Developing Future Professionals to Develop and Engage Youth

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Introduction & Need for LCT Strategy

College students challenge teaching in many ways; their digitally enhanced, fast-paced, need for quick learning, parallel processing, instruction on demand perspectives are contrary to the pre-digital and conventional-oriented instruction. The challenge remains, how do faculty address these challenges yet ensure that students are actively engaged in their own learning. We believe learner-centered teaching is an effective approach to engage college students to develop their teaching capacities as future youth educators. Contrary to traditional instructional practices directed by a behavioristic perspective, where learners are viewed as passive agents, the learner-centered approach, driven by a constructivist perspective, views learners as active agents, engaged in their learning process and yielding better learning outcomes (Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012).

This presentation will highlight some of the learner-centered strategies and activities implemented in two distinct disciplines, Agricultural Education and Child Development, with learners at graduate and undergraduate levels at two distinct universities Purdue and Alcorn State Universities. Within the distinctness in disciplines, educational levels of learners and the type of universities, this presentation draws commonalities in the instructional practices that have been effective across disciplines, levels of students and the university structures. The ultimate and common goal of instruction, being to prepare professionals for the future in the land-grant educational system.

Connection to Literature

The theoretical underpinnings for this presentation are drawn from the constructivist perspective according to which, students are seen as active participants in their own learning (Weimer, 2002). The paradigm shift from teacher centeredness to learner centeredness has been effective in optimizing students' learning. Literature on teacher education programs, including early childhood programs emphasize the importance of self-regulated learning (Perry, Hutchinson & Thauberger, 2008) and help students think like professionals (Thompson, Licklider, & Jungst, 2003). Learner-centered methods have repeatedly been shown to be superior to the traditional teacher-centered approach to instruction, a conclusion that applies whether the assessed outcome is short-term mastery, long-term retention, or depth of understanding of course material, acquisition of critical thinking or creative problem-solving skills, formation of positive attitudes toward the subject being taught, or level of self-confidence in knowledge and skills (Prince & Felder, 2006, 2007). Regarding teacher preparation, learner-centered microteachings helped preservice teachers develop teaching skills regarding content knowledge, planning, teaching process, classroom management, communication, and assessment (Kilic, 2010).

How It Works / Implementation of LCT Strategy

Two youth development education courses were compared—one had a focus on child development and the other focused on developing youth through agricultural education. Both courses prepared future professionals to work with youth in various formal, non-formal and informal educational settings. The purpose of this cross-disciplinary comparison was to explore commonalities and also show how two different disciplines could enhance pre-professional development of college students through collaborations. Appendix I. (Table 1) shows a comparison of the two courses situated in child development and agricultural education at two different land-grant universities.

Results to Date / Implications / Impact

The outcomes of the child development practicum course have been promising on several levels. First, students have demonstrated scaffolding of student knowledge where they have drawn from learning in previous courses to implement activities in this course. This is evident from the weekly discussions and reflections. Second, self-assessment of student practicum experiences have identified strengths and weaknesses in their own work and the need to improve in meeting the students learning outcomes. Third, supervisor assessments were effective in providing feedback and employing the constructivist process of critique. Fourth, the portfolio helped students purposefully collect a summary of their work documenting their growth and determining their goals and documents evidencing their progress towards growth (e.g., statement of reflection, professional resume, sample assignments). Finally, students exhibited a capstone summary of their work and development by presenting their culminating experience in a poster presentation.

The outcomes of the Agricultural STEM Education course have been promising as well. First, students reflect on their perspectives of integrated STEM and have a better knowledge and understanding of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning. Second, students learn how to design integrated STEM lessons and incorporate learner-centered teaching strategies in their lessons. Third, students conduct microteachings in real-world settings with youth, which provides them feedback on how their lessons went. Fourth, students conduct peer observations and self-reflections of the lessons they taught. This helps them to gauge the levels of student engagement and outcomes using a rubric. Finally, students summarize their teaching experience and lessons by conducting a poster presentation.

Both faculty will present similarities and differences in the courses and draw principles that can be replicated by other faculty in various STEM disciplines. The presentation will highlight faculty's co-reflection in terms of curriculum design, instructional delivery, awareness of learning context, differences in the school structures and considering ways to leverage our resources (expertise) to build future capacities. As such, the benefits of two professors in different disciplines co-reflecting on how they develop future professionals include: (1) finding the common ground; (2) knowing the context in which we serve; (3) explore differences in structures and standards; and, (4) consider ways to leverage our resources (expertise) to build future capacities.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

This novel endeavor of faculty members co-engaging in the learner-centered practices to seek commonalities and differences was beneficial for the potential it holds to leverage institutional resources to improve existing courses from different disciplinary perspectives and better prepare professionals for youth development. Futuristically, the potential is to formalize collaborations between two land-grant institutions (1890 and 1862) in preparing future workforce for positive youth development and assessing outcomes of youth programs and engagement. This collaboration is envisioned to culminate in increasing capacities for faculty professional development, academic program growth, college student development, fortifying PK-12 outreach efforts, leveraging strengths from institutional and disciplinary differences, and drawing extramural funding for institutions mutual benefit. Faculty from the disciplines of child development and agricultural STEM education can learn from each other and provide more holistic developmental experiences for future professionals to develop and engage youth.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 1. Comparison of Two Courses that Develop Future Youth Development Professionals		
Elements	**Alcorn State University**	**Purdue University**
Course	6 credits	3 credits
Preservice Youth Educators	Upper-level Undergraduate	Graduate & Upper-level Undergraduate
Foundational Knowledge	Principles of Development Theories of growth and development Developmentally Appropriate Practices Developmental Milestones	Integrated STEM Education Meaningful Learning Learner-Centered Teaching Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
Educational Standards	National Association for the Education of Young Children standards for initial and professional preparation programs Mississippi Early Learning Standards for Classrooms serving infants through four-year-old children American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences	National Standards for Next Generation Science Standards Common Core Mathematics Standards National Educational Technology Standards National Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources Content Standards Indiana State Learning Standards
Planning, Designing & Organizing	Students design lesson plans for one age group individually (toddlers or preschoolers). The lesson plan is for the entire school day with each section of child development	Students design 3 lessons; or, co-design 5 lessons with a peer; each lesson is 45 minutes of instruction
Engagement with Youth (Service Delivery & Teaching)	Classroom instruction in the Child Development Learning centers in various settings - Private, institution based centers, head start centers etc. based on their field placement	Outreach & Afterschool Programs; School Enrichment in K-12 Classrooms
Reflection & Self-Assessment	Students conduct a self-evaluation of their field experience. They also engage in online discussions to reflect and share about their experiences. Additionally, they also journal their experiences throughout the semester when are evaluated at the end of the semester.	Multiple reflections throughout the course and a self-reflection and self-assessment after microteaching experience
Peer Feedback	No formal peer feedback provided. Verbal feedback is provided by peers when the final presentation is made about their field experience.	One peer observes and provides written feedback
Professionalism	Teaching Philosophy Resume & Career Mapping	Innovative Teaching Poster Ideation Discussion Roundtable Proposal