Article

The Effects of Situated Learning Through a Community Partnership in a Teacher Preparation Program

SAGE Open
July-September 2013: 1–9

DOI: 10.1177/2158244013497025
sgo.sagepub.com
SAGE

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Abstract

This article examines the value of using an alternative approach to college course instruction in an off-campus location, an agency for individuals with developmental disabilities. The situated learning model is an alternative to the traditional college course instructional approach for preservice teachers. This model immerses students in the actual setting where they can practice the skills and apply the concepts emphasized in the curriculum. Through a partnership between the college, the community agency, and a public school, graduate students in the special education program developed and implemented a life-skills curriculum for individuals with developmental disabilities, at the same time learning essential principles of delivering instruction. The school-aged students who participated in the study were from a racially mixed urban school district, while the adult clients from the community agency attended the program at the end of their community-based workday. Based on the results of surveys and focus group discussions, participants in the study indicated that the situated learning model of instruction in a community setting better prepared them in the acquisition and application of their teaching skills, and built their competence in developing educational programs for individuals with disabilities.

Keywords

community partnerships, situated learning, preservice teachers, life skills

This article presents evidence that graduate students enrolled in special education teacher preparation classes that offer a situated learning experience through a community partnership believe they are more responsible for their own learning and more proficient in their teaching skills compared with the training they received in a more traditional college course. Based on research by Utley (2006), teacher preparation programs need to focus more on teaching students to apply their skills in real-world contexts. Similar studies by Contu and Willmott (2003) emphasize that students who learn within an organization are better able to integrate and transfer skills and knowledge into that setting. They also found that acquiring and fine-tuning skills in the natural environment make good sense and are more easily integrated into students' social and cultural frame of reference.

The researchers in the present study examined the effects of using the situated learning model of instruction through a community partnership based on the hypothesis that the graduate students would benefit further than if instruction was offered in a traditional course presentation. The course, which focused on individuals with moderate and severe disabilities, was taught in an off-campus setting that provided services for individuals with developmental disabilities, known as The Arc, formally The Association of Retarded Citizens. The Arc services individuals with developmental disabilities from birth to adulthood. A full professional staff works with clients in procuring recreation, counseling for the client and family, summer programs, housing, and employment. Clients attend daily and evening events held at The Arc building as well as social events coordinated by The Arc staff. One of the weekly experiences for the clients was their participation with the college students in this study.

The graduate students worked individually or in small groups with children and adults who had developmental disabilities that ranged from cognitive impairment to physical and behavioral disabilities. At the conclusion of the course, the students completed a written questionnaire and participated in focus groups where the facilitator presented questions about the situated learning experience and asked students to reflect on their personal growth in skills and knowledge. The results of the study confirm based on the graduate students' responses to the survey and focus group questions that the situated learning model

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in a community setting was more effective in their acquisition of content and pedagogy than if the course was offered in a traditional format of lecture and discussion. The study also provided an instructional process that can be easily replicated in other college-level teacher preparation courses.

Review of the Literature

Situated Learning

These days, institutions of higher education are challenged by the issues of accountability and demonstration that their students are able to apply what they learned in real-world practice (Gardiner, Corbitt, & Adams, 2010). Typical college classes engage students in acquiring knowledge with little relevance to their own experiences (Donham, Heinrich, & Bostwick, 2010). Teacher preparation programs that focus on lectures, discussion, and demonstration would be enhanced by incorporating authentic hands-on activities. The situated learning instructional model brings the students to the experience through a connection of improved teaching that leads to improved learning (Utley, 2006).

Lunce (2006) defined situated learning as an approach to instruction whereby students use the process of learning through real-life environments, engaging in practical implementation of the course content. The model also emphasizes 21st century skills such as collaboration, team work, leadership, reflection, critical thinking, and authentic application of concepts (Meyers, in press). Providing students with opportunities for community engagement in the field allows students to discover methods of instruction on their own and to integrate and apply knowledge into the realistic context, while facilitating the relationship between teaching and learning (Nicotera, Cutforth, Fretz, & Summers Thompson, 2011). For adult learners, especially those at the graduate level, they are most successful when given opportunities to apply their knowledge to actual situations (Canipe & Decker, 2004). Situated learning is an on-the-job training with invaluable benefits for students in a teacher preparation program (Akiba & Alkins, 2010).

Contu and Willmott (2003) studied the ways in which situated learning strengthens students' abilities to fine-tune their skills as they practice within the organizational context that they planned to enter after their education. Researchers found that when students' learning was embedded in the context itself, it was more meaningful, and was valued more highly in the workplace and the community (Miraglia & Smilan, 2009). The special education graduate students learned to apply specific learning through authentic hands-on activities as they collaborated with peers and reflected on their own teaching practice. They applied specific learning strategies to teaching school-aged and adult clients with developmental disabilities, while designing and implementing life-skills curricular units.

Community Partnerships

In addition to situated learning, researchers have found that the partnership between different organizations, as in this case an urban public school, a community agency, and a college, further enhanced the value of the participants' experiences (Butcher, Bezzina & Moran, 2011). McNall, Reed, Brown, and Allen (2009) saw the community partnerships with students in higher education as providing opportunities for them to engage in scholarship and collaboration, which often is lacking in a more traditional approach to instruction. They also found that the results of the partnering relationship proved to be long-term in its effects and were sustained after the particular course ended.

While the public perception of colleges involved in community partnerships is positive, many faculty members are resistant to include work with outside agencies in their course design (Fitzgerald, 2012). This reluctance on the part of faculty is attributed to their lack of specific understanding about what a partnership entails and fears that they will not have support of the college as a whole with the partnership initiative (Selkrig & Keamy, 2009). For a successful partnership to occur, all parties must work together to develop common goals so that all parties benefit and realize an advantage from the association of the organizations (Butcher et al., 2011).

Faculty

Based on the research by Knotts, Henderson, Davidson, and Swain (2009), the faculty's instructional styles of those who use situated learning most effectively are described as facilitators of knowledge rather than givers of information to students. Faculty must be willing to relinquish the more dominant role in the classroom for a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning. Engagement in community partnerships also excites faculty because they, along with their students, immerse themselves in the collaborative efforts of designing and implementing programs where they see immediate results as they work with their clients (Meyers, in press). Furthermore, any change in current practice, such as using situated learning in a community setting for graduate-level courses, requires faculty to articulate the rationale, course structure, and delivery, and develop goals that are presented to the college administration for approval (Harris, Jones, & Coutts, 2010).

The aim of this study was to measure the effectiveness of a situated learning model of instruction in an off-campus location, involving a partnership between a college and community agency. This approach was used as an alternative to a more traditional classroom model for course content presentation, which was primarily lecture and discussion. Special education graduate-level students provided the data for the study by responding to written surveys and focus group questions. The agency that provided services to individuals with developmental disabilities presented opportunities for

hands-on activities, whereby graduate students helped individuals with disabilities to learn skills they could transfer to their own natural environments (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2006; Mastro, Jalloh, & Watson, 2006; Wolfe, Van Eijck, Pei-Ling, Marshall, & Mazumder, 2009). The graduate students took the skills that they learned back to their classrooms, and those with disabilities to the settings in which they live and work (Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006).

Method

Participants

A total of 29 graduate-level students in traditional courses and 55 students in courses at The Arc comprised the two groups of students who participated in this study. The students were mainly women (83%), and their mean age was 33.4 years ($SD = 9.2$), with a mean number of years of teaching, $M = 3.3$ ($SD = 3.2$).

The 18 school-aged student clients 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. They were in Grades 1 through 6, ages 7 through 12 years. In all, 14 of the 18 students were African American, and 4 were Latino. The 21 adult clients had a range of developmental disabilities and attended the program after their community-based work experiences. Their ages ranged from 28 years to 55 years, and 15 of the clients were Caucasian and six were African American. The Arc adult clients lived in supported group homes, and 13 of them held jobs in the community. In total, 8 of the clients spent their days at home or in adult recreational centers.

Program Design

College special education faculty approached a local school administrator with a proposal whereby they would provide the 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.

The Arc, a nonprofit organization for individuals with developmental disabilities, was contacted and agreed to allow the faculty to use the facility for the graduate special education course. In addition, The Arc personnel recruited their adult clients who had developmental disabilities for the program. A partnership with The Arc was ideal for the implementation of situated learning to teach life skills. The Arc provides comprehensive services for individuals with moderate and severe developmental disabilities, and their families in the areas of housing, recreation, counseling, community participation, employment, health care, and education. Their adult clients, who attend the program, as well as the school-aged students from the public school district, receive one-on-one assistance with a variety of life skills taught by special education graduate students. The public school administrator arranged transportation for the school students to travel to and from The Arc, while The Arc's clients used transportation provided by their case managers or the county transportation access system.

The adult clients came to the program with individual person-centered plans that included goals, and in addition, the graduate students interviewed the clients and found there were additional areas that were of interest to them. For example, many of the clients wanted to improve their reading and math skills, and the school-aged students had similar goals. As the weekly sessions progressed, the graduate students worked with the adults and young students on their specific goals and designed appropriate lessons. Throughout the experience, the graduate students took responsibility for their own learning as they engaged in the teaching and learning process (Donham et al., 2010; Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006). They participated 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.

The graduate students were enrolled in the course, Survey of Moderate and Severe Disabilities, which is a requirement for a state special education teaching certificate. The students were responsible for designing life-skills units for the children and adult clients with developmental disabilities. The students worked in groups of four or five and together focused on a three-pronged process: (a) assess the aptitudes and interests of the children and adult clients in their charge, (b) create life-skills activities based on the aptitudes and interests, and (c) determine whether the clients acquired the skills after instruction. Based on the clients' progress on each unit, the graduate students designed further instructional plans for different life-skills topics. As the graduate students became more familiar with their clients, they incorporated differentiated strategies to address their needs.

The course format differed from the traditional class in several ways, whereas the content was similar. Students in the traditionally designed course met on campus and received direct instruction through lecture and PowerPoint presentations for the 1st hour of the class session. Then, they worked in small groups analyzing case studies and problem-solving exercises that were provided by the instructor. The instructor used videos and invited guest speakers to the class on a frequent basis to relay to students their own experiences having children with disabilities, or personnel from community agencies described their work with children and adults with disabilities. Assignments for the course were the same as in the situated learning class, which were take-home essay midterm and final exams, assigned supplemental readings, and

the development of a life-skills unit of study. An additional requirement for the situated learning class was a weekly reflection of the hands-on experiences at the Arc.

The class sessions at The Arc began with an hour of course content review. Students met at The Arc and engaged in discussion of the required text and supplemental readings that focused on the definitions and characteristics, and educational, instructional, vocational, and social/emotional challenges of individuals with moderate and severe disabilities. The school-aged students and adult clients arrived for the remainder of the class period, and the graduate students then gathered in small groups and taught life skills on different topics.

Examples of life-skill units included consumer education; community safety; social language; behaviors at home, in school, and in the community; nutrition; and healthy habits. Within each unit, the graduate students planned a theme and developed a scope and sequence of objectives for the content area. Using an informal preassessment tool, the graduate students identified the individual client's prior knowledge and frame of reference in applying the life skills. Then, the students determined what direction their instruction would take.

The target objectives for the consumer education unit incorporated the basics of coin identification through budgeting and comparative shopping. Local newspaper circulars, board games, and simulated activities facilitated the clients' participation as well as the use of assistive technology through I-pad applications to focus on specific content. At the end of the unit, the graduate students set up a store and assisted the clients in purchasing items, counting money, and calculating change, all dependent upon the client's ability levels. Observing and interviewing the clients was an effective way to monitor progress and modify instructional strategies during the instruction. Some clients required more support than others, but as the course proceeded through the weekly sessions, they became more independent and attended the meetings on a regular basis. The graduate students followed a similar process for all of the life-skills units, but based on the group dynamics of both students and clients, different implementation strategies and resources were used.

Data Collection

At the end of the semester, the graduate students in the situated learning and in the traditional classroom courses were given a survey that evaluated their reactions to their particular course. The survey used is presented in Appendix A. The questions were answered using a 6-point scale with anchors 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 6 (*strongly agree*). The scores for each item were compared for the traditional and experimental groups using *t*-tests (with two-tailed significance levels) using SPSS Version 19.

The faculty member who was the instructor for the courses also divided the students into focus groups to provide more detailed feedback about the experiences of the students. The guideline for the focus groups questions is shown in Appendix B.

Results

Survey Responses

The instructor of the course developed the written survey items and the focus group questions after establishing the goals of using the situated learning model of instruction. Teaching both the traditional and situated learning course simultaneously enabled the instructor to fine-tune the survey questions based on observations and different learning approaches of the two groups of students. 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 (see Table 1) were 111.7 and 103.5, respectively, which is equivalent to the mean scores per item of 5.32 and 4.93 on a 6-point scale, a statistically significant difference indicating a more favorable opinion about the learning for the graduate students in the situated learning course. The 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. Significant differences were found for 9 of the 21 items of the rating scale (see Table 1), all significant at the .02 level or better. The students in The Arc course gave that course a higher rating for the following items:

1. The course facilitated my skills in working as a team member.
2. The course format sharpened my problem-solving skills.
9. I explored ideas confidently with other people.
11. The course format provided me with opportunities to use both creative and reflective processes.
12. The course format developed my confidence to investigate new ideas.
16. The course format allowed for exploration of different methods, approaches, and options for instructional decision making.
17. The course format provided opportunities to manipulate variables to realize results.
19. The course format provided opportunities to practice multiple skills.
20. The course format provided opportunities to articulate with colleagues about effective instructional practices.

There were no differences on the following items.

3. The course format helped sharpen my analytic skills.
4. As a result of the course format, I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar situations.

Table 1. Mean differences between scores of students in the traditional and The Arc course.

	Traditional ($N = 29$)	The arc ($N = 55$)		
	M	*M*	t ($df = 82$)	2-tailed p
1. The course facilitated my skills in working as a team member.	4.69	5.56	4.80	<.001
2. The course format sharpened my problem-solving skills.	4.62	5.07	2.37	.02
3. The course format helped sharpen my analytic skills.	4.83	5.16	1.66	
4. As a result of the course format, I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar situations.	4.79	5.15	1.72	
5. The course format helped me better understand the learning process.	4.72	5.11	1.71	
6. The course format provided me with a broad overview of my field of knowledge.	5.03	5.02	0.07	
7. I felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning.	5.14	5.51	1.71	
8. I was able to explore academic interests with staff and students.	5.00	5.31	1.50	
9. I explored ideas confidently with other people.	4.89	5.38	2.38	.02
10. Students' ideas and suggestions were used during the course.	5.11	5.45	1.65	
11. The course format provided me with opportunities to use both creative and reflective processes.	5.04	5.51	2.63	.01
12. The course format developed my confidence to investigate new ideas.	4.79	5.31	2.53	.013
13. I consider what I learned valuable for my teaching career.	5.29	5.53	1.11	
14. I learned to apply principles from this course to new situations.	5.21	5.24	0.10	
15. The format of the course provided opportunities for more transference of learning to a real-world setting.	5.18	5.51	1.56	
16. The course format allowed for exploration of different methods, approaches, and options for instructional decision making.	4.86	5.42	2.48	.015
17. The course format provided opportunities to manipulate variables to realize results.	4.50	5.16	2.98	.004
18. The course format facilitated the acquisition of facts and procedures.	4.96	5.04	0.36	
19. The course format provided opportunities to practice multiple skills.	4.46	5.20	3.57	.001
20. The course format provided opportunities to articulate with colleagues about effective instructional practices.	5.04	5.64	2.87	.005
21. The course format was intrinsically motivating.	5.07	5.45	1.61	
Total score	103.5	111.7	2.33	.023

5. The course format helped me better understand the learning process.
6. The course format provided me with a broad overview of my field of knowledge.
7. I felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning.
8. I was able to explore academic interests with staff and students.
10. Students' ideas and suggestions were used during the course.
13. I consider what I learned valuable for my teaching career.
14. I learned to apply principles from this course to new situations.
15. The format of the course provided opportunities for more transference of learning to a real-world setting.
18. The course format facilitated the acquisition of facts and procedures.
21. The course format was intrinsically motivating.

On none of the questions did the students in the traditional classroom course rate the course more highly. The fact that the situated learning graduate students were selective in their evaluation of the course suggests that a "halo" effect was not operating, but that the graduate students thought that the situated learning setting was better in selected areas. The main areas on which the graduate students in the situated learning setting focused was their increased *confidence* in working with the clients and their improved *problem-solving skills*. The graduate students in both types of courses felt that they acquired knowledge and were motivated.

In particular, the experimental course seemed to have facilitated working as a team member—and practicing multiple skills—much more than did the traditional course. (The difference in the scores for the two groups was largest for these two items.)

Focus Group Responses

The graduate students participated in focus groups at the end of their participation in the program that provided information about the effect that situated learning in a community setting 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.

Focus group facilitators began by asking the graduate students to reflect on the hands-on learning experiences. The graduate students reported that they felt more responsible for their own learning and also for their fellow group members in the collaborative processes of planning and implementing the life-skills lessons. Most important was that students developed a genuine bond with the school-aged students and adult clients (Harris et al., 2010). 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' and adult clients' growth was evident, based on observations and pre- and post-test data, and an added benefit was that the young students, adult clients, and graduate students learned from each other in the process.

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. Their confidence increased by working with colleagues as they practiced multiple skills such as co-teaching and planning, and they also engaged in dialogue with the college faculty about the course content. An important lesson learned by the graduate students concerned the differences they observed between the students they encounter in public schools and The Arc adult clients. The experiences they had working with adults were unlike any they had had in the past. They were surprised that the adults were able to make decisions and advocate for themselves. The adults wanted to be treated with respect and dignity, and the graduate students did just that.

The graduate students spoke about how they grew from the experiences at The Arc. They enjoyed the real-world practice with The Arc clients that took them out of their usual settings and comfort levels. Also, the graduate students said they were able to see relationships between the information read in the textbooks and the real-life experiences (Nicotera et al., 2011).

When asked what improvements could be made to further enhance the effectiveness of the course, the 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 curriculum development and testing procedures for the life-skills initiative, and they 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 that this hindered their abilities to meet the clients' individual academic, social, and emotional needs. The college faculty made improvements to the program, including a more detailed description of the course objectives and performance standards as well as a brief overview of curriculum development and assessment strategies. The faculty has also provided extensive information about life-skills curricula, assessment information, and methods of differentiating lessons.

Discussion

The graduate students were selective in their higher ratings for The Arc course. They indicated that the situated learning model facilitated their skills in working as team members, helped sharpen their problem-solving skills, and provided opportunities to practice multiple skills, and explore different models and approaches for instructional decision making. Both groups of graduate students (those in the situated learning courses and those in the traditional classroom courses) reported that they sharpened their analytic skills, understood the learning process, explored their academic interests with faculty and other students, and felt part of a group that was committed to learning.

When the college faculty joined in the partnership with a community agency for individuals with disabilities and a public school, they sought initiatives that would improve their teacher preparation program. Students and adults with disabilities are included in the general population, and a quality teacher preparation program must include course work that emphasizes embedding life-skills instruction within the general education curricula. The life-skills project described in this paper proved to be an effective approach, exposing graduate students to authentic learning, developing their interpersonal communication skills, and engaging in collaboration and reflection on their own learning. The results of the current study showed that the situated learning model of instruction enhanced the ability of the college faculty to make 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.

The survey results and focus group responses from the graduate students gave faculty reason to integrate situated learning and community partnerships in their teacher preparation programs. Through this study, faculty found that situated learning is straightforward and easily combined with content-area methods courses, providing opportunities for students to learn the concepts in realistic settings. Graduate students' feedback on the positive aspects of this model reinforced to faculty that their teacher preparation programs should provide opportunities for students to engage in the teaching-learning process by immersion in the situated learning model of instruction in an off-campus realistic setting.

Research supports the survey and focus group results in the current study in the following areas: Situated learning facilitates collaboration with problem solving and decision making, it builds confidence in exploring new ideas, and the community partnership is effective through the common

goal of all agencies, which is to improve the educational skills of their constituents. The data from the study support that using the model will increase the likelihood that teachers will integrate the new knowledge into their own classrooms (Utley, 2006).

Implementing a situated learning model of instruction differs greatly from the traditional classroom genre and, therefore, requires that faculty adopt different teaching strategies and methods of content presentation. As the instructor does less direct teaching and more facilitating, the graduate students are required to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Special education faculty must realize that they need to alter their own teaching styles, from giving information to encouraging peer collaboration, risk taking, problem solving, and decision making. Faculty must emphasize the importance of self-reflection, and through the reflective practice, students' confidence and reliance on their own instincts will increase (Miraglia & Smilan, 2009). The faculty is still responsible for all students' learning and for accomplishing the course goals. For a period of time during each class session, the faculty in the present program presented material, answered questions, engaged in dialogue, and provided feedback to students to ensure their acquisition of course content (see Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2008).

The effective use of a community partnership with The Arc was an essential element in the current study. This paper has focused on the advantages realized by the graduate students, adult clients, and school-aged students, but The Arc benefited from the partnership as well. The graduate students brought with them expertise in different subject area disciplines as well as knowledge of special education theory and pedagogy. While the graduate students worked with the school-aged and adult clients, The Arc personnel observed the strategies and were then able to fine-tune their own practices. The graduate students shared life-skills lessons and strategies for presenting information both verbally and nonverbally, and using appropriate social language (Tower & Broadbent, 2011).

The partnership between the college and The Arc has lasted 3 years so far. Currently, the school-aged students are not attending the after-school program at The Arc because of funding issues. However, The Arc administration is dedicated to funding the initiative for their adult clients in the future. The partnership between The Arc and the college continues to generate positive outcomes for all constituents. Adult clients with developmental disabilities learn work-based skills that they apply to their home and work environments. The graduate students learn instructional techniques as they teach life skills to individuals with moderate and severe disabilities.

Appendix A

Situated Learning Student Perspectives

	Strongly disagree			Strongly agree		
Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6
The course facilitated my skills in working as a team member.						
The course format sharpened my problem-solving skills.						
The course format helped sharpen my analytic skills.						
As a result of the course format, I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar situations.						
The course format helped me better understand the learning process.						
The course format provided me with a broad overview of my field of knowledge.						
I felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning.						
I was able to explore academic interests with staff and students.						
I explored ideas confidently with other people.						
Students' ideas and suggestions were used during the course.						
The course format provided me with opportunities to use both creative and reflective processes.						
The course format developed my confidence to investigate new ideas.						
I consider what I learned valuable for my teaching career.						
I learned to apply principles learned from this course to new situations.						
The format of the course provided opportunities for more transference of learning to a real-world setting.						
The course format allowed for exploration of different methods, approaches and options for instructional decision making.						
The course format provided opportunities to manipulate variables to realize results.						
The course format facilitated the acquisition of facts and procedures.						
The course format provided opportunities to practice multiple skills.						
The course format provided opportunities to articulate with colleagues about effective instructional practice.						
The course format was intrinsically motivating.						

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1. Is the hands-on approach to learning important? Why or why not?
2. What do you perceive as the purpose of hands-on learning?
3. Would you prefer to use this approach rather than the traditional classroom approach?
4. What is your perception of the learning that takes place in this environment?
5. Are there positive aspects of using this approach?
6. Are there negative aspects of using this approach?
7. Are there limitations both instructionally and technologically?
8. Did aspects of using the hands-on approach limit the amount of new information you received in this course?
9. Have you changed your views about the hands-on approach for this course? In what ways?
10. Are there advantages of meeting on campus?
11. Was anything lacking in the course format that would have been better if the course was taught more traditionally?
12. Suggest improvements to this course format that should be made.
13. In what ways was the course design and delivery beneficial to student learning? Consider both graduate students, school-aged students, and Arc clients.
14. How can the course design and delivery be improved to increase student learning?
15. How could the classroom environment be improved for more effective relationships and communication?
16. What aspects of the classroom environment facilitate mutual respect?
17. Identify the many interpersonal relationships among the participants in this course.
18. Which exemplified mutual respect and trust?
19. Which did not?
20. When did cooperative learning occur in the class and with whom?
21. Which participants were involved in cooperative learning?
22. What are the positive aspects of cooperative learning?
23. What are the negative aspects?
24. What do you consider to be the most essential characteristics of an instructor in a situated learning environment?
25. What characteristics did this instructor demonstrate?
26. What characteristics should the instructor focus more attention on?
27. How did working in small groups benefit you as a learner?
28. What structure would be more beneficial?
29. How did the instructor facilitate sharing among the graduate students?
30. What opportunities were you provided to take ownership of your own learning in this course?
31. How did you take ownership of your own learning?
32. What additional opportunities could have been provided for you?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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