A Day in the Life: Pedagogy of the Academy for College Excellence's Foundation Course

Abstract:
The article "Rethinking Entry to College" in RP Perspectives January 2013 described the Academy for College Excellence (ACE) Foundations of Leadership Course as an example of a program designed to foster affective development. Although students in ACE have been assessed at the developmental level, both the content and pedagogy of the Foundation of Leadership Course (Foundation Course) are not 'remedial pedagogy' as Grubb and Gabriner describe it in *Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges*[i]. Instruction in too many basic skills courses lives up—or down—to the common description of remedial pedagogy as "drill and kill." In contrast, the pedagogy of the Foundation Course is experiential. However, this broad educational term, rooted in the history of progressive education, can have many interpretations. In *Rethinking the Entry to College,*[ii] the pedagogy is described as a "pragmatic mix of progressive education, with a clear dose of behaviorism." The most effective way to explain the ACE experiential approach is to present it in practice. In this article, [link] one day of the Foundation Course, is qualitatively described in depth, with attention to the student experiences.

In this one day it is possible to illustrate why content and activities that were chosen and how they are designed to increase student engagement in the classroom and to support affective growth. A few of the characteristics of the Foundation Course pedagogy:

Make desired behavior visible: Expected behaviors are made explicit and visible. Students are given positive feedback when they are meeting expectations on behaviors such as attendance and punctuality, and reminded and encouraged when they are not.

Practice participating in class: Students have opportunities throughout the day to write and talk individually, in small groups and in large groups. By working individually and in groups, students—even those who have gotten through school by being invisible—recognize that they have something to contribute to the class. In addition, students are explicitly encouraged to ask questions. Realizing that students think that asking questions might make them look stupid, they are told that others may have the question as well and asking is an act of courage.

Reflection: Every day starts and ends with reflection on what students learned, what surprised them, and what ideas stay with them. Each activity is followed with reflective questions and discussion. Students learn to articulate their thoughts, observations, and feelings as well as listen to the reflections of others.

Build trust and connection: During the Foundation Course, ACE staff and faculty come in to meet the students. While there, faculty may tell stories from their life of overcoming obstacles. In addition, a few students volunteer to tell their stories to the class. This personal openness demonstrates the ways that ACE creates a safe and respectful environment for students to share who they are and who they are becoming.

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Thirty students sit in a circle around the room. They are dressed in clothing that would be common on any college campus: jeans, hooded sweatshirts and sneakers, mostly in muted grays, blues, and blacks with occasional flashes of red or bright blue. A handful of young men wear baseball hats. Backpacks are scattered around the edge of the room. While the group is predominantly traditional college age—late teens to early twenties—there are a few individuals in their thirties or forties. As students come in, some talk with friends, others look at papers. One or two sit with eyes closed.

In many ways this could be any community college class. In other ways, it is quite different. This is the Academy for College Excellence (ACE) Foundations of Leadership Course (commonly known as the Foundation Course) . The ACE model is designed to foster intrinsic engagement and motivation among community college students, particularly those students who are vulnerable and tentatively connected to the college. The Foundation Course is an intensive two-week educational experience that precedes enrolling in full-time academic courses; the course addresses affective and behavioral aspects of being a student as preparation for academic engagement. Colleges implementing ACE offer the Foundation Course for college-level credit. [iii]

In the Foundation Course, curriculum and pedagogy are intertwined. The content focuses on communication and working styles in collaborative teams, skills they will use in school, in work, and in life. In fact, the Foundation Course curriculum is based on materials used in professional development for managers in a number of fields, including high tech, rather than from remedial academic content. If the content is different from what students have seen in school, and what they expect, the pedagogy is equally different, both for students and for teachers.

Each day of the Foundation Course is scheduled and choreographed, with familiar landmarks and changing content. Students become familiar with the rhythm and anticipated activities. Each day starts with a review of the prior day's activities and students reflect on what they have learned. The day also ends with review, reflection, and feedback on the day.

Two other activities are regularly interspersed throughout the day. Each break–morning, afternoon and lunch—is followed by a *Whip Around*. The teacher starts a sentence, and going around the circle, each student repeats the sentence stem and completes the sentence, answering in one breath. In this way, all students speak and listen to each other and energetically come back to class. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon, when energy is getting low, the discussion will pause for a *Light and Lively*, something active and playful that gets students out of their seats. Both

these activities are drawn from the *Alternatives to Violence*[iv] program, a curriculum rooted in Quaker principles of non-violence.

During the two weeks of the Foundation Course, the room itself becomes a record of activity and learning. The walls are covered with a wide range of hand written posters, daily schedules, products of class brainstorming sessions, and attendance sheets. Important ACE ideas may be on printed posters, for example, one poster with four key behaviors is on the wall: Come to every class/ Be on time/ Care about school /Respect yourself and others.

In this particular class, slightly more than half of the students are male, although that is not typical of other ACE cohorts, nor of the community college population. About one-third of the students are Latino, which also varies by location. On the first day of the Foundation Course students described their prior school experiences. They were rocky and uneven: high school didn't work for me…I got into trouble…I went to three high schools…I got kicked out and went to an alternative high school. Taken together their stories describe students who have dropped out, been kicked out, had trouble, gotten in trouble, didn't like school, or just didn't care. The students attended a variety of community high schools and alternative high schools, a few finished in adult school with a GED. Their academic vulnerability is evident; school experiences have not given them confidence in their ability to perform academically. More than half also reported, without particular emotional weight, that their parents were separated or divorced. A few say they were raised by a sister or have raised younger sisters and brothers. They bring their complex and disrupted lives, but also the hopes and aspirations that are typical of community college students.

What follows is a description of a day in the second half of the first week of a Foundation Course as taught at Cabrillo College by Diego Navarro, ACE founder and director. The activities and student responses illustrate the ways the ACE pedagogy opens possibilities, invites student participation, and fosters confidence through concrete experiences.

A large sheet on the wall lists all the students' names. As they come in, first thing in the morning, after a break, and after lunch, each student marks his or her name. If they are on time, the mark is green; if they are late, the mark is red. This is one of the behaviors learned on the first day. A quick glance at the sheet shows the pattern of attendance and punctuality. Looking at the attendance sheet, Diego notes, "There's a lot of green – you guys are doing great being on time." This happens frequently in the Foundation Course, desired behaviors are made visible, practiced, and reinforced.

Diego then goes over the agenda from the day before, which is written out on a sheet on the wall. "What did we do? Step by step, naming and helping students recall each activity." The teacher goes through the complete schedule of the day two or three times throughout the day, giving students a chance to recall, weaving the fabric of learning. They begin each day going back over the activities of the day before, and then reflect on what they learned, adding their overnight

thoughts. Reflection is a chance to summarize, review, and articulate; this is a foundational skill of academic learning.

Before asking the students to write their own reflections of the day, Diego offers his observations, encouraging behavior and participation. "Yesterday, when we were talking about the movie (*Stand and Deliver*[v]*),* some people who hadn't spoken before spoke in class. That's important for your teacher to hear and for your cohorts to hear. When you wrote about your gifts, you were attentive, you concentrated. In the interviews yesterday with ACE staff, you asked good questions."

The morning's reflection questions are projected on the front wall. "What was new and different? What ways were you stretched or challenged? What excited you most?" The students write their reflections individually, then count off into teams, and move to sit in small groups of four or five. Although students may tend to sit with friends, counting off mixes the groups and gives everyone a chance to work with a range of classmates. In the small group they share reflections, taking turns speaking and listening. Later, they turn to the circle and contribute to the large group discussion. Diego captures some of the big ideas, writing them on a sheet on the wall:

> "What was new and different? What excited you?" ….interviewing, and asking questions….listening to someone's story …the drawing of my life, that was pretty cool….I grasp what we're learning about… I realize it's helpful to see work styles, we can use it to benefit ourselves and others.

> "What was challenging?" …how to relate to the speaker's story…drawing …interviews, you have to retrain and respond ….being out of my comfort zone, it felt awkward .

Diego asks, "Sitting for 8 hours? I thought I'd hear that. And it's a challenge to concentrate, to focus." There are nods and verbal agreement throughout the room.

The main topic of the first week is Mike Sturm's *Spherical Dynamics,* a model of work styles or energies that maps the cycle of a work project from initial generation of ideas all the way through to action. This methodology was chosen because it gives students a way to conceptualize a task and work collaboratively in teams.

Students first gain familiarity with the work styles model by describing characters in movies. Before they take on the personal task of looking at themselves and their classmates, they practice with fictional characters. The activity for the morning is, as the teacher says, "More practice seeing. We're going to watch another movie, *Whale Rider*[vi]*,* has anyone seen it?" Only two students have. The first movie they watched in class, *Stand and Deliver,*provided a range of characters for students to describe in terms of energies and working styles. The movie also told a

powerful tale of schooling, expectations, and courage, which the students understood. They could see themselves and their school experiences in the movie.

"But, this isn't a movie theater." Diego says, "This is college. We'll watch the movie, then we'll stop, and find out which characters to watch." Mid-way through, the movie is paused to identify which characters to score: the young girl, the grandfather, the grandmother, and the uncle. The class continues to watch the movie.

After watching *Whalerider,* the *Whip Around* is 'Something I connected to in the movie was… The students complete the sentence:

       the ocean…the sense of family…the competition of girls and boys…the little girl…the stubbornness of the grandfather…dad going away…the way they liked animals…a family member living far away… the bond with her grandmother… the closeness of the family…the girl being outcast…culture and tradition… her not wanting to leave home… the beauty of the ocean…feeling like an outcast… the little girl's strength… people's love of ocean… how much they liked whales…the sense of tradition…the way she was interested in heritage…her determination… that kids don't get a say.

Some men in the class say they related to the character of the young girl.

As the students discuss the characters from *Whale Rider,* they demonstrate that in a few days they have become familiar with the work styles model. They score each character by a rubric that includes descriptive words. They explain the words they have chosen for each character and point out the times in the movie that illustrate those words. They construct a shared profile of each character with a group vote. On all four characters, they capture the key characteristics. Diego is encouraging, "Give yourself a hand. You're getting this."

The rest of the morning and afternoon the class delves more deeply into the working styles, moving to the conceptual frame. The context for the work styles model—as noted above—is the development of project from beginning (Synthesizing) to communication and engagement with others (Interacting) , to detailed planning (Analyzing), through action (Concluding). Every phase of project development has a related energy or work style. As students become familiar with this model they are able to name what they can do well and to recognize areas they may need to work on. This model encourages students to see their own strengths and challenges as well as the strengths and challenges of others. However, it's not a case of labeling people. Individuals have multiple strengths, a balance of inclinations and roles they might play in different settings. Each person has all four styles in differing amounts, and more intensity in one or two of the styles. Therefore each person has the strengths in a particular team project phase to add value to the team.

 The morning discussion sets the stage for the afternoon when the class will go into the working styles in more depth. At one point in the discussion, Diego points out, "Did you notice that people on this side of the room were volunteering words? So I'll pay more attention to the other side. I want you to participate if you want to." On the first day, Diego invited student

participation. When he asked a question and no one answered, he said, "When we first started in elementary school, we're excited when the teacher asks a question. Kids jump up to answer." He mimes the restless excitement of a kid who wants to be called on. "But if the teacher calls on you, and you give a wrong answer, what happens?" Students answer, "Kids laugh." Diego adds, "Or maybe the teacher won't call on that kid again, because she doesn't want to embarrass him. Probably he won't put his hand up again. It's learned behavior. But the problem is if we want to learn quickly, we have to be active, we have to make mistakes. In high tech, we said 'make mistakes as fast as you can.' Here we have a community. People won't laugh at each other."

On return from lunch the group starts standing in a circle for a *Light and Lively* activity. For two days, the students have been wearing name tags and the teacher has made an effort to call students by name. Now they play the name game. Each student chooses an adjective that begins with the same letter as their first name. They go around the circle, each student saying their own adjective and name, and saying all the names before them. People nearby are helpful, whispering the names when someone hesitates. People across the circle helpfully act out their adjectives. At the end, people's names have been said, repeated and joked about. Then students return to their seats, knowing, or at least trying to remember, everyone else's name.

In a pedagogy that reflects progressive education, students begin with the concrete and move to the conceptual. They are now shifting from the practical examples to the more substantive concepts. Diego dives in to the working styles content, "What we were talking about earlier and the letters that we've been using, now we're going to put some meat on those bones. If you want to be a leader, you have to know how to work with people, how to understand them, how to motivate them."

Since Monday afternoon, students have been using the work styles rubric. They have practiced on characters in movies and visitors to the class. They have done it in a way that is both individual and interactive. Four key words have been mentioned and referred to, but not discussed. S stands for Synthesizing; I for Interacting; A for Analyzing; and C for Concluding. These are the stages of the work cycle and they are the energies that students have been using to describe movie characters. For each working style, a PPT slide is decorated with an abundance of clip art cartoons and some descriptive text. For each slide, the class spends time looking at the pictures. Diego asks, "What do you see? Why do you think it's there?" Students point out the pictures and provide possible explanations. Diego builds on their comments.

While the class discusses the energies, their future math teacher comes in and sits down. Faculty who will teach this cohort's academic courses during the semester meet the students during the Foundation Course. When there is a natural break, the math teacher introduces himself, mentioning that faculty go through the same curriculum that the students are experiencing. Personal stories from the teacher, the students, and any visitors, are part of the Foundation Course. The stories open up empathy and trust within the group. The teachers tell a personal story about overcoming an obstacle in their education or their life. This humanizes the teachers

to the students and strengthens the web of the community. And telling the tale quietly reminds the teachers of what it felt like to be a student, to face a challenge. In his story, the math teacher shows slides from when he was a mountain guide. He uses the metaphor of climbing, "I teach clients how to walk on ice, how to be part of a team, but I can't pull them up the mountain. Like school, I can teach you skills so you can go up the mountain."

Then Diego directs students to material in their notebooks. As homework, students have underlined words they didn't know or wanted to learn more about. Opening the discussion, he asks, "What words stand out? Remember if you don't know, probably someone else doesn't know either. You can help by asking. In class, being courageous may mean asking a question." The students identify words "…pragmatic….synergy… due diligence… non-linear…delegate... skeptic." Diego supports their willingness to ask, "It's good getting these out. Words are important. "

For the next activity they count off into teams of four. Diego prompts them, "those not facing each other, get into a circle. Look like a team." The next application of the energies/work styles is a set of four statements. Each one represents an energetic style and the task is to identify which energy the statement represents. "We'll start the first one together. Which statement is the easiest? Which is most typically what someone with that energy would say?" "Then there are three to go and it's a process of elimination. This is hard. Figure it out as a team."

The groups work through the remaining statements. On a matrix on the board each team names the energy they have linked to the statement so that patterns of agreement and disagreement are evident. Diego notes, "We all agree on this, almost unanimous. But this statement, we have some differences here." Turning to the team that identified the statement as synthesizing. Diego asks, "Why did you think this might be an S?" Without directly saying what is right or wrong, Diego elicits thoughts, raises questions, and lets students hear other perspectives and reconsider their thoughts.

For the next set of statements, one group that struggled through the first example enthusiastically wants to put out their answers. By the third vignette, there is growing agreement across all the groups. In Vygotskian terms the students are exploring the Zone of Proximal Development,[vii] the area where students are learning something they are not ready to do on their own. By practicing with peers, they get stronger and become able to do it alone.

The next activity is concentric circles, a communication activity developed and widely used by the Anti Defamation League. The whole group counts off by twos. Number 1's bring their chairs to the center and make a circle, looking outwards. Number 2's bring their chairs and pair up, facing a number 1 in the inside circle. The teacher asks questions, some very safe and public, others more personal or a bit risky. What music do you like? What place would you like to travel? Where did you grow up? What was the happiest time in your life? Where do you think you will live when you are successful in your life? Who is a positive person for you? What wild

animal would you like to have for a pet? For each question, one person answers, the other listens and then they switch. After each question, one of the circles rotates, so each time they are facing a new partner. The pool of possible questions was generated early in the ACE program by asking students what they would like to know about each other.

In Concentric Circles, each student has spoken and listened, sharing as much as they are comfortable with classmates. After concentric circles, students return to the big circle for reflection and summation, "what did you learn?" ... it was easy to answer a concrete question…. as soon as we got into a conversation, the bell went off… sometimes mimicking body language is distracting…there were people who were more like me, and looking at them, I wouldn't have thought so.

In the closing activity, Diego reviews the day, "What did we do today?   What movie did we watch? What *Light and Lively* did we do? What were the vignettes?" Students answer his questions. "Okay – go for it." The end of the day feedback is given with colored sticker dots. Students go to copies of the agenda's written on chart paper in different parts of the room. The students place dots on each activity. There are green, yellow and red dots, one per person per activity. Green is great, 'really worked for you.' Yellow means 'it was OK.' Red means 'it should change.' Students put up the dots. By the third day, the summary activity of the day is familiar and the overall patterns of satisfaction or difficulty are evident.

Diego pulls the class back together, "What do the dots tell us? Anything we can learn?"
One student replies, "the things where I put red were boring." Diego asks, "Anything we can do to improve the activity?" While the student doesn't reply, another student says, "About the reflections in morning, when we are in small groups. People just read what they wrote. I like what I heard, and I would like to hear more. I'd like a conversation." Diego responds to the request, "We can make time for that."

The group as a whole responds to final wrap up questions. Answers to the final question reflect the growing trust among the group. "How're you doing as a group?"…good…I feel more comfortable…it's more like a classroom, not a room of strangers… we're getting to know each other.

Diego explains the schedule for the next day and previews what is coming next week. "Tomorrow is the last day on work styles. Over the weekend, you'll be looking at bioreaction and then next week, communication. Don't forget to get sleep." The Foundation Course addresses students' mental, emotional, and physical learning.

Conclusion

This is a moment in the two-week ACE Foundation Course. In this day it is possible to see the ACE philosophy and principles in action. The freshness and relevance of the curriculum lets

students engage with the ideas without preconceptions from prior school experiences. The Foundation Course is a liminal space, a safe place for students to try on the new identity of successful student, practice it, and become comfortable with it. They have the space to make mistakes or change their mind or try again. The expectations and behaviors of being a student are made explicit; students have multiple chances to refine their behaviors. The educational and emotional environment is safe, a place for students to get to know themselves, their classmates, and their teachers. The class becomes a closely bonded cohort, able to appreciate similarities and differences, able to give and receive support.

Although the content of the first two weeks is not directly tied to academic disciplines, it is related to professional skills and students can see the relevance to their lives. The activities, writing, and reflections are precursors of academic learning.

Students who came to college hesitant or vulnerable finish the Foundation Course optimistic and ready to engage with the challenges of academics. They are not harboring the false optimism that so often marks the first few weeks of college and they are not in the shadow of their prior difficult experiences in school. They have learned skills they will use and built relationships with peers and teachers. In their own words, "I feel more prepared to be a successful student because…"

- I ask questions. Make sure I understand what's going on in class
- I've learned to be interactive and be creative. Be aware in class. No procrastination. Be punctual.
- I've learned to listen, how to talk, and to try and see reality unbiased
- I have to take college very seriously. There's times that I'm going to get stuck on a subject, but I can't give up
- I have learned a lot about myself as a person and as a student, focusing on my strengths and weaknesses
- Skills I need to work on –organization, finding a study group, bringing a recording device to class, be more engaged in learning. I'll continue to grow as a person and become a more successful student
- I feel like I learned a lot about self-discipline. I now have a recipe for success.

The ACE Foundation Course curriculum and pedagogy are intertwined and designed so that students have safe experiences of participating, engaging, and learning. They engage with ideas and practice behaviors such as actively contributing in class. Activities are scaffolded, from concrete to theory, from public to personal. Students get a chance to think and write individually, work with one partner or a small team, and share in a large group.

The experiential pedagogy described here is a pragmatic mix of progressive education, with a clear dose of behaviorism. Students have a chance to rethink their identity as a learner, to reconsider their ability to succeed in academics, and to reinforce their role as part of a

community with similar goals. The focused front-loading of this experience lets them move into academic courses with more confidence, skills, and sources of support. The lessons and skills they learn in class are relevant to life beyond school as well; they can use them at home, work, and in their social interactions. The experiences of teaching and learning in the Foundation Course illustrate the essential interconnection of the affective and the cognitive in learning.

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He has more than twenty years of experience in research and management with Hewlett Packard Labs, Apple Computer, and was CEO of two successful high-tech start-up companies. Diego holds a B.S. in Information Systems from Antioch University and a graduate degree from Harvard University's Graduate School of Business.
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[i] Basic Skills Education in Community Colleges: Inside and Outside of Classrooms, W. Norton Grubb with Robert Gabriner, Routledge, Taylor and Francis NY 2013

[ii] Rethinking Entry to College RP Persepctives January 2013

[iii] Different colleges have organized college credit differently. One college, for example, took the Foundation Course student learning outcomes and mapped them onto outcomes of other courses and gave students credit for the other courses. Other colleges give credit similar to college success courses or psychology courses.

[iv] Alternatives to Violence http://www.avpusa.org/ another resource used in the design of the Foundation Course is *Non-violent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg

[v] *Stand and Deliver* the movie is about math teacher Jaime Escalante teaching AP calculus at an LA high school.

[vi] *Whale Rider,* the movie is about a young Maori girl challenging traditional values and her family

[vii] The Zone of Proximal Development according to Vygotsky, is the distance between tasks that a learner cannot accomplish alone, but can accomplish with support or assistance.