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Abstract

Excerpt:

The Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences embraces the contemporary ideal for criminal justice education. It has provided benchmarks that criminal justice education programs should measure themselves against to ensure quality, recommending that the programs conduct outcome assessments as a means of improving themselves over time (Janeksela & Iacovetta, 1992; Moriarty, 2006). The benchmarks measure how well the programs, both undergraduate and graduate, develop critical thinking, communication, technology and computing, quantitative reasoning, and ethical decision-making skills,...

Keywords

SoTL, Criminal justice education, Graduate seminar course design

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Using a SoTL Approach in Designing and Teaching a Graduate Seminar Course

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The Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences embraces the contemporary ideal for criminal justice education. It has provided benchmarks that criminal justice education programs should measure themselves against to ensure quality, recommending that the programs conduct outcome assessments as a means of improving themselves over time (Janeksela & Iacovetta, 1992; Moriarty, 2006). The benchmarks measure how well the programs, both undergraduate and graduate, develop critical thinking, communication, technology and computing, quantitative reasoning, and ethical decision-making skills, as well as understanding of diversity and subject matter knowledge (Southerland, 2002).

With these benchmarks in mind, and in hopes of better facilitating student learning, I redesigned a master's-level 3-hour seminar on criminological theory that I taught during the fall semester of 2008. It was my special intention to help students develop analytical and applied skills that would meaningfully link criminological theory to some specific research questions and to practice in the field. To facilitate the development of skills, the course included new active and collaborative learning components and accompanying assessment measures (Schneider, 2007).

The concept *learning* cannot stand independent of the particular knowledge and skills a student or group of students is meant to learn. The students in my redesigned criminological theory course were expected, at its conclusion, to comprehend a variety of criminological theories; to understand how social contextual factors played out in theories' development; to apply theories to explain behavior (including criminal behavior) in various situations; to think through theories' implications for policy; and, finally, to both construct research questions addressing gaps in literature and obtain evidence to answer those questions. In a sense, I expected them to learn to be active learners capable of thinking like theorists (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005; Scarboro, 2004). While the master's students who ultimately enter doctoral programs constitute a small minority, *all* students should adapt better in their professional roles when they possess essential analytical, synthesis, and research skills. Criminal justice careers span a wide range, nearly all requiring strong higher order thinking skills and the ability to work within an interdependent team (Rockell, 2009). To facilitate my students' achievement of this goal, I set out to create an environment that was learner-centered and that featured learning activities promoting students' *own* responsibility for knowledge construction (Blumberg, 2009; Carlson & Schodt, 1995; Garfield, 1995; Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005).

In this particular graduate seminar, I used five major active learning activities in and out of class. The first learning activity was a weekly pass/fail exercise, to be completed and shared with me by email at least 1 hour before the class meeting, in which the student raised and briefly answered meaningful questions that reflected and also moved beyond the week's assigned readings (Greene, 2005). The assigned construction of questions has been used to prompt learners to analyze, apply, and integrate materials (Greene, 2005). We used the questions students constructed to facilitate class discussions; to address misperceptions

about theories as well as theorists' assumptions; and to link theoretical work to practice. Because students had to supply tentative answers for the questions they constructed, they needed real understanding of our readings.

The second major learning activity was an individual presentation, delivered before the entire class, that explored a criminological theory in the context of extant scholarly articles of relevance and of further possible research questions. I used a rubric for the redesigned course to serve two functions, not just guiding students as they prepared their own presentations, but supplying a framework for responding in writing to their classmates' presentations.

Per the rubric, each individual presentation was to include a set of questions to be used during a presenter-moderated follow-up class discussion of the presentation. Question construction was vital to the assignment's basic content, calling as it did for useful research questions illustrating a criminological theory, and was further practiced as each presentation concluded. Question construction, again, is a technique providing a valuable opportunity to analyze, integrate, and apply information (Greene, 2005), so the individual presentation activity in effect delegated to presenters the responsibility for their classmates' learning. Throughout the semester, as they completed the first and second learning activities, students practiced refining the questions they asked and were asked, which helped prepare them to generate significant, testable (whether with theory application or empirical data), *real* research questions of relevance to their careers.

The third and fourth major learning activities from this redesigned course were also active and collaborative. The third activity consisted of three rounds of peer editing with the students' term papers. Scheduled at different stages of the papers' development, our peer editing work followed specified procedures and an appropriate rubric. The students were required, first, to make detailed comments leading to the improvement of a classmate's paper and, second, to subsequently evaluate the edited version of the paper in light of those comments. The term paper assignment began with a requirement to formulate a practicable research question and establish its significance. Students were then to specify a theory of use in answering the question, and explain how that theory would be used. They were asked next to discuss policy implications of the potential study findings and, finally, to bring all the elements together in a final manuscript.

After each round of peer editing had taken place, students had one additional week to finalize their papers. I performed the final grading of the papers; I had also assessed each one at each stage of development, weighing how thoroughly and productively students had addressed peer editors' remarks.

The fourth learning activity consisted of three group discussions requiring students to apply criminological theory to explain crime and criminal behavior. Our four discussion groups each had 4 to 5 students, whom I had assigned to the groups keeping gender and race/ethnic representation in mind. In advance of each group discussion, I formulated for each group several questions based on course materials and earlier class discussions. Each group member was first given a defined period during which to write down points answering the first of these questions. Next, members of the group discussed their written notes, collaborating to develop the best collaborative answer possible in the allotted time. When that time had elapsed, each group passed the question, and collaboratively developed an answer, to a different group to respond to, in turn receiving a new question and its

proposed answer. The process was repeated until all four groups had worked with all four questions.

During the period for addressing the final question, each group also evaluated the answers prepared by the other three groups, leading to synthesis of ideas. At the conclusion of the group discussions, a subsequent class discussion provided the opportunity to demonstrate individual and group accountability. Specifically, each student was asked to assess (a) his or her personal effort during the group discussion, (b) fellow group members' individual efforts during the exercise, and (c) his or her group's entire collaborative effort. I also graded each individual student's personal performance separately, based on my reading of the pertinent individual and group answers, along with my review of the feedback collected at each group discussion's conclusion.

The fifth learning activity was class discussion. During our 3-hour class meetings, we typically devoted an hour, at minimum, to a class discussion in which I ensured each student participated. The starting point for most of these discussions was one or more of the weekly assigned questions students emailed to me an hour or more before class time. Additionally, class discussions were held at the conclusion of other collaborative learning activities. Students explained to each other their answers to the questions classmates had constructed. Listening to peers' differing approaches to issues was an important chance to become more flexible, cognitively (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005). On a regular basis, misperceptions were cleared up during class discussions. According to the literature, an instructional strategy making use of in-class dialogs facilitates students' participation and hones their critical thinking (Scarboro, 2004). In my class, students who tended to remain quiet during discussions would be requested to participate.

Obviously, a faculty member who comes to subscribe to the principles underlying these five learning activities will play a different role in a course than formerly. In my case, both classroom and out-of-class learning activities for the redesigned course had to be completely and precisely rethought before the semester began. All activities needed to reflect the range of students' likely knowledge levels, backgrounds, and learning styles. I had to create an evaluation for each learning activity, one giving evidence of its effectiveness for student learning. The new learning activities had to be highly structured; but because granting responsibility to the class for knowledge construction means allowing discussions to proceed in a number of directions, the activities needed also to be very flexible.

In the redesigned course, I had to continually delegate to students some authority for the learning process and foster the lateral communications requisite to such delegation (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002; Rau & Heyl, 1990). Most importantly, I had to remain willing to be a learner myself, continually examining my own efforts for opportunities to improve.

Methods

To assess students' achievement in the redesigned seminar course in the fall 2008 semester, I used several direct and indirect measures of how well its learning objectives had been met. The study sample was first-year master's degree program students enrolled in a seminar course, at a large research university, that emphasized their active and

collaborative learning about criminological theory. I was the course instructor, and I had made deliberate efforts to incorporate in the syllabus collaborative learning activities able to facilitate student learning. I had also approached assessment in this course in a new way, one that enhanced the students' responsibility for their own learning.

Specifically, the syllabus included new active and collaborative learning components requiring the use of two new evaluation strategies gauging the components' effectiveness. In the first, students' learning outcomes were measured directly and indirectly. The direct measures were pre- and post-testing and students' grades associated with (a) written assignments including papers, (b) weekly exercises, and (c) group and individual answers prepared during in-class group assignments. The indirect measures comprised each student's required evaluation of him- or herself; of each member of his or her discussion group; of that discussion group as a group; and of the seminar overall. The second evaluation strategy involved my assessing how the final term papers submitted for my redesigned course compared to papers students submitted for the course in semesters before the redesign.

Results

In a redesigned master's-level seminar on criminological theory, students were expected to construct a base of knowledge and also to develop outcome skills in the areas of critical thinking, knowledge application, and synthesis. The course had a number of identified learning objectives, which at semester's end were measured both directly and indirectly in order to assess learning outcomes. Each student's outcome for each learning objective was directly assessed with three instruments: an individual presentation in class, a series of weekly exercises completed out of class, and the written assignments across the semester. I assigned a grade to each assignment. The measured results show that each student in the redesigned course demonstrated *acceptable* or better than acceptable performance; almost half demonstrated *good* performance. Acceptable performance was defined as earning at least a B grade for the course, while good performance was defined as earning an A for the course.

Pre- and post-testing of the students in the course provided an additional direct measure. This pre- and post-testing comprised students' completion of an identical multiple-choice instrument (with questions on criminological theory and its application) both during the first class meeting and then during the final meeting of the semester. The pre- and post-testing showed students in the redesigned course to demonstrate greater knowledge of criminological theory at the end of the semester than at the beginning.

For the pre-test, the mean number of correct answers was 14 out of 31; for the post-test, the mean number of correct answers was 19 out of 31. The mean scores yielded a *t*-test result of 5.2 ($p < .01$). Detailed analyses indicated that all but one student in the redesigned course answered more questions correctly on the post-test than the pre-test. Despite the variation in their previous academic preparation, the students in the course on average showed a significant increase in their knowledge base at the end of the course.

The study's indirect measures consisted of students' comments about the course as a whole and about particular collaborative learning activities completed in class. Their comments were overwhelmingly positive concerning the structure and design of the course as a whole.

They stated generally that the redesigned course was very well organized, with expectations made clear, and that student participation had typically been adequate, the student presentations helping their understanding. A few students remarked that the course had required extensive work on their part. In addition, responding to a change of classroom that became necessary close to the semester's end, some students commented that seating arrangements might be able to promote collaborative learning. Students mentioned they derived satisfaction from the fact that the course provided a strong foundation for future research. In addition, commenting on the requirement to evaluate their own and classmates' work in class, some students noted that they had learned something about approaching problems from different angles; or had, by adopting a classmate's perspective, been better able to understand materials (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005).

In my comparison of the students from the redesigned course to earlier students completing fewer active and collaborative learning activities and lacking grading rubrics showed that term papers prepared for the redesigned course were more concisely written, reflecting close alignment with the criteria from the grading rubric. In addition, the individual presentations by students enrolled during fall 2008 seemed structured more effectively than earlier students' presentations, again reflecting the use of a grading rubric.

Discussion

We are seeing a shift within American higher education from support for an *instructional paradigm* to support for a *learning paradigm* (Barr & Tagg, 1995). In light of new expectations for institutions and faculty, we need to adopt this learning paradigm that originates in the importance of student learning. The new focus on the learning paradigm has generated concomitant new interest in how students construct knowledge as they learn (Shen, Hiltz, & Bieber, 2008). To achieve the new expectations, an environment conducive to active and collaborative learning should be provided for students, because such an environment is associated with effective student learning.

In a criminological theory course during fall 2008, several steps were taken to create the necessary environment (Lo & Olin, 2009). Students were encouraged to take responsibility for learning, while the instructor assumed a role of teacher-facilitator (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002). The course adopted varied learning and assessment methods. In-class and other planned activities were used as vehicles for active and collaborative student learning. Assignments were framed to elicit critical thinking, including problem solving, application of knowledge, and active learning. The instructor encouraged shared, lateral communication among students, both in the classroom and outside it (Scarboro, 2004). Results of a variety of outcome assessments used in the course make me confident that by the end of the semester, the students had gained both knowledge and the desired outcome skills.

A limitation of this study of my redesigned course must be mentioned. The study was not able to evaluate each new learning activity's impact individually, since during the course redesign, several activities to promote student learning were added simultaneously. Therefore, the observed improvement in overall student learning is associated with the addition of all the activities together. Having said this, the students' voiced satisfaction with collaborative learning activities is great feedback to guide the future development of techniques meant to engage their interest (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Jones, 2006).

A minor obstacle for such course redesign is the course instructor's increased workload. The well-designed activities required to promote student learning in this way involve planning and preparation beyond the norm. Obtaining the questions and answers for the class discussions proved to be much more involved than I had expected. Moreover, feedback could no longer be provided at my convenience; to make clear to students the importance of their personal accountability, and to capitalize fully on the benefits offered by group and class discussions, I needed to respond to students within a week of any activity they completed. This extra preparation and timeliness, on the other hand, allowed me to better track students' understanding and progress over the semester.

Whatever the study's limitations, there is good news in that, despite the present redesigned course being a graduate-level course, nothing appears to preclude incorporating similar active and collaborative learning activities in upper-level undergraduate courses.

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