The Lifenet View

Fostering Contextual Understanding
in the Professional Education Curriculum

Jan Armstrong

Introduction

Practitioners in all fields, teacher education and K-12 schools being no exception, must be able to work across gender, class, ethnic, and language differences in order to teach, counsel, heal, assist, and collaborate effectively with those unlike themselves. Efforts to foster multiculturalism and contextual understanding within professional communities often begin with the obvious: humans are relational beings who live in particular social and material contexts. However, professionals-in-training must be taught how to shift focus from the individual to the relational and from the psychological to the contextual.

This requires humanistic teaching strategies that go beyond what Schön (1983) has called "the model of technical rationality" (p. 21) implicit within many educational policies and practices. Such strategies support college students' intellectual, ethical and moral development as they move toward more complex and relativistic ways of making sense of the social world (Perry 1968/1999).

However, teaching about race, class, culture, gender, and human diversity in professional preparation programs is an enterprise fraught with conceptual complexity and pedagogical hazards (e.g., Fendler, 2003; Gorski, 2009; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Ibarra, 2000; Johnson, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2006; McKnight, 2004; Sanchez & Fried, 1997; Sleeter, 2001). Many university students come to class with strong interpretive biases toward decontextualized, individualistic (essentialist and reductionistic) ways of thinking about human diversity. In other words, students often tend to

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(mis)attribute cultural differences to psychological and sometimes genetic ("racial") qualities assumed to be biologically innate, or at best, profoundly resistant to change (Watson, Charner-Laird, Kirkpatrick, Szczesiul, & Gordon, 2006).

Such misattributions may contribute to the communications gaps between educational practitioners and the diverse communities they serve (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sleeter, 2001). Further, teacher educators and other post-secondary educators who seek to foster student intellectual growth through democratic discourse soon discover that culturally diverse college students are also *developmentally diverse*, characterized by age-associated differences in life experiences and cognitive, emotional and social maturity.

The number of older adult students enrolled in post-secondary education is expected to increase through 2016 (Snyder, Dillow & Hoffman, 2008, 261-262), with recent changes in the GI Bill likely to increase the number of non-traditional students enrolled in postsecondary education in the near future. This, in turn, will increase the developmental diversity of students enrolled at all levels of post-secondary education. Students also differ not only with respect to their gender orientations, but their consciousness of LGBTIQ issues, which clearly warrant "a place at the blackboard" (Savage & Harley, 2009) in developmentally diverse classrooms.

The work described below represents an effort to foster a contextual understanding of human development in culturally and developmentally diverse classrooms through autobiographical reflection and reflexive inquiry. My goal is to use the exercise to foster "deep learning" (Grauerholz, 2001) about human development and to develop a classroom environment that values and fosters classroom community (Fassinger, 1997; McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, & Schweitzer, 2006). This means

establishing a classroom environment that reduces barriers to meaningful collaboration and intergroup friendship formation (Allport, 1954). By encouraging students to learn from each other, classroom communities provide a powerful venue for intellectual, social and emotional growth. A first step in establishing such communities involves creating the conditions necessary for students to begin to trust and learn from one another.

The Lifenet View

I developed the Lifenet View exercise to help post-secondary and graduate students better understand abstract theoretical perspectives on culture, context, and individual differences, and to explore with them the relevance of these principles for their future work as professional educators, counselors, and social service providers. Lifenets are visual images that portray one's relationships to people, places, and things. As students draw and share their lifenets, they learn about themselves and their classmates.

Thus, the exercise provides a way for students of all ages in racially and culturally diverse classrooms to get to know each other and to examine differences as well as similarities in their life experiences. It also affords college instructors an opportunity to become better acquainted with students. I have used this exercise in a number of courses at both graduate and undergraduate levels: human development; qualitative research methods; multiculturalism in the helping professions; aging and education, with good results.

I begin with a brief review of some of the theoretical ideas that have informed this work. After describing the exercise in detail, I summarize what I have learned from looking at and reflecting on my students' lifenets and commentaries.

Theoretical Framework

The Lifenet View provides a set of principles that articulate the role of place, social networks, spiritual beliefs, institutions (science, religion, government, media, education, business), economic and material resources, cultural practices, and emotion in human development through the lifespan. The model offers a way of conceptualizing complex, multiply positioned selves (as opposed to static, monolithic identities or constellations of individual differences) through guided visualization, representation, reflection and conversation.

It integrates ideas from anthropology, sociology, and psychology into a framework for understanding the situated, relational nature of the self. It's key concepts reflect classic social and psychological perspectives: social network analysis (Bott, 1971); culture acquisition theory (Pitman, Eisikovitts, & Dobbert, 1989); exchange theory (Graziano & Laursen, 2002), relational cultural theory (Miller, 1987), attachment theory (Bowlby 1969), and ecological perspectives on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979/2005).

Grounded in time-honored traditions of thought, the Lifenet View exercise emphasizes the need to view development *in context*, reflecting the growing appreciation within the human sciences for the inseparability of individual development from the relational contexts in which such development occurs (Comstock, 2005; Fogel, King & Shanker, 2008; Robb, 2006; Thomas, 2001). The development of human beings is always, fundamentally, a political process.

The Lifenet View Exercise

Lifenets are cognitive maps of the self, drawings that represent an individual's perception of his or her relational, contextual self. During part one of the exercise, I present students with a set of principles that define a contextual view of human development: What I call the Lifenet View. Here is how I introduce the exercise:

> The Lifenet View was originally developed to teach people about how anthropologists and sociologists see the world—their view of "human nature." For a variety of reasons, we often tend to think about human differences psychologically. What this means is that people tend to explain individual differences by referring to psychological traits and dispositions. When we encounter a behavior or characteristic requiring explanation, we use concepts like intelligence, motivation,

> self-discipline, self-control, introversion, masculinity/femininity, and so on. But the story is more complicated than that. Here are some of the ideas associated with the contextual view human development—the Lifenet View.

I next display and discuss key concepts associated with the perspective, elaborating and providing examples:

1. Humans are social beings who form bonds with other people, places, and things.

2. These connections convey both information and emotion. Early in life, humans form a few, intense bonds with other humans. As time goes by, our circle expands.

3. Our relationships (connections) with other humans teach us about our abilities and place in the social and material world, and about how the world works.

4. The flow of information and emotion mediated by these connections is bidirectional.

5. The connections between people—lifenet connections—vary in number, emotional intensity, richness of information, geographical distance, and mode of transmission.

6. Modes of transmission can be direct (face-to-face), symbolic (art, music, drama) or mediated by technologies, including books, newspapers, television, telephones, and computers.

7. Lifenet connections can also include spiritual ties to higher beings and to ancestors.

8. Access to economic, material and symbolic resources reflect and affect (influence) our relationships with people, places, and things.

9. Perceived connections have real consequences.

10. The complex, patterned combination of all of these relationships is the LIFENET.

After this introduction, I pass out plain, 8-1/2 by 11-inch sheets of paper and invite students to visually represent their own lifenets. I encourage them to use whatever visual strategies seem best suited to capturing their relationships to people, places and things. I also ask them to try to express as many of the Lifenet View principles as possible in their drawings. I have found that providing groups of students with colored pencils, felt markers and crayons fosters an informal and relaxed atmosphere. This encourages playfulness, creativity, and cooperation,

as students share drawing materials with one another.

My students typically tackle this formidable challenge with enthusiasm. Their lifenets reflect the many different lifeways, values and representational skills students bring with them to the classroom.

After 15 to 20 minutes, I ask students to talk about their lifenets with one or two classmates. This seems to help even very shy students get to know other students better, discovering similarities and common interests as well as differences. At the end of the exercise, I collect the drawings, promising to return them at the next class. I am invariably surprised and often delighted by what students create. Studying lifenets has helped me get to know my students as individuals and as a community of learners.

Looking at Lifenets

It is difficult to convey the rich complexity and vibrant energy that characterize my students' lifenets. Looking at lifenets carefully and comprehensively has given me a new appreciation for the variety of life experiences, community ties, talents, interests, and concerns students bring with them to their university studies. Lifenets often reveal talents and imagination of a different kind than students display in other venues (classroom discussions, examinations, papers and written assignments).

Some general patterns are evident in the lifenets I've seen over the years. Most

Figure 1
A Basic, Schematic Lifenet
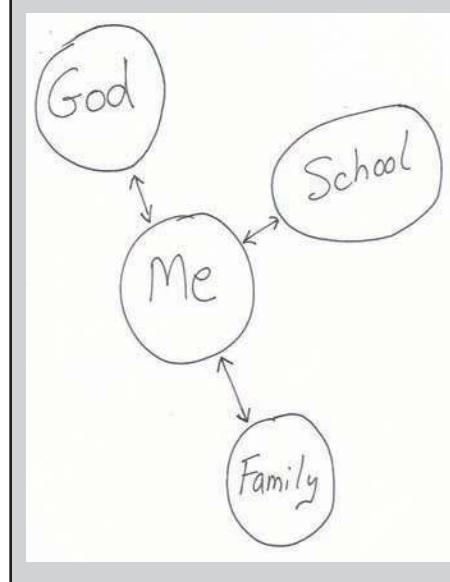
are symmetrical, and often the self ("me") is placed near the center of the drawing. Students use one of three basic visual strategies as they depict their lifeworlds. Some draw schematic drawings—circles, squares or words connected by lines (see Figure 1). Some draw visual metaphors—a scene or single item such as a landscape, tree, flower, boat, or person (e.g., see Figure 2). Others draw collections of symbolic objects representing concepts such as money, time, religion, schooling, work, or recreation (e.g., see Figure 3).

The people most often depicted in lifenets are family members and close friends. Young college students are still very much tied to home and hearth. They are in transition from high school to the world of work and may worry about the slow pace at which they are moving toward full adult status. Some of their classmates are returning students (over 30 years of age) juggling multiple responsibilities— raising children and adolescents; nurturing new, blended families after divorce and remarriage; beginning new careers; caring for aging parents. I've found that taking time to study students' lifenets is well worth the effort. Lifenets create opportunities for further conversation with students and lend themselves to pedagogical reflection.

Rethinking Pedagogical Assumptions

Assessing students' understanding of (and ability to apply) the Lifenet Model led me to modify the course curriculum to better achieve my instructional goals. The purpose of the exercise is to encourage students to think more broadly and "contextually" and less ethnocentrically about human development; to appreciate the roles teachers and human service professionals play in the lifenets of others, and to understand the logic behind the lifeways of rural, indigenous, immigrant, working class, and poor Americans. And yet, despite the fact that my teaching goal was to foster contextual ways of thinking with this exercise, most of my students' lifenets depicted family and friends. Few represented or referred to the wider social and institutional context.

In order to learn more about what appeared to be a discrepancy between my teaching goals and what students were taking away from the exercise, I changed how I evaluated students' understanding of the model. Instead of asking them to define the model on written examinations, I asked what they had learned from the exercise. Their answers surprised me. Here are examples of some of my students' replies when asked on an exam to describe insights they had gained from the lifenet exercise:

That my family is closely connected to me; that they're very important to me and the way I live my life.

It really made me prioritize what was or is important and who I surround myself with.

I gained how much I value my family and education. I have stronger feeling toward these two elements than any other. My lifenet was based on the importance of my family structure. The strong, close family which we enjoy is a reflection of the family and the Hispanic Community in which I was raised.

I had assumed, naively and erroneously, that presenting the Lifenet model and giving students "hands on" experience drawing lifenets would produce deep learning about contextual human development and that students would understand fully the implications for professional practice. Although students could describe some or all of the model's features, they tended to privilege the personal over the contextual and often had difficulty when asked to discuss implications for teachers, counselors and human service providers.

For many students, the exercise may have simply reaffirmed the importance of their ties to loved ones. The literature demonstrates that new teachers in urban settings often draw upon stereotypes when working with urban students and families, and they also tend to use their own experiences and cultural group as the standard against which to compare others (Watson, et al., 2006). As I reviewed what students had to say about the exercise (and noted how little they had to say about its implications for practice), I realized that the Lifenet exercise might have reinforced this problematic tilt toward cultural self-affirmation.

As my goal was to try to *disrupt* this predisposition, I made several changes in the way I used the Lifenet exercise in the curriculum, revisiting the lifenet concept throughout the semester to explore issues of power, gender, class, ethnicity, culture, as well as professional images, roles, responsibilities, and challenges. In teacher preparation classes, in addition to the Lifenet task, I asked students to draw an image of a teacher. I subsequently talked about three public images of teachers: teacher as technician, professional and change agent (Joseph & Burnaford, 1994; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). I then suggested another possible image: the teacher as "lifenet artisan," and asked students to describe what might distinguish this image from the other three. I also talked

Figure 2
A Metaphorical Lifenet

about the role of voluntary associations in professional communities and gave an assignment requiring students to identify and investigate a professional association in their area of specialization.

Here are some of the questions I have used to generate discussion with the goal of helping students examine some of the implications that follow from this way of thinking about human development:

1. *Our relationships with others must be maintained if they are to persist over time. As a general rule, how do men and women differ with respect to their responsibilities for lifenet maintenance?* This usually generates lively discussion of the relative contributions of men and women to family systems. I prompt discussion of family reunions, holiday celebrations, social gatherings, sending birthday greetings to distant relatives, and so on.

2. *In what sense are lifenet connections a reflection of and also affected by access to economic resources? For whom are connections to family and friends most essential to survival?* The aim here is to get students thinking beyond deficit models of poverty. Although poor families face numerous challenges, they are also critically important to survival and are, contrary to stereotypes, strong, resilient, and powerful.

3. *How does education affect people's lifenets? What difference does literacy make with respect to how lifenets develop over time?*

4. *How does physical appearance (gender, height, hair and skin color, attractiveness, health, fitness) affect people's relationships to other people, places and things?* Again, the goal is to move beyond simplistic generalizations toward more nuanced explora-

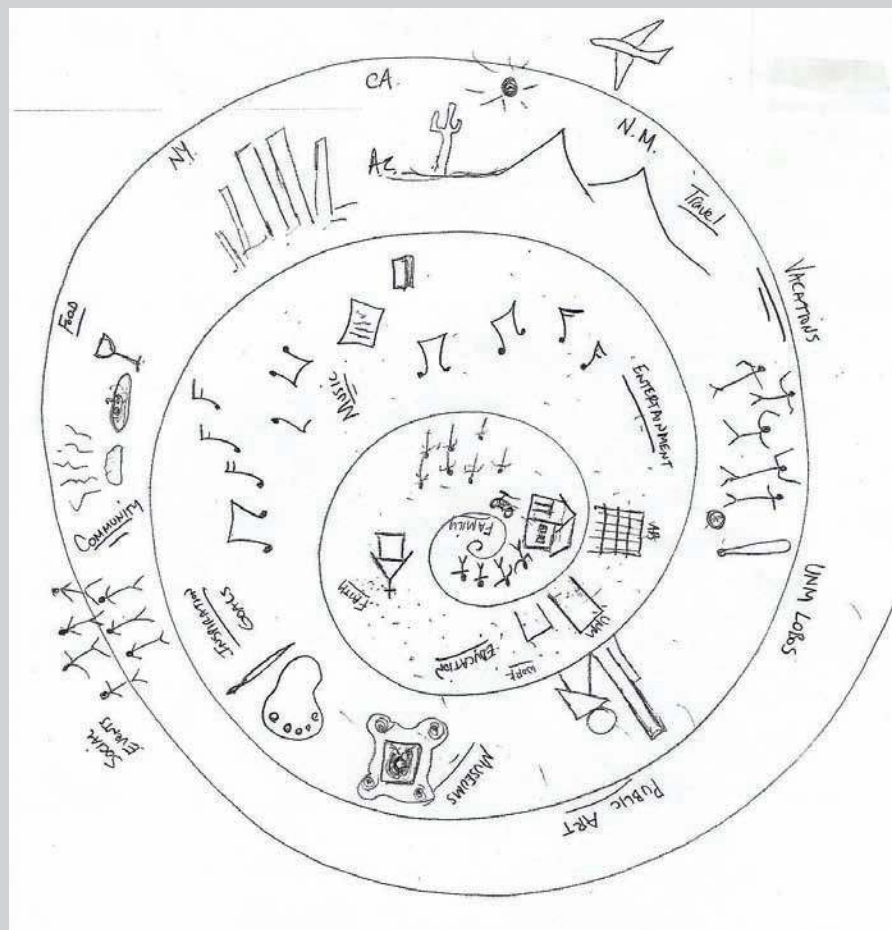tions of multiple factors and complex trade-offs.

5. *How do you want your lifenet to look when you are 75 years old? How do lifenets change over the course of the lifespan? In what sense are lifenets a matter of survival for the elderly?*

6. *How do voluntary professional associations affect the lifenets of members?*

The pedagogical agenda at work here has been to encourage students to broaden their conceptions of human development to include a consideration of relationships as they function within diverse social, institutional and economic contexts. After I revised the curriculum to better address my actual teaching goals, I noted that students began to make explicit conceptual connections (in class discussions and in written assignments) between the Lifenet Model, reading assignments, and the professional's potential role as interlocutor, advocate, community member, change agent and life-long learner.

Conclusions

Lifenets provide a good way for students to get to know each other, which may have particularly important benefits in culturally and developmentally diverse classrooms. Acknowledging and honoring personal experiences, values, and family relationships benefits all students, particularly first-generation and culturally diverse college students and women (Ibarra, 2000). Lifenets provide information that can help professors get to know their students better—collectively and as individuals.

There is always something new and interesting to be learned from reflecting on student lifenets, which often seem to invite conversation and dialog. Lifenets provide powerful and poignant insights into students' perceptions of their life-worlds. They keep me mindful of the many challenges my developmentally diverse students confront and manage to overcome as they pursue their university studies.

However, I have also learned that it is important to assess what students do and do not understand about the model and its implications for practice. As a stand-alone experience, the exercise may simply reaffirm bonds of loyalty to and affection for family members. Instructors should employ follow-up activities and discussions that highlight key teaching points and concepts

Figure 3
A Lifenet Drawing Using Multiple, Symbolic Objects

Lifenet Discussion Questions

1. As a general rule, how do men and women differ with respect to their responsibilities for lifenet maintenance?

2. In what sense are lifenet connections a reflection of and also affected by access to economic resources? For whom are connections to family and friends most essential to survival?

3. How does education affect people's lifenets? What difference does literacy make with respect to how lifenets develop over time?

4. How does physical appearance affect people's relationships to other people, places and things?

5. How do you want your lifenet to look when you are 75 years old? How do lifenets change over the course of the lifespan? In what sense are lifenets a matter of survival for the elderly?

6. How do voluntary professional associations affect the lifenets of members?

related to culture, class, gender, power and professional roles and responsibilities.

The Lifenet View exercise is not limited to use in teacher education and counselor education courses. It could readily be adapted for application in undergraduate arts and sciences courses or in professional preparation courses in law, medicine, social work, geriatrics and gerontology, occupational therapy, counseling, and engineering. The exercise can be integrated into the course curriculum in a manner that explicitly links it to students' developing conceptions of their professional roles as future educators, healthcare practitioners and human service providers.

The exercise could also be adapted for use with younger students (11-18 years). Aside from helping younger students get to know one another better under circumstances likely to support the development of intergroup friendships, the exercise could have other pedagogical uses. For example, teachers could explore its value for assessing changes in students' perceptions of their relationships to the subject matter (social studies, language, literature, health) over time.

Fostering deep learning about racial, cultural, and developmental diversity in the professional socialization process requires programmatic planning, faculty collaboration, curriculum innovation across multiple courses and field/clinical experiences, and meaningful efforts to assess outcomes over the long haul (Darling-Hammond, 2006). I hope that the Lifenet model will prove useful to others who share a commitment to this enterprise.

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