

## A Conceptual Approach to Teaching College Student Development Theory

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Student development persists as a primary outcome of higher education. Thus, student development theory (SDT) remains core to professional preparation in student affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; CAHEP, 2021; CAS, 2021; Torres et al., 2019). While retaining field-level importance, student development theories and concepts continue to expand as minoritized student populations become better represented in the canon (Jones & Stewart, 2016; Patton et al., 2016). Additionally, scholars use third-wave approaches that interrogate development using critical and poststructural paradigms to produce new questions on what counts as development (Jones & Stewart; Lange & Duran, 2021). These forces have created a large body of literature with complex theoretical explanations of students' learning and development. Below, we discuss the necessity of pivoting to new instructional strategies to capture the broad swath of research on college student development. Then, we discuss our re-envisioned SDT curriculum that reduces dependence on centralized SDT authorities and eliminates textbook costs. We hope this brief inspires others to orient themselves differently to teaching the next generation of higher education professionals.

Our individual and collective ways of teaching these concepts must adapt as student development retains its field-level importance. Recently, scholars have proposed new ways of categorizing SDT scholarship. Jones and Stewart (2016) organized student development theories into three waves, focusing on these studies' populations, paradigmatic and disciplinary influences, and purposes. Expanding on this work, Abes and colleagues (2019) organized student development through key theoretical constructs instead of focusing on specific theories. They convincingly argue that while particular theories may resonate more or less over time, core constructs like dissonance, agency, and context endure as essential components of learning and development (Abes et al., 2019). With this emerging scholarship in mind, we turn to our approach to teaching SDT to master's students.

### Taking a Concept-Based Approach

We have taught SDT together at the University of Iowa, where the HESA master's program requires two semesters of student development classes. Historically, these classes were divided by cognitive/moral/spiritual theories (fall semester) and psychosocial/identity theories (spring semester) and taught by two separate faculty. In 2017, Linley took over teaching responsibilities for both courses and engaged Lange in re-envisioning the SDT curriculum. Inspired by Abes and colleagues (2019), we structured the fall course around student development concepts. We did this for several reasons. First, we noticed that, even as we incorporated more third-wave perspectives into the curriculum, students still referred to theories primarily by their author (e.g., Perry, Baxter Magolda), implying reliance on first- and second-wave theories more than third-wave ones. Second, by centering authors instead of core constructs, our SDT curriculum was *theorist*-focused rather than *theory*-focused.

Student development concepts like dissonance, authority-dependence, and context can be considered different tools in one's SDT toolkit. In this way, our approach de-centers particular theorists with famous SDT legacies while teaching students how to apply concepts in practice.

We sat with various SDT texts (e.g., Abes et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2016) and determined which concepts we would teach in the course. We developed three units: Contexts of Development (sense of belonging, developmental ecology, intersectionality/systems of power); Cognitive Growth (authority-dependence, dissonance, reflection); and Developing a Sense of Self (identity exploration, identity salience). In the revised version of the course taught by Linley, Irwin, and Stroup, each unit ends with a class session focused solely on applying cumulative theoretical understandings to practice. We have included a course overview in Table 1.

With this concept-based approach, we engage students in cross-wave thinking. As one example, in our developmental ecology week, we explore the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), ecological systems (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Linley et al., 2018), and critical understandings of context (Duran & Jones, 2019). Rather than one author or model taking precedence, we provide students various approaches to unpack and analyze the idea of context during class time. We first begin class by asking students where theory has been in their life since the class last met. We then engage students in an experiential activity concerning the zone of proximal development, emphasizing how the concept works. Following this, we offer a brief lecture on ecological systems and engage students in discussion. After a break, we ask the students about the utility of the different theories, how they might apply across functional areas, and how larger societal contexts might affect student development (keeping an eye toward the intersectionality unit coming the following week). This format creates a robust class session where students do not feel tied to recognizing particular theory stages in practice but can instead consider how they can use developmental tools across work contexts.

**Table 1**  
*Course overview*

<b>Week</b>	<b>Key Concept</b>
1	Course Overview & Introductions
2	History of Student Development Theorizing College Students
<b>The Contexts of Student Development</b>	
3	Sense of Belonging
4	Developmental Ecology
5	Intersectionality & Systems of Power
6	Applying Theories of Context to Practice
<b>Cognitive Growth</b>	
7	Authority-Dependence
8	Provoking and Using Dissonance
9	The Art of Reflection
10	Applying Cognitive Theories to Practice
<b>Developing a Sense of Self</b>	
11	No Class – Conference
12	Exploring and Committing to Identities
13	Identity Salience
14	Applying Identity Development Concepts to Practice
15	Semester Review

This organizational change to our course has several advantages. First, we do not require students to buy textbooks, eliminating an anticipated cost. Second, we engage students in high-level discussions of student learning through different kinds of assignments and course discussions. Students write short papers on recognizing these constructs in their everyday work and reflect weekly on the applicability of course concepts. Third, while still assigning select chapters from *Student Development in College* (Patton et al., 2016) and other texts, we de-center the high authority these texts have in shaping students' sense of what counts as SDT. Teaching in this format, we find that students' approaches to SDT center on developing tools rather than a laundry list of person(s) who identified such concepts. More importantly, because of this approach, students can better use and articulate theory-based tools and rationales in their practitioner roles.

### **Coda**

Educators are powerful socialization agents, and our efforts to teach SDT should evolve as theory evolves. The approach presented here is *one* way to conceptualize an SDT course, not *the* way. We offer our process for re-envisioning master's-level SDT courses to explicitly center student development processes and concepts. By centering concepts and processes of student development, instead of theorists with famous legacies, we argue that future practitioners will better apply theory to practice as they facilitate student growth and development.

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