

# What is contextual teaching and learning?

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Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) helps us relate subject matter content to real world situations and motivate students to make connections between knowledge and its applications to their lives as family members, citizens, and workers and engage in the hard work that learning requires. Contextual teaching and learning strategies:

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**Problem-based.** CTL can begin with a simulated or real problem. Students use critical thinking skills and a systemic approach to inquiry to address the problem or issue. Students may also draw upon multiple content areas to solve these problems. Worthwhile problems that are relevant to students' families, school experiences, workplaces, and communities hold greater personal meaning for students.

**Using multiple contexts.** Theories of situated cognition suggest that knowledge can not be separated from the physical and social context in which it develops. How and where a person acquires and creates knowledge is therefore very important. CTL experiences are enriched when students learn skills in multiple contexts (i.e. school, community, workplace, family).

**Drawing upon student diversity.** On the whole, our student population is becoming more diverse, and with increased diversity comes differences in values, social mores, and perspectives. These differences can be the impetus for learning and can add complexity to the CTL experience. Team collaboration and group learning activities respect students' diverse histories, broaden perspectives, and build inter-personal skills.

**Supporting self-regulated learning.** Ultimately, students must become lifelong learners. Lifelong learners are able to seek out, analyze, and use information with little to no supervision. To do so, students must become more aware how they process information, employ problem-solving strategies, and use background knowledge. CTL experiences should allow for trial and error; provide time and structure for reflection; and provide adequate support to assist students to move from dependent to independent learning.

**Using interdependent learning groups.** Students will be influenced by and will contribute to the knowledge and beliefs of others. Learning groups, or learning communities, are established in workplaces and schools in an effort to share knowledge, focus on goals, and allow all to teach and learn from each other. When learning communities are established in schools, educators act as coaches, facilitators, and mentors.

**Employing authentic assessment.** CTL is intended to build knowledge and skills in meaningful

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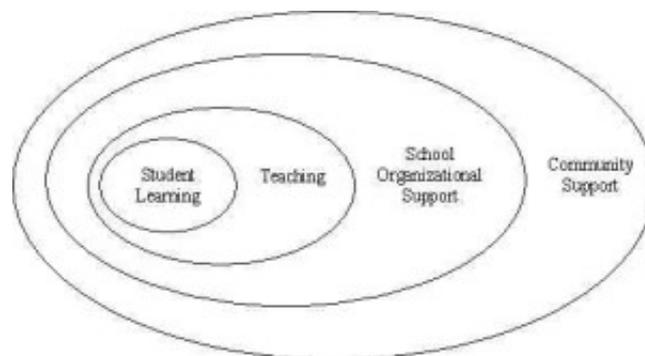
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ways by engaging students in real life, or "authentic" contexts. Assessment of learning should align with the methods and purposes of instruction. Authentic assessments show (among other things) that learning has occurred; are blended into the teaching/learning process; and provide students with opportunities and direction for improvement. Authentic assessment is used to monitor student progress and inform teaching practices.

Many of these strategies are used in classrooms today. Activities such as team teaching, cooperative learning, integrated learning, work-based learning, service learning, problem-based learning, and others support CTL and are already occurring in many classrooms and schools. Many educators routinely use these activities to encourage inquiry, creative problem solving, and use of higher order thinking skills. These educators see these teaching/learning processes as methods to help all students meet state and local standards.

For CTL to be effective, all strategies must be present in the teaching/learning experience. Implementation of CTL may not require drastic changes in practice for all educators. It may require enhancement of practice in one characteristic and not another. Continual use and reflection on CTL processes broadens and deepens educators' knowledge and ability to facilitate learning.

Similarly, implementation of CTL has ramifications for the school organization. According to some CTL advocates: "This approach differs from other ways to think about teaching and learning. Here, we are not attempting to raise achievement scores by teaching basic skills. Furthermore, a quiet, orderly classroom is not to be expected. Principals, school boards, parents, and other members of the community must support this approach... to increase its probability of success" (Carr, M., et al., 1999, p.2). For CTL to be successful for all students, a school must value and support the approach. Newmann and Wehlage (1997) describe a system of support for authentic learning that has been adapted to describe supports for CTL.



In Newmann and Wehlage's circles of support, the ultimate goal is to support high quality student learning. To do so, everyone in the school must agree on a definition of what students should learn and what strategies support learning. Next, teaching and learning strategies, (whether in the classroom, school, or community) require considerable support from the school organization. Finally, external supports provide encouragement and resources to help students and educators create high quality teaching and learning environments.

TeachNET has been designed to engage educators with a range of expertise in the use of CTL practices. TeachNET activities generate discussions and actions that help educators improve their abilities to facilitate CTL in their classrooms. Each educator will draw upon his/her expertise when considering means of enhancing CTL practices and making them work in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Because TeachNET participants, their schools, and communities are diverse, we have outlined an action planning process in which educators will identify, implement, reflect upon, and improve supports for CTL in

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their classrooms, schools, and communities.

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