

Early Field Experience: One Approach to Contextual Teaching and Learning

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Dr. Wanda L. Stitt-Gohdes
The University of Georgia

Transfer of knowledge has long been an issue as students move from the classroom to the workplace. For years many educators believed that simply because students studied and learned something in class, they would be able to apply it later in a meaningful way at their place of employment. Even a brief perusal of training and development programs in business and industry and the amount of funds allocated to such programs indicates the likelihood that significant transfer does not occur. Indeed, transfer is only successful when the learner recognizes similarities in context between what is being learned and where it will be applied.

We do know that students' understanding of a particular topic depends on what they already know about the topic. This means educators at every level must realize knowledge is not static but is dynamic and is transformed over time. "The creation of learning communities thus depends on a dynamic combination of engagement, imagination, and alignment to make this interplay between the local and the global an engine of new learning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 228).

Two years ago a group of faculty from the College of Education at The University of Georgia received a contract from the U.S. Department of Education to develop a preservice teacher education model of excellence which centers around contextual teaching and learning (CTL). The major components of CTL include experiential, real- world experiences in the home, community, and workplace settings that connect prior and ongoing experiences deliberately—as opposed to incidentally—to problem solving, higher order thinking skills, collaboration, sensitivity to issues of equity and diversity, and reflection.

Learning to identify and solve problems in multiple contexts—various situations in which learners find themselves—can enhance our ability to apply our current understandings to new contexts (transfer of learning) and/or to generate new understandings in the same context (development of knowledge). Not only is the concept of learning in context important for secondary school students, it is also critical for preservice teacher education students. For these future educators, the view of knowledge as both process and product or outcome means that the end product (education) is as much dependent on the process and context of learning as it is on the content to be learned.

Thus, the dilemma is many preservice teacher education models only place students in schools—the context in which they will ultimately work—during their student teaching experience—at the end of their college education. Several years ago, The University of Georgia began to require early field experiences of our business education students. Students spend a year in middle and high school classrooms prior to their student teaching experience, providing multiple opportunities for these preservice candidates. First, they are able to experience actual school settings—the context in which they have said they want to work—and work with practicing

teachers. Second, as they experience both the middle and high school levels, it can be helpful in deciding at which level they may ultimately choose to teach. Third, as the placements must be in different school districts, they also experience diverse student populations. Finally, this early exposure helps affirm—or sometimes negate—their decision to become a business education teacher.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the reflections of these early field experience students in business education as a school-based element of CTL. Specifically, students were asked to reflect on the following as they related to the school and students they observed this semester:

1. Describe the extent to which you saw students really involved in critical thinking and problem solving. Problem-based learning is an instructional approach that uses real-world problems as a context for students to learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and to acquire knowledge of the essential concepts of a course. Were these situations contrived or connected in some way to the world outside of school?

2. What effort/opportunity did you observe where a specific connection was made between what was learned in class and how that may be used outside of class? Work-based learning is an instructional approach in which students use the context of the workplace to learn content of school-based courses and how that content is used in the workplace.

3. To what extent did you see “authentic instruction” being modeled? Authentic instruction fosters thinking and problem solving skills that are important in out-of-school settings. It is instruction that allows students to learn in meaningful contexts.

4. Finally, how have these observations helped you identify problems and solutions regarding effective instruction? Have you recognized a need to connect school-based learning with work-based learning? How might you make that connection with your students when you become a classroom teacher?

Conceptual Base

Contextual teaching enables learning in which students employ their academic understandings and abilities in many in- and out-of-school contexts to solve simulated or real-world problems. This construct of CTL has sweeping ramifications. It should influence and guide the design of teacher preparation programs. Also, while increased student achievement is critical, some might suggest the ultimate goal of school is graduates who are able to learn and solve problems in a variety of complex *contexts* throughout their lifetime, no small task! One may conclude, then, that **contextual learning** occurs when students apply and experience what is being taught referencing real problems associated with their roles and responsibilities as family members, citizens, students, and workers.

Characteristics of CTL “include teaching and learning that is problem-based; fosters self-regulated learning; occurs in multiple settings or contexts; anchors teaching and learning in students’ diverse life contexts; uses teams or interdependent group structures so students can

learn from each other; views learning as situated, social, and distributed; and employs multiple methods for assessing student achievement” (Sears & Hersh, 1999, p. 5).

Findings and Conclusions

Twenty business education students were enrolled in early field experience spring semester 2000; nine were in middle schools and eleven were in high schools. This was the second semester of field experience for all these students.

The students were first asked to describe the extent to which they saw students really involved in critical thinking and problem solving. They were also asked to determine if the situations were contrived or connected in some way with the world outside of school. Most of these students did see problem solving as a key part of the learning process as was a connection with the “outside” world. Perhaps the best example was reported from an observation in a Banking and Finance class where each student opened a checking account at the “class bank” by completing the application for a checking account. They “earned” their checking account money by being on time for class, being prepared in class, turning assignments in on time. Conversely, they were charged for expenses such as rent on their space in class, fees for checks they used, charges for items they borrowed in class, and charges for not being prepared in class. Of course they were also required to balance their checkbook and reconcile their bank statements. An additional task required they figure out if they had enough “money” to make it from one “pay period” to the next—well grounded in a life after high school!

Many students reported evidence of critical thinking and problem solving in spreadsheet classes. Students in these classes were being asked to design spreadsheets to manage and report data for a fictitious company. One field experience student engaged his high school students in a fictional activity where they planned their Grandmother’s birthday party. Their “budget” was \$100, and they used a spreadsheet program to manage their money. In this way, they not only learned how to use a spreadsheet, but they also learned about budgeting money. This also provided a non-business yet real-world connection with classroom learning. Another example, in a database class, was where the students were given a scenario where the “company” they worked for was having a hard time keeping track of their employee records. The assignment was to develop a database to manage employee records—an excellent problem-solving situation as well as one connected to the world of work. Another field experience student reported on her experience in a Website Design class where students had to develop a Website and were faced with time deadlines, specific guidelines, and a prescribed set of tools to work with. This experience mirrored those they may encounter later after they leave high school.

Middle school students in a Money Management class had to develop a personal budget, balance their checkbook, and learn about the stock market. Students in a computer technology class worked with students in family and consumer sciences to develop a wedding invitation for a mock wedding. They incorporated problem solving and cooperative learning in this situation—one many will be involved in later in life!

Unfortunately, five of the field experience students felt there was little or no evidence of critical thinking, problem solving, or connection with the world outside of school in the activities they observed. Typically they reported much lecture, much rote memorization, with no

opportunity for problem solving or critical thinking. This quote from a field experience student perhaps reflects the tenor of responses, “I cannot possibly tell you the number of times I heard the students say, “Why do we have to do this?””

Next students were asked to relate those opportunities where a specific connection was made between what was learned in class and how that may be used outside of class. This quote from one paper, exemplified the best cases: “ [my teacher] constantly reinforced the concepts she taught in class with connections to the real world. Students clearly understood how they could use the knowledge and skills learned in Mrs. X’s Career Connections class in the real world.” In this class students learned how to complete job applications, write resumes, and develop reference lists. Guest speakers were invited to reinforce what students had already learned. Another field experience student reported on a High School Survey class where the students produced a news broadcast. Every decision regarding the newscast was made by the students. They also learned to meet deadlines, problem solve, work cooperatively, and think and plan ahead. Another observed students, many of whom held part-time jobs, learn about computing payroll, including hourly wages, overtime, and holiday pay. In a lesson on Excel, a field experience student was teaching a lesson on budgeting. One student had already developed his own budget based on what he’d learned in the class. The field experience student congratulated the student and provided further encouragement by allowing the student to use the budget he’d developed and extend it by calculating how much he would need to save to restore an old pickup truck!

In a work-based class, a field experience student saw how the classroom teacher discussed with her students world events and work-related events from the previous week. As students told their stories, the teacher made a deliberate connection between the workplace and what they could learn from their experiences. In other classes students observed business education students developing Websites, learning the importance of one’s character, learning fundamental consumer skills such as balancing a checkbook and writing appropriate business letters. Others observed guest speakers in classes talking about their everyday lives in the business community and how closely related classroom learning is to needed work-based skills.

Again, unfortunately, some students saw no evidence of a connection between in-class learning and out-of-class needs. For example, one field experience student observed an English teacher who was attempting to help students learn new words by developing sentences using the vocabulary words. No mention was made, however, of the lifelong value of a wide and varied vocabulary. Again, frequent, simple reproduction of textbook documents occurred in keyboarding classes with little or no explanation or reason why the work was required nor what might be learned from the drill. Several students reported no obvious or specific connection being made to the world of work. Admittedly, these students were in middle schools; however, students even at this level need to know the *why* of what they are doing. It provides a *connectedness* to something beyond rote memorization and reproduction, a context in which the learning fits.

Next, students were asked the extent to which they saw “authentic instruction” being modeled. Authentic instruction fosters thinking and problem solving skills important in out-of-school settings. One field experience student wrote, “Authentic instruction is a main focus of

instruction at XX High School. The teachers there believe that students learn better when they actually do what they are being taught.” Students in these classes actually apply what they are taught. In a Banking and Finance class, one student observed the use of rubrics, providing clear expectations, similar to performance evaluations in the workplace. In an Excel class, a field experience student observed an assignment dealing with interest rates and payment calculation. As part of the assignment, students could choose the kind of car or type of home they wanted to “purchase” to determine what the monthly payment would be. This led to a discussion regarding interest rates and the effect of good or bad credit on the interest rate a bank may offer a patron—exactly the kind of experience they will definitely encounter later in life.

In a Career Connections class, the field experience student witnessed student evaluation of five fictitious interview scenarios. Students looked for appropriate interview behavior, punctuality, dress, and manners. Two students reported a similar practice where at the start of class the teacher would write a question on the board which students had to answer in their journals. They were required to think critically to answer the question; they could also work cooperatively with classmates to find the answer. In other classes, field experience students saw teachers use everyday, real-world examples to connect school-based learning with work-based needs. In a middle school, one field experience student wrote, “Authentic instruction was used quite effectively The students that obtained skills in the keyboarding classes that I observed will be able to use those same skills in other classes to write papers and create documents in an effective and efficient manner for other classes and in other situations that could occur at the home or at a job.” And when this teacher was asked why they needed to know how to type, she consistently provided a variety of situations where this skill would be need, such as finding a job.

Again, there were other schools where little or no authentic instruction was observed. One field experience student reported no evidence of higher-order thinking or problem-solving strategies. Another student said she never saw the classroom teacher teach the students; she simply told them where they could find their assignments on the Internet. And yet another field experience student wrote, “None of the teachers tried to show the students how important learning things are for the real world. They never told the kids that math will help them with checking accounts, taxes, and sales at stores. No connection was made to tell students about this helping in the real world.” Another student wrote, “The world outside of the school was not brought into the classroom.”

Finally, students were asked how their observations helped identify problems and solutions regarding effective instruction and how they, as future teachers, would help their students connect school-based learning with work-based learning. Consistently, field experience students reported the benefits of their observations. These statements from students’ papers best express these sentiments.

- “Seeing both sides of the coin has allowed me to see how beneficial contextual learning can be. It also allowed me to see what I hated about school, doing things for no reasons. There is a direct need in bringing classroom learning and work-based learning together. The main key is to remember that every little thing that we learn is involved in the real world.”

- “After these observations I realize that students need so much more than a textbook and teacher. Students need to touch, smell, hear, taste, and see in order to learn. Also, I now know that it’s imperative that students know why what they are learning is important and how they’ll use it later in life.”
- As I was thinking about these questions, I remembered when I was in school and how I would often wonder if I was ever going to use what I learned in school outside of class. My teachers never did explain the connection between school and work. Students will learn best if they know how they will use materials outside school.”

Consistently, field experience students reported on the need to connect school-based learning with needed work-based skills. Some observed this connection as a motivating factor. Others saw the connection as a way to make discussions more meaningful and interesting.

Two students identified problems regarding effective instruction and posed plausible solutions. One student stated, “Another problem I saw was spare time and extra time in the classroom. It is imperative that students are kept occupied, and not with busy work. This free time is also a good way to bring in the outside world.” Another student, hesitant to criticize a teacher, was really disturbed at rarely ever seeing the classroom teacher “lecture or teach a topic, rather she would tell the students what to work on at the start of each period. It seems hard to incorporate CTL into the classroom if no actual interaction with the students takes place. She would circle the room and answer questions, but no actual discussion ever took place when I was present.”

Most University students observed high school and middle school students involved in critical thinking and problem solving, much of which was directly connected to the world outside of school. These preservice candidates were able to determine that most teachers they observed made a concerted effort to connect learning in class with work outside of class. Fewer students observed authentic instruction being modeled, and most reported being disturbed at that finding. In these situations, students were more likely to follow instructions, eliminating the need or opportunity to think critically and problem solve what needed to be done and how it should be done. Finally, all the students’ papers reviewed indicate the extraordinary usefulness of these early field experiences in seeing the need to contextualize classroom learning, to connect school-based learning with work-based learning. It also gave them opportunities to think about how they might approach teaching various business education subject differently from the teachers whom they have observed.

One may conclude when these students enter the methods and curriculum classes and ultimately move from the periphery to the center of instruction, they will be better prepared to understand and demonstrate the connection between school-based learning and work-based learning.

Implications and Recommendations

The experiences reported by this group of early field experience students provided an

insight into the context of their future work. They saw real problems, some of which were solved and others which were not. Many saw dedicated teachers consistently connecting classroom work with future contexts for middle and high school learners. Perhaps more importantly for preservice teacher education programs, the observation may be made that early involvement with schools and school children is an integral piece of their preparation. Not only does it get them actively involved in schools prior to student teaching, but it also provides a real context where they may apply that which they already know and are able to do.

Based on these findings, the inclusion of extensive early field experiences in business education preservice programs is strongly recommended. These early field experiences provide a context where these candidates may observe the extent to which current business education teachers make a specific connection between school-based learning and work-based learning. This is borne out by one of the comments in student's papers. "To just simply assign the students to create a spreadsheet is not enough. It's important to remind them how they could use this to balance a checkbook, keep up with attendance, or record inventory. If they knew their jobs just might depend on these skills one day, more attention might be paid to what they are learning." And finally, "Students have the right to know why they have to learn something."

References

Sears, S.J. & Hersh, S. (1999). *Preparing teachers to use contextual teaching and learning strategies to enhance student success in and beyond school*. Sponsored by USDOE/OVAE and The National School-to-Work Office.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

<http://www.tadda.wsu.edu/avera/The> University of Georgia
The University of Georgia
Department of Occupational Studies

EOCS 4360/6360: Instructional Strategies in Occupational Studies
Spring Semester 2001
Dr. Wanda L. Stitt-Gohdes, Associate Professor
225 River's Crossing
Office phone: 706-542-4078; department phone: 706-542-1682
E-mail: WLSG@arches.uga.edu

Course Overview

The purpose of this course is to give the prospective teacher of business and office, marketing, technology, and family and consumer science subjects the specific background and experiences required to succeed as a student teacher and finally as a successful professional educator.

This course includes an evaluation of teaching materials, methods, and variety of teaching and learning strategies.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Demonstrate the correct principles, methods, and techniques involved in teaching occupational education by developing and submitting lesson plans for topics taught in your program area and by demonstrating in class your ability to present the material included in those lesson plans.
2. Apply the teaching-learning principles into practical experience through micro-teaching sessions.
3. Demonstrate your ability to teach both traditional and hands-on subject matter.
4. Develop such personal characteristics such as cleanliness, appropriate attire, good manners, and the use of good judgment as demonstrated in the practicum experience.
5. Understand the critical need to value diversity in your classroom and in your role as a professional educator.

Textbook

A course packet is available at Bel Jean on Broad Street.

Grading/Assessment Procedure

The following serve as the basis for evaluation for the course.

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| 1. Teaching demonstrations | | 35% |
| 2, 20-minute demonstrations | 15% each | |
| Review of teaching demonstrations | 5% | |

2. Lesson plans for both teaching demonstrations @ 10% each 20%

3. Examination 10%

4. Application of Business Education Conference (for Spring semester students) 13%

On Friday and Saturday, February 2 & 3, the 38th annual Southeastern Business Education Conference will be held at the Georgia Center for Continuing Education here on campus. In lieu of class on Friday, January 12, you are required to attend at least three sessions offered. For this assignment, you will write a paper that (1) documents which sessions you attended, (2) your opinion of the value and/or applicability of the topic, and (3) how you might see the topic being included in a class which you may teach in the future.

5. Critical Issue Paper 10%

This is an opportunity for you to select that issue which you think most affects education today. It need not necessarily be an issue peculiar to your program area. Your choice must be supported by some documented evidence, e.g., reported research. Once you have stated your critical issue and provided support for its selection, recommend what you deem to be an appropriate solution/remedy. Explain your solution/remedy.

6. Bulletin Board plan 2%

7. Contextualizing your Work as a Teacher 10%

Your student teaching assignment may be in a very different setting from your previous middle and high school experiences. You know the students' environments external to the classroom affect what goes on in the classroom. For this assignment, you need to investigate the community in which you will do your student teaching: the demographics, the socio-economic levels and issues, business/industry base and employment opportunities/rates, and community support.

Based on your findings which must be included in your report, you will then develop two mini units of study for a subject you will teach that incorporates your findings and helps you and your future students see the connection between school, work, and community. For example, if you are teaching a Nutrition class and are in a setting with a high population of low socio-economic individuals, you may have your class develop menus that are both sound nutritionally as well as economic. Or, if you are teaching a Word Processing or Computer Technology class in a school with a high drop-out rate but low unemployment rate, you may have your class invite prospective employers to talk about employment opportunities and the need and value of staying in school.

A = 90 - 100%

B = 80 - 89%

C = 70 - 79%

D = 60 - 69%

F = 59% and less

Tentative Class Schedule
Spring Semester 2001

Week 1

Monday, January 8 Introduction; Learning About Learning video; Philosophies of Education

Wednesday, January 10 Principles of Learning; Barsh Learning Style

Friday, January 12 No scheduled class; time made up with attending Business Ed. Conference

Week 2

Monday, January 15 Holiday!

Wednesday, January 17 Multiple intelligences; Learning about students & meeting their needs
Due: Critical issue paper

Friday, January 19 Developing objectives and lesson plans; approaches to instruction

Week 3

Monday, January 22 Approaches to instruction; cooperative learning

Wednesday, January 24 Teaching demonstrations: Rooms 139 & 135

Friday, January 26 Teaching demonstrations: Rooms 139 & 135

Week 4

Monday, January 29 Teaching demonstrations: Rooms 139 & 135
Due: Contextual teaching & learning paper

Wednesday, January 31 “Keeping Control of the Class” & “Managing Student Conflict”

Friday, February 2 Teaching demonstrations: Rooms 139 & 143

Week 5

Monday, February 5 Teaching demonstrations: Rooms 139 & 143

Wednesday, February 7 Teaching demonstrations: Rooms 139 & 143
Due: Bulletin board design

Friday, February 9 Final examination
Due: Business education conference paper and review of teaching demos

To: Spring Semester Field Experience Students
From: Wanda L. Stitt-Gohdes
Date: April 16, 2001
Subject: Final Assignment

The topic for your final assignment for this semester is included in this memo. For those who were enrolled in field experience last fall, this will be a familiar assignment for you. And, yes, it is intentional that the same assignment is required this term. I am involved in developing a report on your experiences and the extent to which they are similar or different over time and in different school settings. For those who are new to field experience this semester, I am hopeful it will cause you to reflect on the complete experience you observed this semester. What follows provides some background information that should be helpful in understanding the assignment. Please read it carefully.

Several faculty in our department, including me, and from other departments in the College of Education are involved in a contextual teaching and learning (CTL) contract with the U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of the contract is to develop a preservice teacher education model of excellence. The major components of CTL include experiential, real world experience in the home, community, and workplace settings that connect prior and ongoing experiences deliberately—as opposed to incidentally—to problem solving, higher order thinking skills, collaboration, sensitivity to issues of equity and diversity, and reflection.

A key element of this model is learning in context. One prominent author says this about the nature of learning from a contextual view: “The creation of learning communities thus depends on a dynamic combination of engagement, imagination, and alignment to make this interplay between the local and the global an engine of new learning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 28). A key word here is dynamic which implies that learning, and thus knowledge, is not static but rather is transformed over time and by experience.

Learning to identify and solve problems in multiple contexts—various situations in which you have found yourselves this semester—can enhance our ability to apply our current understandings to new contexts (transfer of learning) and/or to generate new understandings in the same context (development of knowledge). Probably this semester you have, consciously or not, identified problems in the classrooms where you are observing. For future educators such as yourselves, this view of knowledge as both process and product or outcome means that the end product (education) is as much dependent on the process of learning as it is on the content to be learned. To understand most fully, then, students not only need to learn what to do but to understand why they are doing it. Further, students learn not only by participating in contexts provided by teachers—here at UGA—but also by creating their own contexts for producing, testing, generating,

applying, and transferring knowledge. You've probably been doing some of these things throughout your observations.

So, one may ask, What is the role of the school from a contextual viewpoint? As you well know, learning takes place in a variety of situations; however, schools have been instituted for this specific purpose. From a contextual perspective, the school represents a formalized setting for learning but not the only site for all learning. From a CTL perspective, it has as its primary purpose in a democratic society to create the conditions for maximizing the development of citizens who will become effective participants in the larger society. Other desirable outcomes are that our youth will be prepared to participate fully as adults and that learners will be stimulated to remain curious about life, the world, and its people.

Given all this background, you perhaps may be aware that through these early field experiences you have been participating in a school-based aspect of CTL! For the final assignment for the field experience credit, you are to prepare a paper which includes your reflections on the following as they pertain to the school/s and students you have observed this semester:

1. Describe the extent to which you saw students really involved in critical thinking and problem solving. Problem-based learning is an instructional approach that uses real-world problems as a context for students to learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and to acquire knowledge of the essential concepts of a course. Were these situations contrived or connected in some way to the world outside of school?

2. What effort/opportunity did you observe where a specific connection was made between what was learned in class and how that may be used outside of class? Work-based learning is an instructional approach in which students use the context of the workplace to learn content of school-based courses and how that content is used in the workplace.

3. To what extent did you see "authentic instruction" being modeled? Authentic instruction fosters thinking and problem solving skills that are important in out-of-school settings. It is instruction that allows students to learn in meaningful contexts.

4. Finally, how have these observations helped you identify problems and solutions regarding effective instruction? Have you recognized a need to connect school-based learning with work-based learning? How might you make that connection with your students when you become a classroom teacher?

Your paper must be keyboarded and double spaced and state the name of the school you are observing, indicating if it is a middle school or a high school. Please respond to the above questions by number. Your papers are **due Tuesday, May 1, 2001**. Please call, 542-4078, or e-mail, WLSG@arches.uga.edu, if you have questions.