

# Teaching a Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum: Transformative Learning through the Parallel Process

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## Abstract

A social and emotional learning curriculum embedded in freshman seminar content can support freshmen in the transition from high school to college. As such, the university participating in this study has increased the number of students taking freshman seminars. To accommodate the increase in social and emotional learning sections, several nonclinical faculty members were invited to teach the seminar which required training in the curriculum. The purpose of this study was an exploratory assessment of the process of teaching the social and emotional learning curriculum to determine the perceived impact of both the training and teaching experience on the faculty members and their teaching styles. This was a qualitative study, using a systematic thematic content analysis of transcribed interviews. Results indicated the emergence of several themes that highlighted a transformative learning experience for the faculty and indicated that there is a parallel process in teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Social and emotional learning, Freshman seminars, Faculty learning

## 1. Introduction

A growing body of empirical research indicates that higher levels of social and emotional skills are positively correlated with a variety of positive outcomes for academic performance and overall adjustment to higher education settings (Parker et al, 2005; Petrides, Fredrickson, & Furnham, 2004). Swart (1996) found that college students who had significantly higher emotional competence scores received better grades. Wang et al. (2012) found that teaching social and emotional learning not only increased that competence in freshmen; it also increased their academic performance as measured by GPA (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). Social and emotional learning, academic performance and overall positive adjustment from high school to college indicate the need for an SEL curriculum in freshman seminar. Social and emotional learning will be referred to as SEL throughout the paper.

Over the past several years, the university participating in this study, has increased the number of students taking freshman seminars. Approximately 70% of the incoming freshmen were enrolled in a freshman seminar. Many majors, such as nursing, require a freshman seminar in the first semester and a task force formed to assess the needs of freshmen, recommended an increase in the availability to all freshmen. The SEL curriculum was originally taught by faculty who “had clinical training in the fields of social work and psychology ... they were skilled at facilitating the development of insight and assisting in problem-solving” (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013, pg. 110). However, to accommodate the increase in SEL sections, several nonclinical faculty members were invited to participate to teach the seminar.

The social and emotional learning curriculum was developed to instruct students in several areas of emotional intelligence. The curriculum developed by Wyatt and Bloemker (2013) included lessons in emotional awareness, development of relationship skills, and self-management skills. The SEL curriculum was to be implemented in freshman seminar classes as a mechanism for supporting students in the transition to college both in the logistics of college life and the emotional development skills that would assist them in both their academic and social success (Wang et al, 2012; Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). As the freshman seminar sections were expanded, the initiative required the addition of nonclinical faculty to teach the sections. The nonclinical faculty were identified and invited by the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs. The nonclinical faculty members were selected based on their familiarity with undergraduate, and particularly, freshmen student needs. The content of the SEL curriculum includes topics such as self-awareness, behavioral flexibility, and communication skills. Nonclinical faculty required training in the SEL curriculum as well as the pedagogy and skills needed to deliver the curriculum.

The purpose of this study was to explore and assess the process of teaching the SEL curriculum and to determine the perceived impact of both the training in the curriculum and delivery, and the actual teaching experience on the faculty members and their teaching styles.

### 1.1 Social and Emotional Learning in College Curriculum

Literature on teaching social and emotional learning to college freshmen emphasizes the importance of social and emotional learning for academic success and a smooth transition from secondary education to university (Marchesi, A., Cook, K., & ICF, 2012; Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). One article about the impact of SEL on student success revealed that in a program implemented at Texas A&M:

73 percent who participated earned GPAs above 2.0 compared to 62 percent of students in the control group (Low & Nelson, 2006, p. 5). In addition to higher academic achievement, freshmen participating in the EI curriculum as part of their first year experience (FYE) also were more likely to remain in school compared to those not exposed to the program. For example, 59 percent of the students participating in the EI program were retained versus 53 percent of those in the control group (Marchesi, A., Cook, K., & ICF, 2012, p.6).

In reviewing the literature, it was evident that there is no research that directly addresses the dynamic exchange between college freshmen and college faculty teaching social and emotional learning. There is also a significant gap in the literature pertaining to the impact teaching this curriculum has on the faculty who teach it. As such, we were particularly interested in exploring the impact of teaching the curriculum on faculty.

### 1.2 Teaching SEL and the Parallel Process

During the process of training faculty in the SEL curriculum, it became clear that the faculty were engaged with the material in a new way. Faculty combined their experiences and knowledge of freshmen vulnerabilities with their assessment of the curriculum in order to reflect on ways to best teach the content. It was clear that faculty engaged students in a relational process along with their teaching, especially when addressing process issues like adjustment to college, coping with conflict, accessing resources, and managing workload. We began to wonder about a parallel process between faculty teaching the curriculum and their students since these relational components were not readily captured in the course learning outcomes. In addition to the impact that SEL has on student success, the training in and instruction of the SEL based freshman seminars seems to have created a parallel learning process for the nonclinical faculty themselves, in developing their approaches to students as well as in curriculum delivery. Wallerstein and Ekstein first introduced the term parallel process in 1958 (Tracey, Bludworth, & Glidden-Tracey, 2012). Parallel processes were first identified through psychoanalytic supervision. Specifically, parallel process was used to define those experiences in the supervisory relationship that provided the supervisee with insight about dynamics in their helping relationship with the client (Tracey, Bludworth, & Glidden-Tracey, 2012). It was found, for instance, that supervisees would often demonstrate the same dynamics with their supervisor that clients were demonstrating with them in therapy. Thus, by processing these dynamics in vivo during supervision, the supervisee gained insight about how to deal with it in their work with clients. This same process can be expanded to explain the parallel learning process that may take place in any educational relationship (supervisor/supervisee; trainer/trainee, teacher/student). What faculty members do in their connection with students is as important as what they teach. As such, teaching SEL in a freshman seminar poses an opportunity for the development of a parallel process to emerge for faculty and students as faculty seek to demonstrate the very elements and skills of SEL through modeling, interactions, and activities in the classroom. In addition, faculty themselves are potentially affected by both the curriculum and the dynamic between teacher and student.

#### 1.2.1 Teaching SEL: A Transformative Learning Experience

As part of the parallel process of teaching SEL, teaching SEL became a transformative experience for faculty. Transformative learning theory proposed by Mezirow (2000) encourages the self-reflective experience to foster exploration of biases and assumptions that have developed throughout a person's life experiences. Through critical self-reflection, individuals proceed through phases of the transformation process that begins with a *disorienting dilemma* leading to self-reflection on internalized assumptions. The process of reflecting on assumptions can encourage new ways of being and thinking and eventually new levels of competence and perspectives that are more open-minded and inclusive of broader constructs (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). The *disorienting dilemma* proposed by Mezirow is the initial moment of realization that "triggers a critical examination of our meaning structures, opening us up to alternatives" (Fraser, 2015). Similarly, Nohl (2015), defined this *disorienting dilemma* as the *nondetermining start* that "begins when novelty, neither anticipated nor planned, breaks into life. The new occurs abruptly..." (p.39). Nohl explained that the novelty can be experienced in "casual mode" or in "crisis" but the essence of the

*nondetermining start* is that it is an initial step in a process that is based on an experience (p.40). While the process of developing the new, transformed perspectives proposed by both Nohl and Mezirow may require continuous exploration as well as self-reflections, the beginning of this process, the transformative catalyst, may be a single event. While transformative learning cannot be viewed as an instantaneous occurrence, or be determined or truly measured in a finite amount of time, the beginning of the evolutionary process and the beginning of transformation, may be as elementary as a training or in our case, a new way of approaching teaching and curriculum.

Faculty trained in the curriculum of SEL indicated throughout the training that learning about SEL was a rewarding and novel experience. They indicated it expanded their knowledge of specific skills, and also solidified their own intuitive sense developed from their experiences in life and with their students. In order to better understand this phenomenon, the following study was developed.

## 2. Method

Several university instructors who developed and taught the social and emotional learning curriculum created training for nonclinical faculty, including an instructional manual for the SEL content. Material covered in this training including review of the five factors associated with Social and Emotional Learning- “Awareness of Emotions in Self and Others, Tolerance of Difference or Conflict, Interpersonal Relationship Skills, Flexibility in Perspective-Taking and Behavior, and Self-Management Skill” (Wang, Young, Wilhite, & Marczyk, 2011, p.46), as well as the pedagogy and group process needed to encourage discussion and development in of these areas.

The nonclinical faculty who were trained in the SEL curriculum provided feedback on the training, and on their delivery of the curriculum. Based on informal discussion and feedback, the faculty indicated that the process of teaching the curriculum was a positive experience for them and enhanced their connections with the students. Despite the research that supports the importance of SEL in student success (Parker et al, 2005; Petrides, Fredrickson, & Furnham, 2004; Swart, 1996; Wang, et al. 2012; Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013), there is limited research that assesses the effect of the faculty’s own social and emotional learning skills on the experiences of their students in the classroom.

As a result of the lack of research discussing SEL, its impact on faculty, and the subsequent impact on students, the following research questions emerged:

What is the effect of teaching the SEL curriculum on the SEL of the faculty?

How do faculty perceive the effects of teaching the SEL curriculum on students?

How do faculty perceive the effects of teaching the SEL curriculum on their relationships with students?

### 2.1 Study Design

This was an exploratory analysis designed as a qualitative study predicated on a phenomenological approach which implemented a thematic content analysis of data collected from two sources: individual interviews and an online survey. The purpose of this research was to further explore the transformative parallel process of the faculty through their experiences of teaching the SEL curriculum. An interview protocol and a Faculty Social/Emotional Rating Scale were created to gather data related to the research questions. The study and protocols were reviewed and approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in the research design.

The phenomenological approach to research seeks to understand the “lived experiences” of participants (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). This approach allows the researchers to examine the phenomena of teaching the SEL curriculum through the experiences of the faculty trained in the method of teaching the curriculum. Thus, while this was a qualitative study, the exploratory nature of the inquiry was informed by the themes of the SEL curriculum as well as the theory of transformative learning. The qualitative responses of the participants were analyzed in a systematic thematic content analysis to allow the emergence of themes. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to examine the data for both semantic and latent content that emerge to illuminate both the explicit meaning of the themes as well as the underlying assumptions and boarder meaning of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### 2.2 Participants

Eight nonclinical faculty members were recruited to teach the SEL curriculum and participate in the training as well as the study. Of the eight faculty members who were trained in and taught the SEL freshman seminar, only six participated in the study. These faculty members had academic training in science, English, and education to name just a few content areas. The six nonclinical faculty members participating in the study were asked to complete a short survey via, Survey Monkey, related to the curriculum and instruction of the SEL courses in the end of the fall semester.

### 2.3 Measures

The survey was a six question self-report scale asking them to rate their knowledge in six areas of social and emotional intelligence (See Appendix A). The faculty members were also asked to participate in an hour individual interview to discuss the process of teaching the SEL curriculum. The interview protocol consisted of nine semi-structured, open-ended questions related to the process of delivering the SEL curriculum (See Appendix B). Data from the faculty interviews were audio taped and transcribed by a research assistant for analysis. The research assistant as well as the three principal researchers analyzed the data through a systemic method of assessing each line of the transcript in a comparative process to determine convergence of responses into main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A similar systematic approach was implemented within each main theme to determine the divergence of each main theme into subthemes.

## 3. Results

Through careful analysis of each of the faculty member's interview transcripts, four main themes emerged: Faculty Self-Awareness; Awareness of Student Development; Impact on Relationships with Students and Impact on Pedagogy.

### 3.1 Faculty Self-Awareness

Upon reviewing the interviews and responses to the survey, Self-Awareness emerged as a main theme. This self-awareness as described by the faculty was an element of their experience of teaching. For the faculty teaching the SEL curriculum, all six discussed the element of self-disclosure and self-reflection as mechanisms for helping students better understand their own self-awareness, emotional awareness, and impact on relationships. One faculty member stated, *I've even ... self-disclosed when we talked about it in class and maybe will give some of myself as an example, of how I maybe look at things or how I've transformed when I look at my own social emotional learning.*

This reflection on the process of sharing of themselves, brought a deeper sense of and reflection on their own social and emotional awareness. Another faculty member shared,

*You say 'of course, I know what that [SEL] is' but I like going through that training because it really did go through the components and a lot of things that I hadn't been covering with freshmen students, in the past, but really needed to be covered. I think it made me look deeply into myself. And it made me look more deeply into my teaching and the reasons why I do certain things. (pause) and don't do others.*

As faculty pondered and explored their own SEL, they developed a greater capability for teaching the curriculum to freshmen. This reflective process then led to the emergence of two other main themes, Awareness of Student Development and the Impact on Pedagogy.

### 3.2 Awareness of Student Development

Faculty identified greater attunement to student development in terms of process as well as outcomes such as academic success. Several faculty participants indicated that through the content and activities of the curriculum they became aware of the developmental difference they saw between their freshmen students and the students in their other upper level classes. This reflected a new awareness about student development and created a deeper understanding of student needs. For example, one faculty member stated that,

*I think I've realized how very young they are. For me teaching the freshman seminar is a good reminder that emotionally many of them are very young. I remember early on talking about extroverts and introverts and a student said 'What's an extrovert?' ... So the fact that a 19 year old wouldn't know what that was reminded me that they all come at different levels.*

Another faculty participant stated, *I realize that their social emotional learning level is certainly at a much different place than mine...they are at a different stage or point in their development and they are looking at things differently than I would look at them.*

It became clear through the discussion of awareness that the faculty members' own Self-Awareness and Development of Student Awareness were simultaneous processes such that through their own use-of-self during discussions and activities, the faculty not only became more aware of their own SEL process, but also that of the students. As they embraced and engaged in the content, the faculty developed a deeper understanding of the students. This developing awareness led to the emergence of the final two main themes, the Impact on Relationships with Students and the Impact on Pedagogy.

### 3.3 Impact on Relationships with Students

As the researchers continued to explore the responses related to increased levels of awareness, a third theme emerged about the Impact on Relationships with students. This theme overlapped with Faculty Self-Awareness and Awareness of Student Development in that as the faculty developed these new levels of awareness, they were better able to connect to the students. This new level of connection positively impacted their relationship with students. Specifically, each of the six faculty members discussed a deeper relationship with students that allowed them to support the freshmen in their classes, especially as related to their transition into college. Some faculty shared:

*Seeing them during that time we really built a partnership every one of them. Some of them are still emailing me today. Some of them are asking for letters of recommendation. Um, some of them are still coming down here to see me here.*

Another indicated a mentoring relationship explaining that,

*discussion is more open with me. They'll tell me things that they might not in a regular classroom scenario... we lower that sort of inhibition and...I even tell them that if there is something going on that I can help you with I'll find some direction for you to be able to go.*

Many of the faculty members shared that their experience of teaching enabled them to develop relationships that supported the students in their transition to college. They attributed this directly to the nature of the topics, material discussed, and the personal nature of the content. As a result, many faculty members reported ongoing mentoring relationships with students well after their course had ended.

### 3.4 Impact on Pedagogy

Throughout the analysis of the responses related to the impact of teaching the SEL curriculum, it became apparent that in addition to the impact it had on the faculty and their relationships with the students, it also had an Impact on Pedagogy. Each of the six faculty interviewed indicated that one of the main outcomes of being trained to teach the SEL curriculum to freshmen and actually teaching it, was that it changed the way they approached their pedagogy. One faculty member stated: *it made me kind of really rethink it differently pedagogically...while I was doing some of this I didn't really realize how I was doing it until I reflected on it.* This reflection on how they taught was a common sentiment. For example, one faculty member stated, *I have a different level of reflection, a different level of engagement with them.* Another faculty member shared:

*I do a lot of reflective stuff and we talk about self-care, flexibility, and a lot of the things that are part of the curriculum so its kind of what I do... I think that the students that go through it [FRS seminar] really have felt heard in a different way so I think usually in the freshman seminar I have a different level of reflection, a different level of engagement with the students*

This shift in pedagogical thinking to be more sensitive to the students' development and needs was reflected in the attempts the faculty made to create safety in the classroom to encourage sharing. Thus, one of the Impacts on Pedagogy specifically discussed was the creation of safety. One faculty member shared, *It creates that safe space to share some very deep concerns...the gentle questioning it kind of trains them how to look more deeply at this stuff.* The nature of the material and conversations in the class led the faculty to re-conceptualize their approach to students and teaching. They attended to the interpersonal milieu of the classroom, which allowed for greater interpersonal safety for students to explore their own development and experiences.

In reviewing the responses of the faculty, the four themes that emerged connected with each other through the transformative process that the faculty experienced. As the faculty engaged in the process of teaching the social and emotional learning curriculum, their own process of self-awareness and self-reflection about SEL emerged. This subsequently opened the way for a deeper awareness of and appreciation for the students' developmental process. These new levels of awareness paved the way for enhanced relationships with the students that led to more support of the students in their transitional process. Finally, as faculty reflected on the impact of teaching SEL they shared an overall shift in their pedagogy to take into consideration the students, their needs and the interpersonal effects of their own teaching style.

## 4. Discussion

The SEL curriculum and training discussed in this article was designed to teach nonclinical faculty about the five components of social and emotional learning and review pedagogical methods for teaching them to students. These components include emotional awareness in self and others, relationship skills, self-management skills, tolerance for difference and diversity, and behavioral and perceptual flexibility (Wang, Young, Wilhite, & Marczyk, 2011).

Faculty responses to a survey and interview about their experiences with the training and delivery of the curriculum indicated that an outcome of the project was their own social and emotional learning. Specifically, as the faculty engaged in the curriculum, their own utilization of self-reflection enhanced their self-awareness and their awareness of the students' needs. Additionally, their responses to the awareness of their own development, reflection on the teaching process, and their assessment of students' development enhanced their own behavior related to both pedagogy and relational approaches to students. These faculty experiences, in which their own understanding and attunement to the needs of students was expanded through the instruction of SEL, supports research by Miller (2004) indicating that although the concept of parallel process was first developed in connection between a therapist and supervisor, this dynamic process can be replicated among students and faculty. Additionally, this parallel process of developing SEL skills through the teaching process reflected a transformative learning experience for the faculty in their own development and pedagogical approaches. Specifically, as the faculty engaged in the material with the students, their understanding of students, and themselves as faculty members, was transformed. Thus, in support of Merizow's (1997) concept of the *disorienting dilemma* or Nohl's (2015) *nondetermining start*, the experience of teaching SEL became the catalyst for their own transformation. This transformation occurred in their own social and emotional learning, their teaching style, their reflective capability to evaluate their assumptions about students, and subsequently, student learning.

#### 4.1 Implications for Teaching

The implications of this study on teaching are reflected in the transformative nature of this parallel process. Considering that faculty identified areas of transformation via this training and teaching project the experience of teaching SEL can then be categorized as a *disorienting dilemma* (Mezirow, 1997) or a *nondetermining start* (Nohl, 2015). For example, Impact on Pedagogy theme represents the transformative impact that teaching SEL had on faculty members' conceptualization of and approach to teaching. The process of creating lesson plans to teach the five components of social and emotional learning created opportunities for faculty to reflect on and explore assumptions about the teaching process and students. This led to the creation of new mechanisms for teaching such as self-disclosure and the use of personal examples that enhanced their pedagogy. As such, this training and teaching project became a vehicle for enhancing their pedagogy. The implication of this finding for classes other than freshman seminars may be that the enhanced awareness of student needs and the importance of use of self by faculty may enhance the academic experience and success of students via such a parallel process.

#### 4.2 Limitations

This program was a pilot program to train nonclinical faculty to teach the social and emotional learning curriculum. The number of faculty invited to teach and participate in the training, as well as the subsequent research study was small. This small sample size led to several limitations. While the information obtained from the participants indicates transformative, parallel experiences for the faculty, this result cannot be generalized to all faculty teaching SEL curriculum. In addition, since the participants were nonclinical faculty, it is possible that the transformative nature of the experience was more deeply felt by those involved who were not accustomed to thinking about or teaching clinical concepts such as social and emotional learning. Finally, in addition to the limitations presented by the small number of participants, the responses were based on the self-reporting mechanism of the faculty. Therefore, as with any self-report measure, researchers must be aware of the possibility of "social desirability bias" skewing participants' responses, which can happen if the participant anticipates the socially appropriate and expected responses then answers accordingly (Fisher, 1993).

#### 4.3 Future Research

The results of this study are promising and demonstrate a potential for new ways of thinking about teaching as a mechanism for modeling social and emotional learning. Additionally, this new approach to pedagogy could prove instrumental in supporting and enhancing student success and retention. Further research to compare the experience of the students with that of the faculty would provide better understanding of the parallel process and how this process can enhance student success.

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