

USING DEVELOPMENTAL CLUES IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Developmental clues represent a translation of abstract theory into statements that practitioners hear students make. Instead of focusing on the theory and trying to fit theory to students, the focus here is on the students and what they say as it relates to theory. The clues, then, are related to the structure of the theory, i.e., each clue or set of clues is related to one of the four major areas of Perry's theory, as previously outlined. Thus, the developmental clues are the link between theory and student.

Three examples follow that describe how student personnel practitioners and faculty unfamiliar with Perry's theory were trained to informally assess and respond to students' cognitive developmental level.

Mentoring Project — A training situation in which the developmental clues approach was used involved a workshop for faculty and student affairs professionals who had agreed to serve as mentors for a retention/student development project at a large midwestern university. Participants were trained to function as a mentor, resource person, or friend for new freshmen. Training participants to understand developmental theory was seen as a complement to other training received in interpersonal skills because it could help them respond to individual differences and enhance communication via empathic understanding of the student (McEwen, Higgins & Pipes, 1982).

The training session for the mentors lasted two hours. After a short lecture on the four stages of the theory, participants practiced categorizing developmental clues according to the four stages. Most were able to make correct categorizations. Next, participants were divided into groups of four to listen to three ten-minute taped interviews of students evaluating a class in which they were enrolled. (Stonewater & Shrock, 1982.). Participants were to categorize each student into one of the four theory stages. Of the 35 participants, all but 2 or 3 made correct categorizations. Thus, with minimal training in theory and with an emphasis on developmental clues, participants were quickly able to learn to assess informally cognitive developmental level with some degree of accuracy. The advantage of this kind of skill for faculty and staff members is that they are able to learn, by picking up clues in discussion with a student, something about that student's cognitive ability and what the student is able to understand. That knowledge can aid the staff member in communicating at a level that makes sense to the student.

Instructional Consultation — In another situation in the same institution the developmental clues approach was used with a faculty member concerned that many of his students could not do high-level, abstract and relativistic problem solving required on his examinations. In this case it was important for the faculty member to understand that students at different cognitive developmental levels think differently and could perform different problem solving tasks. Additionally, it was important to point out that instruction to help students learn different aspects of problem solving must be geared to the students' cognitive development levels. In short, this professor needed to understand that helping him solve the poor performance problem depended, in part, on students' developmental levels and that solutions would vary across levels.

A variation of the developmental clues approach was used in this case. The professor was asked to select an excellent, an average, and a poor student to be interviewed. Each was interviewed for an hour and an assessment was made of