Overview of Using Vignettes to Develop Higher Order Thinking and Academic Achievement in Adult Learners in an Online Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

This case study investigated the use of vignettes as a teaching strategy and learning activity of the Generative Learning Model in a hybrid online course. The Generative Learning Model, which consists of five main components: attention, motivation, knowledge, generation, and metacognition (Wittrock, 2000), was incorporated when requiring students to answer teacher-generated vignettes and to generate their own vignettes. As a result of using vignettes within the Generative Learning Model in a hybrid online course, two outcomes were anticipated: (1) enhancement of academic achievement and (2) higher order thinking. This study considered data from student work collected from the Instructional Techniques Course, GITED 631, taught in the Graduate School of Education at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the fall of 2003. Eight participants responded to teacher-generated vignettes, created diagrams and rubrics, created their own vignettes, and recorded their thoughts concerning vignettes in reflective learning logs. This research indicates that the use of teacher-generated vignettes can increase academic achievement, and that learner-generated vignettes can help students achieve higher order thinking.

Keywords: adult learners; assessing academic achievement; generative learning activity; higher order thinking; online learning; stories; vignettes

INTRODUCTION

Recently, several different strategies and accommodations have been considered in the teaching of adults. There has been more emphasis on providing meaningful learning activities for adults, so that they can bring their previous knowledge and experience to the classroom, add to their knowledge base, and transfer their new learning to their own personal or professional situation (Knowles, 1970, 1978, 1984, 1995; Gordon, 1992; Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, & Rasmussen, 1994; Ryan, 1995; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998;
Online learning plays a significant part of the future, and will continue to provide education to individuals facing time constraints. Stories are a part of mankind’s history, and will continue to help people find meaning in life, and with the benefits of online learning, are able to assist adults in higher order thinking and academic achievement.

The primary purpose of this study is to show how adults can achieve higher order thinking and academic achievement when they are provided with a supportive learning environment. Such an environment involves meeting their learning needs and requiring their participation in meaningful learning activities that consider higher order thinking and encourage academic achievement. One model considered in researching how adults learn is the Generative Learning Model. In this study, vignettes were used as a generative learning activity to help students “create meaning.” One environment in which the combination of the Generative Learning Model and vignettes may be used successfully in helping adults achieve their goals is the online learning environment.

BACKGROUND

The following are the major components of this study: adult learning needs, the Generative Learning Model, vignettes, online learning, and educational outcomes such as academic achievement and higher order thinking.

Adult Learning Needs

The learning environment best suited for adults is supportive, focuses on course goals and individual goals of the adult learner, promotes active learning, and considers learning activities that assist adults in transferring their learning to their own situations, and one that provides flexibility for the adults’ learning needs. When considering learning strategies for adults, the types of teaching strategies and learning activities noted as successful are those that consider their prior experience (Knowles, 1970, 1978, 1984, 1995; Knox, 1986; Moore & Bogotch, 1993; Evans & Miller, 1997), consider reflection (Brookfield, 1986; Vella, 1994; Johnson & Bragar, 1997; Dempsey, 2000), require the learner to take an active part in his or her learning (Knowles, 1970, 1978, 1984, 1995; Brookfield, 1986; Evans & Miller, 1997), and are meaningful and helpful in transferring learning into his or her own environment (Knowles, 1970, 1978, 1984, 1995; Gordon, 1992; Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, & Rasmussen, 1994; Ryan, 1995; Kolb, 1984; Wlodkowski, 1999; Dottin & Weiner, 2001).

The Generative Learning Model

Since its inception in 1974, the Generative Learning Model has been modified over the years to include five major components: (1) attention; (2) motivation; (3) knowledge; (4) generation; and (5) metacognition (Wittrock, 2000, p. 210). Attention is important in directing and sustaining activity (Wittrock, 1990). The motivation component of the Generative Learning Model focuses on making sure the learner knows his or her role in the learning process and understanding that he or she has the responsibility and ability to achieve their learning goals (Wittrock, 1990). The knowledge component of the Generative Learning Model considers how the learner’s memory works in the learning process. The generative process includes: “(a) organizational structures for storing and retrieving information; and (b) processes for...