Utilizing Field-Based Instruction as an Effective Teaching Strategy

Joy M. Kozar  
*Kansas State University*

Sara B. Marcketti  
*Iowa State University, sbb@iastate.edu*

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Utilizing Field-Based Instruction as an Effective Teaching Strategy

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of field-based instruction on student learning outcomes. Researchers in the past have noted the importance of engaging students on a deeper level through the use of active course designs. To investigate the outcomes of active learning, two field assignments created for two separate undergraduate courses at different four-year institutions were implemented. The intended outcome of both assignments was to broaden and expand students' learning experiences and knowledge. As a result, the authors found that in both settings, the field experiences proved to be worthwhile, enriching students' understanding of the subject matter and facilitating student retention. Based on these observations, the authors propose that instructors implement field-based instruction as a method of active learning into their courses whenever appropriate, allowing students the opportunity to obtain a more "real-world" perspective on the subject matter.

Disciplines
Fashion Design | Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts | Industrial and Product Design | Other Arts and Humanities

Comments
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UTILIZING FIELD-BASED INSTRUCTION AS AN EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGY

JOY M. KOZAR, Ph.D
Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS

SARA B. MARCKETTI, Ph.D.
Iowa State University, Ames, IA

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of field-based instruction on student learning outcomes. Researchers in the past have noted the importance of engaging students on a deeper level through the use of active course designs. To investigate the outcomes of active learning, two field assignments created for two separate undergraduate courses at different four-year institutions were implemented. The intended outcome of both assignments was to broaden and expand students’ learning experiences and knowledge. As a result, the authors found that in both settings, the field experiences proved to be worthwhile, enriching students’ understanding of the subject matter and facilitating student retention. Based on these observations, the authors propose that instructors implement field-based instruction as a method of active learning into their courses whenever appropriate, allowing students the opportunity to obtain a more “real-world” perspective on the subject matter.

Active learning occurs when students are mentally engaged in processing knowledge in order to construct understanding. Through mental engagement, meaning is made, learning is internalized, and knowledge, skills, and concepts are applied (Starnes & Carone, 2002). In many classroom settings today, however, it is not uncommon to observe students taking a fairly passive role in their learning. This is especially the case when instructors employ mainly traditional methods of teaching (i.e., lecturing, note-taking, and using multiple-choice and true-false exams). Unfortunately, while these methods can be convenient for the instructor, they often do not impact student learning in a significant way. As reported by Wingfield and Black (2005), passive methods of teaching are likely to be more instructor-centered. Conversely, active styles of teaching foster greater student participation, which oftentimes results in more intense and longer-lasting learning. Active learning has also been linked to critical thinking, increased levels of social integration resulting in subsequent institutional commitment, and enhancement of the well-being and personal growth of students (Braxon, Miled, & Sullivan, 2000; Koljatic & Kuh, 2001).

Field-based instruction, a form of active learning, has proven to be worthwhile to enhancing student learning outcomes, including retention of the subject matter, and improving student’s problem solving skills (Davis, 1993). Field experiences are learner-centered, allowing students the
opportunity to apply ideas and concepts taught in a traditional classroom setting to an environment that stimulates critical thinking and analysis (Hickcox, 2002). Field experiences enable students to further develop cognitively from more simplistic positions (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Ediger, 2001). Even students perceive active course designs to be more relevant to their future as compared to passive course designs (Wingfield & Black, 2005).

Experiences outside of the classroom where students will eventually live and work are useful in teaching students to apply theory to practice (Hickcox, 2002; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). Davis (1993) recommends, “don’t tell students when you can show them, and don’t show them when they [the students] can do it themselves (p. 181).” Many educators in higher education recommend that instructors adopt fieldwork and other hands-on activities into their courses. Yet, while the consensus suggests that active learning tends to be more effective than passive learning, active course designs are not necessarily implemented more frequently by educators (Wingfield & Black, 2005). Perhaps part of encouraging educators to incorporate more activities that facilitate active learning into their curriculum involves outlining specific methods for doing so. As part of this study, field assignments created for two undergraduate courses within the family and consumer sciences discipline were implemented to assess the effectiveness of this method of active learning. The overall goal of the activities was to broaden and deepen students’ understanding of the course content by combining theory and practice.

Field Assignment 1

The first field assignment was designed for a junior and senior level apparel and textiles entrepreneurship/small business class. In the course, students are given the task of developing, researching, and writing a detailed business plan. This type of activity is highly appropriate for a course of this nature since many lending institutions expect to see a business plan prior to financing a new entity. Yet, many students seem unable to fully grasp the practicality of their entrepreneurial ideas. The field-based activity was developed to broaden students’ understanding of the dynamics involved in starting and sustaining a small business. This activity was consistent with recommendations made by Wingfield and Black (2005): “The experiences have to be relevant to the learning goals and then the learners must have time and opportunity to reflect on the experience (p. 119).” As part of the assignment, students were required to observe and report various aspects of a small business similar to the type of business proposed in the business plan. In a previous study, undergraduate business students perceived job shadowing to be more useful in understanding the subject matter as compared to giving speeches, taking tests, analyzing case studies, listening to outside speakers, or watching videos (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). Consequently, part of the assignment also included a job shadowing component where students interviewed the business owner and were directly exposed to the daily operations of running a small business. Based on their observations, students were then expected to critically evaluate the merchandising, marketing, and financial
strategies employed by the firm.

This assignment was carefully planned and designed around the specific learning outcomes of the class. Upon completion of the class, students should understand the issues involved in starting a new business and have the skills necessary to successfully formulate and present a detailed business plan. For this field assignment, students were given handouts that described the purpose and requirements of the project. Upon completion, students were also asked to provide an evaluation of the assignment to assess the effectiveness of the field experience, including whether the activity was useful in better understanding the business plan project, and identifying the most interesting as well as difficult aspects of completing the field assignment.

Coupled with the job shadowing component, there were four major elements included in the field assignment. The first component required that students analyze the firm's merchandise mix, including the type(s) of products, brand names, and price points of merchandise sold by the firm. The second component required students to research the market in which the business operated in. This task involved identifying the store's main competitors and target market, in addition to the differential advantages employed by the firm. The third component required students to examine the location of the business, including whether or not it was strategically placed given its relative distance to competing businesses and other non-competing businesses serving the same target market. The final component required students to evaluate the firm's overall business concept, including the perceived image projected by the business as well as the general strengths and weaknesses of the firm. As part of the job shadowing activity, students were given a list of possible questions to discuss with the business owner, including the owner's motivation for starting the business, the financial requirements needed to sustain a small business, the pitfalls and rewards of owning a small business, and advice for those considering initiating an entrepreneurial endeavor in the future.

After students completed the field assignment, the instructor recognized a significant improvement in student's work. Based on comments made by the students, the field assignment proved useful in providing students with a greater understanding of the subject matter and the requirements for completing the business plan:

"This activity enabled me to observe another business similar to mine and provided additional insight with some of the aspects involved in completing the business plan project."

"This activity has assisted us greatly in writing our business plan. We can take what works for that business and expand on it. We can also learn from their weaknesses and not make the same mistakes in our own business."

"This activity has helped me to understand the project better and made it easier for me to complete."

Many students after the experience also revised their plans to be more practical and noted the unreasonableness of some of
their original ideas. For example, comments made by students included:

"The most frustrating thing about this assignment was that while I was analyzing this business I realized weak places in my own business plan that need further thought."

"It was really interesting to recognize some of the mistakes small business owners can make and may not even realize."

Students found the activity to be worthwhile and as providing additional insight into planning, maintaining, and financing a small business. Given the comments made by students, the instructor perceived the field assignment as significant to enhancing the students' learning experiences. Additional comments gathered from students included:

"The store I visited is almost a replica of what I imagine my store to look like. I got a basic idea of the layout and structure I want for my store, as well as the type of merchandise I plan to include."

"I believe that by doing this activity, I was made more aware of what I need to be looking for in my own business so that it can be successful."

"As a consumer, you don't really think about the overall image a business is trying to project. This assignment made me really think about all the pieces that go into that."

Overall, this field experience proved to be a means for enriching the process in which students learned and applied the course material. The activity challenged students' existing ideas and reinforced new knowledge concerning the challenges of developing a well-written business plan and managing a small business. Students also seemed to be more involved in the subject matter and class discussions after completing the field assignment, which created a more enjoyable and rewarding learning environment for the students and the instructor.

Field Assignment 2

The second field assignment was designed for an introductory textile science class, a required course for many undergraduate, fashion merchandising programs throughout the United States. The course, designed for sophomore level students discusses "textile fibers, yarns, fabrication, coloration, and finishes; quality and performance application to apparel, furnishing, and industrial textiles" (Iowa State University Catalog, 2006). Similar to other university science courses, the introductory textile science class requires students to memorize factual information as well as apply their knowledge in a hands-on laboratory environment. Though an extremely beneficial course offered by many traditional family and consumer science programs, instructors in the field are aware of students' frequent difficulty with the course content. Previous research suggests that students within a textile science course were more satisfied with active, hands-on activities and projects rather than passively learning information in a lecture-situation. Furthermore, students enjoyed applying the information collaboratively with fellow students and the instructor.
through hands-on activities in face-to-face lab sessions (Marcketti & Yurchisin, 2005). The field assignment for this course was carefully planned and designed around the specific learning outcomes for the class, particularly “to understand and identify textile fabrics and to select appropriate textiles to meet the needs specified.” Students were given an overview that described the objectives and requirements of the assignment as well as a timetable for completion (Davis, 1993). Upon completion, students were also asked to provide an evaluation of the assignment similar to the one described for the first field assignment.

To enhance students’ comprehension of the subject of fabric constructions, students were given the task of participating in a scavenger hunt at a local, discount retailer. This experience occurs at the midpoint of the semester. Class content has included the topics of weaves, knits, nonwovens, and compound or composite fabrics. This experience serves as a review before the fabric exam. Students were asked to work in groups of two to three to find examples of specified fabric constructions as used in various products throughout the store. Students were instructed to locate specific categories of fabric constructions such as wovens, knits, nonwovens, and compound structures in various departments of the store, including men’s and women’s clothing, home and kitchen goods, bath and beauty, paper goods, and the pet section.

Based on the student’s reflections, the instructor was able to draw themes that suggested the usefulness of the assignment regarding student retention of course content. Students seemed to find most interesting the ubiquity of textiles throughout the store as well as their own surprise at how much information they had retained and could apply to a real-life setting. Student comments included:

“I found it really interesting that all of the things we have learned in class can be applied to everyday activities. I used to just buy things, but now, I will actually pay attention to the fiber type and the construction method.”

“I was surprised by my ability to identify fabrics. I have learned and retained more information than I thought.”

Two themes regarding difficulty of the hunt for textiles emerged, including logistics and content knowledge. Under the category of logistics, students were concerned with efforts to car pool to the discount retailer, time constraints regarding the experience, a busy and crowded store environment, and too many choices for possible product selection. Under difficulties with content knowledge, students expressed frustration that they could not remember specific information and difficulty in differentiating between product types. Although this experience can be quite frustrating for students, their difficulty in remembering and accessing content knowledge can both facilitate and necessitate content specific dialogue.

Students deemed the exercise extremely beneficial to their engagement in the learning process, identification of product categories, and understanding of the course content and application of their knowledge. Specific comments made by students
included:

“This was a beneficial activity because it forced us to look at different products and to figure out how they were made.”

“This excursion made me realize that what we learn is important and relevant. It was great to see where some of the things that we learn about are actually used in the real world.”

“When you go shopping, you rarely pay attention to the details of how a product is made. This [exercise] made me think about the quality of what I buy based on how it is constructed.”

“I was surprised by my ability to identify fabric types. I have learned and retained more information than I thought.”

The instructor found that following this field experience, students were more apt to openly discuss in class their own, individual experiences within varying shopping environments. This seems to suggest that students compartmentalize their learning to the classroom. By participating in a field-based experience outside of the traditional classroom environment, students actively engaged in the learning process, were able to make meaning, and apply and utilize their knowledge and skills of various textile science concepts.

Conclusion

Based on the effectiveness of the field experiences in enhancing the overall learning process, the authors propose that instructors implement field-based instruction into their curriculum whenever appropriate. The experiences must be well developed and timed accordingly. In both field experiences mentioned in this paper, the instructors covered course content, had students complete the field work, asked students to reflect on their experiences, and then completed either projects or exams. The experiences contributed to student engagement in the learning process, increased their understanding of the course content, and allowed students the opportunity to apply their knowledge through hands-on, real life situations. Overall, the activities enhanced the quality of instruction for both the students and the instructors, thus providing a more interactive, high quality learning atmosphere.

References


