**Students that Change the World! Innovative Course-building for Transformative Learning**

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Caralyn Zehnder, University of Massachusetts, Amherst czehnder@bio.umass.edu

Julia Metzker, Stetson University jmetzker@stetson.edu

Cynthia Alby, Georgia College cynthia.alby@gcsu.edu

At many of our institutions, mission statements put forth a vision for educating students which aspire to grow students into liberally educated individuals with the knowledge, skills, and desire to make positive change in their communities. These are laudable goals, but what do they really mean? In ancient Greece, a liberally educated person was “classically” trained in the liberal arts, such as grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The[Yale Report of 1828](http://www.higher-ed.org/resources/Yale/1828_curriculum.pdf) defined a prescribed curriculum as one, "best calculated to teach the art of fixing the attention, directing the train of thought, analyzing a subject proposed for investigation; following, with accurate discrimination, the course of argument; balancing nicely the evidence presented to the judgment; awakening, elevating, and controlling the imagination; arranging, with skill, the treasures which memory gathers; rousing and guiding the powers of genius.”  In both cases, this educational model was only available to men with privileged stations in society. In modern times, the[American Association of Colleges and Universities](http://www.aacu.org/) (AAC&U) has led the charge to redefine liberal education for the 21st century as "an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change,” typically equipping students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. Practically, at most institutions, liberal education is confined to a general education program where students select from a wide variety of classes (often with little guidance) that have little direct connection to each other. Despite significant societal changes and demands, many of these courses look the same as they would have 20 or 30 years ago. For most students, these requirements get coded as a checklist of courses they must complete before they can get to the "good stuff.”

What if the "good stuff" was infused into every course a student takes? What if the purpose and meaning behind every course were front and center?  What if learners knew how each course fit into a big picture plan? What if every course they took addressed a real-life issue, dilemma or problem in some way?

**How would this impact students’ learning?**

*The problem:*

Our society faces broad-scale, complex issues whose solutions may require years of work, call for collaboration among individuals from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, and demand innovative, creative thinking. If today’s students are to become leaders with the capacity and desire to address these problems, then they need teaching strategies that prepare them for these challenges. There is a shift underway in higher education to move from teaching highly specialized disciplinary content to courses that lead to transformative learning and are built around outcomes such as critical thinking, global citizenship, communication and other skills important to students’ success as professionals and citizens in the 21st century. These skills are articulated by AAC&U as[Essential Learning Outcomes](http://www.aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes) (ELOs). The ELOs describe the skills, abilities and attitudes that a liberally educated college graduate should have1 and are intended to guide progress through college curriculums.

Many colleges and universities use the language and promise of the ELOs in their mission statements. However, meaningful learning experiences don’t just happen; they need to be intentionally designed. At many institutions these outcomes take the form of ‘add-ons’ or ‘overlays’ and aren’t fully integrated into courses. It is ineffective and counterproductive to continue to teach students to memorize decontextualized concepts, equations, and dates and then hope that they will develop critical thinking or other higher-order skills. In order for transformative learning to occur, course assessments and classroom activities need to be more than just ‘add-ons’ or ‘overlays’. Outcomes, assessments, and activities require intentional design to result in higher-order, essential,*transformative* learning.

Our definition of transformative learning, a pragmatic interpretation of Mezirow’s work (1991), is a quality of learning in which a student encounters an idea, a theory or evidence that changes their perspective. Transformative learning makes a significant, long term impact on the life of the student that can’t be “shaken off” because it becomes part of the learner.

As professors who evolved into faculty developers at liberal arts institutions, we frequently encounter courses that claim to develop ELOs in students but don’t provide explicit opportunities for the student to develop and practice these higher-order skills. Not surprisingly, these students demonstrate disappointing levels of achievement on many measures (Arum & Roksa, 2011). As demonstrated in AAC&U’s landmark study,[On Solid Ground](https://www.aacu.org/OnSolidGroundVALUE) (2017) the cause of this disconnect frequently arises from a lack of attention to assignment design and course-based assessments. A history professor may hope that students will learn analysis because analysis occurs in a history class. But unless this skill is made explicit and students are provided with opportunities to develop this skill in increasingly complex contexts, they will not likely cultivate this skill at a significant, transferable level.

[Rossing and Lavitt](https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2016/spring/rossing) (2016) argue that faculty have become the neglected learners in efforts to bring purpose to higher education. Institutions have initiated first-order changes, such as mission statements and general education programs, yet haven’t invested time and resources in faculty so that they are prepared to teach transformative courses, engage with students, employ evidence-based teaching practices and reflect on their own learning and development. Institutions continue to hire faculty predominantly for disciplinary expertise, so it is incumbent upon our institutions to fill the gap by providing meaningful development that guide faculty through the process of building courses designed for transformative or essential learning.

We recognize that most faculty truly want their students to critically evaluate complex issues, to think creatively, to propose solutions, to work collaboratively across difference, and to communicate clearly and effectively. However, when it comes down to deciding the BEST allocation of their time, the sometimes exhausting work of teaching and demands of the faculty reward system lead to setting aside those aspirational goals in order to meet more pressing demands - such as that paper that needs to get written for tenure or that grant that needs to be submitted. We also know that some faculty just don’t know *how* to be a transformative teacher, even if they entered the profession precisely to do just that.

*Our proposal*

We propose a process to bridge this gap by building courses that (1) are intentionally designed around ELOs, (2) require students to engage with complex dilemmas, issues, and questions (DIQs) facing society and (3) use “connected assessments” to measure learning. The nexus of this idea is to guide intentional course design around ELOs and DIQs while also incorporating evidence-based practices and course-based assessments that directly measure learning with[AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics](https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics). The DIQs provide a framework to focus much or all of the course content, assignments and assessments. Our process guides faculty in connecting disciplinary content knowledge and skills to authentic applications, intentionally incorporating essential learning outcomes into their courses, and designing learning experiences that support students in achieving these outcomes.

Our strategy is to synthesize what works from research and best practices for practical integration into the classroom by offering an intensive course-building institute with an accompanying field guide. This institute will provide a roadmap for faculty to build courses anchored in research that are intentionally designed around the ELOs, appropriately and efficiently employ high-impact practices , and assess student learning authentically (AAC&U, 2017; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Blaich, 2013).

By the end of the 5-day institute, participants will be able to translate the Essential Learning Outcomes into specific, measurable course-level outcomes. They will use the VALUE rubrics to design activities and assessments that connect outcomes, activities, and feedback with both formative and summative assessments. They will be able to implement evidence-based, high impact teaching practices in their course. They will develop skills in utilizing formative assessment and providing students with frequent feedback. They will also grow as professional educators who have developed the tools to explain to students and society the benefits of transformative learning and its role in higher education.

Faculty can then achieve a certification in Course Design for Transformative Learning by participating in a year-long, collaborative process following the institute. During this year, participants work in small interdisciplinary learning communities in order to provide support for one another and hold one another accountable as they implement their newly designed course. These groups are supported by mentors who will provide expert support and feedback to help faculty work through issues, such as facing student resistance, using assessment results to improve upon course design, and curating student work. Their work will culminate in a teaching portfolio documenting their course design. The field guide will provide additional guidance, examples, and structure for designing courses for transformative learning during the initial year and beyond.

In order to be a powerful and transformative process, the program cannot revolve around seat time but must result in an exceptional product. Successful certification will require a teaching portfolio that demonstrates transformative student learning through course outcomes, assignment design, evidence of student learning, and reflections that document their own learning and development. Teaching portfolios will be peer reviewed using well-defined criteria, and faculty will receive substantial feedback guiding them towards continued learning and professional development.

This institute and certification process will support faculty as they teach courses that transform students’ lives. In these courses, students will grapple with issues, dilemmas or questions as they develop into creative, critical thinkers who can effectively collaborate and communicate. Students will be able to meaningfully reflect on their learning and point to specific ways they have been significantly changed by the course. Faculty will transition from neglected learners to empowered educators who design courses that intentionally challenge and engage students in tackling complex, real problems. The ELOs will be the foundation that courses are intentionally designed around. Evidence-based, high impact teaching practices will engage students and faculty in the challenge of learning. Faculty will know that student learning occurs because they have “closed the assessment loop” by implementing connected assessments that measure essential learning outcomes and using that evidence to refine their teaching practices.

The Course-building for Transformative Learning Project is a passion project of the[Innovative Course-building Group](https://icbg.wordpress.com/) - a grass-roots social network for learning. If you are interested in learning more or want to bring the project to your campus, the authors and other members of the Innovative Course-building Group are available for consultations, workshops and other faculty development activities. You can[contact us through our blog](https://icbg.wordpress.com/about/contact-us/). Plans are underway to offer the inaugural institute in January 2018 at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida.

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