PROMOTING ACTIVE LEARNING: THE MARITAL SCENARIOS PROJECT

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ABSTRACT. Students in family relationship-type courses typically have the opportunity to apply their learning in both personal and professional ways. Students can make the most out of these opportunities by engaging in "active learning." The Marital Scenarios project was designed to encourage active learning that promoted higher order thinking and used problem-based and collaborative learning strategies. The project incorporated multiple series of invented scenarios that described the processes of individuals meeting, courting, marrying, and managing marital adjustments and crises. The scenarios were given to 89 undergraduate students (students were grouped in fours) throughout various points of the semester with the charge of applying course content to make sense of the actions/feelings of the individuals within the scenarios. After several weeks of new course content, the same groups would reassemble and apply the new content to their evolving scenarios. The project cumulated in a final paper and presentation for each group that required students to synthesize course content from across the entire semester, with a touch of the students' own creativity and personal expectations. Student feedback revealed that students generally found the project to help improve their understanding and retention of course content and to make it applicable to real life.

Many universities offer courses on family relations/intimate relationships. Course content typically has important application for students who train to be involved in Family Life Education, family service agencies, the childcare industry, and other related professions. It can also be very relevant to students who hope to improve their own intimate relationships throughout their lives. Because most traditional college students are in a developmental stage conducive to examining and internalizing ideas and practices related to intimate relationships, these courses have the potential to leave an important, lasting impression on learners (Hunts & Marotz-Baden, 2004). The Martial Scenarios Project was designed for the purpose of helping students master and appreciate course content on a personally meaningful and applicable level.

KEY WORDS. Active learning, Problem-based learning, Collaborative learning, Marriage education

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Its design is based on several principles of learning that can enhance a student's educational experience.

Principles of Learning

Family relationship-type courses at universities traditionally have used a variety of methods to help students personally relate to course content (see review by Sollie & Kaetz, 1992). Case studies, role plays, simulations, and group projects have helped facilitate active learning (Wilkerson & Gijselaers, 1996). Generally, the overall purpose of having students take an active role in the classroom is to help them reach higher levels of thinking and learning (Sutherland, & Bonwell, 1996).

Higher Order Thinking (HOT)

Bloom (1956) is well known for what is commonly deemed a hierarchy or taxonomy of cognition. According to this cognitive model, people learn to think on multiple levels, ranging from lower to higher orders of thought. These levels begin at the lowest level—*knowledge* (recall information, knowledge of major ideas)—and continue on through *comprehension* (understanding, interpreting), *application* (use information, solve problems), *analysis* (see patterns, organize parts), *synthesis* (generalize, draw conclusions), and *evaluation* (verify value of evidence, compare and discriminate between ideas). The higher levels may be encouraged by teaching methods that push students beyond basic memorization and superficial interpretation. For example, classroom simulations (Lewis & Gurung, 2003) and using true-to-life scenarios (Shapiro, 1995) have been used to help students grasp psychological and relational theories on deeper and more personal levels than through reading and attending lectures alone. The Marital Scenarios Project demands higher levels of thinking—particularly application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Ideally, students will come away from the project with a greater

understanding of course content and an enhanced ability to bridge content to their own life circumstances because of the higher order thinking opportunities.

Problem Based Learning (PBL)

Framing learning objectives as problems for learners to solve can be an effective way to implement higher order learning. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) was developed as a technique for training medical students (Barrows, 1986). A problem was presented to the students who were then encouraged to learn and apply the necessary information to solve the problem. This strategy has proven to be especially effective in skill-based learning and retention of knowledge (Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003). It has also been used in a variety of educational settings and can be implemented as a general approach to teaching (Wilson, 1996). Because students learn information in the context of a problem, the process of learning becomes more active and student-driven as solutions for the problems are sought (Wilkerson, & Gijselaers, 1996). This learning approach gives purpose and applicability to knowledge.

The Marital Scenarios Project borrows from the general problem-based approach by presenting students with realistic case studies that require students to use their analytical and evaluative skills to identify and integrate course content in a way to make sense of the case studies. Invented case studies were used because the precise details of the circumstances and dilemmas are not directly based on students' personal lives, which can help students more easily see past their own biases or personal investment in the situation while still being able to relate to the scenario in some way (Swearinger-Hilker & Yoder, 2002). Ideally, this project can help motivate students to master and apply course content as a means for addressing the "problems" presented to them in invented scenarios that reflect realistic and relevant situations.

Collaborative Learning (CL)

When students work together on a group project, the dynamics of learning change. Consistent with Vygotskian theory, students learn more in groups than as individuals because of the diversity of interpretations of the same problem or situation to which they are exposed (Bruner, 1985). Furthermore, as students articulate their knowledge and thoughts to one another, they enhance their awareness of their own understanding and learning processes (Van der Linden, Erkens, Schmidt, & Renshaw, 2000). As they pose questions to group members and explain their understanding of course content to one another, students can solidify their understanding of the content, comprehend a broader range of how course content applies to real life, and improve their social skills (Chan, Burtis, & Bereiter, 1997; Rubin & Herbert, 1998). This verbal exchange not only promotes the discovery of knowledge but also its joint construction (Van Boxtel, Van der Linden, & Kanselaar, 2000). Overall, students tend to learn more, retain more, think more critically, and report more satisfaction when they engage in collaborative learning (Gokhale, 1995; Davis, 1993). The Marital Scenarios Project draws upon small group dynamics to enhance students' learning experiences as they work collaboratively to analyze and integrate course content that applies to true-to-life scenarios.

The Marital Scenarios Project

The primary element of this project is the use of invented but true-to-life scenarios about individuals who meet, fall in love, marry, and manage marital adjustments and crises. Overall, this project gives students the opportunity to apply and master course content by utilizing the prior reviewed principles of learning. The main objective of the project was for students to gain a deep understanding and high potential for personally and/or professionally applying course content. This objective was to be facilitated by having students:

- actively engage in the learning process (PBL, CL),

- integrate course materials from across multiple bodies of course content (HOT),
- apply course materials and personal insight/experiences to life-like circumstances (HOT, PBL),
- review course materials in more than one manner (HOT, also helps with retention), and
- learn from and appreciating others' perspectives (CL).

The project was used as part of a course entitled "Marriage" at a relatively large, Midwestern university (the students will be described further in the feedback section below). Students met throughout the course of the semester in pre-assigned groups of four on five different occasions during class time, which culminated in a group paper that documented how students applied course content throughout the semester. Student groups were generally formed at random, though adjustments were made to ensure that the relatively few males in the class were spread out into different groups. The objectives and procedures of the project were explained to the students prior to their first group meeting, occurring at the third week of class.

During each of the group meetings (usually lasting 30 to 45 minutes long), students were required to become familiar with written details provided to them by their instructor regarding two invented individuals. The details were usually only a few sentences about the behaviors and reactions of each individual/couple, and some questions or directives that guided students toward making links between the people's lives and specific course content. Each group was given a unique scenario to work with that described the invented people and their background experiences. The instructor generated 12 different scenarios before the project began. Scenarios included sets of individuals that had various degrees of similarity with one another. For example, in one scenario, both individuals grew up in a large city, while in another scenario one individual

grew up on a farm while the other grew up in a large city. In one scenario, one individual had parents who fought openly and often, while the other individual had parents who hid their conflict. In another scenario, both individuals came from similar homes regarding their parents' relationships but had very different parent-child relationships. Thus, each scenario was likely to introduce some unique opportunities for students to apply certain theories or concepts while the overall topics were similar for all the scenarios at a given time. Throughout the semester, the individuals within each scenario would eventually meet, fall in love, marry, and confront adjustment issues and crises in marriage.

Students were instructed to refer to concepts, theories, and statistics that they had learned from previous course readings and lectures to make sense of and elaborate upon the information provided to them about the individuals/couple (see Appendix for model scenario and instructions). Students were invited to use their creativity and personal insight to add to the scenarios—or even change the information provided to them within the scenario. However, students were to justify their decisions and give explanations for the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the invented individuals by referring to specific course content for their justifications and explanations. For example, the first group meeting included a scenario that provided background information about two individuals (where they were raised, their intentions regarding higher education and/or employment, and the types of family relationships they grew up with). Students were also given questions to answer about how the individuals' concepts of love and their potential for future relationship strengths and weaknesses could be linked to their background experiences. They were also instructed to refer to course content and its sources for their answers. For the second meeting (approximately three weeks after the first meeting) students were given information about the same individuals' dating histories, how they met each

other, and their potential sexual relationship. This information corresponded with the course topics taught since the first group activity: dating, mate selection, and sexuality. At the third meeting, students incorporated the recently-taught information about courtship and early marital adjustment into their scenarios. Thus, after every two or three weeks, the groups reassembled and added to their scenarios, taking the invented individuals/couple through a progression that mirrored the topics of the course—from personal background influences on future relationships to divorce (or the potential to divorce).

For the second through fifth meetings, students were instructed to not only link the new information with recent course content, but to link the new information about the scenarios with the prior actions and circumstances of the invented individuals/couple. By doing so, students could reflect on how decisions and actions made before and early on in a relationship can have consequences later in the relationship. Therefore, students were advised to take notes and keep track of the decisions they make from meeting to meeting, including specific references to course materials that they applied to their scenarios. Eventually the scenarios had evolved enough that it was no longer necessary to provide further information about the invented couples, only directives about which general course content to link with the scenarios. For example, in the fourth meeting, students were instructed to choose from among several provided marital crises or challenges that can happen through the life-course of a marriage. Students were instructed to use the past information from their evolving scenario and from recent course content to explain why their couple would be prone to such a crisis and how the couple would respond to it. For the fifth meeting, students had to decide how vulnerable their couples were to divorcing based on their communication and conflict resolution skills and the traits and histories of the individuals/couple that are relevant to divorce.

After the five meetings, student groups were required to write a paper that reflected their completed scenarios and the specific course content they had applied to them throughout the semester. This part of the project necessitated students meeting together on their own time outside of class. The paper was not simply a description of what happened to the invented individuals; its purpose was to document how students had integrated specific course content into their scenarios by explaining why events occurred as they did, and why their particular individuals reacted the way they did to those events. In short, the paper was a culmination of the decisions they had made from each of the in-class meetings, documenting how course content was applied to their scenario throughout the semester, and how students had linked information (course content and circumstances in the scenario) from later in the semester with the information that they had received earlier in the semester. The papers were about 10 double-spaced pages long and were organized around the major events or periods experienced by the individuals/couples—such as family background circumstances, meeting each other, getting engaged, etc. In addition, groups were given 8 minutes to give an oral presentation of an aspect of their overall project. Presentations could include video clips, skits, games, etc. to showcase some aspect of their work. Groups were encouraged to be innovative with their presentations and to illustrate what they deemed as the most interesting element(s) of their scenarios.

Student Feedback

The “Marriage” course was offered to juniors and seniors. A total of 89 students were enrolled within two sections of the course (taught by the same instructor). Fifteen students were male. All students participated in the project and were invited to offer anonymous written feedback about the project. Nearly all complied (n = 87). The students were instructed to

"provide feedback on the overall project (in-class activities, the final paper, and presenting the project)" by responding to the following:

1. Please describe how you think this project helped you apply and/or learn course materials:
2. What aspect of this project was most beneficial to you?
3. What aspect of this project was least beneficial to you?
4. What suggestions would you have for how to change the project?

Responses were analyzed for content and frequency. When a student listed more than one response to a given statement/question, only the first response was tallied for the sake of categorization and student frequency of a given response. Patterns of responses are provided in Table 1 with the frequency of students whose responses fit within a given pattern (category).

The project was helpful in applying/learning course materials in that students generally found that the objectives of the project were met. Specifically, students mentioned that relating course content to a life-like situation deepened their understanding of materials, that the project functioned as a review of course content, and that the project helped them integrate and connect course materials throughout the semester. Similarly, when asked to mention the most beneficial aspect of the project, nearly 40% of the students mentioned that they benefited by applying the content to scenarios. Twenty-six students specifically mentioned the group element of the project as particularly beneficial, which was consistent with an objective of the project. Other elements such as the final paper or presentation and the requirement to continually use course readings in the project were also mentioned as most beneficial to several students.

The most common element of the project that was considered least beneficial was the oral presentation, followed by the response that "everything was beneficial" (a smaller portion of

these responses included an absence of a response). Though some students mentioned working in groups as most beneficial, others found it challenging to work in a group. Other responses focused on procedural issues, such as how much information was given out about the project or about the scenarios, or how class time was used. Similarly, when asked to make recommendations for changing the project, nearly half of the students suggested making no changes (a smaller proportion of this group simply offered no suggestions). Responses relevant to the presentation and procedures regarding the information provided about the project were also mentioned as least beneficial, along with a few suggestions regarding choosing groups and in-class time usage.

Discussion

Overall, student feedback suggested that this project promoted *higher order thinking* through the processes of *problem based* and *collaborative learning*. Specifically, students had to *apply* course content to the scenarios to make sense of them; they *analyzed* content to determine how it fit with their respective scenarios; they *synthesized* content from across the semester and with their own experiences and expectations; and they *evaluated* theories and concepts regarding the extent to which they helped explain the respective scenarios and help students draw conclusions about martial relationships. Generally, students reported the procedures of the project to be beneficial, especially in regard to their deeper understanding and remembering of the course content. They also tended to enjoy the opportunity to apply course content to a set of circumstances, dilemmas, and problems in a group atmosphere, which is consistent with previous research on the consequences of problem-based and collaborative learning (Dochy et al., 2003; Davis, 1993).

There were some elements that students found less useful. Some students found the oral presentations to be too stressful (they feared public speaking), too redundant (the content was too similar to the paper), or too vague (they thought they had too much freedom to be creative). However, some students enjoyed this element of the project the most, indicating that student personality and preferences play a large role in such feedback. Given that the presentations can require extensive class time and can appear redundant to students who have to observe many presentations (especially in larger classes), the presentations may be the least necessary part of the project. Instructors should consider class size and available class time when deciding to use presentation. The process of presenting and preparing for the presentations can be very valuable for the students. Instructors must weigh their options carefully against the learning objective for their students and the constraints discussed above.

The element of group work received both positive and negative feedback. Many students enjoyed the interactive nature of the project. Some mentioned that it helped them to hear the ideas and interpretations of others; some liked it as a change of pace from lecture and other classroom pedagogy; and some enjoyed the social element of getting to know new people. Some of the logistical issues of working in a group—such as scheduling meetings outside of class with other students, having to depend on others to do their fair share, and working with strangers—were challenging. Most students appreciated the amount of in-class time given them throughout the semester. Students were continually reminded that the more efficient and productive they were in class, the less time they would have to spend together outside of class. Part of that process was taking thorough notes and not relying on a single person to keep all the notes (if that person missed an activity, the rest of the group had a hard time picking up where they left off). Some also preferred to choose their own groups. In a previous semester, students were allowed

to choose their own groups. Many students were unacquainted with one another so little was accomplished by having them select group members. Those who did know each other tended to be too social in the group setting and thus less efficient. Regardless of whether or not students choose their own groups, there will likely be the issue of unequal contributions in at least one or more groups. For this project, students knew from the beginning that about 10% (and potentially more in extreme cases) of their project grade depended on peer evaluations from their other group members at the end of the semester. Student scores were affected if they did not contribute their agreed-upon effort to the final paper and presentation.

Another challenge in facilitating the project is helping students understand the project's procedures and outcomes. A continuous project that builds upon itself through the course of the semester was unusual for most of the students. Giving clear directions at the beginning and reinforcing them every meeting helped alleviate some confusion. Explaining the criteria at the beginning of the project for the final paper and presentation helped students grasp the big picture of what they were working toward. Some high-quality blind examples of papers from previous semesters were also made available for students to view in the instructor's office throughout the semester. Still, some students needed extra reassurance that things would become clearer each meeting, and that there was enough flexibility in the project so that decisions students made in one meeting would not jeopardize the quality of their efforts in future meetings. Such flexibility also included allowing students to replace any details provided by the instructor with their own ideas. Informal feedback (a show of hands) suggested that most students were satisfied with the amount of information that was provided them in their scenarios, though some students preferred more information (also see Table 1). It can be challenging to strike a balance between flexibility/creativity and structure. In a way, the uncertainty of the future elements of the project

paralleled the uncertainty of the future happenings of a relationship and eventual marriage. This parallel was pointed out to the students in hopes that they could appreciate and embrace the nature of the project.

This project can be adapted to fit other circumstances and/or course content. The number of times groups meet, the information in the scenarios, and the type of paper and/or presentation that results from the in-class activities can vary. A major element of the project was spacing group meetings so that they occur between relatively small amounts of course content and then culminate in a paper/presentation that connects the content. Such a process helps students focus their attention on a limited—but relevant—amount of information at one time, helps them review content more than once for the sake of mastery and retention, and helps them build off of previous work with past content to see how content throughout the semester is interrelated. This process also acts as a change of pace for the students which can help bring variety to the classroom learning atmosphere. The scenarios themselves could be designed to address families with young children, extended families, an individual confronting multiple contexts, and other relevant interpersonal situations around which a course may be designed. The creativity required by both the instructor and the students can make this an enjoyable project that will be different each time it is experienced.

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Appendix

First Meeting: Family of Origin, Love, and Marriage

Instructions: Think about elements of these individuals' backgrounds and current circumstances. Using your readings, find information (concepts, theories, statistics) that helps you predict the type of marriages these individuals could have (don't think about them being married to each other for now). Focus primarily on the Family-of-Origin readings and the readings on love, and make connections between the individuals' family background and how they might think about/experience love. Also, think about the "baggage" each person might bring into marriage because of their family experiences. Be sure to document the course content you used and how you used it (including page numbers and citations).

Scenario:

T (male) grew up in a small town in Indiana. He dropped out of high school last year and is working at a gas station. T's parents divorced a few years ago. It was a relief to him because his parents were always arguing in front of him. He hated the divorce, but it seemed better than the fighting. T would sometimes feel his parents competing for his love, and he felt caught in between. Because he felt so much pressure, he left school to earn some money to try to get away from Indiana and start a new life.

B (female) grew up in a large city in Indiana. B graduated from high school and has plans for college. B's parents had their ups and downs. They separated a couple of times, but always worked it out and strengthened their marriage. Her parents were careful not to fight in front of her. B never really felt close to her mother, and they would often argue as well. They finally reached a point to where they could confront each other but not have any kind of an emotional connection.

Second Meeting: Dating and Mate Selection

Instructions: Discuss the following and document your decisions based on course readings-

- How might their individual characteristics and their family upbringing/relationships (from your last meeting) contribute to dating decisions the individuals might make?
- Why are these individuals attracted to each other? (think about mate selection theories, family-of-origin information, dating histories, etc.)
- What challenges might they face in their dating relationship (including their own interaction, pressure from family, pressure from society, etc.)? What strengths do they bring into the relationship?
- Begin to think about how their initial dating experiences and selection of one another could influence their future relationship, even marriage.
- You can also focus on how sexual their relationship is and how that is related to their relationship, background, etc.

"T" was too busy to date much as an adolescent. He went out of his way to flirt with the girls, but didn't go on many "dates." He wasn't happy with his job and felt like he was going nowhere. His mom encouraged him to meet people, but his dad warned him about "getting snared by some bossy woman."

"B" began dating when she was 15, and always dated older, sophisticated guys. She was never the one to break up a relationship. Her mother disagreed with her dating habits. T and B were set up on a blind date and they hit it off instantly. They became very passionate very quickly. They felt like soul mates and moved in with each other after a few months to start making their wedding plans. They had a difficult time making any specific decisions.

Third Meeting: Courtship and Early Marriage

You have been given details about their courtship and wedding. Considering all the information you have been given about your individuals (i.e. demographics, family relationships, dating histories, their dating relationship), and the details you have added to their story, respond to the questions below, integrating course readings.

- Why do you think they got engaged and married the way they did?
- What type of adjustments are they facing in their early marriage, and why (think about individual background, family of origin, dating history, etc.)?
- How might they be changing as individuals and as a couple?
- In general, what strengths and challenges are they developing?

T and B decided to elope after dating/living together for about a year, despite some negative input from their parents. They moved to a different apartment to get a little more "space" (away from their parents).

Fourth Meeting: Marital Challenges (may include Work-Family roles)

Using your readings on marital crises, select one of the "Turning Points" that occur during marriage. It can be at any stage of the marriage you choose, and may include challenges associated with work-family issues. Then, answer the following:

- What is the turning point, and when does it happen?
- Based on what you learned abut that turning point, what factors in their individual backgrounds and past and current relationship contributed to the turning point occurring how/when it did?

- How did the individuals and the couple deal with the turning point? What were their reactions (think of both positive and negative reactions, based on the rest of the information/story established thus far)? How did it affect their relationship?

Fifth Meeting: Communication and Divorce

The last part of your scenario will consist of your assessment of the couple's potential for sticking with the marriage or divorcing. You should pay special attention to the following:

- How does the couple deal with conflict? What are their strengths and weaknesses? In what ways do the strengths and weaknesses matter to their marriage?
- Based on their past experiences (as individuals and a couple), their circumstances (including adjustments, turning points, and good/bad relational habits), the ways in which they handle conflict (as individuals and a couple), and their attitudes and behaviors that are risk factors for (or buffers for) divorce, how likely is it that they eventually divorce? Explain why they would be especially likely to divorce or avoid divorce, regardless of the condition of their marriage.

Table 1

*Student Feedback by Category and Frequency (*N = *87)*

Items	Category	Frequency
Please describe how you think this project helped you apply and/or learn course materials.	More understanding by relating things to life-like scenarios	33
	Provided a review of materials	12
	Increased use of course readings	11
	Helped see how content was interrelated / brought everything together	11
	Helped to learn the theories better	9
	Enjoyed creative expression	5
	Learn from other group members	2
	Did not help to learn materials	2
	No response	2
What aspect of this project was most beneficial to you?	Applying content to scenarios	34
	Working in a group	26
	The final paper	9
	Having to refer to course readings	8
	The oral presentation	8
	No response	2
What aspect of this project was least beneficial to you?	The oral presentation (redundant; nervous about public speaking)	29
	All beneficial / no response	23
	Working in a group (scheduling out of class; unequal effort)	15
	Too much time in class / stretched out too long	7
	Having to come up with details for the scenario on own	7
	Not enough information provided about project criteria	3
	Not apply to self / not find helpful	3

What suggestions would you have for how to change the project?	Don't change anything / no response	39
	Presentation (get rid of; more direction; more time)	15
	More description of project criteria	12
	More in class time	6
	Choose own group	6
	Too much in-class time	2
	Other (more personal; more freedom; more info in scenario)	8