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Student Voices: Engaging Diverse Learners through Shared Learning

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Student Facilitators: Sarah Barnes is a graduate student and graduate assistant in occupational therapy. Haley Boggs is a graduating senior who plans to continue her studies to be a speech/language pathologist. Roswell Manning is a graduating senior and plans to get his Masters in Psychology with an emphasis in Applied Behavior Analysis. Margaret Woods is a rising junior in special education and specializes in Deaf and hard of hearing.

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Student Voices: Engaging Diverse Learners through Shared Learning

Maria Lynn Manning, Susan Skees Hermes, Julie Duckart, Sarah Barnes, Haley Boggs, Roswell Manning, and Margaret Woods

Eastern Kentucky University

A student panel discussion and reflection on revising an assignment from a simulation to an experiential learning activity will be presented. Student facilitators represent several majors and levels of undergraduate experiences which also allows modeling for roots of interprofessional collaboration. Students as teaching partners increases awareness of diversity and disability culture on the EKU campus.

Introduction

The traditional lecture format aptly termed “sage on a stage” is outdated and ineffective (Morrison, 2014). Lecture-based postsecondary instruction has given way to more interactive experience-based learning styles (Douglas et. al., 2019). Students tend to have a focused attention for about 20 minutes where instructors need to not only cover course content but also develop skills necessary in today’s society. Baum and McPherson (2019) stated that skilled teachers take advantage of instructional time with focused academic learning that includes interpersonal and cross-cultural competencies. Experiential learning is one method that can bridge the gap between traditional lectures and active learning while allowing instructors opportunities to integrate content with culturally relevant pedagogy in novel ways that engage learners (e.g., Herbert, 2000; Yardley et. al., 2012).

Two courses at Eastern Kentucky University (SED 104: Introduction to Special Education and OTS 401: Practicum in Occupational Science - Diversity) require that learning outcomes be met while fostering interpersonal communication and cultural diversity across both disciplines. Across both fields, there is a recognition for interdisciplinary collaboration and communication that supports special educators, occupational therapists, and other stakeholders as they enter their respective fields working with individuals with disabilities. In a study conducted by Zakaria and Awaisu (2019), more than 75% of students who engaged in a

shared learning experience believed it improved their communication skills and influenced the priority of this collaborative initiative.

Both courses explore key aspects in disability culture through unique lenses. Key student learning outcomes that overlap across disciplines include diversity, cultural awareness, and perspective-taking of marginalized groups were identified. These courses also include Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) core values for cultural competency, which is characterized by equitable opportunities and treatment, mutual respect, and the inclusion and celebration of diverse peoples and ideas (The Office of Multicultural Student Affairs [OMCO], n.d.). Using interdisciplinary student learning outcomes across disciplines, the presenters identified and prioritized common teaching objectives that targeted key areas integrating interprofessional collaboration, and culturally responsive pedagogy while embracing the students as teachers (Carpenter, et. al., 2019; Green and Johnson, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Xiao et. al., 2005). The purpose of this study was to determine if an interdisciplinary shared learning experience that fosters cross-cultural competence across both fields using a *students as partners* framework will improve learning.

Methods

EKU Faculty members from the College of Education and College of Health Sciences collaborated with eight advanced level student volunteers (known as student facilitators) to develop an interdisciplinary experiential learning session to explore disability culture. All the student facilitators had taken an Introduction to Special Education course previously and also represented a diverse student perspective as being declared majors from four different programs (e.g. psychology, communication disorders, occupational therapy, and special education). Student facilitators were recruited using convenience sampling from current or former EKU students. Culturally responsive pedagogy guided the interprofessional collaboration between student and instructor with conversations, experiences, and shared reflective processes to redesign and deliver a more student centered campus exploration activity. Instructors were able to model collaboration across disciplines/ programs and support organic learning in lieu of the traditional lecture-based instruction. The respective study was reviewed by the University Institutional Review Board and was designated as exempt.

The student facilitators were actively engaged as partners in teaching. Specifically, their objective was to develop an interdisciplinary activity that addressed disability cultural awareness through accessibility and equal access to EKU campus locations

under a variety of conditions, including navigating without using stairs, without opening doors and no limitations. Student facilitators selected the locations. During the activity the student facilitators served as guides, discussion leaders, and recorders of comments while walking the campus with participants. They also acted as facilitators and implemented the shared learning activity by:

1. Ensuring group members were on-task, using appropriate use of language when describing diverse learners, identifying direct application of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and universal design of learning (UDL),
2. Redirecting dialogue that might be considered “othering,”
3. Assisting with recording activity-based data (e.g., start/stop times, recording comments).

Participant students from both classes were divided into groups of six and assigned a student facilitator as they entered a classroom. The student facilitators assisted their groups in choosing from a list of preselected on-campus locations. Groups were then instructed to (1) decide on a location on campus from the preselected list (2) time how long it takes to walk there and back to the classroom and (3) generate a list of five examples they believe meet criteria or are concerns for ADA and UDL compliance. After the group decided where they wanted to go, they further split into three subgroups or pairs. Pair A was the control and was able to walk to the location and back without any limitations. Pair B was instructed to remain on a flat surface at all times (e.g. avoid stairs, curbs, and uneven sidewalks). Pair C was instructed that no one in their small group may open doors independently (i.e. they must request assistance from others, use automatic doors only). Student facilitators were distributed across all three scenarios (A, B, and C). When students return to the classroom, instructors assisted with recording locations and start/stop times on a large graph as well as generating a list of items they observed. Instructors and student facilitators engaged all participant students with large group discussions about their experiences, time differences, obstacles, and other challenges. Other questions focused on ways everyone could ensure UDL expectations in order to enhance equal access to all. Students had an assignment after the shared learning experience with reflection questions on Blackboard for further discussion.

Data were collected using written responses from student facilitators and student participants. These responses were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach by open coding and followed by collapsing into themes. Post activity reflections were coded using a qualitative descriptive method and were collapsed

into three themes. This process was repeated for comments from student participants in OTS 401 and SED 104.

Analysis/Assessment

Student facilitators wrote reflections based on their experience with the learning activity to add qualitative ethnographic content. These comments were coded, resulting in three overarching themes. Undergraduate comments were also analyzed but were not included in this paper since the focus was on student facilitators.

Student facilitators reported back some of the interesting challenges they faced when visiting their location. Facilitators noted difference social interactions due to physical barriers and group cohesion that influenced participation in the learning experience. For example, one location, an outdoor amphitheater, was surrounded by stairs, and it was impossible for students with no stairs restrictions to reach this location. For one building, the group chose to stay together and assisted each other with different conditions, thereby having similar travel times. Ironically, the Center for Student Accessibility took the longest travel time due to construction on campus. A social hub for students just outside the Crabbe Library was inaccessible to enter the library due to ramps, which could be socially isolating for students with disabilities. These observations led to a rich discussion of the culture of accessibility on university campuses and the need for students to collaborate to solve these problems.

Student facilitators' reflections on the learning experience were coded and themed, resulting in three major themes including the importance of collaboration, lack of access on campus and the need for problem solving. Three core themes emerged when analyzing student learning based on in class and online discussion activities.

Student Collaboration in Related Disciplines Fostered Common Language

Developing professionals need to have early exposure to students from other disciplines in order to develop a culture of mutual respect and problem solving (Howell, 2009). Facilitators recognized the importance of learning from the different perspectives of students studying different disciplines than their own, specifically in preparation for a professional career that requires collaboration among disciplines. One student facilitator wrote,

“As a student leader, my participation in this shared learning experience helped me develop a broader base of knowledge regarding the different lenses students use to receive and interrupt activities. Looking at the background of the students from different disciplines (OT, speech, Special Ed, undeclared, etc.) determined the specifics each group of students look for in the activity. For example, the same general ideas were common throughout, but the terminology and description of the activity was slightly different based on the students.”

Students Identified Potential Barriers to Learning and Service Delivery Including Accessibility and Advocacy

The learning activity instilled a need for advocacy for students with disabilities and future clients. One facilitator recognized that students can act as change agents and advocates for others when recognizing accessibility issues for the university. Another student commented:

“The members in my group discussed the importance of raising awareness of the places on campus that need more accessibility because without such information there would never be any change.”

Student Participants Moved from an Empathy/ Sympathy Response to a Problem Solving Response

One of the biggest challenges with simulation-based learning is the tendency for students to develop a sympathetic stance toward individuals with disabilities. With the shared learning approach, students were able to move toward a problem solving approach that focused on advocacy.

“I was afraid that their conversations might lean towards feeling sympathy for those on our campus with disabilities instead of feeling empathy. In reality, their conversations were focused around what they could do as advocates to support individuals with disabilities on campus to help make [it] a place that is accessible for all students.”

Discussion/Considerations/Implications

Students were recruited to be partners in teaching, and given instructors reviewed possible shared learning options. This group had autonomy to select the activity and participated in a discussion regarding distinction of simulations versus shared learning experiences to support their serving as the student facilitator group. The

students as-partners-in-teaching model helped to interweave targets such as interprofessional collaboration, culturally responsive pedagogy, transparency in teaching, and students as teachers (Carpenter, O'Brien, and Ford., 2019; Green & Johnson, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Xiao et. al., 2005). The presenters, including student-facilitators, addressed strategies for incorporating diversity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and/or inclusive excellence into students-as-partners teaching and learning models and designs that promote equitable learning experiences and attempts to address identifying systematic barriers with collaborative recommendations.

Student facilitators benefitted from interprofessional experiential learning experiences, the culturally responsive pedagogy supported ongoing and consistently incorporating diversity in teaching and learning models, and using the students-as-partners model was a powerful way to develop shared learning experience to foster interprofessional collaboration across academic programs. They reported recognizing the value of interprofessional communication skills and were able to practice their new found skills. Upon reflection, student facilitators were able to master the knowledge before they taught it and to master the knowledge of common focus other disciplines, which broadened their interdisciplinary scope. Facilitators developed concept merging and understanding other perspectives through the lens of another field and how the disciplines work together for a shared common goal and a better understanding about the necessity of authentic partnerships leading to better communication.

As a pilot phase of a future IRB study exploring interprofessional culturally responsive shared experiential learning, there were several limitations. Some issues with the processes and student preparation became evident. For example some students had competing program requirements and were distracted by pragmatic concerns. Limitations to the study included student fidelity when complying with their groups' restrictions outlined in the instructions and atypical construction on campus limiting main travel paths. As primary investigators, the plan is to continue to refine and explore culturally responsive pedagogy in an interprofessional context. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, a more thorough study will be completed in 2021 including cultural awareness surveys and more intensive interviews with facilitators and participants. In the future, we will include explicit instruction on disability culture prior to engaging in a shared learning experience to enable a deeper level of discussion.

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Appendix

Location: New Science to	Control	No stairs	No opening doors	Student Comments
Whitlock Center for Accessibility	22 min.	24 min.	27 min.	Took the longest because of construction
Ravine Stage	14 min.	25 min.	14 min.	Students with no stairs condition were unable to reach stage
Noel Reading Porch	10 min.	18 min.	13 min.	Students could not enter the library without going up stairs
Keen Johnson	14 min.	21 min.	17 min.	Students needed to enter a separate building to take an elevator to avoid stairs
Scholars House	14 min.	13 min.	13 min.	Newer building with current ADA compliance
Begley-doors locked	20 min.	20 min.	20 min.	Students stayed together