Exemplary Teaching Practices Across Educational Contexts (P-20+): Unifying Principles and an Ecological Model for *Teaching for All to Learn*

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Abstract

This paper highlights that teaching for all to learn is a central theme of exemplary practice across all educational contexts from preschool through graduate school (P-20+). Ten unifying principles will be presented based on this theme. Although these principles are consistent across P-20+ settings, the ways in which these practices are implemented will differ, depending on the context. An ecological model for teaching for all to learn will be developed, presenting a conceptual schema of the components and factors involved in exemplary teaching across all contexts from preschool, special education, elementary, secondary, through all levels of higher education.

Are there similarities of exemplary practice that transcend all teaching contexts? What lessons can be learned from our colleagues who teach at different levels? Can university professors and elementary teachers learn from each other and share a common professional language? The educational professional community is far too often siloed into categories or groups based on a specific level or context of instruction. The vast majority of teaching conferences, journals, workshops, articles and research studies focus almost exclusively on one subject discipline or at one level of instruction. Although there is much to be gained from sharing content expertise with ones' peers, we are limiting our potential when we do not allow ourselves to view exemplary teaching and effective practices through a larger lens and broader perspective across contexts, levels of instruction and subject disciplines.

This paper will illustrate that *teaching for all to learn* is a central theme of exemplary practice across all educational contexts from preschool through graduate school (P-20+). Ten unifying principles will be presented on this theme. Although these principles are consistent across P-20+ settings, the ways in which these practices are implemented will differ depending on the context. An ecological model for *teaching for all to learn* will be developed, presenting a conceptual schema of the components and factors involved in exemplary teaching across all contexts from P-12 through higher education settings.

Defining, Identifying and Assessing Exemplary Teaching

The professional literature has struggled to define, identify and assess exemplary teaching practices. In addition to the term exemplary practice, research and studies have used range of terms including teaching excellence, effective teaching, high quality and best practices. For the purpose of this research, the terms will be used interchangeably.

In the K-12 professional community, critics of No Child Left Behind have argued that we should not be aiming for "highly qualified teachers" as required by the 2001 legislation, but we need "highly effective teachers" (Barnett, Daughtrey & Wieder, 2010). Yet, defining what "highly effective teaching" means is fraught with challenges. In its most basic terms, effective teaching is often assessed if students achieve one grade level in one academic year based on standardized tests. Yet that definition does not take into account the social context in which learning occurs, including the impact of socioeconomics, students' prior learning experiences, English language learners, special needs, and other factors that are out of the direct control of the "effective" teacher. Some have suggested that a "value added" (Olson, 2004; Rothman, 2010) formula be applied that takes these factors into account when determining if teachers are "effective" for terms of contract evaluation, promotion, pay-for-performance or termination.

In higher education, effective teaching, research and service are the three most commonly used criteria for tenure and promotion. However, effective teaching is too frequently based on course evaluations which typically assess "student satisfaction" of the professor and course, rather than focusing on the effectiveness of teaching or whether the learning outcomes were appropriate and achieved. (Angelo, 1996; Astin, 1992; Denson, Loveday & Dalton, 2010; Feldman, 1996, Kahn, 1993; Kreber et al, 2010). In addition to its primary role as an institution for higher learning, higher education is, in fact, a business, and, therefore, it may be important to determine student satisfaction. Students are consumers and can select another college or university if they are not satisfied with their experience (Gruber et al, 2010; Helgesen & Nesset, 2007). Student satisfaction, however, should not be confused with or used instead of assessing effective teaching resulting in effective learning. It has been recommended for over two decades (Angelo, 1996; Astin, 1992; Braskamp & Orly, 1994; Cashin, 1995, 1989; Centra, 1996, 1993; Lowman, 1996) that multiple means of assessment, such as evaluations, review of syllabus and assignments, and classroom observations by colleagues need to be systematically implemented to provide a more robust evaluation of teaching practices in higher education.

What needs to be enhanced, however, is not simply determining effective or exemplary teaching for tenure and promotion, but identifying excellence in teaching for ongoing faculty improvement to ensure student learning. Lowman (1996) concludes that exemplary college teaching involves providing organized interesting presentations and ways to motivate students to meet academic challenges. Kreber (2002) distinguishes between "expert" and "excellent" teachers. Expert teachers are excellent, however, excellent teachers may not be experts. The difference is that expert teachers are motivated to seek out new opportunities to further their understanding of the problem by identifying,

analyzing and solving problems in order to develop even more effective strategies.

In summary, no clear definition of exemplary/excellence in teaching has consistently emerged from the research, rather, characteristics of teaching excellence have been identified. In this paper, exemplary teaching will be defined as teaching in which successful learning (students meeting learning outcomes, student achievement, engagement of students, successful completion of course/program) has occurred and/or has been evaluated as excellent (by students, peers, and/or colleagues through course evaluations, observations and/or portfolios) based on identified criteria.

A Unified Theme and Guiding Principles: Teaching for All to Learn

A preliminary meta-analysis, comparing and contrasting research and studies of exemplary teaching in early childhood education, K-12, special education, higher education and on-line learning was conducted to determine if there was a central theme and patterns of exemplary practice that permeated across all contexts (Ableser, 2011*)*. Vote-counting, coding and forest plotting were used in this initial analysis. Future research will involve a more robust meta-analysis using a fixed effect or quality effect model. The vast majority of research in the past has examined teaching practices within one context or at one educational level, such as elementary education or higher education. The purpose of this research was to analyze teaching practices and the factors impacting such exemplary practices across contexts.

In summary, the research found that exemplary teaching across all contexts/levels involves a high level of content and pedagogical knowledge, skills and professional dispositions. Strong content knowledge and pedagogy is necessary for teaching excellence, however, it is not sufficient. To meet that higher level of exemplary practice, teachers need to have a commitment to all their students, a commitment towards learning and learning outcomes, and towards their students successfully meeting those outcomes. *Teaching for all to learn* is a hallmark of teaching excellence across all levels (P-20+). Based on the research reviewed, the following are ten principles of exemplary teaching which transcend across all contexts/levels. Exemplary teaching practices include:

1. Educational values, beliefs and philosophies that support teaching for all to learn.
2. Focusing on learning that is relevant, purposeful , meaningful and meaning making.
3. Focusing on learning and learning outcomes.
4. Facilitating learning.
5. Learner-centred active engagement by providing a range of techniques and authentic learning opportunities to meet the needs, interests and styles of all learners.
6. Assessing and supporting learners' strengths, interests, needs and learning styles to ensure their success.
7. Demonstrating respect, fairness and care of learners' development and learning to ensure success.
8. Creating a community of learners.
9. Intentional and purposeful curriculum planning.

10. Engaging in reflective practice. (Ableser, 2011)

Comparing Some Examples Across Contexts

Effective teaching is ultimately and primarily centred on effective learning. A teacher is effective if the students master and learn the intended outcomes. Exemplary teachers focus on learning and learning outcomes by having a strong understanding of the content and pedagogical content knowledge. Rather than focusing on what teachers need to teach and how they should teach it; teachers need to subtly shift their paradigm to what it is that students need to learn and how they will best learn it (Biggs & Tang, 2007, Biggs, 1996; McMahon & Thakore ,2006; Tagg 2004). This involves an ongoing cycle of curriculum planning and reflective practice, including establishing learning outcomes based on standards, curriculum, goals and purpose; assessing students' prior knowledge, interests and needs; determining and providing methods and approaches to engage students in their learning, having a clear criteria of evaluation to know whether the learning has been mastered, assessing the learning to determine whether it was mastered, or allowing for additional opportunities for further development.. Biggs (1996) describes this as constructive alignment incorporating learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities (TLAs) and assessments that measure the learning outcomes.

Alignment can be implemented in all settings or levels, yet, how it is applied varies depending on the specific context. For example, in special education settings, students receive Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that outline goals and objectives (learning outcomes). The objectives are frequently broken down and taught in small sequential task analysis steps (TLAs) and then assessed based on criteria to determine whether the objective has been met prior to moving onto the next stage. In higher education, alignment might include providing a detailed syllabus that clearly articulates learning outcomes based on professional standards. Expectations of how to meet the outcomes, with detailed descriptions of all major assignments (TLAS) and evaluation criteria could be included to support the students' mastery and assessment of the learning outcomes.

Exemplary teachers facilitate learning in their classrooms by structuring the learning environment and learning experience, and then stepping back to allow the learner to take the active role in their learning. In an early childhood classrooms, such as a Montessori setting, the role of the teacher involves organizing and structuring the classroom by arranging materials and activities that encourage children to discover and learn independently and to take ownership of their learning (Copple & Bredekamp ,2009, 1997). In an on-line class, this too can be done when a professor uses inquiry and problem-based learning by posing questions, situations or dilemmas and having the learners' research and explore the problem. As King (1993) said of college teaching, we need to move from "sage on the stage to guide on the side". As teachers, we need to focus less of our time on instructional teaching to ensure that more of the time is spent on student learning. All of these methods are in direct contrast to the traditional teacher-centered transmission model where the teacher transmits information through direct instruction or lecturing.

As previously stated, exemplary teaching involves more than content and pedagogical expertise; it requires a commitment to supporting successful learning

for all students. In a special education classroom this is achieved through the development of Individual Education Plans, accommodations, modifications and ongoing support or through the implementation of Universal Design of Learning that promotes equity in access to learning for all students. Differentiated Instruction in K-12 settings focuses on assessing students' interests, needs and learning profiles and providing a range of projects and activities that match these dimensions. In K-12 literacy classrooms, literature circles can be used to motivate and teach students based on their interests or styles. In higher education, learners can be provided with a research problem or question and can have a range of ways to present their results such as through a report, Power Point Presentation or oral presentation.

An Ecological Model for Teaching for All to Learn

A model or schematic map can provide a visual representation and framework for conceptualizing and integrating these principles of exemplary *teaching for all to learn*. Numerous models have previously been developed at the K-12 level or higher education levels (Conrad, Johnson, & Gupta, 2007; Dell'Olio & Donk, 2007; Kember, 1997; Light, Calkins, Luna, & Drane , 2009, Munro, 2005; Seidel & Shavelson, 2007; Rue et al., 2010).

Conrad et al (2007) presents a "Teaching-for-Learning" (TFL) model for a faculty development program. Rue et al (2010) developed an "Evaluating Learning Quality Model ("ELQ/AQA08") to assess quality teaching by focusing on the learning action, the context and settings, the functions and the outcome results. Munro (2005) provides a model for Best Practices in Teaching and Learning that includes a "flow chart" that involves conducting a needs assessment, developing effective feedback systems, engaging in personal reflection, building academic-business partnerships and developing learner profiles. In order to conduct an extensive meta-analysis, Seidel & Shavelson (2007) developed a cognitive model for analyzing effective teaching in K-12. Rue et al (2010), Munro (2007) and Seidel & Shavelson (2007) all stress the importance of "context" in the teaching and learning process. They do not, however, sufficiently differentiate, develop or illustrate the impact of the context in their models.

As previously stated, the central theme and guiding principles of exemplary teaching may be consistent across levels, but what is different is the way in which these principles are implemented. It is not, however, simply the "level of instruction" or the "delivery system", it is the full "context" that impacts the specific practices. This context includes specific student characteristics, classroom environment factors and the larger culture and society context. For example, how a strategy or technique is implemented may be somewhat different, depending on the developmental level, interests, needs, and background of the students. The way in which exemplary practices will be implemented are also dependent on classroom factors such as class size, discipline or subject, grade level, higher education or on-line learning. More global issues, such as political, social and economic factors will also impact teaching practices.

This new model for *teaching for all to learn* integrates exemplary practices across all levels or contexts of teaching and learning. It differentiates between three contextual levels, the larger societal/global context, the classroom context

and the context of the actual student/learners. In the research reviewed, numerous qualities of the effective "teacher/professor" were listed and described but were not organized or categorized in any specific manner. This new model groups teacher characteristics into four categories; skills, knowledge, dispositions and values/beliefs/philosophies.

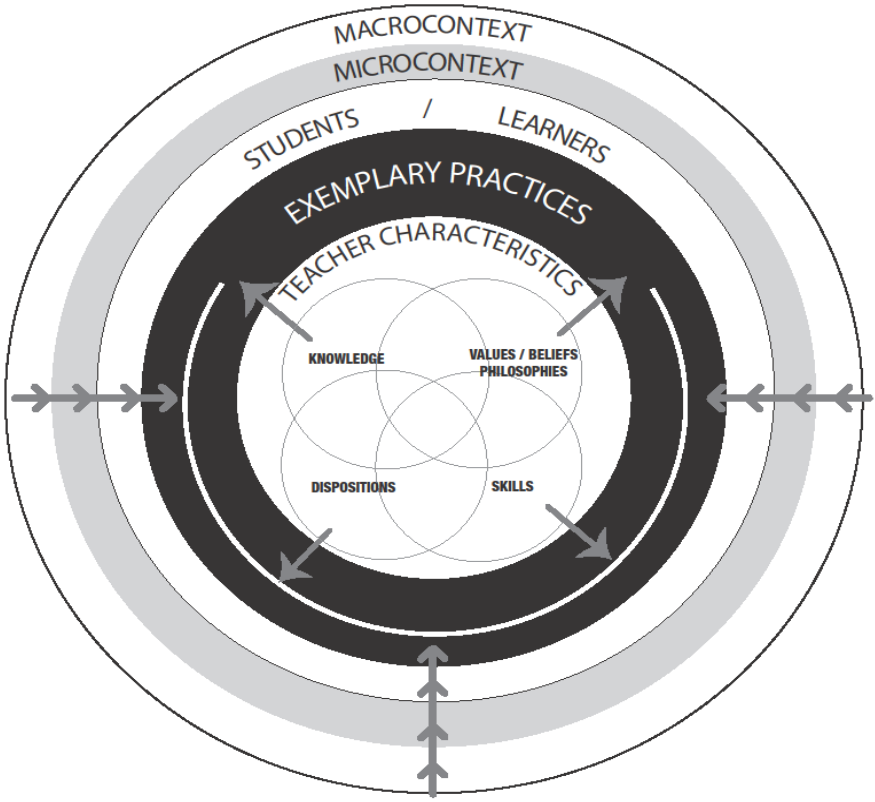

Illustration #1: Ecology Model of Teaching

This new model integrates the results of the research comparing and contrasting exemplary practices across contexts (Ableser, 2011) and applies the framework and structure of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model of Human Development. Ecology is the scientific study of the relationship and mutual interaction of living things with the environment. Bronfenbrenner created a "target shaped" visual model that stresses the importance and interaction between the four levels of the environment on human development. This new Teaching for All to Learn Ecological Model illustrates the interaction and relationship between the learner, the teacher, the teaching practice and the social context in which it occurs. This visual model is similar to the Bronfenbrenner's concentric circle framework by designing an eight circle schema. The three external circles focus on the "context". The outside circle is the *Macrocontext*, followed by the *Microcontext*, and then the *Student/Learner*. The most critical component of the model is the fourth circle focusing on *Exemplary Practices*. The teacher

characteristics are represented by four internal circles shaped into a Venn diagram. These overlapping circles represent the *Beliefs/Values/Philosophies*, *Skills*, *Knowledge* and *Dispositions* of the teacher/professor.

A component of this model is the interaction and interdependence of each circle. Each of the three context levels plus the four teacher/professor characteristic components impact and influence exemplary practices. This is illustrated by the use of arrows pointing from the three contextual rings into the exemplary practice circle, and from the four rings comprising the teacher characteristics pointing out to the exemplary practices.

The *Macrocontext* refers to the larger societal and global context including the impact and influences from social, political, economic, culture, society, global, institutional, technological professional community, time, current events, and prior events. The *Microcontext* include aspects more central to the specific learning situation such as the learning environment, the discipline/subject, grade level, preschool/K-12/higher education, delivery model (face-to-face, on-line, mixed delivery), and class size.

The *Student/Learner* is, in fact, part of the *Microcontext*; however, because the learner is so central to teaching, a separate circle is included to highlight its importance. Factors such as development and learning, styles of learning, interests, needs, life experience, life situation, prior knowledge, socioeconomics, age, gender, race and ethnicity are included in this circle.

The four categories of *teacher/professor characteristics* are illustrated by a Venn diagram, representing the interaction between categories. *Values/Beliefs* of exemplary teachers are grounded in educational philosophies of constructivism, transformative education, teaching for all to learn, and critical and higher level thinking. *Skills* noted in exemplary teaching include organization, clarity, effective communication, planning, resources and technology, assessment techniques, follow-through, and reflective practice. *Knowledge* includes pedagogical content knowledge, learning theories, content, learning and learning outcomes and curriculum. *Personal characteristics* include passion, enthusiasm, supportiveness, fairness, confidence, respect, responsiveness, humour, and caring.

The three external contextual rings (*macro, micro and students*) and the four internal Venn diagram rings focusing on the teacher characteristics (*values, skills, knowledge and dispositions*) all impact and influence the *Exemplary Practices*. The *Exemplary Practice ring is* the central or critical dimension of this model. These practices include such strategies and techniques as focusing on learning and learning outcomes, facilitate learning, active engagement, critical and high level thinking, authentic assessments, mastery learning, relevant and meaningful experiences, high expectations, clear evaluation criteria, Universal Design of Learning (UDL), differentiation, inquiry and problem-based learning, ongoing assessment, constructive and prompt feedback and creating a community of learners.

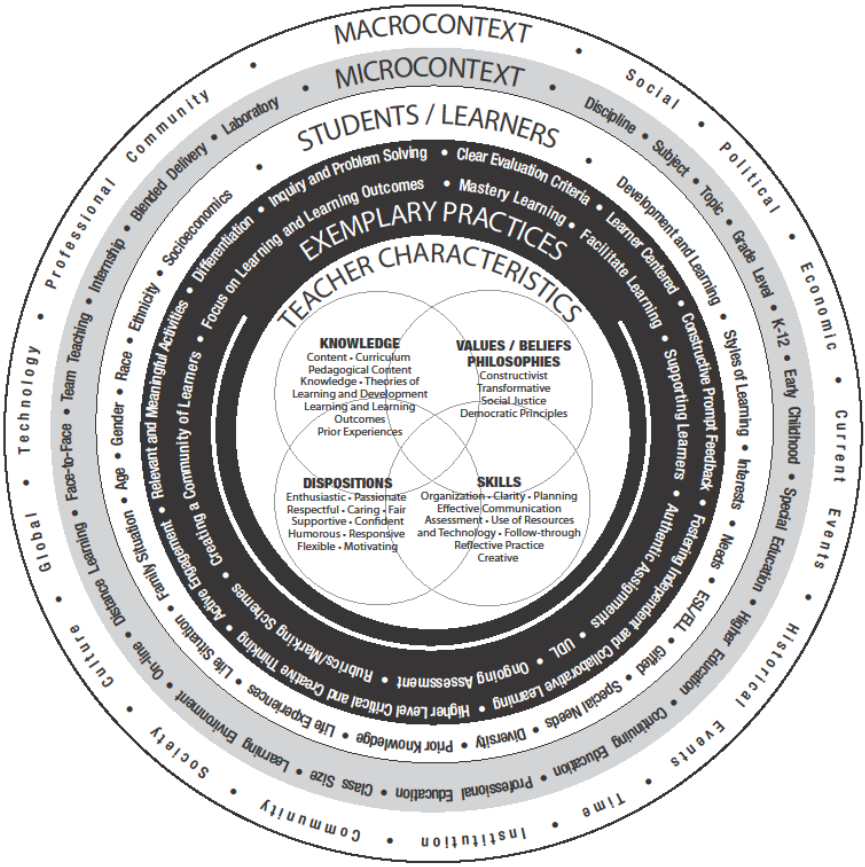

Illustration #2: Ecological model of teaching: Teaching for all to learn

Implications, Limitations and Future Directions for Applying the Principles and Model of Teaching for All to Learn

This *Ecological Model of Teaching for All to Learn*, is just that; a model. It is a theoretical construct to conceptually represent and illustrate the components and contexts that impact exemplary teaching. No individual teacher/professor will have all the qualities listed, nor will any one individual demonstrate all exemplary practices. Additional or different qualities, practices and contextual factors may be included. The intent of identifying the ten principles of exemplary teaching and the ecological model for *teaching for all to learn* is to provide a framework for teachers from preschool to graduate school to reflect on their own teaching, to engage in conversations with their colleagues and to realize that lessons can be learned from educators in other contexts and situations.

Further development of the ecological model and additional meta-analysis and qualitative research studies will be conducted in the future, comparing and contrasting the ways in which exemplary practices are specifically implemented in a range of educational settings. The ecological model will provide a framework for such future studies. One such study will examine exemplary practices in higher education at a comprehensive university. Exemplary teachers will be identified by deans, based on who have won teaching awards or

recognitions. Data will be collected by interviewing, observing, reviewing syllabi, assignments and evaluation criteria to validate the model and to provide exemplars and examples of exemplary teaching resulting in exemplary learning for all. Similar studies will take place in a range of P-12 classrooms with the goal of comparing contexts within the P-12 community and between P-12 and higher education.

The theme of *Teaching for All to Learn*, these ten guiding principles and the Ecological Model provide a common framework and language for teachers at all levels and from all contexts to generate conversations about what they do best and areas in which they can continue to develop. In addition to talking among our peers in our own area of teaching, we can now share our experiences, our knowledge and expertise across educational contexts using a framework and model for discussion. Special educators can shed light on ways they implement universal design of learning that may be helpful in inclusive K-12 or university classrooms to increase successful learning for all students. On-line instructors can transform ideas used to create communities of learners in traditional classrooms into their virtual courses. University faculty can develop active student-centred strategies by understanding how early childhood professionals set up the learning environment and allow children to discover and problem solve.

Perhaps it is time to not only have these conversations amongst our own colleagues, but between educators across contexts to generate more robust thinking and practice in teaching and learning. Professional and Faculty Development in P-12 and in higher education, including professional learning communities, teaching circles, and Centres for Learning and Teaching can build upon this work to create opportunities for collaboration amongst and between educators to increase exemplary practice that can promote and support learning for all students.

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