

Advanced Practicum: Final Paper

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Student affairs professionals have many fundamental approaches to choose from when developing pedagogy for working with students. Often, we hear the terms “student affairs”, “student services”, “student personnel”, “student learning”, and “student development”. While each provides guidance for how to best work with students, my experience over the past two years has led me to believe in the approach of student development. Especially in my practicum experience as the Homecoming advisor, the term “student development” is a more comprehensive approach than the others. The following argument provides evidence for this approach and examples of how I have used “student development” as a guide for working with students.

Student Development as a Fundamental Approach

According to the authors of many of the articles read in this course this semester, student learning is the primary fundamental approach for working with students. However, I feel that many of these authors, in their explanations, offer evidence into why student development may be the best approach. For example, Ellen J. Langer said, “The key to this new way of teaching is based on an appreciation of both the conditional, or context-dependent, nature of the world and the value of uncertainty” (p.15). Simply teaching and allowing students to learn specific content does not teach them to be prepared for “context-dependent” situations or navigate through the uncertainties of life.

Langer also states that simply teaching content and forcing students to ingest this content leads to mindlessness. As educators, we must teach students *how* to learn, and how to question reality as they know it. Langer says, “When we drill ourselves in a certain skill so that it becomes second nature, does this lead to performing the skill mindlessly?” (p.13). This idea is

emphasized by Hooks in his discussion of the idea of “engaged pedagogy”. He says, “Engaged pedagogy emphasizes well-being” (p.15). My interpretation of this statement is that by engaging students in learning, we are promoting their overall development as human beings.

Paulo Freire, in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues similarly in the following statement: “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.” (p. 83) In student affairs, I have come to see this to be true in my work with students. It is my job to not just teach students content, but to teach them how to exist in an ever-changing world. In college, through various experiences, students should develop the capacity to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and try to understand how the world changes.

This semester, in working with the Homecoming committee and the university at-large, I found student development to be the fundamental ideology that I used to guide my practice. I began to see this opportunity for students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the community to get involved in a collaborative celebration so that we could learn from each other and grow. While the entire WIU community came together to celebrate our common interest in WIU, this opportunity was also one for many individuals to develop and understanding of the world around them.

Contextual Issues

One of the major contextual issues I can see in using student development as a guiding ideology is the emphasis on student learning in higher education. I agree that learning is one of the primary goals of education, but I believe that student development is more than learning and encompasses so much more growth. Learning course content is merely one aspect of student

development in the college setting. I believe that many professors may not be fully understanding of this notion. We know that many students enter college to get an education and become prepared for their future careers. This being said, learning is the primary goal for these students. However, as student affairs professionals, we understand the importance of encouraging students to think critically and develop as an individual. Therefore, we employ certain practices that will allow them to do so in and out of the classroom.

Another contextual issue that may argue against a student development approach to student affairs is the “tasky” side of many of our positions. Most of us have specific obligations and tasks to fulfill in order to provide to students, including budget management, schedule development, payroll, organization, etc. These tasks must be completed in order to continue our jobs, however, they can often be seen as far from developmental. An more appropriate title for these tasks might be student affairs or student services. In this sense, we are providing certain services to students, but they may not help students develop intellectually.

Strategies Used in My Practicum Experience

Throughout my practicum experience as the Homecoming advisor, I employed a student development approach in various ways with students. Both Freire and Hooks mention the importance of student learning as well as professional learning within ourselves. In many cases, I learned a lot from the mistakes I made and “experiments” I tried in employing this method. For instance, as Hooks says, “Sideways learning...makes us receptive to changes in an ongoing situation” (p.23). I was able to use sideways learning in multiple scenarios, but specifically in a meeting with a member of a student organization that was not satisfied with the way an event was run. Not having much experience working with this student before, nor working with this type of student group, I used great caution in what I said and did. I was able to teach her some of

the procedures of holding an event like this, but she also taught me how to handle a heavy conflict. We were able to navigate the situation together.

Ellen Langer also mentions the importance of not getting stuck in the conventional. With such a traditional event, it is easy to get caught up in the way things have always been done, but it was very important for the homecoming committee to recognize ways that the event could be improved and changed to be more enjoyable and efficient for others. For instance, students questioned the “chalking” that was done for the parade, and developed a more efficient way of marking the parade staging route with traffic cones. They also had multiple meetings to discuss the theme selection for 2010 and weighed the pros and cons of keeping a theme similar to past years. Eventually, they decided it to be in the best interests of the WIU community to create a more spirited theme.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of student development that I keep close to mind in all of my work is the development of students as professionals and competent adults. Freire says, “Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object intermediates with the cognitive actors” (p.79). For all of the committee members involved, especially the Homecoming chairperson, the methods in which they communicated with one another, with myself, and questioned past decisions, they saw every aspect of their positions as a learning, growing experience. In our one-on-one meetings, I made a specific effort to talk to these students about how their experiences related to real life, and what they were learning from the experience. In the end, each student was challenged, but learned so much from their experience that helped them develop as an individual.

Conclusion

I agree with many members of the higher education community in the notion that student learning is a primary goal of college. However, as a student affairs professional, I believe college allows students the opportunity to develop so many more skills outside of their academic experience. It is my opinion that student development is much more comprehensive than student learning, but still includes student learning. Student learning is merely one component of the skills and knowledge gained by students in the college experience and it is my job to make sure students are equipped with many life skills upon graduation.

References

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