

Utilizing a Social Constructivist Model to Create Immersive Online Learning Events

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COURSE

HUMS 414: Rural Treatment Strategies for Human Services Professionals online course utilizes a social constructivist learning environment that encourages students to construct new understanding and knowledge through independent research and social interaction with peers.

A term long multimedia case study was implemented to assist students with developing an understanding of the unique challenges of delivering human services to clients in rural and remote locations, and to provide scaffolding for the immersive learning process.



Students are also required to enhance their understanding of the cultural aspects, socioeconomic conditions, social structures, public health concerns, and effects of global warming on rural Alaskan populations through interviews and team based assignments.

AUDIENCE

Students enrolled in the Human Service Program stem from a variety of urban, rural, and village communities. Eighty-two percent of the population is over 21. Fifty-five percent are working fulltime and seventy-six percent carry twelve or more credits per term. On average, fifty percent of the students enrolled in HUMS 414 live outside of Anchorage.

OUTCOMES

HUMS 414 examines human service delivery models, ethical standards, values, environmental factors, intervention strategies, and methods of service delivery by contrasting urban, rural, and remote settings. Human Service Professionals in Alaska must be able to analyze intervention and prevention strategies for alcohol abuse, addiction, mental illness, public health, disability and aging that are complicated by an array of social, economic, political and public health concerns many of which are unique to rural Alaska.

Students employ the human service, medical, public health, and eclectic models to process past, present, and future challenges of delivering rural and remote services, taking into account the changing migration patterns of Alaska Natives to regional hubs and urban centers. Upon completion of this course, students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of:

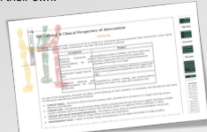
- the historical, cultural, economic, political, environmental factors, and other dynamics of rural and remote communities that make service delivery to these areas challenging and unique;
- organizational structures of rural service delivery;
- appropriate, culturally sensitive methods and techniques of intervention for clients in rural and remote communities with a focus on Alaska Native and other minority groups
- the impact of globalization on rural Alaska;
- climate data as it relates to humans (society, politics, economy, and culture) and wildlife in the Arctic, and the ability to distinguish between related fact and political rhetoric.



RATIONALE

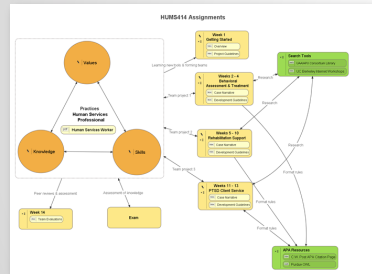
We believe the major instructional challenge that lead to the implementation of this innovation is that of teaching students to understand a client's cultural and lifestyle perspective rather than their own.

One of the instructional goals for students is to understand that values drive decision-making, working with clients from different cultures and sub-cultures, necessitates that the student understands the various dynamics that affect how their clients construct their world.



DESCRIPTION

Course activities are designed sequentially to scaffold student learning beginning with simple tasks and progressing in complexity. "Authentic experience" is purposefully designed into the modules to allow students, working in teams, to collect information from a simulated practice setting.



The simulated practice is presented as a 3 part multimedia case containing audio, video, images, and narrative written in the first person in an attempt to immerse students in the culture and community of the client they are serving during the course. Students are also encouraged to interview and, where possible, meet with professionals that theoretically would be part of the client support team.

Weekly discussion forums are provided to promote online interaction and systematic thinking. The forums are designed as mini case review meetings where students can ask questions, share information with their peers, and review findings. In an effort to enhance the simulation, the instructor also uses the forums to provide additional case information and to share current events relative to the cases (projects).

All case modules were scripted and a student with a local dialect was brought in to create the audio segments for the cases. The course content was developed with: Word, Audacity, Captivate 4, Dreamweaver, and VUE (Visual Understanding Environment). Utilizing this series of tools allows the content to be modified outside of the learning management system (LMS), and allows students to navigate the materials in a non-linear fashion within the LMS.

STUDENT IMPACT

To emulate the type of team based environment that occurs within the professional setting, the instructor places students into 3-4 person heterogeneous teams. Teams are responsible for selecting a team manager (leader) with whom the instructor (supervisor) communicates to provide direction and assistance with the development of team cohesiveness. Team work requires coordinated effort on the part of each member to complete the assignments. For many students, this is their first experience working in a term-long team based setting requiring that the first few weeks of the class be dedicated to community building, defining roles and responsibilities, and rules for collaboration.

Human Service Professionals are challenged to solve client support issues by thinking critically and creatively. Assignments for this course are open-ended requiring students to identify resources as well as define support plans and communication strategies. In most cases, students have not experienced open-ended assignments or the level of technology presented in the course. As such, many students initially find the course overwhelming requiring strategically designed instructional scaffolding and support mechanisms.

Despite the rigor of the course, student feedback has been positive. The following are just two examples of responses received through the IDEA course evaluation:

"The class was somewhat challenging, but I gained a lot of knowledge and information from doing my research."

"The time that it took to gather information, write reports and power point presentations allowed me to understand more clearly of what it takes to help someone successfully connect to resources available. I learned so much about community, state, federal and other resources from this class compared to other's that I have taken."

REFLECTION

In respect to casework, the original case study assumed that there would be no right or wrong answers for the assignments and that grades would be determined based how the students processed and presented information. Based upon the first series of assignment submissions it was determined that the students did not have the depth of understanding required to develop a viable support plan. The assignments were therefore modified to provide a range of options within which to develop the client support plan including the modification of the assessment criteria focused on plan feasibility based upon environmental and economic variables.

HUMS 414 is in its fourth online offering. I still view this class as a work in progress and am open to modifications when appropriate. There are several student reactions to this course that are now predictable. Students will say the course is too time consuming; that too much information is included; that they do not have the computer skills to navigate the course; that they have taken several online courses but nothing like this; and that they would feel more comfortable if they were given step-by-step instructions rather than giving them the ability to be creative in their approach to helping. Given my knowledge and experience within the Human Services Profession, I empathize with their concerns but feel that I would be remiss in my duties if I did not provide them with a safe, supportive environment that will provide them with the skills required to be successful within the profession.

Finally, I was under the impression that after teaching this course once or twice, I could basically cut-and-paste from previous announcements and discussion boards. I've learned that each class takes on the unique character and that I need to pay close attention to how the course is developing and monitor the predictable friction that can occur in work teams. Each course offering has taken different directions to reach the same conclusions. This is something that I should have anticipated based on my professional experience, which has taught me that no two clients or situations are ever exactly the same. To my way of thinking, this is what constructivism is basically about. We may be seeing the same problem but the way we construct our world will determine how a problem is approached.



SUSTAINABILITY

Background

The village and associated environmental issues defined in the case segments are real, but all of the characters and human interactions are fictitious. Every effort has been made to present environmental and cultural variables concisely and accurately. The cultural aspects of the case scripts were reviewed by Dr. George Charles and Dr. Phyllis Fast, and the veteran issues in Part 3 were reviewed by a clinical psychologist at the Vet Center in Anchorage.



Constraints

- The scenarios in this course is built around current events. When events change the case materials may need to be revised to maintain authenticity.
- The case study deals with two individuals from one village, thereby limiting cultural and professional exposure.
- Technologies selected to present course materials have a steep learning curve associated with them.

Suggestions

- To reduce the number of content revisions keep case materials somewhat generic and have the instructor augment the materials with web resources and supplemental materials posted to discussion forums and announcements.
- Increase client scenarios to include additional regions and tribe through collaboration with other instructors and elders.
- Reduce the technology learning curve by creating case templates and using text-to-speech and speech-to-text tools where appropriate.



ADVICE TO PEERS

I believe that this innovation can be replicated in other academic disciplines. It not only can be used in human service settings, it can be used in the social sciences and physical sciences. The scope of this approach is only limited by the creativity of the person who designs it.

From my experience, this type of approach to learning takes a significant amount of the instructor's time, especially at the beginning of the semester. I think it's important to explain what the educational outcomes are and how students will obtain them.

I believe that the most difficult decision a faculty has to make will be how much latitude is given to the students to gather, synthesize, and organize the relevant information needed to complete assignments.

Another decision will be whether or not to allow one-on-one consultation with students who are confused about the course or just need direction. If the instructor allows individual sessions, this may not be an efficient use of time because many other students will seek assistance for same issues.

Furthermore, it would not be fair to have in person meetings with students in Anchorage when students who live outside the Anchorage area would not have the same access.