Building an Academic Culture of Praxis

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ABSTRACT

Facilitation of student learning is arguably the most important action of higher education. The paper focuses on student-centered education, praxis, and assessment in the context of a particular university campus. It considers how colleges can bridge theory and practice with the goal of achieving praxis campus-wide. The paper examines the process undertaken by the campus to holistically apply praxis. It discusses the benefits of a student-centered approach that extend beyond the classroom to include administration and staff. The resulting unified organizational culture can have profound positive effects on the student learning experience and the entire college community.

INTRODUCTION

The scholarship on student-centeredness is primarily focused on individual classroom pedagogy. Grebennikov and Shah (2013) conducted a recent study that delved into the trends in perceived importance and performance of various university services and main issues that a particular university had been addressing to enhance student experience. One of their findings was that it is the total experience of the university that shapes students' judgments, not just what happens in the classroom. As stated by Cahill, Turner, and Barefoot (2010), "higher education managers should ensure that institutional strategies and infrastructures promote the improvement of student learning and the students learning experience" (p. 292). Cullen, Harris, and Hill (2012) also took student-centeredness beyond the classroom and asked academic leaders to consider the broader implications of making their institutions fully learner-centered.

This paper focuses on how higher learning institutions can progressively implement the effectual art of bridging theory and practice with the perpetual aspiration of achieving campus wide praxis. "Ideally, theoretical constructs and real world practice should be closely related" (Williams, Sánchez, & Hunnell, 2011). Praxis denotes doing or action: the exercise or practice of an art, skill, or science (Chapman, 1999). Acquiring content knowledge of a particular field or discipline through higher education alone is not enough. Jarvis (as cited in Chapman,

1999) explained that there is content knowledge and process knowledge. The former concept indicates why and the latter indicates how (Chapman, 1999). The 'learning while doing' approach relies on data and on adjusting the organization's implementation plan and the underlying ways of operating (Kerman, Freundlich, Lee, & Brenner, 2012).

The explanatory analysis of the campus presented in the following manuscript is part of a university that prides itself on being a teaching institution with professional and career orientations. The campus offers its students hands on experiences, with laboratory learning practice embedded in the curriculum. Curriculum is at the heart of what higher education does. To truly effect change, the curriculum needs to be examined and aligned with learner-centered practices (Cullen, Harris, & Hill, 2012). Research shows that students are better able to effectively apply principles when instruction is combined with experiential learning (Grover & Stovall, 2013). The university is committed to experiential education, which continues to serve an integral part of the institution's identity. Through an interdisciplinary approach to learning, the campus in question has sought to build and expand the notion of campus community to develop a culture of praxis wherein theory meets practice within and without the classroom. The concept of praxis challenged the higher education conventions of faculty versus administration, student affairs versus academic affairs, and the master teacher syn-

drome. The master teacher syndrome is the antithesis of instructor lifelong learning; it is the belief that competent teaching is a finite feat that requires no additional development. Progressive pedagogues are contrastingly responsive, flexible, and evolving (Morris, 2013).

This article addresses and extends knowledge in the areas of student-centered education, praxis, and assessment. It reports the results of a university campus that executed a holistic, student-centered initiative that effectively melded academic and professional orientations (i.e., theory and practice). The paper reviews the pedagogical literature pertaining to student-centered learning and praxis. It relates how a particular college campus philosophically and conceptually aligned the academic experience with industry skills. The amalgam is at some level irrelevant, because highly effective instructors in industry and the professions intuitively share both with students. The idea that academic orientations and professional orientations are schismatic is foreign to the instructor that possesses both of these. For instance, a bi-oriented teacher would link site visitations (i.e., field trips) with relevant Essential Learning Competencies (ELCs) such as higher order thinking, critical thinking, analysis, interpretation, and problem solving in a classroom discussion.

Enhancing the Student Experience

In student-centered environments, the student often determines the learning goal, the means to support learning, or both (Hannafin, 2012; as cited in Hannafin, Hill, Land, & Lee, 2014). Despite espousing student- or learner-centered classroom teaching practices, teachers often employ didactic, teacher centered approaches (Polly & Hannafin, 2011; Johnston, 2009). Terms such as student-centered and learner-centered are ubiquitous in contemporary educational discourse. Their pervasiveness causes them to be used casually, which does not often reflect the high level of responsibility and expectation that is placed on the student (O'Neil & McMahon, 2005). The educational process benefits when learners become partners in the teaching process (Hein, 2012) rather than being required to listen to didactic oriented instructors providing lengthy on-ground classroom lectures where the amount of learning is questionable (Henderson, Finkelstein, Beach, & 2010; Fata-Hartley, 2011; Yamarik, 2007). At the broadest level, conditions where students are able to not only provide input, but rather, control and have "greater autonomy" (Hein, 2012, p. 23) over their programs, courses, delivery methods, and matriculation (Gibbs, 1992) of study assumes that students have both the capacity and the maturity to guide themselves or function at a high level. Hains and Smith (2012) discovered that student confidence levels increased because
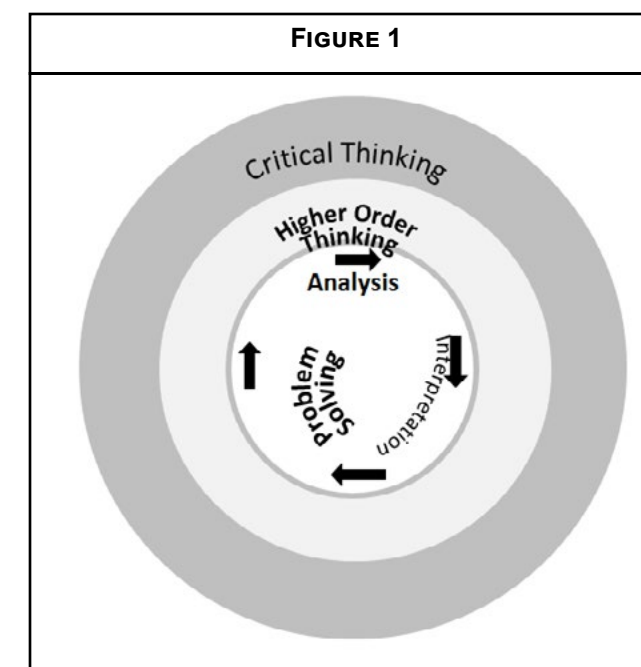
of a student-developed course. The authors reported that course development process proved to be a catalyst for student development and allowed the students to take further ownership of their education. Hence, a student-centered focus symbiotically relates to or, at the very least, leads to self-directed learning (i.e., autodidacticism). The pursuit of a measured student-centered learning environment can be advantageous while enhancing the student experience (Zuhal, 2012; Wright, 2011; Polly & Hannafin, 2011; Azevedo, Behnagh, Duffy, Harley, & Trevors, 2012; Lewis & Reinders, 2008, as cited in Feuer, Given-King, & Low, 2009). Egle, Navarre, and Nixon, (2011) affirmed the student-centered, discussion-based classroom and its valuing of multiplicity, diversity, opportunity, and democratic process. When a college or university prioritizes and seeks to facilitate the needs of students first, they tend to be more student-centered rather than faculty-centered (Wright, 2011). Ahn and Class (2011) concluded, "Worthwhile benefits can be realized for students and instructors alike within different disciplines through a shift in pedagogy from a traditional teacher-centered to a student-centered approach" (p. 277). This type of prioritizing ensures that services, activities, and resource allocations will directly or indirectly enhance the student experience. Achieving a student-centered learning goal can be an aspiration wherein academic leadership, faculty, and staff can create an environment that fosters a student-centered trajectory. According to Cahill, Turner, and Barefoot (2010, p. 292), "The key to the success of enhancing the student learning experience is the engagement with students at both a faculty and university level."

Sparrow, Sparrow, and Swan (2000), suggested that while there may be limitations to establishing a student-centered learning approach, it is possible and worth the journey. A student-centered approach helps students to develop a "can-do" attitude (Jones, 2007). It is effective, motivating, and enjoyable. Stukalina (2010) regarded student motivation as an essential factor for the educational environment's quality improvement. The journey to pursue a student-centered learning setting requires a concern for how students learn and a mind shift towards grooming students to become self-directed learners (Feurer, 2009). As learners become more adept at monitoring and taking responsibility for their own learning, the use of technological tools becomes more effective (Cullen, Harris, & Hill, 2012). Student learning should be viewed holistically, by examining each element of the learning process. Thus, matching and aligning those elements with an academic experience that is intentionally designed to reach the totality of what constitutes a student becomes likely. The discussion inevitably leads to the underlying goal for academics—developing independent, lifelong, autonomous learners.

U.S. President Bill Clinton once said, "We are living in a world where what you earn is a function of what you can learn" (U.S. Department of Education, 1995, as cited in Ayofe, Ajetola, & Oyewole, 2009, p. 327). To educate students to be prepared for the work force and life, a middle ground between Theory (pure-research based knowledge) and Practice (industry, hands-on knowledge) should exist. Welsh and Dehler (2012) contended "that student-centered learning experiences need to be more firmly grounded in theory and paired with pedagogical strategies that, in combination, result in deep, intentional and integrative learning" (p. 772). Students are often exposed to an almost breathtaking array of curricular and co-curricular learning experiences. The obvious concern is how educators should help them make meaning of their diverse learning. Taylor (2011) suggested pedagogical processes that promote reflection across learning experiences in a student-centered approach to integrate learning. The self-education or autodidactic aspect is essentially a contemplative, absorptive process. Love (2013) argued that what is missing in the discourse on theory-to-practice is the recognition of the role of informal theory that serves as the bridge between formal theory and practice. Informal theories are the theories that individuals carry around in their heads about all aspects of their work. Love (2013) claimed that all professionals develop and use informal theories. Faculty members move pedagogically toward this center from their unique perspectives.

The Student-Centered Campus

The new focus on assessing that the students are actually learning the information offered by the institutions' programs and that students can demonstrate what they have learned is a benefit to all stakeholders (Ashley, Friday-Stroud, & Collins, 2010). As a result, it is no longer enough for administrators and faculty members to claim that "we have taught the students," but they must now demonstrate and confirm that the students have learned the materials taught; hence, promoting the development an assessment culture (Ashley, Friday-Stroud, & Collins, 2010). It is an accepted pedagogical premise that the evaluation methods are determined by the objectives and practices employed, and the extent to which the course objectives are fulfilled (Cornelius & Gordon, 2008, as cited in Wright, 2011). A variety of tools can be used to assess and evaluate different aspects of student-centered teaching and learning. Wright's (2011) research indicated that students tended to respond positively to learner-centered changes that were introduced, and that the teachers considered themselves successful in their quest to create more learner-centered classrooms while achieving their course objectives. Establishing a student-centered learning environment requires incremental steps of preparation to student readiness before beginning college, active learn-

ing at a high level, and student choices. The university campus at hand recognized the requirements and recently employed an alternative strategy of placing emphasis on the student experience to eventually reach an authentic student-centered campus. Figure 1 shows how an entire organizational team can facilitate the student experience strategy in panorama.

Figure 1. The Hickman Model (named after the administrator on campus who created it) is a nonlinear illustration of how ELCs can work concurrently in learning, and an example of how anyone on the team can participate in the process of building Praxis on campus.

Sixty-five percent of college professors report that what is taught in high school does not prepare students for college (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Far too many high school graduates enter college without the basic content knowledge, skills, or habits of mind they need to succeed (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). The student campus population at the time was nearly one-third white, one-third black, one-third Hispanic, making it rather culturally diverse. In terms of age, the student average was 24 years of age. Considering this, the campus examined how student learning was affected by:

- student learning styles,
- demographics,
- academic achievement before entering college,
- placement scores,
- and study skills.

From each of these contributing factors emerged the need for deliberate and strategic faculty development.

Campus faculty members were reputed for their passion, industry knowledge, and love for students. There was a case for the faculty to be immersed in focused teaching and learning developmental training activities that would address the needs of the students. Connecting the student experience (classroom instruction, faculty interaction, industry preparation) to rigor can occur through deliberate engagement by faculty.

The following four areas of concentration led to giving students a balanced education:

1. Starting at orientation and continuing through their academic career, students were introduced to basic learning competencies, termed Essential Learning Competencies (ELCs): interpretation, analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and higher order thinking. These competencies are at the core of all campus learning and create sound thought processes from which all future learning takes place.

2. Students received experiential learning components that can be observed and measured within each of their courses. Kolb defined experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (as cited in Grover & Stovall, 2013, p. 1). Classroom projects were delivered with depth, breadth, and understanding of all levels of higher order thinking. Co-curricular events and projects also demonstrate a richer format through the integration of the critical thinking: theory meets practice.

3. Wherever possible, an interdisciplinary approach is used to further challenge students to think critically and about all the areas a particular question or situation may influence a decision or outcome. This creates a tool for life-long learning both in the work force and in personal life (Lin & Lee 2013).

4. Through an ongoing teaching and learning initiative sponsored by the university, faculty cohorts designed acceptable minimal standards for writing, oral communication, and information literacy. The specific communication criteria produced ensured that regardless of course,

discipline, or college, all faculty members would deliver and expect consistent standards of work.

In direct response to addressing academic rigor, a model for building an academic culture of praxis on the campus was presented to all faculty, deans, and chairs. The model (see Appendix) illustrates a continuum from pure industry, hands-on practice, to pure research-based theory. Theory and practice converge in the middle of the continuum's vectors. This juncture is often referred to as praxis. Praxis is generally understood to be between the theoretical and the practical (Ramsey & Miller, 2003). The goal of this model is to create conditions wherein each faculty member moves pedagogically along the continuum towards praxis. There are five areas of concentration that stem from the campus's journey to a culture of praxis:

1. The ELC Initiative,

2. Experiential Learning & Co-curricular integrative learning components

3. Interdisciplinary Pedagogical approach

4. Writing, Communications, and Information Literacy standards, and

5. Physical Classroom Environment

The ELCs are a shared philosophy for teaching and learning. It is important to note that the type of collaborative process required for such an endeavor is not typically a part of the culture of higher education, which places a premium on individual faculty autonomy (Henderson, Finkelstein, Beach, & 2010). Nevertheless, ELCs help the campus by providing more specific definitions to ensure an appropriate balance between student engagement and rigor. Competent teachers have always calibrated to the low end and vectored to the high side. In this instance, the primary expected outcome of creating the ELC initiative was to encourage faculty and students to overtly specify, identify, articulate, reflect and provide feedback, utilizing specific competencies:

1. interpretation, analysis,

2. problem solving,

3. critical thinking,

4. and higher order thinking.

Policies and practices that enhance student engagement with feedback may build students' sense of responsibility and ownership for their learning (Handley, Price, & Millar, 2011).

There were two areas of focus during the introductory rollout of the teaching and learning initiative. The first

was working with faculty to consistently connect the ELCs in all classroom deliveries. The second was getting students to recognize the ELCs when they are being applied. Students were introduced to the ELC program through their college orientations, a 1st year introductory class, meetings with their academic advisors, and through classroom instruction. The ELCs became a talking point that was referenced on screen savers of all student-accessed computer monitors, office tents, and classroom posters. Faculty examined assignments, exams, and projects to ensure that delivery methods emphasized interpretation, analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and higher order reasoning. A survey sample of 160 students responded to a questionnaire, in which they identified that they understood most of the ELCs. Nonetheless, critical thinking and higher order reasoning was consistently misinterpreted by the students sampled. In response, three faculty members went to a national conference on assessment training. They were trained on delivery and assessment of critical thinking. They subsequently trained ten other faculty members through a formalized teaching and learning initiative.

A random sampling of 200 hundred seniors across colleges were administered a Critical Assessment Test (CAT). The test was developed by Tennessee Technological University and is used by higher education institutions throughout the United States to assess critical thinking intelligence quotient:

> The CAT Instrument is a unique tool designed to assess and promote the improvement of critical thinking and real-world problem solving skills. The instrument is the product of extensive development, testing, and refinement with a broad range of institutions, faculty, and students across the country. (Center for Assessment & Improvement of Learning, 2014)

During a 2-day period, 10 trained faculty members graded the tests. The results would later be used as a baseline to measure student progress during a phased implementation of the ELCs. The campus administered the same assessment instrument in a subsequent term: winter semester 2012-2013. All timeline activities were accomplished during the 2011-2012 academic year.

The other interesting factor that played an essential role in the success of the ELC initiative was the convergence of faculty and administrators attending pedagogical development seminar sessions. By requiring administrators on the campus' academic leadership team (i.e., the chief academic officer, dean's, and chairs) to be in the same teaching sessions as faculty representatives, they too become leading learners. More specifically, administrators were more likely to focus attention on what students are

actually doing when they are in class (Brookhart & Moss, 2013),

- see themselves as educators first,

- to have less of an 'us and them' attitude,

- have a bigger stake in the part of their jobs to lead learning,

- understand and have 'buy-in' for academic resources.

In the instance of this specific campus, administrative leaders were to abdicate their position power and have the humility to attend the sessions. Having representatives from both academic factions interacting during the teaching session, getting to know one another in a different setting, and eating lunch together undoubtedly increased their level of understanding and trust of each other. The academic leadership team spent its summer retreat developing next steps to move the ELC initiative into the 2012-2013 Academic Year phased implementation. The program revision was more recently repeated during the 2013-2014 academic year.

During the 2013-2014 academic year, the campus invested in Team-Based Learning (TBL) training. Instructors began to integrate the TBL model into various classrooms. Sweets (as cited in Sibley & Spridonoff, 2014) defined team-based learning:

> A special form of collaborative learning using a specific sequence of individual work, group work and immediate feedback to create a motivational framework in which students increasingly hold each other accountable for coming to class prepared and contributing to discussion. (p. 1)

Michaelsen and Sweets (2008) determined that the benefits to using this model include better classroom attendance, increased pre-class preparation, improved academic performance, and the development of interpersonal and team skills. They concluded that TBL is effective irrespective of academic disciplines or year in study. The TBL model, similar to the flipped classroom model, provides yet another opportunity for an educator to reduce lower-order thinking instruction in the classroom; thereby, foster a higher-order thinking learning environment. The flipped classroom inverts traditional teaching methods, delivering instruction online outside of class and moving 'homework' into the classroom (Knewton, 2014). The traditional group project approach to classroom teaching had emerged as one of the highest student dissatisfiers on the campus. The TBL began to effect change in how students view class projects and collaborative learning assignments.

Experiential Learning & Co-Curricular (Integrative learning). The charge to all campus faculty members was to continue to develop experiential learning components that could be observed and measured within each of their courses. Many remarkable interactive examples emerged that were strengthened through the application of the ELCs. Classroom projects were delivered with much more depth, breadth, and higher order thinking skills. Course and campus-wide co-curricular events and projects also demonstrated a richer format through the integration of the ELCs (e.g., Arts & Sciences Fair, Entrepreneurship Contest, Leadership Cultural Immersion Symposiums, Conference, Management Course Business Simulations, and dramatic interactive plays performed by students taking the Drama Studies course).

Interdisciplinary pedagogical approach.

The academic community began to connect disciplines where possible to encourage instructors to seek out deliberate and meaningful ways to connect relevant disciplines to further challenge students to think critically. For example, Leadership course faculty partnered with Media Relations course faculty. Fashion Merchandise & Retail Marketing faculty partnered with Culinary Arts faculty. Sport Entertainment & Event Management/Marketing faculty partnered with Marketing and Management faculty. This faculty community identified experientially-based projects to foster collaboration. One such project was the development of Cultural Engagement Leadership Conference designed to leverage the campus' diversity through leadership exercises that allowed disciplines to intersect. Other disciplines that joined the partnership included Psychology, English, Math, and Sociology. Additionally, partnerships between the academic affairs and student affairs departments emerged wherein the dean of students began working as an active member of the academic leadership team. Collective and co-curricular experiential learning events were developed. For example, a Stereotype Awareness Week was designed through this collaboration. Such bridges have created a healthy synergy between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs resulting in a more holistic student experience.

Writing, communications, and information literacy (standards through the TLS). Faculty cohorts designed acceptable standards for writing, oral communication, and information literacy. The standards were put in place to ensure that, regardless of course, discipline, or college,

all faculty and students would be held to consistent standards of acceptable work.

Many faculty members incorporated the ELCs into their course syllabi, teaching strategies, and general philosophy on teaching and learning. The faculty members made great progress, and there is still more to learn as the campus embarks upon this charge to make student learning more meaningful and worthwhile. It is also critically important that faculty make a distinction between ELC and student learning outcomes (SLOs) to avoid confusion. To be exact, these ELCs are not SLOs. ELCs are intended to complement SLOs. In the campus examined, ELCs are used as an internal feedback loop to directly address academic rigor. In examining faculty assignments, exams, and projects, faculty and administration looked for the presence of specific competencies like interpretation, analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and higher order thinking. The ELCs were specifically identified for their role in helping to determine the presence of rigor). The campus's comprehensive assessment of courses and assignments revealed that for the most part, rigor was present. However, it was not clearly articulated or being consistently delivered.

The above initiative does not add or subtract from SLOs for any course. Rather, the effort aims to develop both faculty and students to overtly

- specify,
- identify,
- articulate,
- reflect, and
- provide feedback,

utilizing these specific competencies. It also does not change the learning objectives or content of the courses. The ELC initiative supports the university's long-standing academic culture of providing students with a meaningful and worthwhile academic experience. It helps by providing definitions that are more specific to ensure that there is an appropriate balance between student engagement and rigor. In short, the need for and use of the ELCs are better thought of as a shared philosophy for teaching and learning and as an added assurance of rigor in the classroom. The approach does not supersede or conflict with the university system's outcomes assessment work. It complements the larger outcomes programs that the institution's faculty is implementing. The ELC process described in this article may not only lead to productive instructional changes within a particular department but may also reduce conflict within and without all departments (Henderson, Finkelstein, Beach, & 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

Student-centered, inquiry-rich, and cognitively complex demonstrations and/or activities are sometimes referred to as constructivist methods (Metty, 2013), and were extended beyond the classroom at the campus described above. An initiative that bridged theory and practice led to the campus achieving the goal of facilitating praxis. Five foci guided the campus to reach the organizational culture of praxis. The ELC model described encourages higher order student thinking under the guidance of a facilitating professor. ELCs that represented a shared campus praxis philosophy of teaching and learning led the academic culture to the opportune juncture where academic and professional orientations converge. Faculty members incorporated the ELCs into their classes with great student learning results. Following the ELC Initiative roll-out, many on-campus faculty and staff members were enthusiastically seeking to embed the ELCs into their courses. Organizational culture gives an organization identity (Cheung, Wong, & Wu, 2011) and can determine organizational results (Jacobs, Mannion, Davies, et al., 2013; Asif, 2011; Yilmaz & Ergun, 2008). Universities articulate their identities during moments of organizational change (Macdonald, 2013), particularly when they involve academics and students. Linking academic priorities, like praxis, to a university's culture can be an effective method for creating a learning environment for all constituents—students, faculty, and staff. The process facilitates an atmosphere of 'closing the loop'—where declarations meet reality. University community members can understand, accept, and may even be ignited by their stake in the campus philosophy and how such guiding principles educate students. The preceding article examined how one campus leveraged its university's vision by linking it to its academic priorities. It provided an overview of the progressive steps taken to develop what can be referred to as an academic pipeline for success. The larger expected outcome from the research and case illustration explicitly shows how when bridges are built across academic affairs, student affairs units, and campus environment, the interconnectedness among these units can have profound positive effects on the student learning experience. Empirically measuring the extent of such influences is the next step for future research.

Hence, the above article provides support for practitioner efforts to apply theoretical developmental constructs to industry-related programs, and augments the organizational behavior literature, so that effective tactics and strategies can be applied to the implementation of developmentally focused on-campus programs. Higher education instructors and administrators alike would serve their campuses well if more learning and teaching "on the

fly" collaborations and serendipitous discovery were encouraged, rather than corralling learners (Morris, 2013), in ways targeted to focused problems and broader social concerns (Welsh & Dehler, 2012) using an integrative discipline, which connects and integrates useful knowledge from a variety of disciplines.

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APPENDIX
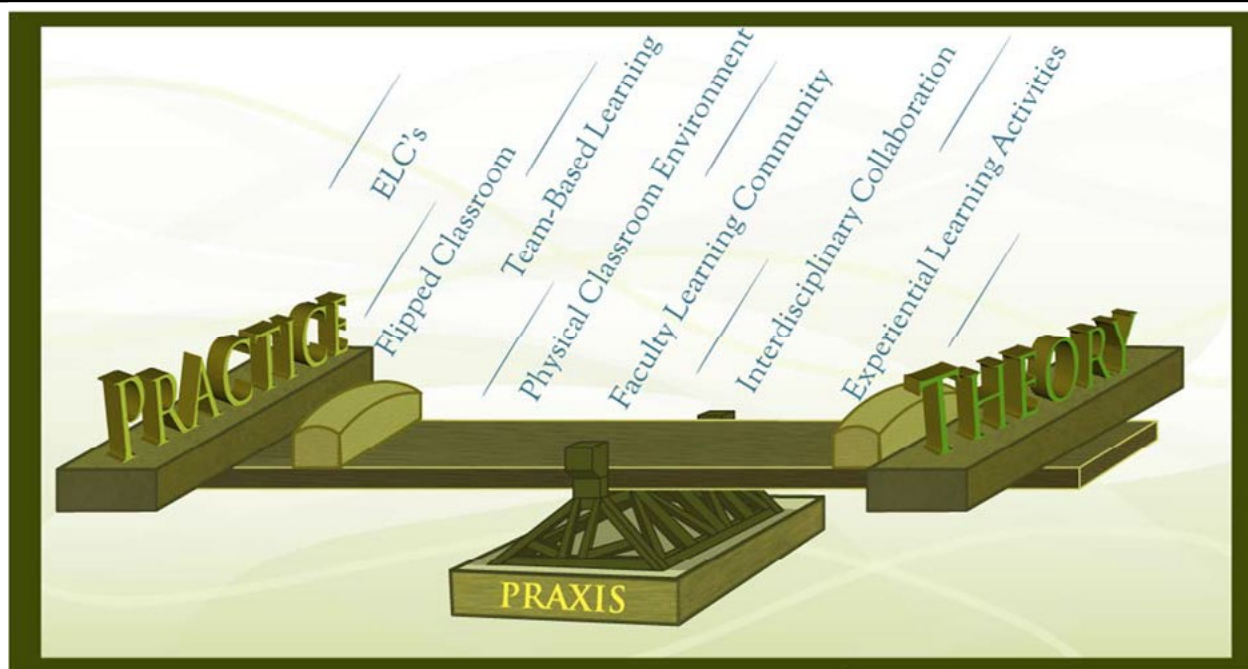
Note. The background shows progressive classroom elements that can be used toward moving toward praxis. The order and positioning of their appearance does not represent any particular sequence or hierarchy.