

**Parenting  
(HDFS300)  
Problem-Based Learning Course Portfolio**

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**About the Instructor**

Clara Gerhardt has been teaching using a PBL approach since 1998, and some of the courses are in their fifth teaching cycle. Currently she is teaching Family Law and Policy in PBL format, and she is rewriting the Human Development over the Lifespan to fit PBL requirements. She has presented nationally and internationally on PBL, including Canada, Sweden and by special invitation to three South African teaching institutions.

Dr. Gerhardt is a licensed Clinical Psychologist and licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. She is also a certified Family Life Educator. Her PhD is from the University of Pretoria, South Africa and she spent much of her academic career at the University of South Africa (UNISA) before joining Samford University as an associate Professor in Human Development and Family Studies.

Dr. Gerhardt has published over 110 articles for the Popular Press and in South Africa she authored a monthly help column in a magazine, as well as having participated in over 60 radio and television shows. She wrote a book, *Slim Attitude*, for a major slimming organization. She is the author of over 25 academic publications and has presented at over 80 conferences, 9 of these as keynote speaker. During 2001 she was Professor in Residence in London teaching multicultural studies.

**Introduction**

Parents are the link between generations; they are transmitters of family values, cultural beliefs, and ideologies. They are powerful in determining the atmosphere of well being in the home. They are nourishers and socializers. They are teachers of skills. They are cheerleaders, support systems, out eternal friends and sometimes, regrettably, our adversaries. In short, their roles are endless (Arendell, 1997; Brooks, 1999; Jaffe, 1999). Nevertheless, our society frequently expects our young adults to enter the arena of parenthood ill prepared and virtually untrained, despite the fact that two predominant factors in determining quality of parenting, are the parenting skills of the caregivers and the support that caregivers receive (Levy, 2000).

**“The parents are the architects of the system.”**  
----Virginia Satir

**Course Design**

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a proactive learning approach (Camp, 1997; Colby, 1986; Samford University Web site). Students are faced with certain problem situations and in solving them they acquire theoretical and practical skills (Cross & Steadman, 1996; West & Moore-West, 1988). Students share the responsibility of their education with a teacher, who becomes a guide and facilitator. Students work in teams and combine their resources. They learn group skills, improve their negotiating abilities, and learn to listen, to take on leadership roles, to co-operate and to become part of an independently functioning unit. The acquired process skills, parallel with content knowledge for applicability in future parenting contexts (Sollie & Kaetz, 1992; Whelan, Woolley & Marshall, 1999). It is a process which stretches creative thinking, enhances flexibility and allows students to ‘think on their feet,’ as they tap into their own resources to find solutions. Students become flexible and creative in their problem-solving abilities and the presumption is that this new knowledge and these skills will be transferred to parenting interactions.

Emphasis is placed on the interrelatedness of this particular course with other courses in Family Studies. Knowledge and skills from other areas of the curriculum and other areas of the lives of the students are re-contextualized and find fresh applications. Because students become personally responsible for end results, there is an investment of resources and motivation that leads to refreshing and invigorating results. As teachers, we know that engaging the student is the first step in the shared journey of the three A's of acquiring, assimilating and applying knowledge. An engaged student is attentive and receptive – ideal learning conditions.

Good problems which are facilitative tend to be characterized by the following:

- Engaging problems: a learning situation which grasps and holds the students' attention
- Open ended, without simplistic "cookie cutter" answers, and based on real life situations
- Preferably have a practical, seemingly authentic application; the closer to real life, the better
- Require proactive input from the student
- Demand a teacher who is also a facilitator, preferably with a sense of humor
- Teach students group solving skills, and group dynamics, life skills such as team work, generating practical solutions and taking responsibility
- Require the learner to go out and find the required tools to solve the problem; the tools could be information, resources, inspiration and even perspiration
- Finally, just like a good movie, a problem that is multi-layered and which discloses its content gradually, tends to hold the learner's attention

### **Parenting Thesis**

As Thomas (2000) succinctly states: "Some parents get confused as to what their job is. The job of a parent is to offer opportunities for growth to their child. The child uses or wastes these. It is not the parent's job to change the child. The parent's job is to offer the love. The child's job is to take it" (p.87).

A powerful way in which to enhance the quality of family life; is to provide some sort of training or preparation to future parents. The issue at hand is how to reach parenting to groups of students who aren't parents themselves? One possibility is to teach the Parenting Class through a Problem-Based Learning approach. This means that instead of the traditional lecture format, students are involved in real life problems similar to the ones they may face once they themselves take on parenting roles (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 1999).

### **Course Management**

Once the teaching of the Parenting Course begins, a few initial sessions focus on group functioning and problem solving skills, including group cohesion, group dynamics, roles and expectations. The students are exposed to practical situations which allow them to make and experience the shift from reactive to pro-active learning. Only when this initial bonding and orientation process is completed and actual parenting training commences.

The professor allocates group membership. This can be done randomly, alphabetically, by birth date, or any other manner allowing for a degree of randomness to enter the equation. In our classes it is important to have a good gender mix, to provide different points of views in discussions, and we make sure that this requirement is met. GPA can be used additionally to obtain a good mix in each group, as diverse strengths add to the uniqueness of each group.

### **Description of Problems**

This course used the following four problems, which describes how material was sequentially disclosed and how problems became multi-layered and increasingly complex in their focus and application. Each sub-unit was given a name and the goals and outcomes in terms of curriculum and skills are highlighted.

## 1. The making of a family quilt

Visible and invisible influences, personal and social icons and images in family life are examined through the problem of symbolic gifts for rites of passage (e.g. a wedding or graduation gift). The students chose to produce a piece for a quilt. The final product is the submission of an article to a popular monthly magazine on parenting.

### Hidden agenda of this unit

To encourage students to formulate their notions of parenting based on their own experiences of having been parented – a most of them have not yet experienced parenthood. An article for a family paper and a symbol of parenthood, e.g. the quilt, are produced. They had to access their notions of what parenting involves, how it looks inter-generationally and what values they can take from a successful parenting experience. In short, if they look back on their own experiences of being parented and grandparented, what would they like to take from it and what would they like to pass on to the next generation or their own offspring?

End Product: article for submission to a popular newspaper on parenting and symbolic gift, in this instance a quilt section.

### Content:

- History of parenting: Interview own parents and grandparents, or oldest living relative
- Parenting in family of origin: Reflect on own experiences of being parented. Awareness of student's intergenerational "parenting heritage"
- Family systems theory
- Other family theories, e.g. Murray Bowen
- Own roots, family of origin: Draw your own genogram
- Cultural influences: heritage examined through various cultural lenses
- Interpreting theory against personal history: Characteristics of parents
- Identify a personal philosophy of parenting
- Social icons and images of parenthood
- Stereotypes: the good and the bad (e.g. wicked stepmother in fairytales)
- Flashbulb memories and snapshots of family of origin
- The visible and invisible family album (seen and unseen influences)

### Objectives:

At the conclusion of this problem, students will be able to:

- Identify assumptions, beliefs, values related to parenting that have been "passed down" in the students' family of origin-particularly parents and grandparents
- To analyze their particular "parenting heritage" from various lenses of influence such as ethnicity, geographic region, religious group, and generation is a goal
- To write a personal philosophy of parenting that highlight aspects of their parenting heritage that they want to extinguish and aspects that they want to incorporate in parenting of their future child or children in general
- to select a symbol that represents key elements of their parenting philosophy
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Several resources are used in the form of guest lectures, books from the library (Orlofsky, 1974) and appropriate video material e.g., the making of an American Quilt. We visited the quilt collection in the local art museum, and encouraged students to bring their own quilts and family photographs.

This PBL problem allows students to trace the influences of their own family of origin, as well as the various societal systems (micro-, meso-, and macro systems) in the formation of their own expectations and notions concerning parenting (Levy & Orlans, 1998; Marion, 1999). In order to research this, students conducted interviews with members of their family of origin, including their oldest living relative,

observed and analyzed media, investigated formative experiences in contexts such as school and church. The product is a medial article on personal expectations and notions concerning parenting.

The local Family Times publication was involved in a real life problem with a real life solution. the request to the class was for articles which highlight college students' awareness of the assumptions, beliefs, values, related to parenting that have been passed down from their family of origin – particularly parents and grandparents. With the written task completed, students interpreted their own story by contributing a piece to a quilt. The quilt squares captured the essence of what students wanted to convey about parenting, such as the parental values, the theme of separation or simply the loving bond between parents and children.

In the following section the layering and increasing complexity of the problem is summarized.

Level 1:

A guest editor from a local paper is invited and requests articles from the students for publication in the local paper. (The final product was in fact published several months later, making this a true real life product).

Level 2:

The editor reminds students that they should acknowledge cultural differences, i.e. focus on the different lenses through which we may view the products.

Level 3:

Interview oldest living relative and parents, draw own genograms and personalize the information. Indicate what students wish to keep/discard from their personal parenting heritage. Formulate a philosophy for parenting in general.

Level 4:

Create a symbol for each group to express the core values systems of the family unit. The groups produced patchwork quilt pieces and presented these to class.

2. Playing: More than a Game

Developmental stages of children are studied through the problem of age and situation appropriate toy and activity design.

Hidden agenda of this unit

To explore the issues surrounding development during the lifespan from birth to early adulthood, knowledge of age appropriate skills concerning play and communication. Acknowledgement and awareness of several areas: multicultural, special needs, therapeutic component of play, language development and interactive components.

Vehicle:

The students became designers for the "Giopetto Toy Makers Incorporated" a fictitious company which designs and markets innovative, yet educationally appropriate toys. They are asked to design age appropriate toys or interactive games which have any or all of the following characteristics:

- Acknowledge the developmental stage of the child
- Considers the age appropriate skills of children at each developmental level
- Toys which are original and innovative
- Low cost or the ability to make the toy oneself
- Interactive activities which foster interpersonal communication language development

The back-up material for this section was diverse and it should be emphasized that the teacher should use the resources available within their own context. One cannot be prescriptive in what is used. We

used a text focusing on developmental issues (Bigner, 1998) and library resources (Feldman, 1999; Marion, 1999). A detailed observation in the playground of a Children's Learning Center and visits to major toy and educational materials stores in the area. Videos of children playing on other cultures, e.g. Pacific rim and Kalahari inhabitants-to enhance multicultural awareness and collection of toys and musical instruments from Africa.

### Objectives

At the conclusion of this problem, students will be able to identify characteristics of developmental stages during childhood.

- Identify and initiate activities with and for children that are age and developmentally appropriate
- To recognize the role of language development and communicative patterns in interactions with children
- To recognize the needs of children when creating play facilities, including safety and hygiene issues
- To recognize the needs of special populations such as exceptional children with special needs both physical, emotional and intellectual
- To design and make an age appropriate toy or activity and to motivate the choice and indicate which skills this activity addresses including acknowledgement of developmental issues
- The end product (a real toy or activity) may be used in a real life context, e.g. application at the Children's Learning Center

Example of the four levels of disclosure of this problem

#### Level 1:

The scene is set with a memo to the students to design a toy. Students brain storm activities and research theoretical background. Observations of play situations required.

#### Level 2:

The multicultural dimension is added by introducing videos and guest speaker.

#### Level 3:

Special needs children are addressed. Play as a therapeutic intervention. Play as an educational tool.

#### Level 4:

Final presentation of the products in class. Groups demonstrate their toy or activity and give a lecture to the class introducing their design by linking it to developmental stages. Written group papers due.

3. Effective Parenting: Old and New, Tried and True: old and new, tried and true: The foundational theories and parenting assumptions are studied against a historical timeline and current popular parenting books. The end product is the publication of a short brochure and a short seminar.

#### Hidden agenda of this unit

The foundational theories and parenting assumptions are studied against a historical timeline of current popular parenting books as well as the theory as found in the text by Bigner (1998). Focus on skills of parents: theoretical and practical.

#### Vehicle:

The students become part of a team for the Shady Oaks Library Project. In this project they have to allocate budgeted funds towards the "parenting" section of the library. They have to create a brochure for the library listing the resources and present a class project in which they outline the resources as creatively and engagingly as they wish – as they would do for a group of parents in the library.

Backup Material: Textbook, guest speakers from local parenting training groups, visits to local libraries and bookshops with emphasis on selection of parenting books. We introduced two parents to the class to share their real-life parenting experiences and students interviewed them. Select video clips with examples of parenting techniques.

Objectives:

At the conclusion of this problem students will be able to:

- Draw and explain a historical timeline concerning the theories and practices of parenting. (This is a very theoretical and important task)
- Evaluate the parenting books available to parents on both the lay and professional levels
- Be able to identify useful parenting resources from all the media
- Be able to identify useful parenting resources within their own community, e.g. courses promoting parenting skills
- Be able to present the above material in an engaging way to a group of parents (or contemporaries)
- Draw up a resource manual listing resources available to parents. (as it could be used in a library)

Example of the four levels of disclosure of Problem 3

Level 1:

Presentation of the Shady Oaks Library Parenting Project

Level 2:

Compilation of the resource list based on the students' research of available resources in the community  
Class presentation of the historical timeline

Level 3:

Evaluation of the resources, i.e. a value judgment occurs which has to be founded on results of research and the text. Sorting the good from the bad

Level 4:

Presentation of the resources for a fictitious library audience in an engaging manner

4. Big Brother/Big Sister: Models of Resilience

Hidden agenda of this unit

Themes of resilience: Studying the issues in contemporary parenting in high-risk families and step-family systems, as well as special parenting concerns. The problem is addressed via testimonies of guest speakers who have been successful and personify resilient behavior despite the challenges in families of origin. Students identify characteristics of resilience.

The topic is given a positive twist: Instead of focusing on the negative factors these risk factors bring with them, we focus on resilience. This gives the entire unit a message of hope and it becomes inspirational which is the positive note on which we would like to bring closure to this course. As this can be an emotional topic, students have to be debriefed and we suggest that if teachers have no therapeutic training, they should substitute a topic format that covers more neutral territory.

Vehicle:

The vehicle for this unit is that students visit two high schools. Students interact with the pupils at these schools and exchange ideas. Students have to prepare for these sessions by familiarizing themselves with the theory as well as the most basic lay counseling techniques, such as listening skills. Students are supervised by the course presenter and the school teachers.

### Back up material:

Prescribed text and two articles from the Family Therapy Networker (Butler, 1997; Taffel, 1999). Guest lectures by a person whose life is a model of personal resilience

### Objectives:

At the conclusion of this problem, students will be able to:

- Identify challenges associated with high-risk and reconstituted family situations
- Identify challenges linked to divorce and single parent families
- Identify issues surrounding special needs children
- Identify themes that are linked to resilience and good functioning
- Be able to apply very basic lay counseling techniques, such as attentive listening
- Will have visited school settings under supervision
- Will have widened their horizons in theoretical and practical ways

Example of the four levels of disclosure of Problem 4

### Level 1:

The students are introduced to the project of visiting the two schools. At the first level, they brainstorm topics that they find relevant in the context of resilient behavior.

### Level 2:

For each topic they would like to talk about, the students need to research the theory concerning high risk behaviors and family settings. At this level they are also introduced to some very basic lay counseling skills such as attentive listening.

### Level 3:

We visit two schools on two different days. The visit is contextualized at each venue by the directors and counselors of the centers. Students write p their experiences after the visit applying the theory to the practical situation.

### Level 4:

Closure of the unit and of the course. We reflect on the highs and the lows. We ended with a class party to celebrate all the good parenting we have all been exposed to.

In planning any course according to a PBL approach, the teacher/lecturer may wish to bear the following points in mind:

- Theoretical foundations find application in practical settings
- The practical settings try to approximate real life problems, or challenges the students may meet in future work related tasks
- Students acquire real life skills, which have real world applications
- The problems are presented according to a model of progressive disclosure (this is optional and is not a PBL prerequisite)
- Students learn to work in groups and to expand their group negotiation skills
- Students are required to do several group presentations in front of the class as an audience to strengthen presentational skills
- Students are evaluated both individually and in group context
- The theoretical component of the work is also individually assessed in the form of numerous class quizzes and mid-term and final examinations (this format may vary in different PBL applications)
- Small chunks in lecture format and guest lectures can be presented where necessary
- The groups are encouraged to be creative and original and these qualities are rewarded
- Theoretical knowledge finds practical application and the theory is used to substantiate the practice

- The teacher becomes a facilitator

### **Assessment**

Assessment is a very individual matter and there are many models for its application. We have revised our assessment model yearly and still have not found the perfect formula. One possible schema we are currently using is the following:

- Note: The student requires a “Pass” on group work in order to be able to pass the entire course. In other words, obtaining a high score on individual work is not sufficient to pass the entire course.
- Students are assessed following each unit.
- Both group and individual work is assessed.
- The final grade of 100% (or 400 points) is made up in the following manner:
- Units 1-4: Group effort, contributions and group products assessed at the completion of each unit: 40 points per unit totaling 160 points (40%)
- Individual mid-term exam (80 points) and ten quizzes (60 points) (35%). Quizzes need not be announced in advance.
- Individual final written exam: 100 points (25%): Covers the work of the entire semester.

### **Reflective Statement about the Course**

Lastly, in summing up both the teacher and the student reactions to this course, we found the teachers assumed roles not unlike those of parents. Teachers were high in nurturance, creating a safe environment for creative exploration of new ideas. They provided structure and boundaries, without being excessively constricting. Teachers adjusted to the needs of students bearing the ultimate goals of the course in mind. In many ways, the good teacher emulates the good parent, in that the teacher can encourage the student to “develop the internal resources necessary to make healthy choices, solve problems and manage adversity effectively” (Levy & Orlans, 1998, p. 200-1). Like good parents, facilitating teachers tried to encourage their students to develop not only a goal directed and self-disciplined learning style in order to meet the scholastic demands and function constructively within the academic setting. As teachers, we rejoiced when our students found their capacity for joy, playfulness, and a positive meaning in life. Our wish for them is to share these qualities with a future generation of children.

### **Acknowledgement**

Dr. Dan Sandifer-Stech, Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Samford University, was the co-designer of this course in its original format. His contributions are gratefully acknowledged and his insights are especially clearly reflected in ‘The family Quilt.’ Thank you Dan!

Note: The hard copy of this work can be found in the accompanying volume to the Parenting textbook by Jerry Bigner.

Bigner, Jerry J. (1998). Parent-child relations: an introduction to parenting. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Upper Saddle River: Merrill/Prentice Hall. (ISBN 0-13-602038-0).  
A new edition is scheduled for 2002.

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