TACKLING THE FYE CHALLENGE

Using Developmental Theory and Pop Culture to Engage First Year Students

Ann Carlson, Research Analyst
Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education
Western Washington University
Bellingham, WA 98225
360-650-2345
Ann.Carlson@wwu.edu

Karen Casto, Associate Director
Center for Instructional Innovation
Western Washington University
Bellingham, WA 98225
360-650-4943
Karen.Casto@wwu.edu
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Ill-structured Problem-Based Learning for First-year Students

Problem based learning prepares students to think critically and analytically, and to find and use appropriate learning resources.
— Barbara Duch, University of Delaware Problem Based Learning web

What is Problem-based learning, and why use it in the classroom?

Problem based learning helps students develop strategies for solving problems, and helps them build a base of knowledge relating to a discipline. It places the students actively in the center of their own learning environment by giving them ill-structured real-world problems to solve. This helps increase students’ intellectual development.

What is an Ill-structured problem?

- Ill-structured problems are complex and messy and based on real-world scenarios
- They are problems about which disciplinary experts disagree
- They are problems for which there is no “correct” answer

Examples: Existence of Sasquatch, criminal recidivism, chemical additives to food, environmental issues, poverty.

Especially for First Year students:

- Choose problems that are interesting—based on something in popular culture.
- It is better to select problems that students might not be strongly attached to one side or the other, because we advise getting their opinions and then assigning them to research and make an argument for—the other side. If they have strong personal and/or ethical beliefs it is more difficult to get them to consider the other side.
- Find a field trip opportunity associated with your problem, such as visiting a local site where this issue is being studied. Or choose your problem based on what is going on in the community around the university.

How do instructors and students interact when problem-based learning is used?

“Problem-based learning begins with the introduction of an ill-structured problem on which all learning centers. Teachers assume the role of cognitive and metacognitive coach rather than knowledge-holder and disseminator; students assume the role of active problem-solvers, decision-makers, and meaning-makers rather than passive listeners.”

— Illinois Center for Problem-based Learning, 2002
http://www.imsa.edu/team/cpbl/cpbl.html
Especially for First Year students:

- Entering first-year students – as dualistic learners – are more used to being passive rather than active learners, and viewing the teacher as the “authority” with all the right answers. They are not, at first, anyway, active learners and problem-solvers. This means that first-year students require more structure and sequencing in their assignments than do continuing students.
- Be sure that students are actively supported throughout the inquiry process that takes place during problem-based learning, and maintain good connections with them, so that when problems arise you are there to help your students solve them.
- In our experience students also need guidance with the difficult process of learning how to ask questions. They also often have trouble narrowing down and refining research topics: Good library support is essential for this piece.
- Expect “discomfort.” Moving students out of their dualistic comfort zone and challenging them to more complex, relativistic ways of thinking and knowing can make them very uncomfortable. Perry (1970) compares this phase of intellectual development to the Fall in the book of Genesis. This fall, though, is less about banishment and more about minds falling slowly open. The lesson? Don’t move them too fast. If you do, you risk making them so uncomfortable you lose them altogether.
- For more information on what we’ve learned, see What We Know about Western FIG Students on page 10.
The Perry Scheme of Intellectual Development & Entering College Students

The Perry model reflects the critical intertwining of cognitive and affective perspectives at the heart of a college education—a difficult journey toward more complex forms of thought about the world, one’s discipline/area of study, and one’s self.” (Moore, 2002, p. 19)

According to the scheme originally developed by William Perry in 1970 (and widely replicated and refined since then), students journey through nine stages of intellectual and ethical development. The stages are grouped in four categories: Dualism, Multiplicity, Contextual Relativism, and Commitment Within Relativism:

- **Dualism (Positions 1 – 2)**
  - There are right/wrong answers; students are recipients of knowledge given by “Authorities.” Truths are black and white.
  - **1. Basic Dualism:**
    All problems are solvable; No tolerance for different points of view;
  - **2. Full Dualism:**
    Different perspectives and beliefs acknowledged, but are either right or wrong.

- **Multiplicity (Positions 3 – 4)**
  - There are conflicting answers; knowledge is subjective. There are now three categories: Right, Wrong and Not Yet Known.
  - **3. Early Multiplicity:**
    There are two kinds of problems: those whose solutions we know, those whose solutions we don't know yet, but will know in the future (we may never know for sure; what’s important is one’s own thinking);
  - **4. Late Multiplicity:**
    Everyone has a right to their own opinion, all opinions are equal. There is no, one right answer. Learning from peers more valued (although this position can be uncomfortable for learners).
Contextual Relativism (5 and up)
Movement from Position 4 to 5 represents a shift from a dualistic view of the world to a world that is relativistic and context-bound with some right/wrong exceptions. Knowing requires recognizing points of view, including one's own.

Commitment Within Relativism (Positions 5 – 9)
Development shifts from intellectual to ethical, and includes the identification and clarification of commitments or “considered choices,” after experiencing doubt, reflection and having a range of legitimate alternatives.

References
Supporting the Development of Reflective Judgment (Critical Thinking) in Undergraduate Students

1. Show respect for students; assumptions, regardless of the developmental stage(s) they exhibit. Their assumptions are genuine and sincere reflections of their ways of making meaning, and are steps in a developmental progression. If students perceive disrespect of lack of emotional support, they may be less willing to engage in challenging discussions or to take the intellectual and personal risks required for development.

2. Discuss controversial, ill-structured issues with students throughout their educations activities, and make available resources that show the factual basis and lines of reasoning for several perspectives.

3. Create many opportunities for students to analyze others’ points of view for evidentiary adequacy and to develop and defend the own points of view about controversial issues.

4. Teach students strategies for systematically gathering data, assessing the relevance of the data, evaluating data sources, and making interpretive judgments based on the available data.

5. Give students frequent feedback, and provide both cognitive and emotional support for their efforts.

6. Help students explicitly address issues of uncertainty in judgment making and examine their assumptions about knowledge and how it is gained.

7. Encourage students to practice their reasoning skills in many settings, from other classes to their practicum sites, student organizations, residence hall councils, and elsewhere, to gain practice and confidence applying their thinking skills (p. 25).

References
The First-year Interest Group Seminar at
Western Washington University

Seminar Description

The seminar, Perspectives on Learning, gives first-year students a chance to focus on two overarching questions: Where is my place in this academic culture? And, How might I learn best while I am here? The overall goal of the seminar is to provide a learning community context and an intellectual framework that enables first-year students to enter into the academic culture of the university by focusing on their own learning.

Objectives

In an effort to engage students in this intellectual learning community, the seminar has three primary objectives:

1. To provide learners with an understanding of the critical relationship between self-reflection and self-assessment in developing educational goals and achieving success in college;
2. To provide cross-disciplinary opportunities that enable learners to compare how different disciplines construct knowledge and conduct inquiry;
3. To enhance a set of competencies, i.e. setting goals, framing questions, reading critically, evaluating information, and working collaboratively.

Assumptions

1. To learn effectively, students need to feel a sense of confidence in their ability to do college-level work and to gain competencies.
2. To learn effectively, students need a space and a culture that enables them to reflect on their own learning.
3. To learn deeply, students need to make connections between their learning in the classroom and their lived experiences and to make connections with each other.
4. To chart an educational plan for intended achievements, students need to find out where they are intellectually and personally coming into college including becoming aware of their motives for coming, preferred learning styles, expectations, strengths, and needs.
Learning Outcomes

There are four learning outcomes for the FIG Seminar, and they can be assessed by a myriad of measures:

1. Demonstrate **how to develop a personal vision in the context of the University’s mission/vision** and to understand the implications of that vision for personal development. **Sample assessment measure:** *Introductory Reflection and Reflective Essay* (in final Portfolio).

2. Demonstrate **a foundational understanding of disciplinary perspectives and how they connect with each other and across the liberal arts.** **Sample assessment measure:** *Inquiry Project.*

3. Demonstrate an **ability to be an active learner.** **Sample assessment measure:** Analysis/evaluation of discipline-based readings.

4. Demonstrate an **understanding of group processes** as needed to achieve common goals. **Sample assessment measure:** *Group Presentation or Demonstration.*
What We Know About Western FIG Students¹…

- *They want clear expectations clear and explicit goals.* Entering first-year students, especially, need to know what is expected of them, as well as what they are expected to get out of the learning experience. For examples, students in the FIG two years ago were unclear when they enrolled that the cluster that they’d be in contained two large lecture courses, not three small classes. The fact that their FIG experience did not match their expectation made it difficult for them to value some of the learning they did get. Also, students must be made partners with their facilitators in understanding the goals and learning outcomes of the FIG.

- *They don’t want college work to look “just like high school.”* Active, collaborative learning can be very uncomfortable at first to beginning first-year students. For one, they equate group work with high school and tend to discount its value in college (especially at a traditional university like ours, where large lecture courses are more the norm). They also have some difficulty transitioning from the role of passive learner to someone who asks questions and generally participates in class. Second, because they see knowledge as something that is spoon-fed to them by “Authorities,” they do not – at first – see learning from their peers as real and meaningful. Nevertheless, every year both group work and learning from peers have emerged as strong themes when FIG students talk about their learning.

- *First-year students don’t know what they don’t know.* Meaning, we can’t assume they’ll “get it” by the end of the quarter. Indeed, our data indicates that some of them don’t, seeing the Seminar as fairly useless, except for making friends. National data, however, indicates that it isn’t until later in their college career students have matured enough intellectually to be able to understand the part the FIG may/may not have played in their own learning.

- *They want to be intellectually challenged.* While student satisfaction data is fairly high in regard to the FIG Seminar, students do indicate at end-of-the-quarter surveys they didn’t perceive it as particularly academically challenging for them. Part of this may be that they do not see such “process” assignments as understanding their own learning or a group inquiry project as “real” as the content learning they get in their large lecture courses. It is our challenge, then, to design a Seminar experience that both helps them understand themselves better as learners and meets their expectations of what college-level academic work should be.

Bibliography


Illinois Center for Problem-based Learning, 2002
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Logic of Life FIG seminar website, with link to PDF version of paper discussing results from research study of Logic of Life students (available from announcements page).
http://pandora.cii.wwu.edu/casto/


Messages from the Jungle FIG seminar website
http://pandora.cii.wwu.edu/messages/

University of Delaware Problem based Learning Center
http://www.udel.edu/pbl/