

# Contextualized Teaching & Learning

## A Promising Approach for Basic Skills Instruction

Contextualized teaching and learning (CTL), or the concept of **relating subject matter content to meaningful situations that are relevant to students' lives**, offers one promising approach to helping students learn more effectively.

In *Contextualized Teaching and Learning: A Faculty Primer*, the RP Group's Center for Student Success features a broad range of CTL strategies used by community colleges to improve learners' basic skills. (See page 2 for a list of profiled practices.) The following brief offers instructors, college leaders, policy makers and funders a high-level summary of the CTL primer—focusing on core components for effective implementation and strategic considerations for colleges interested in starting or expanding CTL practices.

RP Group produced *Contextualized Teaching and Learning: A Faculty Primer* as part of the California Basic Skills Initiative and in partnership with the Statewide Academic Senate and the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative.

### How do colleges design and implement CTL?

*Contextualized Teaching and Learning: A Faculty Primer* reveals common formats for CTL and a set of core elements that characterize course and program design and implementation. These commonalities have implications for classroom practice as well as indicate organizational and structural considerations critical to supporting and sustaining faculty innovations.

#### *What formats do practitioners use to implement CTL?*

The practices featured offer faculty and administrators two primary formats for CTL.<sup>1</sup>

**Stand-alone classroom practices.** These single classrooms include “infused academic” courses focused on academic skill building with CTL, enhancing the relevance of those skills, and providing opportunities for students to actively engage in the learning process. For example, College of San Mateo's (CA) *Intensive Introduction to Reading and Writing* course develops basic reading, composition, and speaking skills through hands-on investigation of a community issue. Alternatively, “infused occupational” courses approach CTL through a vocational focus, integrating academic skills with occupational content. One example is the Joyce Foundation's *Shifting Gears* project at Ivy Tech Community College (IN), where automotive and math faculty collaborate to increase student readiness for certificate and degree programs by integrating developmental math concepts into introductory automotive courses.

**Linked courses or learning communities.** These practices feature a series of connected courses, utilize a specific context for delivery, and often exhibit a high degree of collaboration between instructors and students. While each course retains its own objectives, learning community classes mutually reinforce a set of shared goals with faculty collaborating to ensure that the content of each course supports the others.

For instance, Chabot College's (CA) *Daraja Program* aims to increase transfer and students' personal and academic success through a freshman experience pairing English instruction and college success courses with a focus on African-American culture, literature, and experiences. The *Spanish to English Teacher Assistant Certificate Program* at Southwestern College (CA) links child development and English as a Second Language coursework to help Spanish-speaking students succeed in coursework delivered in English and prepare them for entry-level employment.

### ***What components do practitioners cite as central to CTL design & implementation?***

Faculty and program directors involved in diverse practices commonly identify several core elements that characterize CTL design and implementation.

**Faculty collaboration.** Faculty collaboration and in many cases, partnerships formed across disciplines or functions and with community stakeholders and employers, encourage CTL innovations. Instructors collaborate to varying levels on a wide range of activities including program design, curriculum and professional development, resource acquisition, and assessment of CTL practices.

**Curriculum/instructional material development.** Most CTL practices require the development of new instructional materials due to the artificial nature of applications in traditional texts and their lack of relevance to students. Practitioners often acquire instructional resources from community partners or from students' own workplace experiences. Faculty frequently point out the significant time and resources required to develop, document, and produce these materials at the beginning of a new practice.

*The RP Group investigated 11 different CTL practices that vary in scale of implementation, type of context utilized, and the intensity of contextualization. Featured practices include:*

Intensive Introduction to Reading and Writing, College of San Mateo (CA)  
Basic Skills Math for Statistical Process Control, El Camino College (CA)  
Elementary and Intermediate Algebra, Los Medanos College (CA)  
Shifting Gears Initiative, Ivy Tech Community College (IN)  
Utilities and Construction Prep Program, Career Advancement Academy, Los Angeles Trade-Technical College (CA)  
FastStart@CCD, Community College of Denver (CO)  
Digital Bridge Academy, Cabrillo College (CA)  
Daraja Program, Chabot College (CA)  
Bridge to Biotech Lab Skills Program, City College of San Francisco (CA)  
Spanish to English Teacher Assistant Certificate, Southwestern College (CA)  
I-BEST, Pierce College (WA)  
Contextualized Teaching and Learning: A Faculty Primer provides a full description of each practice.

**Relevant context.** An authentic context serves as the foundation for all CTL practices and can vary from the personal to the professional. Faculty approach the selection of a context differently, choosing one they believe has significance for students, developing the context with learners, or offering a context students can choose based on their educational or career interests. Faculty stress that a relevant context helps students recognize the purpose and value of basic skills development to their academic or career advancement—enhancing the learning process and facilitating students’ mastery of material.

**Interactive teaching.** Interactive teaching plays a prominent role in CTL implementation. Working with contextualized curriculum offers instructors an array of opportunities to construct complex and engaging interactive activities for and with students including team work, peer to peer review, real-world data collection and problem-solving, experiences with community partners, authentic assessments, and reflective essays.

**Professional development.** A cornerstone of all practices featured in the primer, professional development can support faculty in all aspects of CTL design, development, implementation, and assessment. Professional development focuses on a range of topics, from better understanding and generating course content to exploring how to teach in a contextualized manner. In some cases, academic and occupational faculty “cross train,” taking one another’s courses or partnering to identify natural opportunities to teach basic skills in occupational coursework.

**Institutional support.** Institutional support can prove vital to the success and sustainability of CTL innovations. This support can come in numerous forms including administrative backing for new course creation, release time for professional and curriculum development, sharing of faculty across departments, flexible scheduling, use of facilities, and dedicated support staff.

**Continuous improvement.** The integrated nature of CTL heightens the importance of ongoing reflection and revision. Faculty may find significant learning in the first semester of implementation, with curriculum “gelling,” instruction improving, and the overall understanding of CTL deepening after several semesters—leading to course and/or program modifications.

**Improved outcomes:** CTL implementation can lead to improved outcomes for students as shown through a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures ranging across practices. The most commonly reported outcomes include increased student engagement, motivation, and self-esteem and quantitative measures include improved course completion, GPA, performance in college-level work, and employment.

## How does CTL connect to learning theory?

A literature review also indicates that CTL is grounded in a range of inter-related theories about how people learn. These include research on **motivation theory, problem-based learning, social cognitive theory, and learning styles**. While each is distinct in focus, these theories combine to underscore CTL as a means for advancing student success by increasing interest and motivation, heightening the utility of skills and information, enhancing connectivity to peers, and accommodating diverse ways of learning. Moreover, recent breakthroughs in brain research indicate that CTL can stimulate a student’s brain to develop patterns and create meaning by linking experience and sensory stimuli to new knowledge through real-life application.

## What strategic considerations are significant to CTL success?

Four strategic considerations for starting or expanding CTL emerge out of the featured practices with implications for faculty, administrators, funders, and policy makers alike. These issues are key to situating CTL within broader college efforts, state movements, and national initiatives focused on achieving transformational change leading to improved student success.

**Resources:** Each element for CTL implementation listed above had unique resource considerations. Resource needs vary according to the scope and scale of the CTL practice and can come in varying forms. A small infusion of funds can fuel individual faculty or small teams interested in trying CTL while more holistic, interdisciplinary, or cross-functional models may call for significant and long-term investments. Colleges can leverage state funding such as Basic Skills Initiative grants in California, federal dollars through the Perkins Career and Technical Education and Workforce Investment Acts, and an increasing number of foundation initiatives.


**Research:** An abundance of anecdotal evidence but limited research (particularly using random assignment) exists to back this promising practice. Several practices in the primer provide examples of formal program evaluation targeting continuous improvement. For example, results from a 2007 study of *FastStart* at Community College of Denver (CO) showed statistically significant differences between students in the program and those in a comparison group in terms of developmental math completion, overall completion of basic skills courses, and first semester GPA. At the institutional level, practitioners are encouraged to work with college researchers to incorporate initial assessment and ongoing evaluation into CTL design. Funders and policy makers might consider developing the conditions for longitudinal tracking, agreeing on common data collection and supporting comparative research.

**Replicability/Scalability:** Replication and expansion of CTL models beyond individual classrooms and colleges presents a critical challenge. As several practices in the primer demonstrate, documenting efforts, exchanging experiences, and developing communities of practice can advance CTL innovations. For example, LA Trade-Technical College's *Utilities and Construction Prep* program benefits from participation in a broader network of "Career Advancement Academies" administered by the Career Ladders Project through which resources, training, evaluation, and results are shared. As demonstrated by the I-BEST program implemented in Washington's 34 community and technical colleges (also profiled in the primer), conscious policy and diversified private and public funding can support measured, thoughtful scaling across an entire state system.

**Sustainability:** While special allocations can seed CTL innovations, strategic planning and strong support are critical to long-term institutionalization. Emerging research indicates that investing in an alternative approach like CTL may pay for itself in the long-run through program improvement and increased student achievement. Moreover, faculty interest and leadership as well as intentional shifts in institutional culture are critical to ensuring CTL takes hold over time.

### (Endnotes)

- 1 Mazzeo, C. (2008). *Supporting student success at California community colleges*. Prepared for the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative by the Career Ladders Project for California Community Colleges.



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For a full version of  
*Contextualized Teaching and  
Learning: A Faculty Primer*, visit:  
[www.rpgroup.org/css/CTL.html](http://www.rpgroup.org/css/CTL.html)