Applying Learner-Centered Principles and Strategies: From Face to Face Instruction to a Hybrid Course Learning Format

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the transition from traditional face to face instruction to a hybrid format using the newly drafted 8 Standards of the Educational Leadership Constituents Council (2010) as guidelines for the curriculum, the 14 Learner Centered Principles (1997) from the American Psychological Association as elements for instructional delivery. Best practices for the development of comprehension in content areas from transitional face to face instruction in the areas of pre, during, and post reading in hybrid format instruction are used as examples including ways to provide differentiation of instruction (Tomlinson, 1999) These include strategies to increase prior knowledge needed to comprehend the concepts and various assessment methods to demonstrate knowledge gained through student choice of not only the method of presentation by also the topic based on prior knowledge, learning gained during the course, demographics of the school/district, current position, diversity, and interest.

The key to providing instruction in a hybrid course is developing an understanding of how adults learn. The American Psychological Association developed 12 Learner-Centered Principles in 1993 which were expanded in 1997 to 14.

> *"Learner centered is the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners—their heredity, experience, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs—with a focus on learning—the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners. This dual focus then forms and drives educational decision making. Learner centered is a reflection in practice of the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles—in the programs, practices, policies, and people that support learning for all (APA, 1997)."*

These learner—centered principles are also aligned to the beliefs, characteristics, dispositions and, in particular, the practices created by the instructor. When an instructor embraces these learner—centered principles: 1) learners are included in decisions regarding how they will learn, what they will learn, and how the learning will be assessed; 2) each learner's unique backgrounds, interests, abilities, and experiences are valued, respected, and accommodated; and 3) each learner is treated as a co-creator and partner in the teaching and learning process. The 14 learner—centered principles are classified into four categories: 1) metacognitive and cognitive factors, 2) affective and motivational factors, 3) developmental and social factors, and 4) individual difference factors.

As I have transitioned from face to face instruction to hybrid instruction, I have struggled with how to maintain a learner—centered instructional focus and implement the 14 Learner-Centered Principles in this new format while maintaining a focus on the Education Leadership Constitute Council Standards for Educational Administration.

COGNITIVE AND METACOGNITIVE FACTORS

Principle 1 is the nature of the learning process. The goals of the learning process are the focus of principle 2. With support and instructional guidance, I help each learner to successfully create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge, over time. The hybrid format that I am currently implementing meets three times a semester: 1) the first day of class where the syllabus and course requirements are reviewed, 2) one day in the middle of the semester to connect the online course material with an application activity that extends the major concepts learned through the threaded weekly discussions, and 3) the last day of class where a major projected is presented by each student that demonstrates his/her understanding of the course work learned throughout the semester in a personal experience directly connected to their respective district or school.

A second part of the learning is the threaded weekly discussions that are based on the readings. It is important to insure that the face to face activities are directly aligned to the threaded weekly discussions (Kalte, Garnham, & Aycock, 2005). Each week, readings are assigned. The students are divided into three groups that have alternating roles for demonstrating understanding the major concepts in the weekly readings. For example, for week, Group 1 will answer the discussion question; Group 2 will code the reading by indicating text to text, text to self or text to world connections and write a summary of the connections that were made; and Group 3 will respond to either Group 1 or Group 2 responds. The following week, each role will be rotated to a different group. Group 1 and Group 2 responses are due by midnight on the Sunday of the assignment. Group 3 responses are due by midnight of the following Wednesday. I provide feedback to all students on Thursday in which I include what was done well in general by all students and individual students are given positive feedback for specific content which is shared will all students. Any student that needs to improve is provided specific comments in an individually sent message that only that student sees. A rubric for grading the weekly assignment is provided in the syllabus so the students know what is expected. It is important to note that the threaded weekly discussion provides feedback and validation not only from the instructor but also from other students in the class. At the end of each threaded discussion, I have added a 'Food for Thought' section where students are given a scenario in which they have the opportunity to apply the major concepts from the reading as a new administrator. They are not required to complete this section but it is a way to extend their thinking in a new situation.

Keeping course plans and the technology used in the hybrid course simple will help students be more successful in hybrid courses. In this way, students can focus on the content of the course material and not on learning new technology skills or other new skills to show their understanding and newly acquired knowledge (Katleta, et. al., 2005). Instructional support and guidance is provided through the threaded weekly discussions by the students and the instructor. In thinking about planning the learning process for the students in the hybrid format, I attempt to include differentiation of instruction using various best practice strategies from face to face teaching that will activate prior knowledge, actively engage the students in the reading process, and assess the learning of the students while addressing the diversity of the students.

Connecting new knowledge with prior knowledge in meaningful ways is an indication of a successful learner, according to principle 3. Principle 4 is strategic thinking. Principle 5 states that to be a successful learner, higher order strategies are used for selecting and monitoring understanding through the application of critical and creative thinking. There are environmental factors which impact contextual learning such as culture, technology, and instructional practices, according to principle 6. Principles 3, 4, 5, and 6 drive the development of the strategies used in both the online and face-to-face instruction of students. A successful learner uses a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to achieve more complex learning goals. There are several strategies that I have used in the hybrid format to help students be successful in making these connections. Prior to reading, I have students complete a KWL chart (Stephens & Brown, 2000). This is a three column chart where the students write

what they know about the topic in the first column, in the second column write questions they what to have answered in the reading, and what they have learned in the third column. Citations from the readings are required to support their prior knowledge as well as their new knowledge. Their colleagues then respond to a summary that the students write using the information from the chart.

To help students activate prior knowledge, students are sometimes asked to conduct a free write on the topic. This is a paragraph that is written before reading the material. The stu- dents use the information from the reading to confirm or revise the information from the free write (Stephens & Brown, 2000). Their col- leagues then read both the Tversions of the free write and respond to the writer.

Sometimes students are asked to make a list of words related to the topic that they will be read- ing in one column. In the second column, the student indicates a citation from the readings that confirm its connection to the topic. If there are other important words/connections found in the reading, the student adds them to the list with a citation from the text. Ideas from the first column not found in the reading, are either eliminated or supported with other sources. I use this adaption of Concept Collection with the List/Group/Label strategy to help students activate prior knowledge and support their ideas with evidence from the text. Students place the words from the first column and those added during the reading into groups based on similar traits/characteristics. The students then label each group. These groups are shared during the weekly threaded discussions with a written summary. Colleagues respond to the groups and the summaries as part of the weekly threaded conversations. Students actively engage in the reading of the text to find new knowledge that needs to be supported with statements from the text (Stephens & Brown, 2000).

One best practice strategy that has been transitioned into the hybrid course is the coding of text as the student reads. The student indicates with a question mark (?) the material that is not understood. An '*' indicates a statement with which the student agrees. A 'D' shows a place where the student disagrees, and 'C' designates an area with which a student has a concern. Various other forms of coding can be developed by either the student or the instructor to help the student remain actively engaged in the text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). The student then summarizes the coding statements, explaining why they were chose. Students respond to the summaries through the threaded weekly conversations.

Students use the Four Column Evidence Chart before reading to categorize prior knowledge of the topic in column 1 (Stephens & Brown, 2000). In column 2, students add supporting evidence from the text to support ideas in column 1. New knowledge of the topic gained is added to column 3, with supporting evidence from the text to support the new knowledge of the topic placed column 4. Colleagues then respond to the summary that the students write using the information from the chart. The summary is responded to by colleagues as the discussion question for the weekly threaded discussion.

The third part of the final grade is made up of three papers of which one is presented the last day of class. The students come from various size school districts with very different demographics in rural, suburban, or urban settings who are teachers, administrators or unemployed educators in various grades and content areas, Pre-Kindergarten through college in public, private, or charter schools. As a result, they are given a choice of topics for approval based on their current situation, experiences, interests, value to their school or district. A rubric for grading each paper is presented in the syllabus.

MOTIVATIONAL AND AFFECTIVE FACTORS

A learner's motivation to learn is impacted by the person's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking according to principle 7. Motivation influences what and how much is learner by the individual. Principle 8 states that a learner's intrinsic motivation to learn is influenced by creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity to learn. This principle focuses on a student being a self-inititated learner. The more complex the knowledge and the more difficult the skills to be learned, the greater effort and more guided practice that is required by the

learner. This is the focus of principle 9. Without the willingness to exert this additional effort and time for practice, it is less likely for the learner to be successful except through coercion. Kaleta, Garnham, & Aycock, (2005), indicate that successful learners in a hybrid course need to take responsibility for their own learning, have excellent time management skills, and have the ability to acquire the necessary technology skills to participate in the threaded weekly discussions. Part of the intake process for the hybrid course, is an interview where students answer a series of questions and provide concrete examples to support their answers in several areas that help me to understand the individual motivational and affective factors that may influence their learning. One example is "Please provide evidence from your daily life or current position where you have been self-initiated in your learning, shown excellent time management skills and have been able to communicate ideas very well in writing." A second example is, "What would you find challenging as well as rewarding from participating in the hybrid format of instruction?" (St. Bonaventure University Intake Interview Protocol, 2010). The first day of class, I have the students complete an index card that provides me with additional information about each student's beliefs about education, teaching, and leadership; interests; and goals for the future.

According to Krupp, (1982), adult learning is often self-initiated and aimed toward an immediate goal. Learners who take the initiative learn more and learn it better than passive participants. To assume responsibility for one's learning, the learner must know what he/she is after while being resourceful enough to know where to find it. The learner must also be in an environment that encourages self-initiation both emotionally and physically. It is the responsibility of the instructor in a hybrid course to insure the environment allows for and promotes self-initiation. This is done by providing choices in the method of instructional delivery (face-to-face meetings and weekly threaded discussions); a variety of personal interactions (face-to-face meetings, weekly threaded discussions, feedback from the instructor, and feedback from colleagues); and choices in assessments as well as assessment topics based on the interests, position, demographics of the school/district, etc.

There are several strategies that I use to help insure learners acquire the complex knowledge and skills within the hybrid courses. One is the activation of prior knowledge. The more prior knowledge students have on the topic, the easier the concepts are to understand. I will provide the prior knowledge needed to understand the concepts either by a video clip, an article for additional reading, or an easy text with a summary on the content, should students demonstrate a lack of prior knowledge to make connections as they read text. Within every threaded weekly discussion, the major objectives to be acquired from the reading are listed. This helps the students to focus on what is important and expected to be learned. The discussion questions used each week follow one of several formats: questions based on Bloom's Taxonomy Revised which includes the following hierarchy: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Pohl, 2000). The more prior knowledge students have the more questions that can be asked from the higher levels of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy. A case study or a practical example from the student's school or district is another way students demonstrate the higher level understanding of application. Most of the instruction and assessment of learning focuses on the higher levels of the hierarchy: applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. However, the lower levels of learning are accepted based on the amount of prior knowledge the student has on the concepts. Each threaded weekly discussion has embedded in the process a pre-reading activity to activate prior knowledge, a during reading activity to actively engage the students in the process of reading, and a post reading activity to demonstrate their understanding and application of the new knowledge gained.

DEVELOPMENTAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS

According to principle 10, learning is most effective when the differential development of the learner within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and areas is taken into consideration as the learner encounters different opportunities, experiences, and constraints on learning. Princi-

ple 11 indicates that social interactions, interpersonal relations and communication with individuals have a direct influence on learning. Learners have different strategies for learning, different styles of learning, and different capacities for learning which are directly connected to prior experiences and heredity, according to principle 12. Principle 13 explains that for learning to be most effective, a learner's linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds need to be considered when planning instruction. As indicated by Principle 14, part of the learning process is assessment. Differentiation of instruction can take place in many ways according to Tomlinson (1995). In preparing for instruction in a hybrid course, differentiation takes place by presenting the content in a variety of ways including reading a text, reading an article, viewing a video, reviewing responses by colleagues, or reading a case study for application purposes. Students come to the learning with differing amounts of prior knowledge of the concepts. Differentiation of instruction can take place in several ways and the hybrid form of instruction and assessment lends itself to many of these forms. Continual assessment takes place during the weekly threaded discussions as well as grouping can be flexible based on the project that is assigned. Given student choice based on interest and prior knowledge, students have the option to work alone or in groups on various topics of their choice. The learning environment is conducive to differentiation based on the various formats that the students used to share their understandings of the content.

Knowledge is acquired in several ways. Students can acquire knowledge with incidentally, through wide reading, through exposure in their environment, through life experiences. Some knowledge is learned intentional, because the learner needs to know the information at this moment in time to make sense of a given set of circumstances or a certain situation. So the student searches for the understanding needed through a resource (a book, an expert, etc.) Learning also takes place through direct instruction using various instructional strategies. This is the goal of the hybrid course-to provide direct instruction using a variety of strategies depending on the prior knowledge, background, skill sets, interests, goals of the learner (Brabbam & Villaume, 2002). Several instructional strategies are used to activate prior knowledge before reading, are used to actively engage students during the reading or during the instructional process, and are provide to assess student understanding including choices in assessments such as oral presentations, power point presentations, a research paper or a video as well as choices in topics. The learning environment is set up to value and accept risk taking as well as to encourage physical and emotional safety that is needed by self-initiated learners.

Assessment should be based on setting high and challenging standards for all learners while evaluating the learner as well as the learning process. Rubrics are developed by the instructor or in collaboration with the instructor and the students to determine how each assessment will be graded. The rubrics are shared with the students as the beginning of each course so the students have an understanding of how the assessment will be graded.

The Educational Leadership Constituents Council has developed 8 standards which are followed in the development of the hybrid courses in the Educational Leadership program. The main focus of the standards is to prepare educational leaders that have the ability to promote the success of all students through a district vision, a positive school culture, an effective instructional program containing best practices in learning, and professional development of all staff; providing a safe and healthy environment for all students and staff; providing student success through collaborating with the community; managing resources in a prudent fashion, acting fairly and in an ethical manner; provide success for students by understanding and influencing the larger educational community; and completing a hands on internship experience where the standards are put into practice. When developing the instructional plans and the assessments to insure student learning has taken place, the curriculum is driven by the principles listed below.

STANDARDS FOR ADVANCED PROGRAMS IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

ELCC Standard 1

A building-level education leader promotes the success of every student by collaboratively facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a shared school vision of learning through the collection and use of data to identify school goals, assess organizational effectiveness, create and implement plans to achieve school goals, and promote organizational learning; promote continuous and sustainable improvement; and monitor and evaluate progress and revise plans that is supported by all stakeholders.

ELCC Standard 2

A building-level education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning built on collaboration, trust, and a personalized learning environment with high expectations for students; creating, monitoring, and evaluating a comprehensive rigorous and coherent curricular and instructional program; developing and supervising the instructional and leadership capacity of staff to maximize time spent on quality instruction; and promoting the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning.

ELCC Standard 3

A building-level education leader promotes the success of every student by evaluating the management and operational systems; obtaining, allocating, aligning, and efficiently utilizing human, fiscal, and technological resources; promoting and protecting the welfare and safety of students and staff; developing the capacity for distributed leadership; and ensuring teacher and organizational time is focused to support quality instruction and student learning

ELCC Standard 4

A building-level education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources through the collection and analysis of data and information pertinent to the educational environment; understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse cultural, social, and intellectual resources; building and sustaining positive relationships with families and caregivers; and productive relationships with community partners.

ELCC Standard 5

A building-level education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner to ensure a system of accountability for every student's academic and social success and model principles of self-awareness, reflective practice, transparency, and ethical behavior; safeguard the values of democracy, equity, and diversity; consider and evaluate the potential moral and legal consequences of decision-making; and promote social justice to ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling.

ELCC Standard 6

A building-level education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context through advocating for children, families, and caregivers; acting to influence local, district, state, and national decisions affecting student learning; and assessing, analyzing, and anticipating emerging trends and initiatives in order to adapt leadership strategies.

ELCC Standard 7

A building-level education leader promotes the success of every student through a substantial and sustained educational leadership internship that has field experiences and clinical practice within a school setting monitored by a qualified on-site school mentor.

ELCC Standard 8

A building-level education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding principles for the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school vision of learning; understanding principles for advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; understanding best practices regarding management of a school organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment; understanding strategies for collaboration with faculty and community members, understanding of diverse community interests and needs, and best practice for mobilizing community resources; understanding dispositions of integrity, fairness, and ethical practice; and understanding how to respond to and influence the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context within a school and district (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, Draft 2010).

In conclusion, the hybrid format of online teaching is one way for the university, the instructors, and the students to move comfortably from face to face traditional instruction to a blended format that combines some face to face meetings with the balance of instruction and interaction between students/instructor and students/students to take place during weekly threaded discussions. Maintaining simple technology, simple course requirements, with clearly stated grading procedures through rubrics and well defined deadlines with consistent regular feedback will help the course run more smoothly for students and the instructor. The ELCC standards are the curriculum content which drives the concepts that are to be taught and assessed in the hybrid course. When developing the instructional plan, getting to know the students well through several surveys and questionnaires while integrating the 14 Learner-Centered Principles using best practices strategies from face to face courses will insure students are gaining the knowledge and concepts expected throughout the course. Conducting ongoing assessments of the weekly threaded discussions along with assessment projects designed to use the knowledge gained during the course where students chose their topics and the method they will use to demonstrate their knowledge is key to the success of the hybrid course.

Following these elements has helped me make a transition from face to face teaching to teaching the hybrid format. This statement from a current survey that was conducted with my second semester hybrid course student says it all, "I enjoy the weekly discussion board posts and bringing in the real life experiences that we are able to tie to the text. Making the text to self and text to world connections are the connectors to what makes the class a functional tool in the real world. Application of what we are learning in internship experiences and to what we have or are experiencing and then having the opportunity to come to a place to reflect and discuss in a place where you feel comfortable to reflect really allows you to grow both personally and professionally, that's what makes the hybrid community so successful. Some weeks it felt like the reading text was so dense and then the challenge of the questions that follow where there isn't always a cut and dry answer tends to make it difficult when you are learning. The reality of that though is that there isn't always just one answer and it isn't always cut and dry, so even though this is a negative, it isn't necessarily a fault of the course. The text is a bit overwhelming at times, but the rereading and coming together through the online community to participate rather than sitting in a classroom where you might not participate at all does help force you to digest more of the information with perspective that you may not have originally had." (Student Survey, 2011").

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