

LIFE SKILLS TRAINING THROUGH SITUATED LEARNING EXPERIENCES: AN ALTERNATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

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This article examines the value of situated learning as an alternative to the traditional college course instructional approach for pre-service teachers. The situated learning mode of teaching immerses students in the actual setting, practicing the skills and concepts emphasized in the curriculum. Through a partnership with a college, community agency and public school, graduate students in the special education program developed and implemented a life skills curriculum for individuals with developmental disabilities, while learning essential principles of delivering instruction. The school aged students who participated in the study were from an urban, racially mixed public school district and they attended the program at the end of their regular school day. Analysis of data from student surveys and focus groups revealed the effectiveness of the situated learning model.

Background

Federal legislation, No Child Left Behind (2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (2004) emphasize inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings, while also mandating their participation in state assessments and attainment of proficiency in the areas of literacy, mathematics, and science. As a result, students with disabilities spend most of the school day preparing for tests, rather than learning skills they need after leaving school. These fundamental life skills take a back seat to a total academic program, which discounts the need for skills in preparation for the transition from school to the community.

Special educators, school administrators, and parents recognized the lack of life skills instruction in our public school programs as well as neglecting life skills methods courses in teacher preparation programs. This group of concerned stakeholders believed it was time to address this ongoing dilemma and initiated a discussion with special education faculty at a local college. The faculty shared the concerns that reached even further into the ways in which colleges were preparing pre-service teachers to meet the needs of the diverse populations in their classrooms. As a response, they developed a survey to determine the extent of life skills programs for students with disabilities in the nearby school districts. The survey asked the following questions:

1. Which areas of life skills instruction does your district provide for students with I. E. P's?
2. Does the life skills instruction provided by the district prepare students with disabilities for post school community inclusion?
3. How would you rate the extent of life skills instruction provided by your district?
4. Do classroom teachers have the knowledge and skills required to teach life skills as part of the school day?

The survey was completed by graduate students pursuing degrees in special education. Results of the survey indicated that there were social skills and counseling programs available for students with disabilities but life skills were not being addressed. They reported that even if there was time during the school day to teach life skills, they were not prepared to do so. Teachers in self-contained settings implemented life skills on a limited basis, but all teachers indicated that they focused most of their academic teaching time on preparing for tests. Teachers in the county special education schools noted

that life skills training began at the middle school level and continued until graduation with community based training incorporated in the program.

The Life Skills Training Initiative grew from the survey results and input from public school teachers, parents, administrators and college faculty. The important issues that the initiative addressed were (a) how teacher preparation programs ensure that pre-service teachers have the knowledge, pedagogy and experiences to teach life skills in the inclusive classroom, (b) how general education teachers, who have students with disabilities in their classrooms, make certain they acquired the necessary skills to transition into adulthood, and (c) how teachers can facilitate the mastery of life skills that fosters the students' independence and self-determination so that their opportunities for inclusion in the community are maximized. At the end of each semester, graduate students completed a final survey, where they were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the situated learning experience.

First Steps

College special education faculty approached a local school administrator with a proposal whereby they would provide teachers in the district with strategies to teach life skills. The response from the administrator was positive but the question of time was an issue. Using time after school was suggested but there were no funds to pay teachers to extend their school day. The college faculty thought of alternatives and considered teaching a special education graduate course at a site off campus held after school hours that included teaching life skills to students with disabilities as part of the course objectives. Next, the Arc, a non-profit organization for individuals with developmental disabilities, was contacted and agreed to allow the faculty to use the facility for the Life Skills Initiative. In addition, the Arc personnel enlisted their adult clients who have developmental disabilities to attend the program. The public school administrator arranged transportation for the students to travel to and from the Arc and Arc clients used transportation provided by their case managers or the county access system. The plan was ready to start.

Program Design

Situated learning is the model of instruction for the Life Skills Initiative and yet, it is not widely used for college teaching. Typically, higher education programs base instructional delivery on lectures, discussion and demonstration. More recently, however, adult education programs, especially in teacher preparation, designed courses where students engaged in collaboration with peers, reflection and had opportunities to learn through authentic and student-centered activities. The graduate special education students learned the application of specific teaching strategies with school aged and adult students with disabilities as they designed and implemented life skills curricular units. Situated learning brings the students to the experience and through activities; they participate in the teaching and learning process (Utley, 2006).

The graduate students worked in small groups or teams as they created life skills units complete with unit goals and standards of mastery, pre and post assessment tools, formative assessments that monitored students' progress, and activity based weekly lessons for the delivery of content. The members of each group analyzed the young and adult students' performance and together planned activities based on their levels of skill attainment as well as identified areas for instructional improvement (Gardiner, Corbitt & Adams, 2010). The adults came to the program with individual person centered plans that included goals. The graduate worked with the adults on their specific goals and designed appropriate lessons. Throughout the experience, graduate students took responsibility for their own learning as they connected to the entire teaching and learning process (Donham, Heinrich & Bostwick, 2010). They engaged in group and individual reflective activities after each class session to identify the strengths and weaknesses of past lessons as they worked together to improve future lessons.

Literature Review

Introduction

A review of literature substantiated the effectiveness of life skills training through a situated learning model of instruction. Life skills are necessary components of any educational program for all students; with or without disabilities. As teachers ready their students with 21st century skills, life and career education is mandated in most states. As early as preschool, teachers are introducing skills in the social and emotional domains as foundations for future life and career skills.

Situated learning is *on the job training* with invaluable benefits for students in teacher preparation programs. Students who have opportunities for hands-on practice before they become full time teachers allow them to develop their skills and integrate them into their own repertoire of knowledge. In addition,

this model of instruction emphasizes 21st century skills such as collaboration, teamwork and leadership, reflection and critical thinking and authentic application of concepts.

Also highlighted in literature are the instructional styles of teachers who implement situated learning most effectively. They are characterized as facilitators of knowledge rather than teaching knowledge directly. Teachers relinquish the more dominant role in the classroom and opt for a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

Life Skills

Life skills units developed by the graduate students include functional academics (e.g. reading, math, writing, and problem solving); community living skills (e.g. money management, community access, and safety); personal and social skills (e.g. nutrition, hygiene, civic responsibility, and communication); vocational skills (e.g. career awareness and job search); and self-determination, goal setting and self-advocacy (Benz & Lindstrom, 2003). As the graduate students worked with the school age and adult students, they recognized that their contribution to the acquisition of life skills was critical and that when compared to their own students without disabilities, these students were lower in skill ability for post school transition (Lindstrom, Paskey, Dickinson, Doren, Zane, & Johnson, 2007).

Using an authentic site like the Arc was conducive for movement and hands-on activities. It provided a real-life setting where teachers guided students in learning skills they could then transfer to their natural environments (Wolfe, Van Ejck, Marshall, & Mazumder 2009). The Arc had a kitchen, computer labs and several activity rooms that resembled real contexts where the skills would eventually be applied (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2006; Mastro, Jalloh, & Watson, 2006).

Situated Learning

Collaboration, Teamwork and Leadership

Collaborative efforts in situated learning are central components because of the team planning sessions where group members define their roles and bring their own subject area expertise to the interdisciplinary life skills curriculum. The students interacted with members of their teams or learning communities, which were peer directed rather than the typical teacher to student relationship found in traditional classrooms (Lunce, 2006). The groups had opportunities to look at the curriculum and at the planned activities through different perspectives and expertise, considering each member of the team a resource to further their own learning (Utley, 2006). Team members assumed leadership roles in instructional development at times when their specific expertise was required.

Through collaboration, they applied their expert knowledge to enhance and enrich the life skills initiative and by working together to refine the assignments, they included specific strategies to meet the needs of the individual learners (Herrington, et al. 2006). The graduate students refocused their individual goals to the goals and accomplishments of the group. They participated in shared decision making and learned response strategies from each other that helped them solve unexpected problems and situations. They brought their prior knowledge and newly acquired knowledge to the social community they created through their collaborative efforts (Miraglia & Smilan 2009; Knotts, et al 2009).

Reflection and Critical Thinking

Utley (2006) identified reflection and critical thinking as other essential elements in the situated learning model of instruction. The graduate students spent time during each class session reflecting on the activities and evidence of students' learning through formative assessment results. When the school age and adult students left for the day, the graduate students met in their groups and reflected on the days' events while planning the following lessons. They met in their separate teams first, sharing observations and anecdotal summaries of the students' performance from the lessons they implemented and afterwards, the teams shared with other teams, as they reflected on their own learning and how they would transfer and apply the new knowledge to the contexts in which they themselves taught (Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006). They self-assessed their progress while reflecting with their teammates on the effectiveness, strengths and weaknesses of the activities and lessons they delivered to the young and adult students. Reflecting with their peers, exchanging thoughts about curriculum development, problems encountered and sharing ideas about solutions to those problems, enable them to realize that their learning and the students' learning was meaningful and appropriate for use in their own classrooms (Miraglia & Smilan, 2009; Longfellow, May, Burke, & Marks-Maran, 2008; Canipe & Decker, 2004). Knotts, et al (2009) discussed the importance of teachers' own reflection in their practice because most

are entrenched in their specific subject areas and when observing and interacting with teachers in other disciplines, they are able to make connections and adopt different practices that may improve their delivery of instruction.

Authentic and Student-Centered Activities

The graduate students designed and implemented lessons that were multi-modality, presented in authentic and challenging ways and were appropriate for the interest and ability levels of the students (Knotts, et al 2009, Miraglia & Smilen 2009). The after school format for instruction proved positive for the students' learning experiences because it enabled them to extend their social interactions with peers from school and their employment settings in a familiar community. Longfellow (2008) reported that after school/after work programs are effective to meet the needs of students when life skills are taught in real life settings and where students work alongside others with whom they feel a kinship and comfort level for risk taking and problem solving. The graduate students administered pre tests for each life skills unit and based on the students' performance, constructed lessons that filled in gaps or remediated areas of weakness. The lessons were student centered and presented in a meaningful context whereby the young and adult students understood the relevance of the learning goals (Hannafin, 2009). Rather than a more linear approach to teaching new concepts we find in traditional classrooms, the graduate students taught the life skills in natural contexts and the young and adult students applied their new learning to their own natural environments (Lunce, 2006; Wolfe, et al 2009).

As the graduate students became more familiar with authentic activity development, they chose to focus the lessons on real life tasks that required the young students to spend more time working to complete their projects while receiving feedback from the graduate students which promoted their motivation, sense of accomplishment, pride, and ownership for a job well done (Herrington, et al 2006; Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006). The authentic activities had assessment tools built in, both formative and summative, which were criterion-referenced based on the content of the unit. These assessments allowed for the ongoing monitoring of student progress which then provided information for the future design of instructional plans (Herrington, et al 2006).

Faculty Instructional Styles

Implementing a situated learning model of instruction differs greatly from the traditional classroom genre and therefore requires faculty to adopt different teaching strategies and methods of content presentation. In fact, the instructor does less teaching and more facilitating, encouraging, and monitoring of student progress. The graduate special education faculty realized that their teaching styles needed adjusting. Rather than givers of information, faculty encouraged peer collaboration, risk taking, problem solving, and decision making. Faculty emphasized the importance of self reflection and reflective activities with each other to increase their confidence in relying on their own instincts and perceptions (Miraglia & Smilan, 2009). Faculty was still responsible for all students' learning and accomplishing the course goals. For a period of time during each class session, faculty presented material, answered questions, engaged in dialogue, and provided feedback to students to ensure their acquisition of course content (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2008).

Life Skills Lessons

Financial Sense: Consumer Education

The first step to unit planning was the development of a scope and sequence in each content area. The graduate students investigated the life skills topics and determined which concepts they would include in their theme. The next step was the informal pre-assessment tool, which they utilized to determine the prior knowledge of the students before beginning the instruction. For the consumer education unit, the graduate students used an inventory of coins and dollars of different denominations, functional vocabulary that included survival words, and addition of money with decimals. After analyzing the test results, they created lessons to target the skills not mastered by the students.

An introductory lesson reinforced the initial concept of coins and their values and was delivered in a game format. Students had cards with coins printed on them and calculated the value of their coins to see who had the most money. The graduate students assessed through observation and a checklist to guarantee that the students had enough knowledge of coins and their values before moving to the next activity, which focused on the concept of comparative shopping. Using circulars from local newspapers and given a budget to work from, the students shopped. With teacher assistance, they analyzed the prices listed in the circulars to determine which products would provide the most value for the cost. They used

play money to pay for the products and calculated change as well. The post assessment consisted of students purchasing real items in a store setting, created by the graduate students, to simulate an authentic shopping experience. The students were given play money, again, and did real shopping. The graduate students assisted them in estimating the cost of purchase to ensure they had enough funds to shop. They were also encouraged to make wise choices; buy foods that were nutritious, and supplies that they needed most. During all of the activities, the graduate students worked either one on one or a one to three ratio with the young students, continually increasing the complexity of tasks and using visual cues and concrete materials as students practiced their problem solving skills.

Community Safety

The graduate students found many components included in a community safety unit and narrowed it to safety situations such as fire in the home and general home safety, school safety, stranger awareness and reading functional signs to help them navigate their community. Much of the pre-assessment focused on real life scenarios and visual aids that facilitated discussion along with student interviews. The pre-assessment results assisted the graduate students in further narrowing the theme because the young students had a good deal of prior knowledge in the areas of safety in school and functional signs, however they lacked application of skills in stranger awareness, home, and fire safety.

At the beginning, the students were required to identify basic safety precautions and through discussion, students reasoned why they were essential. One graduate student worked with one or two younger students in completing this task, after which the young students illustrated their own booklets that included written safety rules that they wrote with the help of the graduate students. A next activity focused on role playing, whereby each student was given a scenario to act out along with the safety rule associated with it. A post assessment included an informal interview checklist, which the graduate students administered individually to the young students.

Behavior at Home, in School and in the Community

The behavior unit was different from the others because rules in school are school specific so the graduate students interviewed the young students to identify their own school rules. From the information they received as well as the rules they themselves use in their own classrooms, the graduate students developed the scope and sequence for the following: school rules and reasons for complying with them, strategies for anger management, developing self-esteem, self-determination, and goal setting based on their own values. The graduate students administered a pre-assessment that relied on the interview and checklist format that determined background knowledge.

A first activity required the young students to identify the possessions they deemed most valuable. The graduate students provided a scenario about a fire and asked the students to identify what in their homes they would save first and why. As the young students discussed their priorities, the graduate students questioned their reasoning and asked them to explain their rationale for the decisions they made. The graduate students gained insight through the responses that enabled them to design further activities that were more relevant to the students' frame of reference and background. Other activities included in the behavior unit were strategies for anger management, following school rules, and setting goals, which were implemented through role playing. And finally, the young students designed a picture frame to illustrate symbols that represented the statement; *I believe in me* that included people and possessions they believed identified their individuality. The post assessment was an interview and checklist.

Social Language

The graduate students incorporated language instruction into each life skills unit. Simple exercises such as greeting another person, asking for help in a given situation, vocabulary and phrases needed for shopping, cooking, or responding to different social situations were part of every lesson. The graduate students learned that they needed to adjust their expectations and create activities that were more reflective of the students' frames of reference as they paid attention to the responses and reactions of the students in the varied activities (Akiba & Aikins, 2010). Adding the language component also enhanced further the concept of an interdisciplinary approach to instruction.

Benefits for School Aged Students

The young students that attended the program benefited from the small group and individualized instruction in a student-centered environment that simulated authentic situations based on the pre and post assessment results. The students participated in experiences where they interacted with the learning

environment while receiving regular feedback on their accomplishments (Hannafin, et al 2009; Knotts, et al 2009; Calderon, 2009). The practice of facilitating learning in a more realistic setting helped students make meaning of the concepts as they integrated them into their ecological environments (DalBello, Knowlton, & Chaffin, 2007). In addition, working in small groups removed the competition and allowed students the opportunities share with their peers while having the freedom of independently working toward their own goals (Lunce, 2006). Herrington (2006) summarized additional benefits for learning in an alternative setting away from the classroom and reported that being away from the school removes many constraints and provides meaningful contexts for the learning. A major advantage of the unit design and delivery is the interdisciplinary nature of the activities. Although each activity had primary goals and objectives, there were secondary objectives integrated throughout. When students learned about money, they added, subtracted, estimated, and used relevant math vocabulary. Many times, the students were required to problem solve, apply skills to real life situations, and communicate with appropriate language given specific scenarios. In addition, they had opportunities for practice and repetition of concepts which aided in their memory skills.

Social language was emphasized and continually reinforced by the graduate students. The young students received modifications in instructional strategies to meet their needs as graduate students rephrased instructions, presented visual and auditory cues, graphic organizers that helped with organization, and simplified tasks using task analysis and scaffolding. Modifications were made to accommodate cultural and language differences, as well.

Method and Results

To explore how students responded to this alternative instructional model, a pilot study was run. Twenty-nine students in traditional courses and 55 students in courses at the Arc were asked to evaluate their experience using a specially-designed evaluation form. The students were mainly women (83%) and their mean age was 33.4 years (standard deviation = 9.2)

The two groups of students were compared for their total overall score and for their scores for each item. Overall, the students in the Arc course gave a higher rating for the course than the students in the traditional course. The mean total scores on the 21-item questionnaire were 111.7 and 103.5, respectively, which is equivalent to mean score per item of 5.32 and 4.93 on a 6-point scale. This indicates that students in both types of class found the course experience to be positive and useful, but the students in the Arc classes rated their course higher.

The students were selective in their higher ratings for the Arc course in several items on the rating scale. They indicated that the situated learning model facilitated their skills in working as a team member, helped sharpen their problem solving skills, provided opportunities to practice multiple skills and explore different models and approaches for instructional decision making.

There were no differences on items in the rating scale between students in the Arc program and the traditional students. Both groups reported that they sharpened their analytic skills, felt confident in tackling unfamiliar situations, understood the learning process, explored their academic interests with faculty and other students and felt part of a group that was committed to learning.

Focus Group Responses

The graduate students participated in focus groups at the end of their participation in the program, which provided information about the effect that situated learning had on their own learning. The focus group questions were designed to bring forth information and insight from the participants that then led to unexpected discussion topics since no definitive agenda was established (Williams, Graham, McCary-Henderson & Floyd, 2009). The college faculty looked for evidence from the graduate students of their own intrinsic growth and their ability to influence the educational environment. As they observed the young students first hand, the graduate students realized the attainment of their own goals through independent efforts as well as collaborative partnerships with their colleagues (Wood & Oliver, 2008).

Focus group facilitators began by asking the graduate students to reflect on the hands-on learning experiences. Discussion proceeded to identifying the purposes of the hands-on instructional model and the types of learning that occurred. In response, the graduate students believed that the situated learning experience enabled them to apply theory to practice. They were able to modify instruction on the spot

when approaches to instructional delivery were ineffective. The young students' growth was evident, based on observations and pre and post test data and an added benefit was that both the young students and graduate students learned from each other in the process.

Collaboration and reflection were main components of the situated learning model and were included in the focus group discussions. The graduate students indicated that they enjoyed opportunities to exchange ideas among themselves as well as between groups in a comfortable, more relaxed setting, where they found common ground for interaction, sharing and problem solving. They responded through focus group discussions that their confidence increased by working with colleagues as they practiced multiple skills such as co-teaching and planning, and also engaged in dialogue with the college faculty about the course content.

When asked what improvements could be made to further enhance the effectiveness of the course, graduate students replied that there was a need for more specific course objectives and standards for their performance as they completed the course requirements. They were unsure of particular curriculum development and testing procedures for the life skills initiative and requested explicit guidelines from the special education faculty. The school district would not share information about the young students' disabilities because of confidentiality issues, and the graduate students believed this hindered their abilities to meet their individual academic and social and emotional needs. The college faculty made improvements to the program, which included a more detailed description of the course objectives and performance standards as well as a brief overview of curriculum development and assessment strategies.

Discussion

When the college faculty joined in the partnership with a community agency for individuals with disabilities and a public school, they looked to improve their teacher preparation program. Faculty in teacher preparation programs want to make sure that pre-service teachers are able to teach life skills as well as all content area curricula to the diverse student population in today's classrooms. The life skills initiative proved to be an effective approach when exposing graduate students to authentic learning, developing interpersonal communication skills, and collaborating and reflecting on their own learning. The situated learning model of instruction satisfies college faculty's efforts in making certain that their students acquired the skills, knowledge, and pedagogy to teach in the inclusive classrooms they would soon encounter as fully certified special education teachers.

More and more teacher preparation courses are embracing the situated learning model as an alternative to the traditional college classroom. The model itself is straight forward and easily incorporated into content-area methods courses, providing opportunities for students to learn the concepts in realistic settings. The more teacher preparation programs provide opportunities for their students to engage in the teaching-learning process by emersion in the situated learning model of instruction, the greater the possibility new teachers will take the new knowledge and integrate it into their own classrooms. The partnership between a community organization, college, and public school district also resulted in benefits for the young student participants. Throughout the process, they learned life skills that would in the future contribute to their successful transition into the community (Lindstrom, et al 2007).

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