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Article abstract

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INNOVATION IN A CAPSTONE COURSE IN YOUTH WORK: USING THE AUTHENTIC SITUATED LEARNING AND TEACHING FRAMEWORK

Stéphanie Hovington, Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, and Varda R. Mann-Feder

Abstract: Capstone courses often focus on applied learning, typically practicum experiences such as internships. However, students do not always benefit as much as they could from their internships because teaching and learning resources are not used optimally. This paper explores the use of project-based learning in a capstone course of the Graduate Diploma in Youth Work program at Concordia University that includes an in-class seminar and an internship in a human services agency. Using the principles of context authenticity and cognitive apprenticeship from the Authentic Situated Learning and Teaching (ASLT) framework, we examine the experiences of two cohorts of interns (24 students in all). An analysis of their final papers and participation in a focus group, as well as the results of the university's course evaluation, suggests that the ASLT framework contributes to the transfer of learning in a professional setting. Furthermore, the use of the psychoeducative model to structure active pedagogies in a youth work capstone course provides a means for planning therapeutic activities and organizing intervention programs that help develop competencies to work in diverse settings.

Keywords: Authentic Situated Learning and Teaching, active pedagogy, project-based learning, capstone course, internship, psychoeducation, youth work, child and youth care

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Most college and university programs that aim to train professionals in youth work include an articulation between theory and practice through a capstone experience, often referred to as an internship. It allows students to apply what they have learned in the classroom and to acquire new knowledge and professional skills. Internships also give students an opportunity to develop their professional identity, which is an important part of preparing for professional careers in human services. Furthermore, these types of courses offer professors the chance to teach outside the traditional pedagogical framework (Myers Kiser, 2012). Scholars have advanced the view that internships complement theoretical training by allowing students to acquire the skills and attitudes necessary to practise a profession and to experience engagement in professional tasks in a progressive manner (Myers Kiser, 2012; Villeneuve & Moreau, 2010).

However, a common concern among faculty who teach internship seminars is how to help students make use of the fragmented knowledge they have acquired from the academic curriculum and forge meaningful connections between classroom learning and their experiences in an internship (Frenay & Bédard, 2004). Students may have difficulty using concepts previously acquired in class when the practicum environment does not support their learning (Vanpee et al., 2010).

In the Graduate Diploma in Youth Work at Concordia University, the internship course is designed to include active pedagogies such as project-based learning activities. The course involves a supervised internship in a human services agency and a biweekly 2.5-hour seminar, with in-class instruction provided by a licensed psychoeducator. A distinctive feature of this course is that it blends fundamental concepts of the psychoeducational model with the principles of the youth work program. The psychoeducational model of intervention, unique to French-speaking Quebec and based on the work of Gendreau (1978, 2001), provides a means for planning therapeutic activities and organizing interventions. The model offers concrete tools that can be used in project-based learning activities such as designing and creating developmentally appropriate group interventions.

This paper explores how project-based learning in a capstone internship promotes the transfer of learning. The design of the capstone course was based on the Authentic Situated Learning and Teaching (ASLT)¹ framework (Bédard et al., 2000; Frenay & Bédard, 2004) and incorporates psychoeducational activities.

Pedagogical Methods for Teaching and Learning that Use Project-Based Learning

Active pedagogies assume one learns by doing, which, in turn, fosters understanding of the subject matter (Helle et al., 2006). These pedagogies call upon a set of methods, such as the case method, problem-based learning, games, and discussions, which aim to make students active

¹ Model developed in French: Apprentissage et Enseignement Contextualisé et Authentique (AECA).

agents of their learning. Project-based learning and similar methods focus on action and the creation of social interactions that enhance the learning process (Ménard & St-Pierre, 2014). Project-based learning requires that students move beyond simply stating what they have learned to using what they have learned to offer meaningful responses to relevant questions or needs (Simonds et al., 2017). A project allows for the implementation of diverse knowledge, fosters learning in action, and provides the student with a professional perspective (Leduc, 2014), thus promoting the transfer of knowledge from the classroom to a professional setting (Frenay & Bédard, 2004). Projects are aimed at responding to a real problem or need in the target community. For instance, in the field of youth work, this could involve students designing a social skills workshop that would fit the needs of a group of teens in a high school. It is a real situation requiring students to use what they know about development and social skills to come up with solutions in cases where there is no single correct design (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). As a result, projects become meaningful and have emotional value (Wurdinger, 2016).

Having students address real-life problems during their studies and reflect in and on action (Schön, 1983) promotes the important process of knowledge restructuring for the development of expertise (Helle et al., 2006). In project-based learning, teachers “guide students through a problem-solving process that includes identifying a problem, developing a plan, testing the plan against reality, and reflecting on the plan while in the process of designing and completing a project” (Wurdinger, 2016, p. 13).

The ASLT Framework

Pedagogical frameworks can be informative in bridging theory and practice (Vierset et al., 2015). In this paper, we propose that the ASLT framework (Bédard et al., 2000; Frenay & Bédard, 2004) which falls within a socioconstructivist perspective (Vanpee et al., 2010) is particularly helpful. This framework entails the use of an interactive pedagogy in which the construction of knowledge, although personal, takes place in a social setting (Ménard & St-Pierre, 2014). ASLT has been used to design and analyze the pedagogical aspects of an internship in a psychoeducation program (Hovington et al., 2020) and in a medical school program (Vanpee et al., 2010), with a focus on the roles of the instructor (coaching posture) and the roles of the students (learning posture; Vierset et al., 2015).

The ASLT framework proposes two fundamental and intertwined principles: *context authenticity* and *cognitive apprenticeship*.

Context authenticity emphasizes that learning and teaching approaches should anchor knowledge in a context that is as close as possible to professional practice (Frenay & Bédard, 2004; Vanpee et al., 2010). In this regard, internships give students the opportunity to use therapeutic techniques and interpersonal skills with youth (Renou, 2014). Internship seminar activities allow students to analyze real interventions — to talk about their experiences, their feelings and reactions, and their struggles and achievements (Sweitzer & King, 2009).

Context authenticity is based on seven key conditions in the learning environment: (a) students must engage in learning situations that are as similar as possible to their future professions; (b) students must learn through action, by gradually mastering skills and developing autonomy; (c) learning situations must integrate multiple factors related to professional tasks; (d) students should engage with a range of theoretical frameworks; (e) learning situations should require discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary competencies (communication skills, ethical and legal considerations, etc.); (f) students should experience diverse clinical situations; and (g) students should be confronted with situations that allow for several strategies (including less effective ones) and solutions.

The second principle, cognitive apprenticeship, dictates that the construction of knowledge is facilitated by coaching that encourages the student's cognitive and metacognitive engagement (Vierset et al., 2015). Thus, the pedagogical relationship between the internship instructor and the students is of great importance in learning situations, since it has an impact from both a cognitive–sociocognitive and emotional–relational point of view (Vierset et al., 2015). This second principle includes seven key conditions that focus on the quality of the apprenticeship and the willingness of the internship instructor to guide the student. These include: (a) comparing knowledge from different contexts to facilitate transfer; (b) encouraging students to critically examine their actions while comparing themselves to others; (c) encouraging the generalization of learning in real environments; (d) coaching by the instructor that involves observation and intervention when needed; (e) providing scaffolding through the encouragement of freedom of choice accompanied by coaching by the instructor; (f) modelling by the instructor; and (g) freedom of choice and action that fosters initiative and ownership.

Ultimately, the complementary learning contexts of the internship and the in-class seminar enable the implementation of the principles and conditions required by the ASLT framework. This theoretical framework, which sheds light on learning activities that are conducive to the transfer of learning, served as the basis for the research design as well as the analysis of students' experiences in the capstone course.

The Context: The Internship for the Graduate Diploma in Youth Work

Courses in the youth work program at Concordia University are primarily designed to engage students in experiential learning that includes observational exercises in the community, role playing, and group work to develop facilitation and intervention expertise. Students complete 24 credits (8 courses) prior to beginning their internship. The internship is designed to provide a supervised experience in a professional role as a youth worker in normative youth work (YMCA, schools) or clinical settings (child protection agencies) that builds on the student's previous courses.

The internship capstone course design attempts to meet the 14 conditions of the ASLT framework identified earlier. In addition, the course integrates experiential learning activities that exemplify youth work principles and psychoeducational concepts. Practical skills learned in

internship settings are grounded in the program’s five guiding principles: (a) collaborative relationship, (b) ecosystemic approach, (c) developmental perspective, (d) rights-based approach, and (e) ethics and reflexivity (Ranahan et al., 2015). Active pedagogies are included in both learning settings (seminar and internship). Figure 1 provides an overview of the course design for the internship capstone course.

Figure 1. *Internship Capstone Course Design*

| | |
|---|---|
| ASLT Framework | |
| Guiding pedagogical principles and conditions for course and internship design implementation: context authenticity and cognitive apprenticeship | |
| Internship capstone course Integration of youth work principles and psychoeducation | |
| Seminar (biweekly; 2.5 hours) | Internship (320 or 420 hours) |
| Active pedagogies | |
| Discussions, games, simulations Project-based learning with peers and seminar instructor | Field experience Project-based learning with youth |
| Methods for student evaluation | |
| Reflection journals Psychoeducational activities with peers Final summary journal | Field experience Psychoeducational activity with youth Site evaluation survey based on five guiding youth work program principles |

The seminar begins with an intensive focus on the psychoeducational approach. In particular, the structural psychoeducative model (Gendreau, 2001) and its components are described, demonstrated, and discussed. Students learn how to plan and deliver psychoeducational activities by using the model to support and engender positive action for the youth. In this respect, during the seminar, the university instructor presents video excerpts of activities carried out by youth workers. This allows students to observe and reflect on authentic clinical situations. Psychoeducational activities (discussions and games focused on personal qualities, goal setting, expressing emotions, etc.) are also designed by the instructor and demonstrated throughout the seminar to help students build an understanding of fundamental concepts in psychoeducation. Experiential activities used in the seminar are learner-centred and require the active participation of each student. As a result, students are simultaneously doing and thinking about the work, with the goal being to enhance their higher-order thinking capabilities.

In addition to the hours of applied practicum at the internship, students design and carry out two projects, both of which aim to familiarize them with the psychoeducational model and the implementation of psychoeducational activities. The first project requires students to work in pairs to engage in a psychoeducational activity with their peers. Since the project is carried out by a

team, members share responsibility for the project’s success (Proulx, 2004), which encourages the development of personal and relational skills (Wurdinger, 2016). In this context, the instructor acts as a resource — a “guide on the side” (McLellan, 1996) — and not as a leader.

For their second project, students plan and animate a psychoeducational activity at their own internship site. Through this assignment, students acquire new knowledge while consolidating and integrating specific skills (analyzing situations, using strength-based communication with the youth, adapting to their unique needs) and developing attitudes (empathy, consideration, confidence) that prepare them for work in the field (Simonds et al., 2017). Moreover, evaluation for the course includes written reflection journals to explore personal and professional growth. In a final paper, students discuss their experiences of the course as a capstone experience. They reflect on the skills used during their projects and their overall experience, describing how the course relates to their personal and professional development.

Methodology

This study used qualitative methods to explore students’ learning experiences (Lofland et al., 2006). Triangulation of qualitative data (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016) allowed us to better understand students’ perspectives. The three sources of data analyzed were the interns’ final summary papers, transcripts of a focus group interview, and the results of the university’s standard course evaluation.

Data were collected from two cohorts of internship students, one from 2018 and the other from 2019. The first group comprised 15 students, and 13 (1 male, 12 female) consented to participate in this research. The second group had 11 students (2 male, 9 female), and all agreed to participate. In total, these 24 students were present in 22 internship locations (see Table 1). The principal author was the course instructor for both cohorts.

Table 1. *Number of Students at Each Type of Internship Site*

| Number | Internship site |
|--------|--|
| 4 | High school |
| 2 | Alternative high school |
| 2 | Drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre |
| 2 | Youth protection rehabilitation unit |
| 4 | YMCA |
| 1 | Community youth centre |
| 2 | CIUSS |
| 1 | CLSC |
| 1 | Youth leadership program |
| 1 | Community youth centre |
| 1 | Native friendship centre |
| 1 | Women’s shelter |
| 2 | Hospital child psychiatry unit |

First, a content analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016) was performed on the students' final summary papers ($N = 24$). Documents were read to identify themes and the recurring concepts and perspectives that represent the ASLT principles of context authenticity and cognitive apprenticeship. Quotations that capture the essence of each category were identified and organized in a table.

Second, a focus group was conducted with the interns of the 2019 cohort. Based on a discussion guide validated by the three researchers, the focus group lasted 90 minutes and was directed by a doctoral student who served as a neutral facilitator. Participants ($n = 10$) were made aware that they were under no obligation to answer questions, and that they could discontinue participation at any time. Focus group discussions were digitally recorded, and those recordings were supplemented by notes written by participants during the focus group. A general inductive approach was used to treat data from the focus group. The text was closely read to allow for the identification of themes related to both principles of the ASLT theoretical framework.

Finally, four of the 20 questions asked in the university's course evaluation were relevant to the study and therefore analyzed. All but one of the participants ($n = 23$) completed the course evaluation.

Results

Our results suggest that the integration of project-based learning using psychoeducative activities into an internship capstone course contributes to the transfer of learning in a professional setting. It also appears that the ASLT framework provides a useful means for the conceptualization and design of capstone courses in youth work.

Responses to the course evaluation indicated that students enjoyed the course and found the psychoeducational model useful. All 23 students who responded ranked the course as good ($n = 9$, 39%) or very good ($n = 14$, 61%). Thirteen students (56%) rated their learning in the internship as very good. Interestingly, 43% of students rated their knowledge of the psychoeducational model prior to the internship as average. As one student commented, "We need to be exposed to psychoeducational concepts earlier in [the program] and understand how they are interconnected." Students agreed that the internship seminar contributed to reflection on the actions they had taken by allowing them to share ideas and knowledge.

In the section that follows, we present data gathered from the interns' final papers and the focus group, sorted according to the ASLT principles (see Table 2). The students' descriptions suggest instances of learning and the development of skills, which may be due to the pedagogical conditions conducive to the transfer of learning that were put in place in the capstone course.

Student Perception of Context Authenticity

Table 2. Analytical Examination of the Authenticity of Learning Situations

| Context authenticity criterion | Guiding question | Student perspectives on field experience and project-based learning |
|---|--|---|
| Learning-transfer context | Were students able to experience authentic clinical situations, and practise developing their relationship with the young person? | “I saw most of my clients once every two weeks. This meant that I needed to build rapport, explore needs, develop interventions, try the interventions, and then assess their success all within roughly 10 sessions. I often wondered whether I had enough of an impact in the lives of my clients to promote learning.” |
| Development of skills in teaching and learning environments | Do the proposed tasks lead to the acquisition of skills expected at the end of the internship? | “The youth-work principle that I developed the most is the rights-based approach.” “When possible, I attempted to provide opportunities for the youth to make decisions for themselves (what to do as activity, where to hold the activity, etc.).” |
| Complete and complex learning situations | Have the students had the opportunity to plan, organize, and animate an intervention program or activity? | “My goals of promoting teamwork, creating good rapport between the youth themselves and with the staff, and creating a positive group dynamic were all accomplished in these activities [human bingo and rally] The rally accentuated that collaboration and problem solving were necessary for young people to succeed.” |
| Multidisciplinary content | Did students have the opportunity to propose a multidisciplinary solution for the project? | “The activity I chose was art-based therapy, which is not something the agency does often. The activity was perfect. Many of the youth are artistic and find that drawing is therapeutic.” |
| Multidimensional problem situations | Have the students confronted situations with challenging ethical, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions? | “The staff team is composed of individuals with various ways of counselling, intervening, and simply being with kids. A component that allowed me to grow as a person, is that I decided to challenge an older staff whose ways of doing intervention contradicted what I valued as a professional. It turned out to be a great debate on how different intervention styles can help some, yet not all, youth.” |
| Diverse situations | Did the students experience diverse clinical situations that presented unexpected difficulties and required immediate decision-making? | “A few of the youth went into crisis prior to the activity beginning. Due to this, the energy level of the group was too high. I performed a focus activity where I would ask the youth to tap various extremities, drawing in their focus to the moment and to me. This worked well and the youth could start the activity in a solid space.” |
| Multiple solutions for, conclusions regarding, or interpretations of the same situation | Did the students consider several possible solutions, their advantages and disadvantages? | “For the many weeks prior to conducting my activity at the child protection unit, I had difficulties deciding what was both developmentally appropriate and supported their trauma-related needs. I am thankful I could not only test out an activity in class, which allowed me to practice facilitating, but also observe other classmates’ activities that lent inspiration for my own.” |

The study found that as a result of their experience of project-based learning with the psychoeducational model in an internship, the students perceived an enhancement of both their intervention skills in authentic clinical situations with real world constraints and their personal skills. One student wrote, “My confidence has been strengthened to make the transition from university to real world occupation.” Most students concurred, commenting on the applied knowledge and confidence they had gained.

Project-based pedagogy in the seminar created a friendly atmosphere conducive to students showing keen interest in activity participation, collaborative learning, and knowledge sharing. One student pointed out, “I learned more about collaborating as a team member, and figuring out what I can offer to the group.” A pair of students prepared a photo rally throughout campus and one of them found that, “Coming up with reflective questions for the group to consider was fun, engaging, and allowed us to reflect on our experiences together.” The other wrote, “I was glad that we had the chance to plan a psychoeducational activity in class before doing the one at my internship because I felt it was a nice, safe space to prepare and practice. I learnt so much from my classmates through their activities. They all came so prepared and it was obvious they had put a great deal of thought and effort into their activities.”

In addition to the hours of practicum, students were also required to carry out a psychoeducational activity individually, using Gendreau’s model, in their respective internship settings. Table 3 provides an overview of the psychoeducational activities that were designed and delivered by the students. Because the students completed their internships in varied settings, they worked with young people who had unique combinations of strengths and challenges.

These project-based learning activities allowed students to implement the psychoeducational activities in different planning stages. As one intern wrote, “The main advantage of the activity model, for me, would be its firm structure, serving as guide for the construction of the activity.... I found that it really helped in providing the framework to adapt one’s activity to the audience and making sure the learning objectives are reached.” Using the model increased students’ capacity to ensure alignment of the objectives of a psychoeducational activity and the needs of youth in their setting.

Analysis of their templates for the psychoeducational activities illustrate that the interns displayed positive traits that could affect outcomes: a high standard of work, and respect for the uniqueness of the youth. As one student pointed out:

Working closely with certain youth has taught me so much about how to take in all the circumstances surrounding a young person and just remain present in the moment for them. It has taught me to listen with compassion and humility. It taught me to meet someone where they are at and take the steps they feel comfortable with.

Table 3. *Examples of Psychoeducational Activities*

| Internship site | Psychoeducational activities | Youth involved |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| High school | Study skills workshop: Develop efficient study skills and organizational skills | 5–10 students (male and female), ages 14–15 |
| Alternative high school | Girls' day out: Improve the quality of relationships among female students Group brainstorm: Identify things that they appreciate about their classmates | 4 female students, ages 13–15, secondary 2–3 5 students (4 male and 1 female) |
| Youth protection rehabilitation unit | Feelings activity: Helping youth familiarize themselves with the names and facial expressions of different feelings | 7 youth (4 male and 3 female), ages 9–12 |
| YMCA | Summer BBQ kick-off: Commit to and participate in planned activities | Youth from diverse cultural backgrounds, ages 13–16 |
| Community outreach centre | Self-reflection and self-care workshop: Give youth tools to address anxiety and stress | 5 youth, ages 20–30 |
| CIUSS | Discussion group: Identify appropriate sharing of personal information within their social support system | Youth and parents with intellectual difficulties |
| CLSC | Video feedback: Help a mother and teenage son work on their relational issues | Mother and 13-year-old son |
| Youth leadership program | Pitch perfect: Invent a service that will address an issue in their community | 4 youth, ages 12–21 |
| Women's shelter | Body beautiful: Raise awareness of the ways girls and women are socialized, and its influence when it comes to body image | Young women who have experienced conjugal violence |

According to the students' internship reports and the focus group, project-based learning was central to learning how to facilitate and plan a psychoeducational activity in a real environment. One student said, "I have learnt how to facilitate groups and have conversations with individual youth in a way that lays out their options and emphasizes the importance of them making their own decisions." Another reported, "I learned and practiced crisis management and psychoeducational strategies for behavioural intervention in groups and one-on-one with youth with behavioural and learning challenges."

Students made use of their knowledge in practical ways. One student wrote in the final summary, "Basing myself on different theories learnt in the past and this year, I was able to integrate factors of attachment theory and family dynamics theory in understanding the youth's perspective in my interactions." Students faced complex situations throughout their internships. For one student, this meant adapting a board game to increase communication between a parent with an intellectual disability and her adolescent child. For this student, it was an opportunity to respond to the specific needs of the client. His internship site supervisor expressed the desire to reuse the tool with other clients in the future.

The diverse situations experienced by the students integrated several dimensions of the profession and required the use of both discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary interpersonal skills. As one student noted, “I evolved as a person by increasing my cultural awareness. I gained the chance to interact with youth from a variety of different backgrounds who were each very unique.” Many students pointed out that they acquired a better understanding of others: how and why others act the way they do and how to interact more effectively with them. In her final paper, one student wrote, “I believe an influential experience for me which allowed me to grow was the constant ‘act outs’ that occurred. During these moments, I would have to adapt my approach to each individual and understand how to intervene.” Some of the greatest gains in personal growth are evident in an increased sense of confidence and autonomy. As one student wrote, “I learned to voice my opinion to my colleagues and supervisor in order to improve the functioning of the organization.”

Planning an activity for the class also allowed students to compare different ideas and solutions in relation to the same objective. The students learned by working collaboratively while respecting others’ attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs. For one team, this ended up being a challenge; however, they were still able to learn to address conflict in a constructive manner:

This discord and its resolution also further contributed to the training benefit of the project as a whole, simulating the reality of professional teamwork and conflict resolution. In real life, we often do not have the luxury of choosing our colleagues and could be paired with people with different values, opinions, cultural backgrounds, etc. Learning how to effectively collaborate in a team is therefore key.

This comment illustrates that students reflected and adjusted their strategies throughout the activity planning process. In sum, these activities were opportunities for students to learn by doing and observe fellow students in action.

Student Perception of Cognitive Apprenticeship

The first three conditions of cognitive apprenticeship, which refer directly to the learner, present objectives aimed at enhancing student autonomy. The other four conditions represent pedagogical means used by the instructor as a support for both learning and transferring knowledge to practice. See Table 4.

Table 4. *Analytical Examination of the Cognitive Apprenticeship*

| Cognitive apprenticeship criterion | Guiding questions | Students' perspectives on field experience and project-based learning |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Articulation of knowledge | Did students practise mobilizing the knowledge acquired in class and articulating it with new knowledge acquired in the field? | “I got an opportunity to put a lot of my counselling skills to work. I feel like I was a better mentor because there were so many students depending on me, to discuss so many issues from academics to their relationships.” |
| Reflection on action | Were students able to share and develop their point of view with peers? Did students carry out a self-assessment of their psychoeducational activity? | “I became a bit more assertive when dealing with conflict, whether it was with staff or with the youth. I feel because of our discussions [during the seminar], we had gone through issues that people were having in their internship, and because of feedback that was given from our classmates and the professor, I feel it gave me the confidence to assert myself in those situations.” |
| Knowledge transfer | Have students practised recognizing the similarities and differences between similar clinical situations? | Although psychoeducators and other professionals make use of it in working with youth, “the psychoeducational model is just as useful for a youth worker”. All professions are different but “if we are learning how they interact together, how they overlap, then actually, we’re not perpetuating that difference, but rather we’re bringing things together. And I think that’s important.” |
| Coaching | Did the instructor provide support for activities to be performed? Did the instructor use specific teaching material? | Students identified the components of the psychoeducational model from excerpts of a video. Students proposed psychoeducational activities based on everyday play materials (play dough, images, cards). |
| Scaffolding | Did the instructor provide guidance to the students? Did the instructor let the students build their own learning by letting them search for solutions? | The internship instructor facilitated activities such as discussions and games focused on personal qualities, expressing emotions, and contributions to group success. |
| Modelling | Did the instructor communicate strategies for action or reflection by verbalizing them to students? | The internship instructor provided feedback during in-class psychoeducational activities. |
| Fading | When the students have reached a sufficient level of competence, does the instructor give them the opportunity to act alone in practice? | By the end of the term, students performed activities on their own at their respective internship sites. |

The seminar discussions allowed students to articulate what they knew, demonstrating that the transfer of knowledge was taking place. As one student wrote, “The class discussions were a guide in terms of directing me on how to react to different situations and provided an opportunity to problem solve as a group.” Students were able to understand connections between concepts underlying youth work and those foundational to psychoeducation, while also identifying differences. In fact, two students commented that youth do not appear to have enough of a say in the planning of psychoeducational activities. For these students, this represents a gap in Gendreau’s model as illustrated in this comment:

This activity ... has highlighted for me also the importance of the collaborative approach within the field of youth work. I believe that it is difficult to create a great psychoeducational activity in a vacuum, as the success of such activity, I believe, is determined in how you bring the participants together in the activity.

Students also reflected on their internship experience. For example, a group of students created a game of snakes and ladders to explore highs and lows of the internship experience. Students learned about themselves and others and discovered the personal and social implications of their learning. As one student pointed out, “I learnt a lot while preparing for the facilitation [of the psychoeducational activity] because it gave me an opportunity to be creative [and] it gave me a feeling of how to work with colleagues in an actual work situation.” Although this preparatory activity was perceived positively by students, one student pointed out the adjustments that became necessary because of the context: “My classmates represent a far different audience than a group of young people.... Getting them to participate was easy, which minimized areas of challenges.” Another student’s comment supported this view: “The behaviour from the youth is unexpected, in the sense that they may participate, or they may act out. Whereas, with our peers and in the setting of a class, the expected behaviour is to participate.” These comments illustrate the difficulty of replicating real world practice in the classroom. The student’s comments also suggest that internship experience is more effective when combined with pedagogies conducive to critical thinking and reflection.

Students engaged in a variety of metacognitive processes to monitor their learning. They planned their projects, monitored the success of various strategies while facilitating their activities, and reflected on the degree to which their strategies and interventions were working. As one student pointed out, “If I could plan this activity again, I would include more time for explanation, modelled after the classroom teacher’s clear and thorough instructions for group activities, instead of my more loose facilitating style that I had hoped would make the activity feel more relaxed.” In this case, the site supervisor became a model for the student to follow.

Project-based learning also allowed students to discriminate and match their knowledge to the intervention context. One student was surprised at how well youth responded to her activity: “The youth who participated did reach the objectives that I had set. Their participation was creative, thoughtful, and earnest, which surprised me because this was something that was outside their regular routine.” This comment supports the idea that learning and performance are best fostered when students engage in projects that focus on specific goals and target an appropriate level of challenge.

Feedback from both the instructor and other members of the cohort contributed to the students’ ability to implement a psychoeducational activity in different contexts while adapting to the target clientele. As one student wrote, “It helped me to better understand the structural model of psychoeducation in action. I had designed a program for a paper last year but had never thought about actually implementing it. The advantage of running it in an internship seminar is the potential benefit supervision adds to the development of the activity.”

Project-based learning gives students some freedom in their choices and decisions. The supervisor stepped back, allowing students to coach and guide one another. For one student, this approach “was helpful because it allowed us to take ownership of the class, because it was not lecture based but rather discussion and activity based, we knew what we put into the class is what we would get, so this created ownership towards the class and it helped us participate.”

Finally, results also suggest that the internship experience was an opportunity to foster personal growth and develop strengths such as assertiveness and the ability to form working relationships with youth. Most students also commented on the applied knowledge they gained and the professional growth they achieved. One wrote, “I feel that I have had a great opportunity to learn about how the field works in the real world.” After indicating great enjoyment of the internship experience, one student wrote, “This internship has been an amazing experience that taught me so much about myself and the field.” When asked to write about specific learnings regarding the internship experience, this illustrative comment was made by a student: “I am more confident with my animation and program development skills. Having this knowledge of the psychoeducational model increased my professional skill set.” Another intern wrote, “The team activity functioned in improving my skills in persuasion, encouraging participation, and facilitating useful brainstorming; goals that I had set at the beginning of my internship.” Such learnings prompted them to develop a more discerning sense of their professional potential. In his final paper, one student wrote, “I created interventions with youth for the first time, which was an excellent way to motivate youth and make sure they were on track. I now feel confident to create and implement interventions with individuals in the future.” The integration of psychoeducational concepts to the internship seminar contributed to the students’ overall experience.

Project-based learning also presented some challenges, as evidenced by the following comment: “It was difficult to assess the number of participants as the youth come in on a drop-in basis [at the YMCA] in the summer. The psychoeducational model was created for clinical spaces. However, it was easy to adapt to the community organization milieu.” Another student interning in a high school setting added, “My site activity did not entirely go as planned. I received half the number of students that I expected.” This comment illustrates how the complex and diverse situations that arise in professional practice will require students to consider several possible solutions. Consequently, the conditions of the internship do not always allow students to apply knowledge as it was taught in class.

Discussion

Previous research asserts that active pedagogies support higher-order skills in capstone courses such as internships (Vanpee et al., 2010). This study contributes to the literature on capstone courses by illustrating how project-based learning that uses the ASLT framework promotes students’ perception of transfer of learning in the context of internships. Both principles of the ASLT framework are intended to be useful when teachers are committed to promoting in-depth learning (Vierset et al., 2015). In this sense, the active learning pedagogy used in this internship capstone course met most ASLT conditions and supported transfer of learning to the real-world setting. This study also provides empirical findings on the value of innovative pedagogies in human intervention programs.

The positive outcome of this innovation, we contend, can be attributed largely to the integration of project-based learning using a specific model, in this case the psychoeducative model, to guide the capstone internship experience. In particular, the psychoeducational activity projects carried out in the internships allowed students to take actions designed to address a real need in the community and to reflect on the implications of those actions. Indeed, the contextualization of knowledge as a teaching and learning approach contributes to the transfer of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Moreover, the ASLT framework made it possible to reflect on the pedagogical quality of the internship capstone course (Vierset et al., 2015). The format of the internship seminar included activities in which students could learn and reflect on their experiences. As Carlson and Peterson (1993) posited, a capstone course “should give students a sense of coherence of their program of study in a discipline and should deepen their appreciation of the discipline as an approach to specific problems” (p. 239). In this sense, students not only developed the skills and knowledge to perform complex tasks, but they also practised combining and integrating them to develop greater fluency and automaticity (Ambrose et al., 2010). The more the students are involved in real problem-solving, the greater the probability that they will be able to use what they learn after they graduate (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). In this regard, a study conducted among students from all faculties of a francophone higher education institution demonstrated that project-based learning is among the educational

activities most valued. Students feel more competent to perform the tasks required, more confident, and more in control of their learning (Viau, 2009). Indeed, when students are able to find positive value in a learning goal or activity, expect to successfully achieve a desired learning outcome, and perceive support from their environment (cognitive apprenticeship), they are likely to be strongly motivated to learn (Ambrose et al., 2010).

In general, the seminar and internship demonstrated the successful application of many conditions associated with the ASLT model. However, opportunities for application of some conditions, such as learning transfer context and complete and complex learning situations, were limited. Some settings made it more difficult to implement psychoeducational activities, given, for instance, the number of young people present, the fact that participation in activities was voluntary, and the lack of multidisciplinary team discussions. This supports prior research findings indicating that it is insufficient for students merely to possess the skills to realize a task: they must also have the opportunity to learn to apply their learned skills (Frenay & Bédard, 2004). Therefore, successfully meeting the challenge of transferring knowledge to the real world requires that students recognize and are provided with situations in which they can use that knowledge.

Moreover, while psychoeducative activities in the seminar allowed the instructor to model different abilities, she did not observe or coach students during their on-site interventions. This means that modelling, coaching, and scaffolding, which according to Collins et al. (1989) are critical, were limited. Prior research has concluded that classroom learning, even with the extensive use of simulations, is not sufficient to produce effective human services professionals (Myers Kiser, 2012). Thus, even though internships provide an opportunity to practise in the real world, promoting consistency in the coaching posture of supervisors in both academic and practice settings would require also developing the site supervisors' awareness of the ASLT pedagogical principles. This recommendation is consistent with other studies in psychoeducation in which site supervisors call for specific training expectations for internship coaching (Moreau & Villeneuve, 2006).

Clearly, teaching and learning in youth work and psychoeducation require a different approach, one that employs experiential teaching and learning such as project-based learning. In fact, a skilful integration of different approaches is vital in human services work (Ranahan et al., 2015). The Structural Psychoeducative Model could indeed be used by youth work professionals as a rigorous intervention methodology. In order to foster social interactions and to create favourable environments for youth empowerment (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014), youth work professionals need to develop competencies to work at the individual, group, and organizational levels. In this sense, the internship allowed students to engage in embodied learning activities that evoke emotional, physical, and psychological experiences (Ranahan et al., 2012).

When students are given opportunities to learn in authentic situations in the field, such as those provided in internships, the learning becomes significantly more powerful (Flippo, 2016). By engaging in guided experiences, individuals connect their learning to actual experiences, have opportunities for reflection, draw meanings from their reflections, create new learning, and transfer their learning into the next experience (Frenay & Bédard, 2004). In addition, the animation of a psychoeducational activity centred on the internship experience and carried out in class with peers has promoted positive interpersonal relationships, leading to a constructive classroom climate as described by Barr (2016). Students reported that these experiences involved much emotion and personal relevance. The depth of sharing increased over the course of the semester, and the seminar became a collegial support group.

Limitations

This study has idiosyncratic dimensions associated with the Quebec university context where French and English perspectives are intertwined. This context may be different from other jurisdictions and may influence how different pedagogical models have developed. Results should be viewed with caution due to the small number of participants, which limits the study's applicability to students in general. Moreover, despite the precautions taken, the simultaneous posture of researcher and internship instructor played by the principal researcher may have led to biases in the information collected. In this case, the principal researcher was also well versed in the ASLT framework, psychoeducation, and youth work; these particular qualifications may in themselves be difficult to replicate.

While not all aspects of this project can be applied to other universities, the pedagogical methods used may inspire researchers and professionals working in other contexts. Findings illustrate the impact of an innovative pedagogical project that provides grounds for further research on active pedagogies in capstone courses. With this article, we hope to encourage others to consider using the ASLT framework in youth work education, adapting this highly specific template for the design of internships and capstone courses in order to best address the integration of theory and practice.

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