

**Student Development Theory in *Higher Learning*:
Peer Response**

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In reading Amanda's work and speaking with her during our Zoom meeting, we came to the same two conclusions very quickly: (1) that we have very similar opinions about the development and trajectory of the students in *Higher Learning*, and (2) that we cannot believe this movie was made in 1995 and yet is still so shockingly relevant today. In fact, when we had our discussion, we both made comments to about how the only major difference this movie might have now would come down to a wardrobe change—though we did agree that there were some other small nuances that would be different, like dorm security and having a first year student room with a super senior. Additionally, in our meeting we both agreed that Phipps was a very interesting character and we wished we had more time and space to write about him.

Beyond the previous points, our papers were very different. Amanda chose to utilize Chickering's Seven Vectors to analyze the experiences of these characters, while I chose several other theories for student experience, like Critical Race Theory and D'Augeli's Lifespan Model. Though I had a hard time distinguishing between analysis and summary in parts of her paper, I do generally agree with where she placed each student using this model—Malik and Kirsten in “establishing identity” (vector five) and Remy in “developing competency” (level one)—with some small exceptions.

One of the reasons I chose to discuss several theories was that a single development theory doesn't seem adequate to describe every student; furthermore, a single student might have multiple identities that are developing at different rates. For example, though Kirsten hasn't necessarily discovered an identity for her sexual identity (which is why Amanda placed her in this level), she also exhibits some traits that I would say belong in “developing purpose” (vector six). Her ability and drive to find meaning and organize rallies and events on campus in such a short time shows that she can make meaningful connections with her peers and also develop and

utilize her interests for her own personal growth. To that end, something I would have liked to see in Amanda's analysis was an acknowledgement of these developmental differences—not just among the students but within the students themselves.

I also found myself wondering about how gender and sexuality played a role in this film and how it wasn't necessarily reflected in Amanda's paper. When Amanda described Kristen's experience, some of her language choices could have been better. I found myself a bit put-off by her phrasing of Kristen's rape. At the end of the section on Kristen, her sexual and gender identities were dismissed in favor of her development in other areas. Amanda asserts that “[Kristen] hasn't dealt with her sexual identity yet. The movie doesn't address [it].” I do think the movie addresses Kristen's sexual identity quite a bit. In fact, I would say that a large portion of Kristen's development in this movie is tied to her identity.

Of course, like I acknowledged with my own paper, I am sure that a part of this push back stems from my own personal experience as a queer woman. Amanda didn't outright state this, but her comments about Kristen's experience were othering and she expressed how she always looks to people in the LGBTQ+ community for more information when she is trying to learn—my assumption is that she is straight. It can be difficult to explain to peers and classmates about the reality of the queer student experience compared to how heterosexual people think it is and portray it in film. Kristen questioning if she was interested in both women and/or men is a sexual identity in and of itself. Furthermore, bisexual and pansexual student experiences largely go unrecognized because heterosexual people—and even some gay and lesbian folks—are waiting for bi and pan folks to “pick one.”

All that being said, I enjoyed reading Amanda's work; however, I enjoyed my discussion with her more. Like I mentioned previously, I had a hard time separating some of her summaries

from her analysis, which made the discussion even more important. It was the discussion that solidified my understanding of Amanda's views and thoughts about how we can apply student development theory to this film. Additionally, this conversation helped to align where our interests were and focused our conversation on how these theories could be better utilized at an institution like Northeastern (since we both work here). I look forward to taking more courses with Amanda and I look forward to reading more of her work.