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VALUES CLARIFICATION

Getting some clarity about ideas is at the heart of conceptual learning. Figuring out what we really do believe can have a powerful effect on our lives. We can tap a deep wellspring of energy and motivation when we, then, align our values with our beliefs and behaviors. Suddenly, everything makes more sense. We have more focus. When students are unsure about a major, for example, everything's fluid. Their possibilities seem wide open. That can be a plus but it can also take a toll. Without some direction, some clarity of purpose, it may be easier for them to drift and harder for them to find the energy to persevere and do well when they really are in exploration mode. As a result, attrition for students who are undecided about their majors in college remains higher than those who have declared a major and have been inducted into a particular academic sub-culture of like-minded people with more of a structured set of coursework and expectations.

For example, in *Savage Dreams* Rebecca Solnit (1994) references her deep concerns about the health of the environment while describing her involvement in demonstrations against nuclear weapons testing in the Nevada desert in the early 1990's. "*This was the place where the end of the world had been rehearsed since 1951, and it was my third spring at the camp. We were living closer to nuclear war than anyone but its technicians and its victims, which should have been devastating, but we were doing something about it, which was heartening* (15)." Here we can see the clarity of her beliefs and the alignment with her values. Solnit was adamantly opposed to any continued testing of nuclear weapons and, therefore, motivated to take some action as a political protest with others, no matter the danger due to their proximity to the testing site.

One model for thinking about our values reflects a hierarchy of clarification, commitment and action (e.g., Simon et al, 1972), building from a very egocentric (self-based) reference on level one to one that emanates from deeply held "universal ethical principles" on level six. From top to bottom these levels read as follows:

- Level 6: Act repeatedly and consistently
- Level 5: Act on your values
- Level 4: Prize (affirm) your values publicly
- Level 3: Prize your value choices
- Level 2: Choose from alternatives after considering the consequences
- Level 1: Choose your values freely

Choosing freely and from alternatives after weighing consequences

At the first stage of values clarification, we need to be able to choose freely from the options we have in front of us; all the more reason to be clear in our thinking. For example, peer pressure can be fierce on students. How do they react when everyone else wants to do something and they don't? Or in class, when we ask a question and no one wants to respond, can students freely cross that collective inertia of their peers and speak up or ask a question? How do students think about work and career possibilities? If their parents are pressing for one set of choices, how free are they to consider alternatives? Do they think through the consequences of these possibilities? Clarifying their ideas, beliefs and values should underlie their future sense of integrity, their ultimate choice of a meaningful career. If they decide to major in English because they love to read, for example, will their opportunities for future work be limited or enhanced?

On every campus there are staff members who can help students with these decisions. They can help uncover deeper interests, analyze present strengths and provide an overview of various career options. Students can tap into these resources. They can always go back for more advice later and change direction. Indeed, most students do change their majors several times as they take different courses and get exposed to new content and career possibilities. That's one of the biggest advantages of being on a campus with a variety of disciplines.

These kinds of choices raise very real worries for students, however. Instead of ignoring those anxieties, they—and we—can use this model to clarify their thinking and explore deeper concerns on their way toward a better alignment of values, beliefs and behaviors. Remember that this kind of values reflection is a lifelong process involving all areas of life, from work to play, from the personal to the public.

Prizing values, privately and publicly

Once students have thought through feelings and beliefs and made some decisions, they can then move up into the next level of the values hierarchy by being able to share their choices with others. It's all part of a clarification process. For example, when their friends are pressing them to go party on a weeknight when their studies have piled up, they can say something about how important it is for them to do well in their studies. They can also learn how to tell their friends that they value their friendship as well and that they'll be willing to play on the weekend but first things first.

Act repeatedly and consistently

At the highest stage of values alignment, students learn to act on what they've said they believe, "practicing what they preach" or "walking their talk" as they say. With a clarified commitment to their education, they can decide to party after they've gotten their studies

done. Their desire to do well in college means that they can organize their free time appropriately, reserving the time needed to study along with the time they also want to set aside for fun and friends. Clarifying all this allows them to explain themselves and unhook from a need to please others, to gain acceptance just by following the crowd. Binge drinkers, for example, so often seem to get trapped in their own insecurities, their desire to belong and to be liked, to test their new freedoms without any forethought. With a clear alignment of their values, however, students can still be moving toward their long term hopes and dreams while “having a life” along the way—that mix of fun, adventure, friendships, family, community, meaningful work and purpose which fuels us all.

Karen Rattenborg describes how she has used this model with students to help them deepen their understanding of their chose field of study and gain greater clarity about their own choices as future professionals: *“Values clarification seems very applicable in the context of my Professional Skills Development class as it relates to career exploration. After all, students in the socially aware discipline of human development and family studies need to have self-awareness of their values in order to lead a life or pursue a career that reflects those values. Yet, it seems that this is not always the case. It can be difficult for today’s traditional-aged college student to articulate his or her values to others. Furthermore, today’s hectic pace can make it challenging for students to take the time to reflect upon what their values might be.*

Therefore, I utilize a worksheet to provide the students with some time for reflection in the context of a class period. Students first complete the worksheet quietly and then verbally share the information with peers. Finally, the students integrate the information from the worksheet into a paper that requires them to interview a professional in the community from a field that is of primary interest to the student as a potential career. The information from the professional is compared and contrasted with the skills, values, and interests identified by the student to confirm whether the student’s potential career is a good fit.

Many students identify this assignment as being very beneficial on their course evaluations. First, being able to identify and articulate their values brings greater clarity to their career exploration process. Second, the idea that a career can (and should!) be a reflection of one’s values is a new concept to some. A career is much more than simply a way to make money. Third, the opportunity to discuss the realities of a career with a professional in the field is a very beneficial way to ensure that the path one is on is truly the best way to achieve one’s goals.”

Values Clarification
SUMMARY OF KEY TERMS

- **Concepts as categories**
- **Complex cognition**
- **Learning by definition and observation**
- **Active learning**
- **Concept formation and analysis**
- **Learning styles**
- **Inductive approaches:**
 - **Collect data**
 - **Organize into groups**
 - **Label groups**
 - **Hypothesize interrelationships**
 - **Test hypotheses**
- **Debriefing**

References

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Solnit, R. (1994) *Savage dreams: A journey into the landscape wars of the American West*. New York: Vintage.