A New Taxonomy of Learning Goals

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Whenever our center runs a course design workshop, we like to split up the work. Invariably, I'm the one that takes on the "learning goals" portion of the day. Given the reputation outcomes have acquired among faculty these days, it may seem like I'm taking one for the team. But the truth is that this is actually my favorite part of course design.

One way to describe the work of comparative ethicists like me is to say that we study what people value and how those values inform their judgments about how we should live. So helping faculty think through what they value in the context of their courses is right in my professional wheelhouse. That said, my training as a philosopher also means I have a love-hate relationship with most conceptual categories, including those that educational theorists have been using to frame discussions of learning goals over the last 60 years.

For those who are new to this conversation, the most famous categorization of learning goals was proposed by Benjamin Bloom and a number of colleagues in 1956. And "Bloom's Taxonomy" is now so dominant in educational circles that I've yet to attend a session on learning goals where Bloom wasn't at least mentioned. Yet it has not been without critics. Bloom's colleagues eventually revised the original model in 2001, others have expanded it to include more elements, and still others have proposed a variety of alternatives.

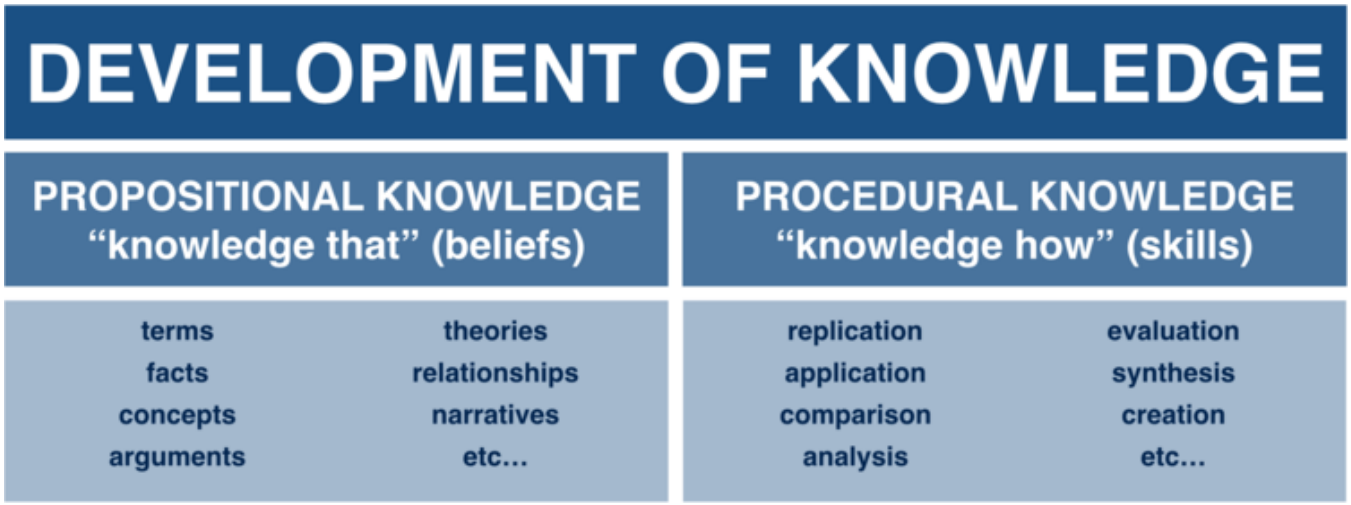
I appreciate that each of these taxonomies exist, in large part because I've seen how useful they can be in helping instructors generate course goals. But I also have to confess that I've never thought any of them make much conceptual sense. So this year, after many years of introducing these taxonomies with the caveat that we shouldn't think too hard about them, I finally decided to create my own. I didn't think the world needed yet another taxonomy of learning goals, but I thought I would do a better job talking with faculty if I could present the alternatives in my own vernacular. And it turns out they liked it enough to insist that I share. So what follows is a slightly new taxonomy that reorganizes the best features of what has come before into a framework that made the most sense to me. As with all taxonomies, your mileage may vary. But on the off chance this might be helpful to others, I am happy to share both the framework and some of the reasoning that supports it.

When I sat down to do this, I began with a basic assumption: that teaching is many things but, at its core, it is ultimately about helping our students to **develop** in various ways. A focus on development makes my taxonomy a bit broader than those that emphasize learning, but that is intentional. When most of us think of the word "learning," we think of a very narrow range of activities and outcomes. But we often hope to achieve many other things when we teach, and a focus on development can give us room to be more intentional about folding those goals into our course planning. More specifically, my taxonomy helps us to think about our teaching in terms of three broad developmental goals: the development of knowledge, the development of self, and the development of experiences.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

Like many who have written about Bloom's original model, I find his understanding of knowledge to be overly narrow. Though he seems to equate knowledge with the memorization of terms and facts, philosophers have rarely thought about knowledge in this way. It is certainly true that the acceptance of a fact is quite different from the ability to evaluate an argument, but philosophers would want to say that each is an expression of a particular type of knowledge. And more specifically, they would say that the former is an example of "propositional knowledge" (i.e., "knowing THAT" something is true), while the latter is an example of "procedural knowledge" (i.e., "knowing HOW" to do something).

If one were to organize traditional learning goals according to this (basic) philosophical approach to knowledge, it might look something like this:



This organization of traditional goals makes more sense to me, but it also has two further benefits. It avoids equating propositional knowledge with the memorization of facts, opening up space to think about higher-order goals in terms of *content*, as well as skills (which helps us to see that propositional knowledge is not always easier to attain than procedural knowledge, as anyone who has struggled to understand Kant's transcendental deduction can verify!). This model also draws our attention to a distinction (between teaching beliefs and teaching skills) that can and should have significant implications for how we design our courses.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF

When Bloom and his colleagues began working on their original taxonomy, they divided the project into two parts. The first book, which introduced the taxonomy we know today, covered the "cognitive domain." But there was an oft overlooked second volume that covered the "affective domain." While the cognitive domain included traditional academic outcomes, the affective domain included outcomes related to the emotions, dispositions, and values of our students.

Today we know that cognition and emotion cannot be so easily distinguished. And many moral philosophers would argue that these alternative goals are also about the development of a certain kind of (moral) knowledge. Nevertheless, it's safe to say that most of us tend to think about these goals as importantly distinct from traditional academic goals. And in my mind, the primary distinguishing feature is that these goals are more closely connected to the development of the student's identity/sense of self.

While it is no doubt true that all beliefs and skills shape one's sense of self, moral beliefs (i.e., one's values/commitments) and moral skills (i.e., one's dispositions/virtues) are often defining features.

So I could see the utility in creating a separate category within my taxonomy for goals associated with the development of the self. As with the development of knowledge, I wanted to distinguish between goals that emphasized the development of beliefs and goals that emphasized the development of skills. But I also thought faculty would have an easier time generating these goals if they thought about them in terms of the commitments and dispositions they think are necessary for academic, personal, and social success. So the organization of this category ended up looking something like this:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXPERIENCES

This final category of development is likely to be the most controversial. And insofar as experiences are not guaranteed to bring about change, one could argue that these goals are not actually about "development" in the first place. But it was important for me to find a way to capture the intuitions of faculty who are resistant to outcomes-oriented teaching. After many conversations about these issues, I've come to realize few faculty are actually resistant to goals in the strict sense of that term. But some are indeed resistant to the idea that what they do in the classroom is of instrumental value. These faculty aim to create certain experiences in their classrooms, and they judge those experiences to be of **intrinsic** worth, regardless of the outcomes those experiences produce.

So when faculty tell me that what they most want for their students is that they feel "joy" when reading Shakespeare or that they encounter the "beauty" of mathematical proofs, they are telling me that they consider these experiences to be both good-in-themselves and worthy ends of their efforts as teachers.

For those who are interested in a longer discussion of this line of argument, I recommend reading the final section of Gary Gutting's "Why College is Not a Commodity," where he argues that the development of knowledge (whether propositional or procedural) should not be the primary goal of

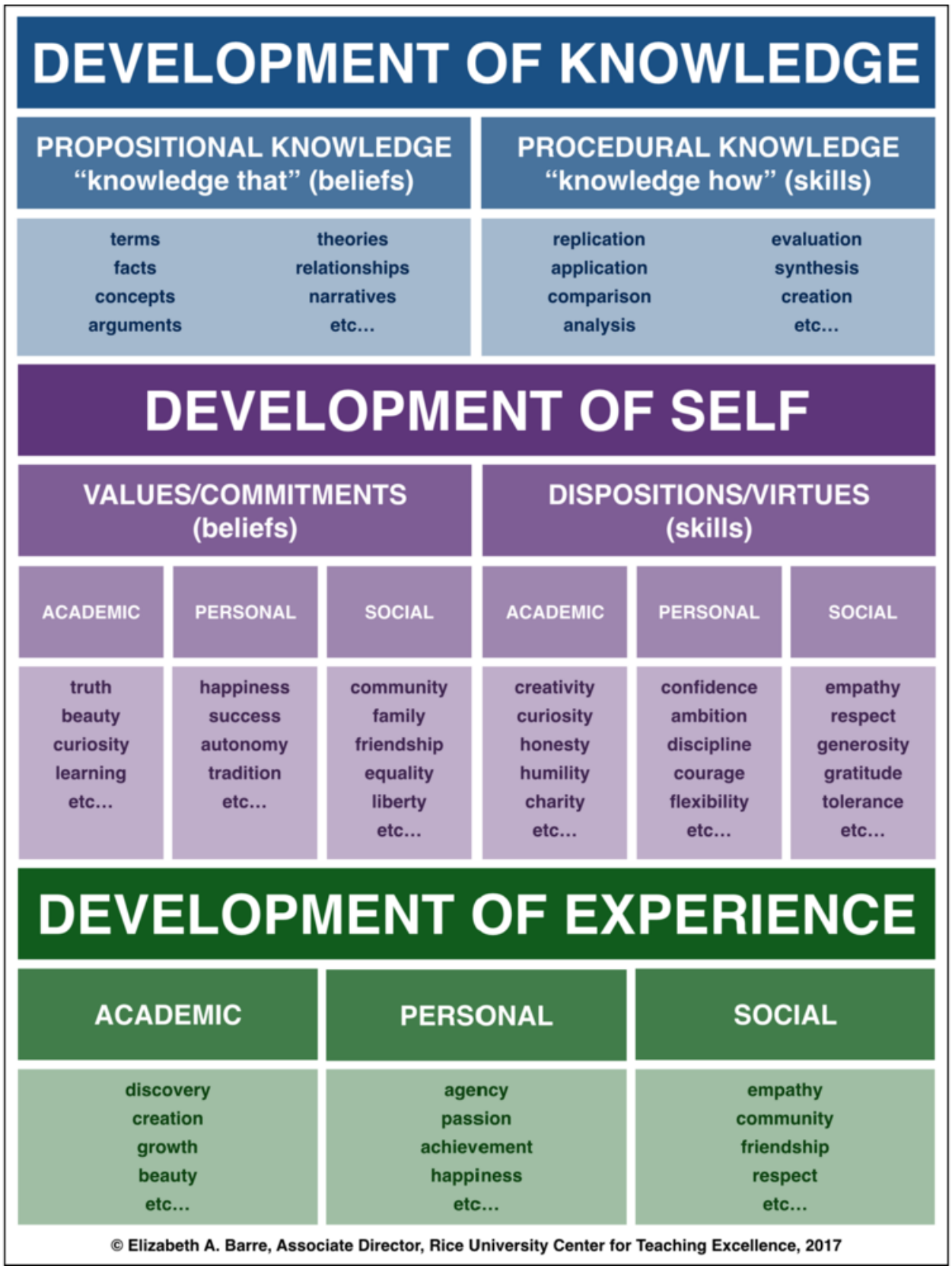
teaching at the college level. Of particular note is the following passage, which highlights well the goals I'm trying to capture in the third section of my taxonomy:

> "The real goal of my teaching, I've come to believe, is that my students have close encounters with great writing. If the object of my teaching were knowledge, then my efforts would be mostly in vain. My actions are successful only if their object is helping students have certain experiences: intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, even moral experiences of reading, discussing, and writing about classic works."

Repurposing the tripartite division between the academic, the personal, and the social that I used above, the final section of my taxonomy organizes experiential goals as follows:

THE COMPLETE TAXONOMY

So putting all the pieces together we get something like this:



If it weren't already obvious, it should be said that this taxonomy is not intended to be a normative guide. Even if it were possible to achieve all of these goals when you teach, it's not clear it would make any sense to do so. And we may have good reasons to think that some of these goals are actually inappropriate in our classrooms (or in higher education, more generally).

The value of a taxonomy in this domain is its ability to both open our eyes to new alternatives and help us better understand our choices. But it is ultimately up to the teacher to decide which alternatives should be pursued, which should be left behind, and why.

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