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A Framework of Contextualized Teaching and Learning: Assisting Developmental Education Instructors

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Abstract: Contextualization in Developmental Education (DE) classrooms is often recommended but underutilized. The Framework of Contextualized Teaching and Learning is based upon existing research and theory in the field. It will help instructors create contextualized lessons and provide researchers a framework for categorizing studies on contextualization.

Introduction

For decades, developmental education and adult basic education literature have called for more contextualization of lessons in the classroom (Perin, 2011). However, in our experience of developmental reading classrooms, the system-wide implementation of contextualized teaching methods is relatively nonexistent. In fact, Williams (2010) states there is “a heavy focus on decontextualized reading skills” in most classrooms that serve students of low literacy levels (p. 36). This is a problem because decontextualized instruction can be demotivating and hinder transfer of learning (Grubb, 1999; Perin, 2011; Williams, 2010). In our current political environment in which standardization of instruction is prized, mechanizing classroom practices is becoming more prevalent. Therefore, instructors who wish to implement contextualized lessons in their classrooms often do not find the support necessary to do so. With this tension in mind, we developed a framework of contextualized teaching and learning to assist instructors in the creation of contextualized lessons and provide researchers a framework for categorizing studies on contextualized instruction.

In this paper we will describe how we developed the framework for contextualized teaching and learning, provide an overview of why we believe contextualization is important, provide examples of using contextualization in the developmental education classroom, and discuss the implications of contextualized teaching and learning in adult education.

Origins of the Framework

Our purpose in reviewing the literature on contextualization in adult basic and developmental instruction was to determine whether the research supported our belief that contextualized instruction was more effective than decontextualized instruction. Although researchers conceptualized contextualization in different ways, we found that most of the studies fit into a four-quadrant framework that we called, the Framework of Contextualized Teaching and Learning. Although there was some contradiction in the literature, generally contextualization was found to be more effective.

Before we published the literature review and the Framework, Perin (2011) published a review of the contextualization literature. We revisited our literature review and the Framework in 2012 through new lenses by asking the questions: Does the Framework fit Perin’s literature review? And, is this Framework useful? Our answer to both questions was yes. We are current and former teachers and researchers of developmental reading and writing and adult basic education. We saw that the Framework distills the information presented in the literature reviews in a more accessible format for both instructors and researchers. Drawing on our personal experiences as instructors we were able to develop and include activities involving contextualization from practice in the Framework. For us, including tried and tested activities from practice added to the functionality of the Framework in the field.

The Importance of Contextualization

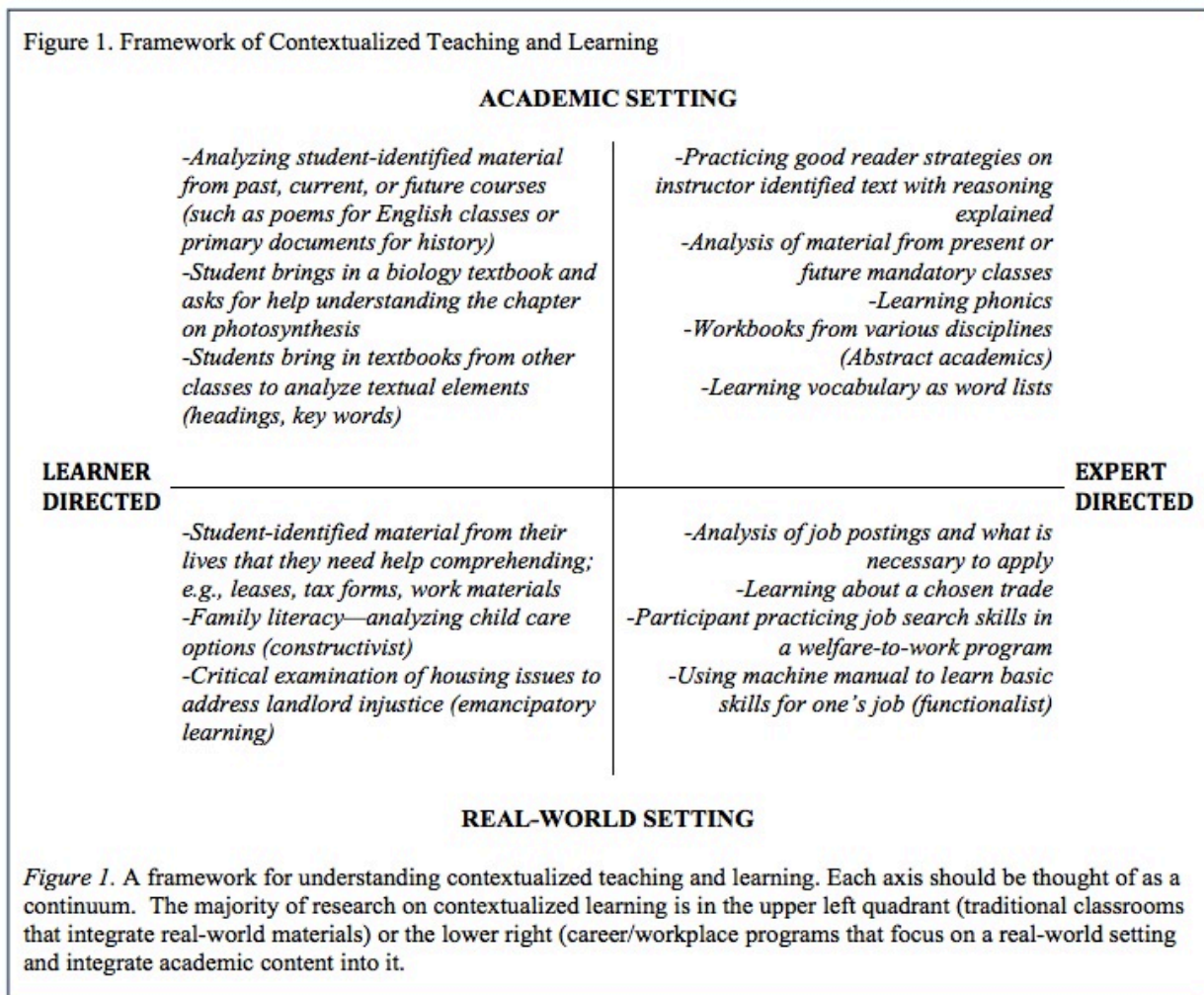
The Framework of Contextualized Teaching and Learning that we are presenting is based upon existing research and theory in the field of developmental and adult basic education. There are multiple definitions and implementations of contextualization (Baker, Hope, & Karandjeff, 2009; Perin, 2011). Some of these definitions include describing contextualized instruction as the use of real-world materials and activities (Beder & Medina, 2001; Jacobson, Degener, & Purcell-Gates, 2003); using critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity on these materials/in these activities (Beder & Medina); connecting the knowledge to its multiple applications in students’ lives (Berns & Erickson, 2001); and learning by doing (Mazezeo, Rab, & Alssid, 2003). Adult education motivational theorist Wlodkowski (2008) stated, “Adults by social definition, economic need, and institutional expectation are responsible people who seek to enhance their lives through learning that develops their competence. The usefulness of what is learned generally is a greater influence on adults’ motivation to learn that its intellectual value” (pp. 97–98). Therefore, the more new material is contextualized and the students can see its importance and utility, the greater the motivation to learn it. Based on a review of the research, Perin (2011) asserted that students’ experiences were more valued in contextualized classrooms, which made the learning more valuable to the learners. She also stated that contextualization “has the potential to promote short-term academic achievement and longer-term college advancement of low-skilled students” (35). However, how can instructors incorporate contextualization into the classroom?

In our experiences, we have seen various levels of commitment to and knowledge of contextualization in the classroom and have been given differing amounts of freedom as to how much contextualization we can incorporate into our instruction. Based on those experiences, we felt a model displaying types of contextualized teaching and learning would enable instructors to see and utilize research on contextualization. It is our contention that the model we have developed will be useful to instructors in their classrooms when wondering how to implement contextualized instruction. The patterns in the kinds of learning that the research identified as contextualized are illustrated in the

Framework and assists instructors in quickly seeing themes and methods of contextualization. We have found it to be useful in our own practice.

Model Elements

The Framework of Contextualized Teaching and Learning as shown in Figure 1 includes four quadrants on two axes. The y-axis represents a continuum from academic setting to real-world setting. The x-axis represents a continuum of learner directed to expert directed instruction. We envision instructors using the Framework to reflect upon their current practice. They can identify which of their lessons are contextualized already by asking themselves where the lessons fit on the Framework. (Does this connect to the real world in which my students live? To the academic world? Am I making this explicit in the lesson?) If a particular lesson does not fit in a quadrant, the instructor will want to evaluate why the lesson is not already contextualized and discern the purpose of the lesson. If the instructor decides the lesson can and should be contextualized, she can include connections to the real world or academic settings so that the lesson does fit in a quadrant. (How can I change it so that it fits the Framework?)



Moving clockwise around the model, in the upper right-hand quadrant the instructor chooses the instructional materials and method and applies them in a variety of academic contexts. The majority of current instruction falls into this category because of the use of standardized curriculum that is generalized for a broad audience. Although the material may be decontextualized, the instructor's role is to show students how these texts and skills will be important in their future academic lives. For example, if students must take standard core curriculum classes after completing developmental education classes, developmental instructors can pull from the types of material the students will be likely to encounter in their future academic careers. This could include biology texts or poems from English literature. Students can then use these texts to practice reading strategies and simultaneously become familiar with text structure and vocabulary in that field.

Similarly, the lower right quadrant includes instructor-identified content, but it is pulled from a real-world context. These texts and lessons are drawn from materials that the instructor decides are relevant to the learners' lives outside of the classroom. The instructor's role is to decide what content is relevant for a group of students and relate the content to the skills and knowledge being learned. For example, students might have the opportunity to decipher instructor-gathered tax documents, utility bills, or workplace materials.

In contrast, the lower left quadrant asks students to identify real-world material relevant to their lives and with which they would like assistance. The instructor's role is to make connections between the materials of interest to the students and related skills and knowledge that are the focus of instruction. For example, students could identify websites that provide information on topics of interest, ask for assistance crafting a resume for a specific job, or bring in a lease to unpack the legal language before signing it. Instructors would then guide the students in connecting new information to schema and show students how the skills they are learning may be useful in other contexts.

Finally, the upper left quadrant, also directed by students, includes academic text that they need or want to become more familiar with in order to succeed in an academic setting. The instructor's role is to show how skills learned in developmental or basic education relate to what they are learning in their other academic courses. For example, the student might bring in an essay from a sociology class they are taking concurrently, or the student may want to work on writing a thesis statement when this was covered in a class he/she took previously. Instructors make explicit the reading and writing skills the student is learning and using and helps the student see how those skills can be useful in other contexts.

The utilization of the Framework in the design of lessons for the classroom may enable instructors to create experiences to which students can better connect the new information to their lives. It may also help instructors to better understand the purposes of their lessons, rather than simply teaching a lesson because it is next in a workbook or because another instructor does it.

Hopefully, the Framework will create an environment of depth and meaning on the parts of the students and instructors.

Implications for Adult Education

In a collegiate system where educators are seeing increasing numbers of underprepared students (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Boylan, 2009; Perin, 2011) and feeling the political pressures of standardization reforms, we feel there is a need for instructor tools that enable instructors to make their instruction more relatable for the students. The Framework of Contextualized Teaching and Learning ties together theory and practice of contextualized learning with examples of classroom application that instructors can use to make their lessons more effective. A consistent assumption in adult education is the effectiveness of relating instructional content to learners' interests and experiences, in keeping with motivation (Wlodkowski, 2008) and adult learning theory (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006). It is our hope that this Framework will inspire adult educators, particularly developmental instructors, to become more purposeful in their lesson creation, relating content with learner's needs and experiences. We have learned from our own classroom practice, the more we can contextualize and assist our students in contextualizing new information, the more motivated, dynamic, and connected our students are to the material and the class. In addition, the Framework provides researchers with a way to synthesize research that has been done on contextualization and enables them to use it as a springboard for future research in this area. As developmental education and adult basic education programs face increasing pressure to transition students to higher education, vocational and technical education, and the workforce (Boylan, 2009; Boylan & Bonham, 2007; MacArthur, Konold, Glutting, & Alamprese, 2010), we are excited by the potential role contextualized instruction can play in that process and charge adult educators to continue to consider such important classroom strategies.

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