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Create-a-Teen Storyline, My SoTL in Educational Psychology

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I. Storyline and the Create a Teen (CAT) Project in an Educational Psychology EPSY 302 course

Program

This SoTL research relates to the use and refinement of a teaching strategy called Storyline. Using storyline, a colleague and I have implemented an instructional method in which the teacher and students co-construct a narrative allowing students to use and make educational psychology content relevant and meaningful.

The course is designed for college students preparing to be K-12 teachers and includes twelve main topics related to learner development and the learning process. Storyline gives continuing structure to the course content as partners work together to create a fictitious teenager (CAT). Each week throughout the semester a different topic is explored and during the appropriate week the college students use the concept as a framework for adding to the development of their fictitious teenager. All the fictitious teens help build and participate in activities occurring in the town, which is part of the shared context. During five of the weeks students get to collaborate with classmates other than their on-going partner because two fictitious teens work together, through their creators to solve a problem or design a project. If students miss class they have to complete the tasks related to their teen on their own. As students respond to the project tasks they post the decisions and explanations about their teen on a thread in the discussion section of our on-line course management program, Desire to Learn, (D2L). This allows all students to read each other’s work and makes the development of their teens hypothetically more public. From time to time I assign students to read about other teens and comment on their work related to their teen.

The teams of college students use Vygotsky’s principles, Piaget’s principles, concepts related to intelligence, knowledge construction, and information processing as they create and develop their fictitious teen. The college students are expected to incorporate concepts and key terms in their response to the assigned tasks. This task requires students to share and verify their understanding of key concepts in the educational psychology course.

II. A rational for the method (theoretical context)

This college level Storyline takes advantage of role playing, visualization, student collaboration, active engagement, expectations for elaboration, and ownership of content in learning. According to Vygotsky, play stretches learners cognitively and learners will perform more challenging tasks when assisted by
others who are more skillful. While completing storyline tasks students are connecting new sometimes challenging concepts to their own prior knowledge as they negotiate with their partner the construction of the fictitious teenagers according to the weekly tasks assigned by the professor. Evidence of motivational flow is observed as students work together creating and experiencing an appropriate level of complexity related to the content being applied.

III. The research question and process

“What are the lessons to be gleaned from this experience?”

The goal of this research was to learn about students’ perceptions and reactions to this instructional technique. The CAT activity has been used in the Educational psychology course for a period of two and a half years. During that time data was collected in the form of course evaluations, end of course survey data, an end of program survey, and my weekly reflections. In addition three students were interviewed using a structured interview protocol about their experience with the “Create a Teen’-storyline project. These three interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data reported was taken only from those students who were in courses where I was the instructor.

IV. Student Data supporting the use of the Storyline method in Educational Psychology Results?

My own weekly reflection focused on student engagement and the development of a community of learners in the classroom. Each week students had to apply content in active ways, work with classmate/partners; articulate understanding and the ability to apply content. I noted that students were rarely absent from class on Friday at 12:00 noon the day of the CAT work. It seemed, based on this on-going reflection, that the strategy helped attract students. Normally attendance at Friday classes over noon is not ideal. As I reflected I also realized that my students enjoyed the development of a teen that grew to have a personality, they were concerned when a random event negatively affected their teen, they were proud to share their teen’s strengths and talents when a pair of fictitious teens had to co-construct a CAT task. I realized that I looked forward to class on Friday at noon and watching the serious energy that was demonstrated as my students worked on their CAT task. I found I was eager to read their weekly D2L postings that communicated their work. In addition it was easy for me to gather information about my students’ ability to use and apply the educational psychology concepts that we were studying.

The university uses the IDEA course evaluation system. On those confidential evaluations the students have communicated that course objectives were met and that they valued the opportunity to be active learners. They also reported that they learned a great deal about working with others. On the Fall 2010 evaluation 96% of the students rated the following two items as 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale when 5 the
highest score—1) This course demonstrated the importance and significance of the subject matter, and 2) This course related course material to real life situations.

More focused research began with feedback gathered at the end of each semester that the CAT activity has been used. The form used to gather that feedback included information summarized below.

| Students who reported instructor should 'keep' or 'do more' of the items listed. |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Generally the use of a fictitious teen to practice | Keep 94 | Do More 5 | Total % 95% |
| Working with a partner | 93 | 6 | 95% |
| Sharing development of teen in D2L discussion | 87 | 2 | 87% |
| CAT guiding questions for CAT lab day | 91 | 4 | 91% |
| Using Friday as the CAT lab day | 98 | 2 | 96% |
| The culminating event | 91 | 3 | 90% |
| Reading other fictitious teens' stories | 50 | 25 | 72% |
| Sharing tasks with other fictitious teens | 70 | 21 | 88% |
| Teaching other fictitious teens | 64 | 15 | 76% |
| Picking a picture of a potential teen | 84 | 10 | 90% |
| Letting teens be different ages | 84 | 8 | 88% |

Table 1: Student end of semester feedback regarding use of CAT during five semesters, fall 2008-Fall 2010; n = 104

The data table above indicates that a high percent of the students, over five semesters, think various aspects of the CAT project should be continued (keep). The data indicates the students particularly think that working with partners should be continued, as should the general use of the project. The students seem to like the weekly schedule with Friday being viewed and used as a CAT lab day. When asked about Monday as a pre-reading day, prior to the on-line quiz on Tuesday 95% of the students said keep this aspect. Other course feedback from students, also support their appreciation of the consistent weekly schedule. Some students were much more enthusiastic about that design than others. However the above data and that gathered on the IDEA (university student evaluation system) forms are strong indicators that the opportunity to work with partners is valued by the students and that the CAT activity was generally well received.
My colleague, who teaches the other sections of Educational Psychology and uses Storyline, and I have used another survey completed at the end of student teaching, to ask student to give us some general feedback about their memories of the CAT experience. These were all students who participated in the CAT storyline 3-5 semesters earlier during their teacher education course of study. This data is summarized and reported below for 19 students who were in my classes and completed this data-gathering instrument. Students were asked to place a mark on a continuum from low to high as a response to each of the following statements:

1) **Please rate the value of this project for understanding the course concepts by placing a point on the dotted line of the following scale.** All of the marks, except one were at the medium level or higher. Nine marks were in the top fourth of the continuum.

2) **Please rate the value of this project for applying the course concepts by placing a point on the dotted line of the following scale.** For this question there were two marks half way between low and medium and again nine marks in the top fourth of the continuum.

3) Students were also asked if they had any suggestions for changing the project. Twelve reported they wouldn't change it in any way, one suggested to eliminate the partners, one suggested to assign personalities to the fictitious teenagers and five had no comment.

The information gathered in this manner additionally provides evidence that the CAT project is a valuable and educationally effective tool. Students remember the project and report that it helped them understand and apply the content that they were learning in educational psychology.

To triangulate and verify the survey data an effort to interview a convenient sample of teacher candidates was initiated. A research plan was outlined, human subjects approval was obtained and those to be invited for interviews were contacted. A graduate student was recruited to complete the interviews, since I did not want the results to be affected by my also having been the teacher. One interview question added another perspective, that of the concept of play as a part of learning.

The interviews resulted in several telling quotes that continue to confirm the value of the strategy. In addition the interviews add a couple new insights. These interviews were done with a convenient sample of students who had been in my section of EPSY 302 and had not yet student taught. Three of the 12 choose to participate in the interview. I will label responses as I1, I2, and I3.

In response to the question “What are your most vivid memories of the CAT project?”

*I1) It was fun, the social aspect was fun and it was nice to do it with a partner*
I2) ...the fact we were able to be creative. It was not a canned project...it had flexibility

I3) I remember the picture of our student and my partner. I recognize her when I see her on campus

In response to the question “Did CAT make EPSY 302 relevant and meaningful?”

I1) It helped us apply the concepts and put the concepts into a real life situation

I3) It made you think . . . better than just reading it

“Did CAT limit learning?”

I1) Didn’t limit

I2) I wouldn’t say it limited rather it expanded learning because is was an alternative

I3) I can’t think of any thing that was limiting

“How did the strategy support your opportunity to practice concepts related to learning and development?”

1) Each week when we did the project we were further working with the concepts

I2) It made us apply the concept in a different setting/compare to what other groups were creating.

I3) It was pretty affective at practicing the concepts because it was a weekly thing

“Did the CAT project help you understand other key concepts such as identity development, motivation and observational learning?”

I1) Oh Yea – it all helps

I2) Oh Yea –I’d definitely say that it did

I3) At the time I understood them really well when I was posting, like they made a lot of sense to me – I don’t remember them all really well now--but that was 2 years ago

“Did the involvement with CAT help you better understand students you worked with in PSII (field based learners)?”

I1) Yea, helped remind me they are all different

I2) I would say to some degree-reminded me that the kids are affected by many things-such as family, friends, other teachers, each learner has a different personality –(paraphrase)-

I3) I didn’t remember CAT but I did think about how the life experiences of my students affected them

“Create a Teen is a strategy that allows students to play while learning. What is the role of play in learning?”

I1) It is important because it allows students to have fun and be more creative. It shows students understand material if they can play with it.
I2) It is just a different instructional strategy, when students create a skit, news broadcast, quiz it is a kind of play and allows students to be engaged and having fun.

I3) I think of play as free exploration, so it allows for more creativity and getting into the content instead of just being told how to do something.

VI. Discussion of Results

There have been five sources of data used to gather information about the effectiveness of the Storyline CAT project used in this researchers educational psychology class. Each set of data seeks information from students in at least one of the classes I taught during the last five semesters. Each set of data is generally a relativity strong statement that students think this project works for them as learners. They enjoy it, appreciate the chance it gives them to work with their classmates using content from the course, they like the structure it provides for them to practice with theoretical ideas, and the fact it allows them to be creative. The interview results indicate that students appreciate the opportunity to learn and play concurrently as one student said “I think of play as free exploration, so it allows for more creativity and getting into the content instead of just being told how to do something.”

VII. Summary

My evidence supports the notion that the storyline method is a great way to integrate adult play into college level instruction. It provides a context for students to apply content and use their prior knowledge and experience. It has provided a nice avenue for students to relate educational psychology content to real life situations. Students who become active learners participating in storyline gain from this type of learning experience.

References:


McKinney, K (2007), Enhancing Learning Through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Anker Publishing


