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Learn, Apply, Share: Combining Student Learning and Community Engagement

Cover Page Footnote

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Learn, Apply, Share: Combining Student Learning and Community Engagement

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Abstract

This paper describes how an upper division Family Life Education course was redesigned using the personal teaching philosophy of *Learn, Apply, Share*. This philosophy provides the framework for meaningful learning to occur at three levels. The *Learn* portion of the philosophy focuses on an experiential learning project, based on andragogy principles, that prepared students enrolled in the course to be family life educators. The *Apply* portion describes how student research assistants on the project used their experiences to prepare for professional positions in academia or other helping professions. This paper concludes by describing how students and the research assistants *Share* and evaluate what they have learned by offering a marriage enrichment workshop to couples from the community seeking to improve or strengthen their relationships.

Introduction

I believe the quality of interpersonal family relationships is a strong contributing factor to overall well-being (Jimenez-Iglesias et al., 2015). I was fortunate to grow up in a family where affection and kindness were shown naturally, and I assumed that all families felt safe and worked like mine. When I was twelve years old, I had an experience outside of my own home that exposed me for the first time to an ugly, even abusive, side of family life. I still remember the look of anguish on my friend's face as he helplessly watched those he loved hurt each other. That moment planted a

seed in me, and from this and other experiences, I realized that a profession focused on helping families was both worthwhile and noble. I have chosen to study the internal dynamics of family relationships and become a professor of this field in order to disseminate this information to a broader audience. My overarching goal is to help my students – and in the process, members of my broader community – to purposefully choose family interaction patterns that promote well-being for themselves and their families. I have summarized my goal into a three-word teaching philosophy which guides me to this day: *Learn, Apply, Share*.

In this article, written with my undergraduate (and now also graduate) research assistants, my team and I detail how we have designed and adapted an upper-division undergraduate course in the Human Development and Family Studies Department (formerly called Family, Consumer, and Human Development), HDFS 5540: Family Life Education Methods. The redesigned course has been offered in this format every spring since 2012. The purpose of the course is to prepare students to practice family life education (FLE) skillfully and effectively. I spend the first half of the semester teaching students the basics of FLE – what it is, what it is not, and best practices in offering it. During this time, students design a session for a marital enrichment workshop. In the second half of the semester, students deliver this workshop to community couples under my supervision. The students are given the opportunity to evaluate their effort and learn from this hands-on experience. In addition to serving as the final project of the university course, the workshop is also a research opportunity. Together with my research assistants, we assess the couples' experiences and outcomes from the workshop through appropriate data collection and analytic methods.

My students and I describe how my teaching philosophy of *Learn, Apply, Share* has framed how I teach this course and how we have used this experience to create learning opportunities for students enrolled in the course, my research assistants, and couples from the community at large. Students enrolled in the course and my research assistants have used this experience as an opportunity to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to solve real problems (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009). This type of “outside the classroom” learning is especially important as the public increasingly clamors for graduates of higher education to be competent in their field (Faculty Innovation Center, 2017).

I first describe how I came to consider principles of adult learning in the redesign of this course. Then, we address each portion of my teaching philosophy in turn. To address the *Learn* portion of my philosophy, we focus on the students enrolled in the course by briefly discussing the students' rating of their own learning (these results are further discussed in Law and colleagues (n.d.)). To address the second point of my philosophy, *Apply*, the student coauthors of this paper describe how working with me on this course and workshop has helped prepare them for professional positions in family life education, academia, and other helping professions. Lastly, we address the *Share* portion of my philosophy by briefly touching on the community couples' experiences with the workshop; more detail on their outcomes can be found in Arocho and colleagues (n.d.).

A Unique Opportunity

I have been teaching HDFS 5540, Family Life Education Methods, since 2001. Although I consistently received higher-than-average student evaluations, after seven years the course began to feel stagnant to me. This stagnation motivated me to begin a serious inquiry about changes I could make that would result in deeper and more meaningful student learning. As I considered changes to HDFS 5540, I found three resources particularly helpful.

The first resource was *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Ambrose et al., 2010), which all Utah State University teachers were encouraged to read at the time. In particular, I found principles four and five helpful. Principle four states “To develop mastery, students must acquire component skills, practice integrating them, and know when to apply what they have learned” (p. 5). Principle five is “Goal-directed practice coupled with targeted feedback enhances the quality of students' learning” (p. 5). After reading *How Learning Works*, I was convinced that I needed to give my HDFS 5540 students opportunities to practice developing and delivering family life education with plenty of feedback from me. Realizing that my students needed opportunities to practice, I decided to look into experiential learning as my second resource.

Experiential learning has gained popularity in higher education because it gives students authentic opportunities to apply what they are learning. Often this application comes from activities outside the classroom (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009).

Under the guidance and facilitation of the teacher, experiential learning activities move students from a theoretical understanding to a broader, more applied understanding (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008). Well-designed experiential learning activities task students to solve problems in unfamiliar situations. It is within this process that students learn what they do and do not know, and then how to learn about the things they do not know. It is through this reflective process that students become self-directed learners (Ambrose et. al., 2010).

As I dug deeper into why experiential learning had such widespread support on college campuses, I was exposed to the term *andragogy*, a more precise word than *pedagogy* when it comes to considering the needs of adult learners. Pedagogy has its roots in the art and science of teaching children (Pappas, 2013) and continues to be influenced by human development theorists, particularly Jean Piaget's cognitive theory and Lev Vygotsky's cultural theory (Constructivism, n.d.). Although we often use pedagogy to denote the learning of all ages, andragogy is a better fit for college students, as it focuses on adult learners. Andragogy is most linked to well-known American educator Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, who conceptualized four principles of learning especially pertinent to adults (Kearsley, as cited in Pappas, 2013).

I decided to explicitly address each of Knowles' four principles throughout the course of the semester. The first principle is that "Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction" (Kearsley, as cited in Pappas, 2013). Although given an outline for the content of their workshop session, in my redesigned course students have been granted autonomy to structure their session and activities to their unique ideas and strengths (though I give final approval of each session once the students have presented me with their organized and thoughtful manual). The second principle is, "Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities" (Kearsley, as cited in Pappas, 2013). Throughout the semester, the students receive feedback in many forms and from multiple sources, including themselves, each other, the participating couples, the research assistants, and me. This feedback is offered in both graded and ungraded evaluations. The third principle, "Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life" (Kearsley, as cited in Pappas, 2013), is easily addressed by the subject matter of the course. Many of the students can apply the material from the workshop to their own lives as family members, partners, or spouses, as well as to their future careers in helping or service fields. Finally, Knowles' fourth principle, "Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented," (Kearsley, as cited

in Pappas, 2013), is addressed by the overall design of the course. Instead of being given hypothetical cases and clinical explanations, students are tasked with designing and delivering content to real people who want and need this enrichment opportunity.

As my understanding of Ambrose's seven principles, experiential learning, and andragogy deepened, I developed a vision of how I could use the *Learn* and *Apply* portion of my teaching philosophy to also create a meaningful opportunity to implement the *Share* component. My HDFS 5540 class would be based on effective learning principles for adult learners and framed by my teaching philosophy; the experiential learning opportunity granted to the students would also provide a chance to share relationship enrichment with the community. I began incorporating these resources and principles into my teaching immediately, but it was not until 2012 that I was able to fully implement my vision of what HDFS 5540 could be. That year, we held the first workshop for community couples. Much has changed since then, described in the *Apply* section below, but the basic principles of the workshop have remained true to my core philosophy.

Learn

We assessed the students' perception of their experience and learning from their end-of-semester evaluations between the years 2012 and 2017, which were conducted anonymously online through the overall university evaluation system. Students consistently rated their satisfaction with the course above other courses in the same discipline and across the university. In feedback left in these evaluations, students commented on the value of the course to their future career and mentioned that they were glad for the chance to apply the knowledge they had gained over the years in their degree program to a real experience. For a more in-depth description of what the students did to prepare for the workshop and the collection of data to assess student learning, see Law et al. (n.d.).

Apply

Student research assistants (generally HDFS undergraduate majors at the time they began working with me, though a few had graduated from their undergraduate programs) have been involved in the course redesign, workshop design, and research

since 2012. The research assistants' main focus was designing the workshop to best meet the needs of the participating community couples. I have often asked them to apply what they have learned from their previous coursework to interpret the experiences we have had and make changes as needed to make the workshop as helpful as possible. There have been various adjustments made over the years to each aspect of the workshop and research design, described in turn below. This *Apply* section is written from the research assistants' perspectives, namely the coauthors of this paper, and describes how they were able to apply their learning to each aspect of the workshop and research design, as well as how working on that particular aspect helped prepare them for later experiences.

Overall Workshop

Although the basic principles of the workshop remained the same between 2012 and 2017, we made a number of significant changes to the workshop format to better serve the needs of the couples and help the experience be more effective.

Timing

In the first year of the course's redesign, we held the workshop over two Saturdays one week apart. Couples struggled to return to the second Saturday session, so in the second year, we decided to make it a two-day workshop held over one weekend. However, we realized that offering multiple sessions in the all-day format, whether spread over one weekend or two, seemed to overwhelm the couples. Thus, in 2015 we changed the workshop to 90-minute sessions one night a week for six weeks. This change was fruitful: couples could concentrate on one topic for longer, had time between sessions to process and practice the skills, and in general seemed more willing and excited to attend. In this format, some participants even said they wanted the workshop to be longer – up to six months in some cases!

Room and enrollment size

Considering room and enrollment size, we learned that bigger is not always better. For instance, in the three most recent years (2015-2017, which were the most similar in design), the room and group size played a role in the success of the workshop. The 2015 workshop was held in a small classroom with seven couples, and the couples sat at tables arranged in a circle around the room. It felt intimate, and the couples seemed to connect with each other and with the facilitators on a personal level. In contrast,

in 2016 we moved to a larger, state-of-the-art classroom and enrolled ten couples in the workshop. Couples were seated at tables arranged in a large square. This workshop proved to be challenging, and we had a hard time creating the “magic” of the year before and felt that the couples were less connected. This was likely due to both technological difficulties and the sheer number of people involved in every conversation. In 2017, we moved the workshop to the smallest room yet and limited enrollment to seven couples. The couples sat around one table and the setting was more intimate. This was a very successful workshop and, once again, the group atmosphere was energetic and engaging.

Offering meals

In the early years of the workshop, funding was limited, and we were only able to offer refreshments (water, soda, and snacks) to the participants. In 2015, we were granted internal funding support, which allowed us to begin serving the couples a catered dinner prior to the workshop each week along with snacks during the session. We believe this meal made the workshop more comfortable and gave the group a warmer atmosphere. A 2015 participant even spoke in a post-workshop video of how the workshop felt like a “date night” and something they could look forward to for fun with their spouse.

Session content

As the format has evolved, so has the workshop content and session organization. In the early years, as many as eight sessions were offered (depending on the number of students enrolled in the course), and they were based loosely on the book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (Gottman & Silver, 1999). However, we eventually reduced the workshop to six sessions and realized that couples desired more varied topics in the workshop – specifically, some mentioned wanting more discussion of sexual intimacy. Thus, we began including information from the book *His Needs Her Needs: Building an Affair-proof Marriage* (Harley, 2011) in the sessions. Since 2015, we have had a consistent outline of content on which the student facilitators base their sessions, and this format has seemed to be both interesting and useful to the couple participants (see Arocho et al. (n.d.) for specific topics of each session).

Through these changes in the overall workshop format, the student research assistants have been given the opportunity to see the logistics of program planning come to life. These details, such as time of day or choosing to offer refreshments or

full meals, made significant differences in the retention and enjoyment of the participating couples, but decisions were not based on things we had learned from classes or textbooks. Instead, we witnessed participants' reactions and moods and were given the chance to discuss these details with participants and with each other, leading to the changes documented here. Without these hands-on, behind-the-scenes glimpses into program planning and management, we would not have such knowledge of the minutia of program development. Because of these experiences, we are able to jump into future program development with eyes wide open to how much the little details matter.

Group Process

In addition to helping with workshop organization, we have had the opportunity to sit in on the sessions and even occasionally facilitate workshop content. This has given us the opportunity to witness firsthand the power of group process (an important component of family life education when offered in workshop formats like this – see Darling et al., 2014). Being able to see the workshop in progress, and hear from the couples, has given us a learning experience like no other. In the words of a student who worked on the workshop for three years (second author), “Applying the knowledge that we gleaned during the time spent listening to lectures, reading, and discussing family life education is where the real ‘sink into your bones’ learning began.” Despite hearing repeatedly about the importance and nature of group process in previous classwork, clarity came after we had the chance to witness what we had been taught in action by applying it to the couples participating in the workshop. After each session of the workshop, the research team would process how it went. This debriefing became a highlight of each workshop night. It was through these conversations that we learned what content and group process seemed to be well-received by the couple participants and what areas could be improved upon. In these back-and-forth exchanges each member of the research team was invited to fully express their opinions in a non-judgmental environment, which made us feel that we actually had an impact on the workshop experience and outcomes.

Research Design and Data Quality

As mentioned previously, this course redesign and the resulting workshop were not only for the students' benefit, but also for the couples who participated. Thus, we

needed to document couples' outcomes in a systematic way. The opportunity to design and participate in the research protocol, from measure selection to data analyses and beyond, gave us the chance to apply our budding research skills, and it prepared those of us who have gone on to graduate school for advanced research training.

Measures

We knew from the beginning that we needed to measure changes in participants' thinking and behavior following the workshop, but our approach had to be refined over the years. In the first few years, we wrote assessments meant to identify changes in the specific behaviors and cognitions addressed in the workshop curriculum. However, we quickly realized that the workshop had the potential to help couples improve in more than just their recollection of specific principles. Thus, we started assessing participants on measures that ranged from marital satisfaction to sexual intimacy. Over the years, as we have learned more about research and measurement, we have continued to refine assessments by adding or removing questions or whole measures. In 2015-2017, we narrowed our methods to a specific set of proven assessments and maintained a consistent research protocol, including three measurement points (pre-workshop, post-workshop, and six-month post-workshop follow-up). See Arocho et al. (n.d.) for the list of measures used and the reasoning behind their inclusion.

Data collection

While choosing appropriate and validated measures, we have also had to refine our method of collecting data from the couples. Early on, we began collecting data online using *Qualtrics* survey software instead of paper surveys for the main assessment points (though weekly satisfaction surveys were collected with paper and pencil at the end of each workshop for ease and speed). Although generally user-friendly, over the years we have learned to more fully utilize the features of this software while still making the measures convenient and easy to answer. Because the assessments are online, we have been able to solicit responses by emailing each participant individually with a link to the assessments, a method that has been well-received by participants.

Encouraging responses

In general, we have found personal contact to be the key to encouraging completion in all waves. In addition, we realized in 2015 that we could encourage more timely responses to the post-workshop assessment by allowing participants to complete the assessment on laptops at the workshop site before leaving the final session. However, we noticed a higher incidence of missing data, especially for sensitive questions, in the post-assessment than in other waves. We believed this may have stemmed from both members of the couples sitting next to each other and feeling uncomfortable answering these questions within sight of their spouse. In the following years, we separated the spouses on opposite sides of the tables to allow each member of the couple to have privacy to respond while still collecting these measures in a timely manner. Overall, we have had excellent assessment rates – of the 21 couples to complete the workshop between 2015 and 2017, at least one member of each couple has completed all assessment points (although the 2017 follow-up has yet to be collected), which we attribute to the personalized nature of the experience and the research assistants' efforts to follow up with participants.

The process of developing the research protocol and managing the resulting data has been especially important to the research assistants who have gone on to attain graduate education. The fourth author of this manuscript, who was in-person during the early years of the workshop and is now involved remotely while pursuing a doctoral degree, credits this experience with giving her firsthand knowledge of the challenges and rewards of collecting prevention and intervention data. “Having the opportunity to design and implement, and to see the results of a workshop and research effort like this, gave me the opportunity to dive head-first into research and determine if I wanted to pursue this type of work.”

Grant Writing, Funding, and Presentations

In addition to workshop facilitation and research design, the research assistants have also been highly involved in successfully securing university funding to pay for workshop materials and food, internships, and research conference travel to present material from this course and workshop at local, state, and national conferences, including the Uintah Basin Research Conference, the Utah State University Fall Undergraduate Research Symposium, the Teaching Family Science Conference, and the meeting of the National Council on Family Relations. The experience writing

grant applications has been important in the students' training, and in the coming years we plan to apply for external grants to continue growing this project.

Share

Finally, I return to my teaching philosophy to highlight the *Share* function of this workshop. Having lived and served in rural communities for much of my life, I am acutely aware that couples living in rural areas are often underserved in their relationship needs and marriage enrichment education. This is in large part due to rural communities often having fewer resources for mental health services or therapy, let alone educational and enrichment activities, as compared to larger urban areas (Openshaw et al., 2012). I realized that this class could serve dual purposes: benefit the students through experiential learning, but also provide a much-needed workshop to the rural communities in which the students were already living.

Although the students enrolled in HDFS 5540 class were registered at campuses and learning centers around the state, the workshop was offered via interactive videoconferencing to couples residing in one rural community (we experimented with offering the workshop to multiple sites in the first year, but decided it was important to group process for the couples to be together in-person, even if the student facilitators were scattered throughout the state). The couples were recruited from the community with flyers, radio ads, social media, and word of mouth. Couples completed pre-workshop, post-workshop, and six-month follow-up assessments, so we could better understand their experiences with the workshop.

In the 2015-2017 years (the most consistently measured), couples reported small but significant improvements in satisfaction (2015 only), communication patterns, commitment, and emotional intimacy (changes in sexual satisfaction were positive, but not significant). Although these changes were not maintained statistically to the six-month follow-up assessment, effect sizes suggested that couples still showed slight improvement in these areas. For more detail on the procedures, statistical methods, and results ascertained from the couples, please see Arocho et al. (n.d). Overall, we believe that this experience was successful in reaching an underserved population, thus addressing the *Share* piece of my teaching philosophy by giving the students the opportunity to reach the local community with useful and meaningful information.

Conclusion

As I reflect back on the past six years of this redesigned course, I feel satisfied that I am being true to my teaching philosophy of *Learn, Apply, Share*. Using well-researched principles on adult learning, I believe I am providing a rich environment for learning to take place with the students who enroll in the class, the research assistants, and community members. While I am pleased with the learning that has occurred with my students enrolled in the course and the community couples subscribing to the marriage workshop, my research assistants' learning brings me the most professional satisfaction. Over the years, we have spent countless hours constructing this experience to make it the most helpful to students and community members. As evidenced by these research assistants being coauthors of this paper and continuing to work with me as their paths have taken them to further education and professional careers, they have moved in my mind from student mentees to valued colleagues.

Overall, this course and the associated workshop have given me the opportunity to apply my teaching philosophy in a meaningful way while also allowing me to be true to my mission to help students and the community develop healthy, satisfying family relationships.

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