her or his own. They did not have to deal with the dynamics of possible conflict nor did they have the opportunity to make connections with people they might otherwise never have known. That was fine if all that was wanted was an increase in credit accumulation, but it didn’t entirely work. The students in the afternoon had no real connection to the space other than as a place to go, if they were so inclined, in order to finish off high school. They had not been motivated to do that initially which is what had brought them to us. By the end of the semester we had one of the five afternoon students attending on a daily basis. The others came in sporadically or stopped coming in at all. Of the morning students only one stopped coming in at all and this, we knew, was due to issues outside of the school. We could not discover what motivated the afternoon kids not to come.

In addition to doing well on the group course eighty-six percent of the students in the morning were also able to acquire their individual credits. Of the afternoon students only sixty percent were able to complete credits. There may have been other reasons for this discrepancy, such as family or other external social and behavioural issues, but the engagement level of the morning group was much greater. From this it is possible to conclude that involving the students in the kind of social interaction we included in the morning resulted in a greater potential for credit accumulation.

The initial problem of practice as defined was one of a developmental nature. The students, in general, that come to our program, have not developed particular social skills. As noted, this observation was not unique to my situation but had been noticed at other sites within our school. The students challenges with having healthy interactions with others, particularly with people in authority who may put undesired expectations on them or with people with whom they might not agree was not directly addressed. What we did discover, though, was that these students began to be more willing to share information and seek assistance in an environment in which they felt it was safe to do so. They were also more willing to put extra work into something in which they felt themselves to have some
controlling involvement - as with the student and peer assessments, and in the idea that the structures for assignments and assessments were coming from them. We saw an increase in the confidence of students to speak up and have an opinion when they knew their opinions would have an effect on the work.

More time and effort was needed to develop structures that allowed for greater student voice in the development of assessment tools. There was still some lack in their capacity to analyse expectations for required learning enough to make decisions about how to demonstrate that the learning had indeed occurred. Out of this it was possible to see that they required some creative training in how to extrapolate from the curriculum documents what was needed to prove that knowledge had been attained. I wondered if the technical aspects of performing the curriculum mapping would be better used as an introduction to the overall expectations and then teach them how to plan for learning experiences by having them teach something familiar to them. The process would then continue by having them learn something simple in order to teach it to someone, most likely something right out of the course. The final step would be to revisit the associated curriculum, already in the back of their minds, and apply the learning plan knowledge to the creation of their own ways of demonstrating that they had learned the course material.

This process is motivated from a very different pedagogical perspective. Even though we are using the curriculum material and it is going to be learned it is being used as an anchor for a completely different learning process. Traditionally the concentration of time would be on having the students perform tasks specific to gaining an understanding of the curriculum. Any personal development would be additional, but not the primary focus of the course. Through this process our primary concern is the development of the students themselves. We are working to have them gain a deep understanding of how to structure their learning which, it is hoped, will transfer into other things they might need or desire to learn. To do this we must teach them how to reflect on their strengths and challenges and how to shift concepts presented in one modality into one that they find more accessible. This is what I see as the challenge ahead for my continuing work on improving my practice and the learning process for these kids: to find a way to a more developmental paradigm.

REFERENCES


**Biographical Note:**

Sam Oh Neill has been working in and studying education and learning for twenty years. He has taught in a number of school boards across Canada and also in South Korea. He has a Masters of Education from the University of Western Ontario and recently began doctoral work through UWO. He currently teaches secondary school students in an Alternative school setting.