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# Professional Development Problem-Solving Activity

Name of participant:

Email address: Institution:

## **Overview of Activity**

This Professional Development Problem-Solving Activity can be applied to a variety of developmental and adult education courses. After a whole group discussion brainstorming contextualized skills and behaviors, students will work in small groups to determine solutions to examples of problem solving in the workplace. After the activity, students will reflect on problem solving in their professional and academic lives.

## **Objectives aligned with the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards**

* Students will construct a list of contextualized skills and behaviors.
* Students will analyze a workplace conflict, identifying the problem and offering a solution.
* Students will work as a group, accepting constructive criticism and potentially revising personal views when a peer makes a suggestion.
* Students will discuss the scenarios with the entire class, sharing the solution they came up with.
* Students will support or modify claims based on peer input during a whole-group discussion.
* Students will examine real world scenarios in their own lives, tying them back to problem solving and contextualized skills and behaviors. This will include self-monitoring, as well as determining a solution to these real world scenarios.

## **Time Required**

Lesson Preparation:

* Read related literature
* Investigate where this activity makes sense in your current curriculum
* Plan lesson and print materials

Lesson Implementation:

* Group Activity- one class session
* Extension assignment- completed outside of class
* Optional class debrief on the following class

## **Why Teach Contextualization in the Developmental Education Classroom?**

Contextualization can provide students in developmental education courses with intrinsic motivation and task engagement because the subject is deemed useful, enjoyable, or interesting to the learner (Perin, 2011). Perin claims transfer of learning theories and learner motivation theories suggest that contextualization is one means of improving instructional methods within the postsecondary context. Adult Basic Education has also benefitted from using contextualized instruction including teaching skills such as writing reports and forms, reading articles in company newsletters, and preparing for tests related to job promotions (Perin, 2011). The contextualization modules created by The Education Institute (TEI) for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) were composed with this transfer of learning in mind, focusing on how to utilize instructional methods that motivate students by focusing on future career goals (Perin, 2011).

The importance of contextualization has been embraced by the state of Texas, as shown by the THECB’s Accelerate Texas Initiative (THECB, 2016). The THECB’s “Accelerate Texas programs are designed to integrate or contextualize basic reading, math, and writing skills with workforce training, providing the student with opportunity for college transition and entry into high demand occupations” (THECB, 2016, para 1). TEI has provided educators with contextualized professional development modules that can be utilized in a variety of courses with the workforce transition in mind.

Instructors and employers note the importance of soft skills, including communication skills and time management (Audant, 2016). Programs often include assistance with job searches and networking, including internship courses where “…students develop their resumes, work on interview skills, and discuss workplace etiquette” (Audant, 2016, p. 304). While traditional students may be attending courses to begin their first career, many students enter college when choosing to switch or advance their existing career. Older students have entered college from the workforce with the goal of receiving a credential, an option that research “consistently found positive financial benefits, either through increased wages or employability, from obtaining a credential” (Cummins, 2014, p. 267). Accelerate Texas provides entry-level career pathways for students (THECB, 2016). Career pathways “are especially important for older adults who have inadequate retirement savings and need to remain in the workforce to reduce their risk of poverty in retirement” (Cummins, 2014, p. 272).

## **The Purpose of this Module**

Contextualization can increase students’ “mastery of basic skills as well as the likelihood of transfer of basic skills to content courses that is not occurring in traditional, decontextualized learning environments” (Perin, 2011, p. 286). The focus of the Problem-Solving Activity is to work with peers to problem-solve using examples from career paths provided by a Texas Community College. While many students in college are employed, some are not. As a result, this activity begins as a whole-group discussion led by the instructor. Students work in groups afterward to discuss a specific work-related problem-solving task. Later, the class reconvenes to discuss their suggestions. The extension activity allows students to make connections to outside employment or work-related academic behaviors. The extension also asks students to brainstorm work-related skills and behaviors needed for their future career choice.

An increased focus on college and career readiness has resulted in a response to the growing number of students who struggled or were underprepared when attending college because they did not possess the requisite skills for trouble-shooting challenging situations (Shuptrine, 2013). This activity uses several cross-disciplinary skills from the Texas College Career and Readiness Standards, including recognizing a problem and offering a solution, accepting constructive criticism and potentially revising personal views. The application of important concepts from the Texas College Career and Readiness Standards is further explained in the lesson objectives.

## **Step 1: Preparation Before Instruction**

Perin (2011) defines the contextualization of basic skills as “an instructional approach that creates explicit connections between the teaching of reading, writing, or math on one hand, and instruction in a discipline area on the other, as, for example, when writing skills are taught with direct reference to topics covered in a history class” (p. 3). The goal of this assignment is to contextualize cross-disciplinary skills into the workplace.

You will need the Problem-Solving Examples Worksheet for the activity. If this is something you plan on doing for several courses, print these on cardstock so they are more durable. Add additional examples as you see fit. Remember to keep workforce skills in mind (rapport with others, problem solving, etc.).

## **Step 2: Apply Problem-Solving Activity to one or more of your classes**

**Introduction:** Engage in a whole group discussion regarding behaviors expected at work. Examples can include timeliness, problem-solving skills, and working well with others.

Suggestions:

* Brainstorm a list of general contextualized skills and behaviors on the board.
* Choose one job and discuss necessary contextualized skills and behaviors (Examples: timeliness, checks emails regularly, communication skills, works well with others).
* Ask students to think of a time at work where they had to work with a challenging personality.
* Use a classroom-appropriate video that shows someone problem-solving at work.

**Problem-Solving Card Activity:**

* Remind students about appropriate conduct when working as a team, including accepting constructive criticism and potentially revising personal views when a peer makes a suggestion.
* Pass out a **problem-solving card** and **group activity sheet** out to groups of 4-5 students.
* One student will be the recorder for the group, filling out the form.
* Give students 10-15 minutes to complete the form.
* Gather as a class. Each group will role play their scenario, as well as their suggestion for the hypothetical situation. Peers can give additional suggestions.

**Class Reflection:** Reflect as a class on the activity and potential implications for future employment.

**Problem-Solving Homework Assignment:** Students will record three times they observed problem solving throughout the week. These conflicts can be either from their own work experiences, observed behaviors in their own lives, academic problem solving, or a problem solving issue observed in the news. Students will fill out **the reflection** portion afterward, discussing if these problem-solving skills will be transferable to the workplace.

**Debrief:** After returning the homework assignment, have a whole group discussion about observed contextualized behaviors and resolved conflicts.

Example Questions:

* What problems did you encounter?
* Did the class activity help you solve or work through this problem?

## **Step 3: Finish the Professional Development Requirements**

Please list the course (subject area) and dates in which this activity was implemented.

Course Subject:

Date the Problem-Solving Activity was introduced:

Date of completion for the Problem-Solving Homework Assignment:

Date of optional Debrief regarding Problem-Solving Homework Assignment:

***Send all materials (make sure your name is on all of them) via email to TSI-PD*** ***theedinst@txstate.edu******. This includes the Reflection Form, and any “teaching artifacts” like links to websites, worksheets, and/or student work that is applicable to the professional development activity. Please remove students' names from any submitted artifacts and follow FERPA guidelines. Please feel free to share any materials and student work that was developed by implementing this activity in your classroom.***

Should you want to learn more about contextualization, here is a list of resources. You can also visit our [References for Developmental Education and Learning Assistance](http://depco.wp.txstate.edu/references-for-developmental-education-and-learning-assistance/) page for additional articles and resources.

## **Resources**

Audant, A. B. (2016). Stackable credentials and career/college pathways in culinary arts at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice, 40*(4), 299-309. doi: 10.1080/10668926.2015.1056918

Cummins, P. A. (2015). The role of community colleges in career transitions for older workers. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 39*(3), 265-279. doi: 10.1080/10668926.2013.843144

Perin, D. (2011). Facilitating student learning through contextualization: A review of evidence. *Community College Review, 39*(3), 268-295. doi: 10.1177/0091552111416227

Shuptrine, C. (2013). Improving college and career readiness through challenge-based learning. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research, 6*(2), 181-188. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov.libproxy.txstate.edu/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=EJ1073224

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2016). Accelerate Texas. Retrieved from <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/index.cfm?objectid=896FFFBE-FD7B-786E-FC7B9F8F4EC245AE>

# Problem-Solving Activity Cards

These cards are examples of scenarios that could occur in the workplace. There are two scenarios for three themes: customer service, working with challenging personalities, and advocating for oneself in a respectful manner. Choose at least one from each category for the group activity. Remember that each group should have 3-4 students. Have students discuss a solution and prepare to role-play their scenario and solution for the class.

**Customer Service**

You are a pharmacy technician. A customer has the flu and would like a prescription for Tamiflu. She is angry that you are not filling her prescription. Unfortunately, the customer has not seen a doctor and does not have the prescription needed to receive the medicine. How do you explain to this customer that you cannot fill her prescription?

You are a chef at a trendy new café in Austin, Texas. A customer who cannot have gluten is asking the waiter for a specific dish that you do not have the ingredients to make. How do you approach the customer to find a solution?

**Working with Challenging Personalities**

Your friend was able to get you a job at the local hospital. You were really excited to work with him, but he has a different personality at work. Your friend does not do his job, makes excuses, and blames others for his mistakes. You are starting to feel uncomfortable because your co-workers keep asking if you can help them come up with ideas to help him change. What do you do?

Your department has a new manager and she has different expectations from your previous manager. The problem? She does not tell you her expectations until after you have not met them. How do you learn what your new manager’s expectations are?

**Advocating for Oneself in a Respectful Manner**

You work in a sales department for a local sporting goods chain. You are working on a group project: a presentation to upper management showcasing how your team increased sales of college-themed merchandise in the Austin area. One member of your group does not want to help with the project. She simply says “you can just put my name on the presentation and tell me what to say.” Explain your response, and explain why this response would be effective.

You have recently been promoted to supervisor. One employee has requested the weekend off to spend time with her family in Corpus Christi. Another employee is asking her to switch shifts so he can go to a Spurs game. She explained that she has taken time off to spend with family, but her co-worker is really disappointed. What do you say to these employees?

# Problem Solving Group Activity Form

Names of group members: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. What would you do in this situation? (If you cannot agree, you can have more than one suggestion)
2. How could you prevent this situation from occurring in the future? (If you cannot agree, you can have more than one suggestion)
3. What workplace skills and behaviors are needed to succeed in this work environment?

# Problem-Solving Assignment

After participating in the Problem-Solving Activity, begin to think of how this applies to “real world” situations. Over the next week, record 3 problems that have been resolved at work or school. **These may be shared with peers, so make sure this is information is school appropriate and you are comfortable sharing. Change the names of people recorded below.**

R**eal World Problem Number 1:**

What happened?

How was this problem resolved?

What problem solving skills used are transferable to work or school?

**Real World Problem Number 2:**

What happened?

How was this problem resolved?

What problem solving skills used are transferable to work or school?

**Real World Problem Number 3:**

What happened?

How was this problem resolved?

What problem solving skills used are transferable to work or school?

**Reflection:**

How has this assignment, as well as the Problem Solving Activity in class prepared you for the workplace?

What career do you plan on pursuing after college?

What workplace skills and behaviors does that job require?