

The House that Chickering Built

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Theories of student development abound. Chickering, Kohlberg, Magolda, and Perry to name a few have all contributed to this body of knowledge. Yet these theories are as imperfect in their conceptualization as they are in their practice and the result is that they work better in combination than they do in singularity. No one theory is fully conclusive nor does any single theory necessarily address the issues faced by any given student or group of students. The issues are as diverse and multi-faceted as the students themselves and this requires a layering of theories to find real and workable solutions.

Yet when one is tasked with picking favorites than one must with honesty note these imperfections, these unavoidable flaws and find logical basis for choosing one from many. My logic is foundational. While I may prefer some of the later theories that address specific populations of students, e.g., female, African-American, LGBT, etc., it is the early theories that provide a foundation for these later and perhaps more accurate attempts to quantify and define student development. Without a proper foundation a house cannot be built.

So in keeping with my logic I will choose Chickering as my favorite foundational student development theory, because it is upon his work that so many others have built. Arthur Chickering gave student development the seven vectors: developing confidence; managing emotions; moving through autonomy toward interdependence; developing mature interpersonal relationships; establishing identity; developing purpose; and finally developing integrity.

There is also an element to my decision that defies logic. It is intuitive. It happens as much in your gut as it does in your head. It's when you come across something and it strikes something within you instantly. It's not a slow revelation but rather a loud and resounding impact that reverberates like a bell. I cannot yet relate to students, neither in teaching them

nor in assisting in any aspect of their development. No. Not in a professional sense. However, I have spent the last five years diligently working with my step-daughter, Sophia, a wonderful 12 year-old child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder combined with pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified. She has come a long way. She still has a long way to go. She is the impetus of my gut reaction to Chickering's theory. I recognized so much of her in what I read and I know that this will help me help her that much better. I know that in learning this so personally that I will better recognize it in the students that I will someday work with and that this experience, this learning, this course will make me a more careful and more considerate educator.

In Chickering's first vector, I recognized the mixed levels of success Sophia has with developing competence. On one hand she is making great strides with her academics easily mastering content. Though she struggles with comprehension, because so often with our language we do not say exactly what we mean and instead allude to, or work around a thing to build curiosity, interest and suspense. So here she is building and growing, keeping up with the majority of her peers and even passing some of her neurotypical counterparts. Each year she develops new skills and new mechanisms for understanding not only her academic life but also the world around her.

Physically, Sophia has impaired fine motor skills. She also has low muscle tone despite years of physical therapy. It is common with an autism diagnosis. This makes it difficult for her to master the second aspect of Chickering's first vector, which is physical and manual competence. She has plenty of energy in many ways but without sufficient focus and interest often lacks the stamina that would be needed to compete against her peers. Her physical posture also sets her apart from her peers, being prone to excessive fidgeting and

equally likely to walk or run in a manner that can be rather bird like. Likewise, Sophia is less of a creator and more of a destroyer similar to her favorite monster Godzilla. And perhaps due to what they called fast math back in second and third grades Sophia often ties success with how fast something is done and not how well something is done when it comes to creativity and therefore struggles to master basic artistic achievements without highly individualized guidance.

The interpersonal competence though is a daunting challenge and perhaps the most complex segment of the first vector for Sophia and in some ways more so for us adults than for her because we recognize keenly every moment of disconnect. We understand immediately when she says exactly the wrong thing. We have seen the looks given to her for these seemingly odd comments, even from adults who should maybe even know better. She tries to be interested in people, but cannot hold an age appropriate conversation unless the conversational partner knows enough to keep leading the conversation by drawing out details and asking questions, because without that she will either go silent or wander off. She is beginning to recognize that she is different. That the girls around her have friendships that are not the same as the friendships she has, but she doesn't understand why they are different and isn't yet equipped to maintain the depth needed to develop such a friendship. In reality Sophia still just wants to play.

In Sophia I can see Chickering's vectors clearly. Every aspect of every vector gave me the knowledge to recognize where she was within the mastery of the vector and where ultimately she should be. What I need to do now is develop more creative ways to lead her to continued development. To help her overcome the challenges of being autistic and reach the goals that will bring Sophia the greatest success.

What I have learned through Chickering, his theory, his vectors, is a foundational perspective of growth trajectory; his work will not stand alone if I am to help Sophia. No. I will need other theories by other researchers to assist me in fine-tuning my assessment and subsequent planning. Chickering is a solid foundation upon which other theories will be added, all in an effort to best address the needs of the individual. And if Sophia has taught me anything it is that we are all a little different and learning differently doesn't mean learning wrong and that there are many paths that all lead to success. And this is a gift I will carry with me and to the students that I work with in my future.

References

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