Experiential Learning via Scenario Enactments

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Abstract
Hypothetical scenario enactments utilize role-playing, simulations, and critical dialogue to experientially explore educational issues and challenges. As a pedagogical strategy, enactments aid novice teachers in gaining communicative and interactional skills for addressing potentially confrontational situations, such as; unexpected instructional or classroom management events regarding student behavior issues (e.g., bullying) and parent-teacher interactions. Enactments, through mock situations that provide a sheltered learning environment, generate situated cognition for tackling tough pedagogical challenges pre-service teachers may face once in the field.

Introduction
The best situation for novice learners, such as pre-service teachers, to acquire skills is not through textbooks, field observations or practitioner guidelines, but through real-life interactions. When those experiences are not feasible, hypothetical enactments can provide foundational experiential learning that is meaningfully engaging (Auman, 2011; Barab, Dodge, Ingram-Goble, Peppler, Pettyjohn, Volk et al., 2010; Hertel & Millis, 2002; Kane, 2004; Moizer, Lean, Towler, & Abbey, 2009; Parr, 2005/2006) and hones learners' autonomous thinking necessary for field work (Kolb, 1984; McDonald, 2012). Agential knowledge is strengthened through situated cognition. Within mock situations, learners' self-sufficiency is gained through a sheltered learning experience where requisite skills are safely acquired and then easily transferred and applied once in real field settings. This paper describes hypothetical scenario enactments as an effective instructional strategy that generates a sense of realism; thereby, addressing limitations of learning authenticity for beginning teachers who are not yet in an actual classroom.

The paper first presents related research which highlights effectiveness of the instructional strategy for promoting student learning. Next, instructional benefits of hypothetical scenario enactments on learners' acquisition of knowledge and skills are provided. Then a general overview and guidelines for implementation of the pedagogical strategy are provided, along with detailed examples for application. Additionally, caveats for implementing this instructional strategy are noted and discussed. Lastly, a concluding comment is proffered.

Related Research

Many researchers, as well as practitioners, have explored the effectiveness of situated cognition on learners' knowledge acquisition through experiential learning approaches and strategies (e.g., Gosen & Washbush, 2004; Kolb, 1984; McDonald, 2012; Wheeler, 2006). Role-playing and simulation are at the forefront as foundational instructional models for providing experiential learning (e.g., Cruickshank & Telfer, 2001; Hertel & Millis, 2002; Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2008; Simpson & Elias, 2011). Several studies have validated use of hypothetical enactments through simulations, role-playing and critical dialogue, to ratchet-up student experiential learning (Barab, Dodge et al., 2010; Barab, Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010; McDonald, 2012). One recent study highlighted pre-service teachers' perceptions of learning authenticity within a parent-teacher simulation (Dotgera, Harris, & Hansel, 2008). Findings indicate that participants perceived interactional skills were heightened. Interactional and interpersonal relational skills are pivotal to novice teachers' mandatory entry proficiencies and prove to be a resulting benefit of hypothetical enactments (Simpson & Elias, 2011). Interpersonal prowess requires learners to relate to an "other" (Barab, Gresalfi et al., 2010) where active listening and position-taking skills must be employed and utilized. Through the enactment process, participants must be able to *feel* from others' perspectives to be effective. Other learning advantages of hypothetical enactments include: in-depth comprehension of content presented (Barab, Dodge et al., 2010; Simpson & Elias, 2011); increased critical thinking (Kerekes & King, 2010; McDonald, 2012; Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008); and communicative proficiency (Barab, Dodge et al., 2010).

Instructional Benefits

In general, hypothetical scenario enactments present a highly interactive (mentally and emotionally), non-didactic instructional approach that optimizes student learning through spontaneity and improvisation within a sheltered, low-risk experiential setting of contrived contingencies (McDonald, 2012; Parr, 2005/2006). Active learning incites learners' internalization and meaning making of the situated scenario challenges (McDonald, 2012). Additionally, the instructional process focuses on learning, not assessment; thereby, exploring decisions and social actions to be taken in the scenario can occur within a level of safety, with little to no perception of academic ramifications (Barab, Gresalfi et al., 2010; Simpson & Elias, 2011).

Significant interactive and communicative skills are developed during a hypothetical scenario enactment process. Potential skills acquired include: (a) critical thinking, inquiry and comprehension (through direct experience and post-reflections); (b) communicative proficiency (through dialogue during enactments and post-enactment critical and reflective discussions) (McDonald, 2012); and (c) interpersonal prowess (through interaction experiences, practicing and acquiring listening ability and position-taking aptitude) (Barab, Gresalfi et al., 2010; Dotgera et al., 2008). Students must utilize critical thinking during the scenario enactment activity; most notably, when differing opinions and points of view are expressed (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008). Higher-level thinking stimulates deeper, more critical comprehension of issues embedded within the hypothetical scenario; thereby, enhancing learners' understanding of concepts presented, constructs explored, and skills practiced during the activity (Anderson &

Krathwohl, 2001). Additionally, the affective domain of learning is involved in hypothetical enactments, where learners' values, beliefs, and dispositions are pivotally brought into play, potentially ratcheting up their level of comprehension. With respect to communicative skills, verbal exchanges experientially support learners' ability to process and internalize conceptual learning, as well as, functionally increase awareness of their own attributes and deficits. During enactments, learners also experience insight of "real-to-life understanding of others' views" thereby potentially increasing interpersonal skills (McDonald, 2012, p. 9). There is a social dimension inherent to enactments which augment learners' competence in visualizing alternative rationales and perspectives.

General Overview
In this paper, a hypothetical enactment is characterized by utilization of both simulations and role-playing during the class activity. These terms, often used interchangeably, are patently different (Crookall & Oxford, 1990). With role-play, participants take a position of other in the script. With simulation, participants respond as self in a real-life manufactured scenario. All participants share the context and purpose for the enactment, but function within these distinct roles. The activity involves two phases: (1) hypothetical scenario enactment; and (2) post-enactment discussion. The instructor serves a non-directive role by initiating the enactment with random distribution of scripts and facilitation of post-enactment discussions. If conducted as a whole class activity, observing peers take notes during the enactment to provide data for post-enactment debriefing discussions. If presented as small groups, students conduct multiple enactments to ensure that everyone experiences different participatory roles (i.e., simulator, role-player, and observer). Post-enactment discussions are prompted with open-ended questions regarding learners' positive and/or negative perceptions of the enactment or specific reflective questions on actions taken. These critical discussions help learners express their unique perspectives and beliefs, analyze complex social issues and internalize conceptual knowledge inherent to the enactment scenarios. All participants are invited to contribute to the discussion.

A non-negotiable factor for authentic dialogue and exchanges to occur is the establishment of a foundational level of trust in the learning environment prior to effective implementation of enactments (Parr 2005/2006). Additionally, scenarios created must present relevance to common events that occur naturally and "resonate with learners for them to invest interest and engage in the activity" (McDonald, 2012, p. 4). An educator's own problematic pedagogical experiences serve as excellent fodder for developing emotionally-tinged hypothetical scripts that potentially trigger emotional responses. Also, exemplary enactments reflect concepts pivotal to course objectives; thereby, extending class discussion from a conceptual to an experiential perspective/level.

In my own practice, I use hypothetical scenarios for exploring multiple teaching issues that provide pre-service teachers experience with decision-making processes and interactional choices for addressing challenging instructional or management events such as student behavior issues and parent-teacher interactions. But, enactments are highly malleable,

applicable to multiple topics, content areas, and disciplines, as well as, effective in meeting myriad instructional objectives.

Implementation Guidelines

First, instructors must create scenarios that are contextualized and present relevant social or interactive dilemmas which are descriptive to a situation but open for interpretation (examples provided in the next section). The goal is to generate scenarios that provide practice space for applying learners' nascent skills and potentially minimize their experiential shortcomings once in the field. The scenarios involve participant function assignments. A participant can volunteer or be randomly assigned to operate as a simulator. Simulators are directed to engage authentically (as themselves) in the scenario task. In a similar process, role-players can be assigned. Role-players are directed to interpret the assigned characteristics and scenario description, interacting hypothetically to the situation. Remaining participants are observers and directed to take notes for post-enactment discussion. Post-enactment dialogue involves the instructor facilitating discussion through a critical questioning process.

Examples for Application

The following are examples used with pre-service teachers to explore unexpected instructional or management events such as student behavior incidents (e.g., bullying) and parent-teacher interactions.

Student behavior incident

A teacher simulator is provided with a bullying situation where the following information is provided: background information, age of children involved, behavior description of child(ren), setting, description of situation, and point at which the teacher becomes involved. All participants receive this information. The following example is provided:

> *It is your first year teaching kindergarten. You find the children delightful and your confidence building with the exception of one problem. Melissa, a shy girl, refuses to talk and is reluctant to participate in any class activities. You have been encouraging her with little impact. You believe that applying too much pressure for her to speak up and interact with others could be counterproductive. You feel with time she will come along, so you remain patient regarding Melissa's behavior.*

A small group of peers role-play as children in the enactment (one as Melissa, two others as the bullies). They are provided with additional information to which the simulator is not privy. The following information example is presented:

> *As the teacher walks around the classroom, two students tease Melissa. One says, "You must still be a baby because only babies can't talk." "She doesn't even say mama," scoffs the other. Melissa begins to cry.*

The enactment begins when the role-players act out the scenario. All other peers are directed to observe and take notes during the enactment. Post-enactment debriefing discussion is conducted with all participants (simulator, role players and observers). The following example questions can be posed for discussion:

- What caused or contributed to the event?
- What are some possible reasons for the student(s) behavior?
- What might you have done to prevent the situation?

- How could you deal with the situation or address the problem differently?

The activity is repeated with different participants as teacher, students, and a new bullying scenario.

Parent-teacher interactions

Basically, two sets of contextual information must be created: student and caregiver descriptions. It is important to infuse into the descriptions difficult issues or situations which educators commonly experience. To ensure that enactments present different contextualized scenarios, diversity of the descriptions (approximately 20 different descriptions of each set are needed), and randomness of script distribution presents multiple possibilities and differing results. Student descriptions include age or grade level, gender, as well as, behavioral and academic characteristics. One student description is randomly selected by the teacher simulator and read to the class. Caregiver descriptions provide more contextual data through background information (cultural, marital status, employment, and dispositions). One caregiver description is randomly selected and presented to the respective role-players. This description is also read to the entire class.

The following are several examples of Student Descriptions:

- Kindergarten boy - exhibits temper tantrums, rarely finishes assigned work, artistic
- Second grade boy - creates bodily noises in class, loves word puzzles, identified as Gifted and Talented
- Third grade girl - a perfectionist compelled to redo work with minor errors, hums during independent work (sometimes distracting others), and enjoys science experiments

The following are examples of Caregiver Characteristics:

- Mr. and Mrs. Tutka are of a low socio-economic background and very hardworking (mother is school custodian; father works three labor-intensive jobs). The mother diverts her eyes away from you when speaking. At one point the father swears during the meeting.
- Mr. Kadel and Mr. James are life partners who are raising three adopted children together. Both are career-oriented professionals. Mr. James also serves on the school board.

Once the descriptions are read, the hypothetical scenario enactment can proceed, followed with the post-enactment discussion. Examples of questions for this discussion include:

- What are some feelings experienced during this enactment? (to simulators and role-players only)
- What emotions were evident during the enactment (to observing participants)
- What went well with this enactment? How do you know?
- What did not go well? What are indicators of difficulty?
- What could be done differently?

The enactments can be conducted in a whole-class or small-group fashion, with use of different participants as teacher and caregivers with different characteristics.

"Real" Caveats of Hypothetical Enactments

Reality-Show Sensation

If participants are highly engaged, simulator and role player exchanges can become heated (similar to episodes of reality shows). The facilitator may need to interject a reminder of the hypothetical component of the enactment process.

Uncertainty

Many enactments present no tidy resolutions which cause some learners to struggle with ambiguity in the process. Exposure through multiple iterations or additional course activities which are similar in nature help learners acquire a hardiness regarding the vagueness, uncertainty or unknown outcomes that simulate situations similar to real life events.

Playful Disposition (Required)

Participants need to develop a playful disposition to truly immerse themselves in the activity, especially when posed with aggressive or challenging role-players. The facilitator needs to be prepared to encourage autonomy during the enactment, especially with skittish participants. This ensures genuine self-discovery of participants' strengths in dealing with scenario challenges and allows identity-forming stances and mastery to emerge.

Stalemates

Most enactments progress towards resolution, but impasses can occur. The facilitator may have to intervene or cue learners to wrap-up an enactment. Generally, when all positions have been explored, time to end the activity has occurred (McDonald, 2012).

Conclusion

Experiential learning provided through hypothetical scenario enactments poses learners with authentic and relevant challenges within a sheltered environment in which to explore and acquire effective communicative skills necessary for addressing myriad interactions and interpersonal challenges in future real-life situations. Situated agency emerges through an interactional experiential and decision-making process as learners test and apply their budding skills and gain confidence to take action in unfamiliar situations.

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