

USING EMPIRICALLY-BASED TEACHING METHODOLOGIES TO TEACH FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION TOPICS EFFECTIVELY

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ABSTRACT. Empirically-informed teaching is driven by empirically-based teaching methodologies and techniques. Three principles of teaching are introduced in this article as foundational approaches to effective teaching. These simple approaches to organizing any teaching presentation can increase an instructor's success in the classroom. The Attention, Interact, Apply, Invite (AIAI) teaching methodology, Fact, Think, Feel, Do (FTFD) questioning techniques, and variety/pacing ideas introduced in this article are designed to engage students in a "praxis" or learn-by-doing approach to learning. The AIAI FTFD Teaching Model can be an effective tool in improving family life educator's confidence in teaching and quality of delivery.

Empirically-informed teaching is driven by empirically-based teaching methodologies and techniques. Surprisingly, very little specific teaching methodology and strategy exists in family science for family life educators. The principles of theory-driven teaching, audience needs assessment, group process, effective evaluation, and approaches to teaching various family science topics have been generally addressed (see Powell & Cassidy, 2001) without a clear and specific methodology for organizing and delivering presentations.

Three specific principles of teaching are introduced in this article as foundational approaches to effective teaching. These simple approaches to organizing and delivering a teaching presentation have the potential to increase family studies instructor's success in the classroom. The Attention, Interact, Apply, and Invite (AIAI) teaching methodology, Fact, Think, Feel, Do (FTFD) questioning techniques, and variety/pacing ideas introduced in this article are designed to engage students in a "praxis" or learn-by-doing approach to learning.

Theoretical Framework

KEY WORDS. Teaching, Effective Teaching, Teaching Methodology, Questioning Techniques, Family Studies, Family Life Education

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Human Ecological Systems Theory

The AIAI and FTFD Teaching Model uses ecological systems theory in conceptualizing a specific teaching methodological framework. Human ecology theory was primarily developed during the nineteenth century. It was spearheaded by a German zoologist, named Ernest Haeckel, who is credited for the word “ecology” (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Human ecology theory has been greatly influenced by such disciplines as sociology, geography, psychology, political science, economics, and general systems theory (Bubolz & Sontag).

Specifically, from this theoretical perspective, the family (i.e., the student in this case) is housed within an ecosystem that interacts with the human built, the social-cultural, and natural physical-biological environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1989; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Additionally, human ecology theory focuses on adaptation and learning processes that both allow humans to adapt to changing environmental structures as well as to modify these structures in accordance with their needs and values.

According to Bubolz and Sontag (1993), “Values are human conceptions of what is good, right, and worthwhile” (p. 435). “Needs” are the requirements individuals, families, and students have “that must be met at some level if they are to survive and engage in adaptive behavior” (Bubolz & Sontag, p. 435). These include physiological, social, emotional, and behavioral needs, all of which may be influenced by the human built, the social-cultural, and the natural physical-biological environmental ecosystems. The family life education classroom provides an excellent setting for values and needs to be addressed and for these various ecosystems to interact.

Coplen and MacArthur (1982) have attempted to identify at least eight of these needs that shape individuals, families, students, and their environments. They are the need to feel safe, to feel as though we belong, to develop a positive sense of personal identity, to have close real love

relationships, to receive respect, to feel worthwhile, to feel capable (competent), and to experience growth.

In sum, human ecology theory focuses on the interdependence and interaction of individuals, families, students, and their environments within the context of available resources, choice, adaptation, and learning (see Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1989). Similarly, it also focuses on the underlying values and needs which shape human behavior and motivate humans to modify both their resources and environments in order to improve life and subsequent well-being. The family life education classroom experience can provide an excellent setting in which students can become motivated to access resources, shape environments, and improve well-being. Because the quality of instruction is a subjective individual perception of both the teacher and the student, human ecological systems theory offers a viable vantage point from which to study and view individual perceptions of the quality of this instruction and to initiate healthy change.

The Process of Change

Family life educators are indebted to David Mace for his conceptualization of how change may occur in an instructional setting and readily acknowledge that this process is really a unique process for every individual and each relationship (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Although his model of change was used in a therapeutic instructional setting, it is applicable to multiple family life education instructional topics and contexts. According to Mace's model, the process of change begins with incoming information about some aspect of an individual's life. It could be an interpersonal or an intrapersonal issue that prompts the individual to attend to this

new information or any one of a myriad of other potential issues that could cause a person to “pay attention” to what is being received by the mind and heart.

It is evident, as we will discuss later, that this new information speaks to values, unmet needs, and desires and is interpreted by the individual as a perceived crisis. This psychosocial crisis occurs because the individual realizes something is missing such as the skills to negotiate intimacy or resolve conflict. This process of realization is called insight. As this realization of what needs and desires are not being met becomes an acute awareness, the commitment to change unfolds. This commitment to change may then lead to a desire toward experimental action with an increased motivation to search for new information and new potential skills.

Easily identifiable examples of how the change process proceeds toward experimental action might include an increased desire to read as much as possible about the addiction process, to explore husband and wife communication issues, or to learn how to parent a difficult child. Other examples might include goal-setting to increase or obtain a new relationship skill or seeking out a therapist when the individual or the relationship feels emotionally “stuck” or stagnant. If an individual perseveres, the results of change include enlightenment, fulfillment, satisfaction, increased confidence, and shared growth with others. In other words, when a person changes for the better, it also changes the dynamics of all the surrounding close relationships. Interestingly, although many people clearly perceive that they have unmet needs and desires and begin moving through the process of change, many never complete it.

Marriage therapist Dr. James Marshall (personal communication, April 2, 2003) maintains that ignorance, incompetence, and resistance to conscience are the three major impediments to completing the process of change. Ignorance includes an unwillingness to seek new information; incompetence assumes a lack of necessary skills; and, resistance to conscience

occurs when people deny the need to change how they treat themselves and others (see Warner, 2001).

The Changing Roles of Family Life Educators

Previous research indicates that family life educators play at least three roles in the teaching environment: (1) expert; (2) facilitator; and, (3) consultant (Myers-Walls, 1998).

Although Myers-Walls applies these roles specifically to parent-educators, the roles of expert, facilitator, and consultant can be applied to family life educators who teach multiple family science topics. Individual and group learning styles, context, and specific audience needs exhibit primary influence on which of these three roles a family life educator chooses to play in the instructional process (Powell & Cassidy, 2001).

Variety in moving in and out of these various roles without becoming “stuck” in any one role is critical to success and survival in the family life education teaching environment. Recently, a colleague who predominately plays the expert role through a lecture or “stand and deliver” teaching style, eloquently expressed this principle when s/he proclaimed “I am worn out by the middle of the semester and so are the students.”

Speaking to Multiple Intelligences

Playing a variety of instructional roles is also important in reaching students with different learning styles. Howard Gardner (1993, 2000) has pinpointed nine areas of intelligence: (1) mathematical-logical; (2) verbal-linguistic; (3) visual-spatial; (4) musical-rhythmic; (5) intrapersonal; (6) bodily-kinesthetic; (7) interpersonal; (8) naturalist; and, (9) existential. The mathematical-logical intelligence area has been most often studied and identified with intelligence (Sternberg, 1997). However, Gardner maintains that this is only one area of intelligence and that

As human beings, we all have a repertoire of skills for solving different kinds of problems In fact, nearly every cultural role of any degree of sophistication requires a combination of intelligences Dance requires skills in bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and spatial intelligences in varying degrees. Politics requires an interpersonal skill, a linguistic facility, and perhaps some logical aptitude. Inasmuch as nearly every cultural role requires several intelligences, it becomes important to consider individuals as a collection of aptitudes rather than as having a singular problem-solving faculty that can be measured directly through pencil-and-paper tests. (pp. 26-27)

With an understanding that individual students possess a collection of aptitudes and intelligences, effective family life educators employ a variety of teaching methodologies and strategies to speak to individual intelligences and aptitudes. For example, Berke, Hamon, and Smay (2006) seek to regularly use a variety of teaching strategies that speak to their students multiple intelligences and aptitudes such as using written reports, presentations, essays, reading assignments, and storytelling to engage their students with verbal-linguistic intelligence.

These authors also use analogies, metaphors and similes, quantitative tests, and data analysis to engage their students who possess mathematical-logical intelligence. Similarly, students with musical-rhythmic intelligence are engaged through teaching strategies such as listening to music, using rap or songs to teach, and comparing or contrasting musical selections and rhythms. Students with visual-spatial aptitude are engaged in the teaching process through the use of art and art media, charts and graphs, and photography. Additionally, students who are bodily-kinesthetic learners are engaged through a praxis, or “learn by doing,” approach to

teaching. These students are involved in the educational experience through role plays, movement activities, and field trips.

Students with interpersonal intelligence are engaged through group discussions, group process, small group tasks, and team work activities while those with an intrapersonal aptitude may be engaged through journaling, reflecting, opportunities for introspection, and individual tasks. Finally, students with naturalistic intelligence are engaged through nature walks and other connections and comparisons of the course material to the environment while those with an existential aptitude are engaged in the learning process through philosophizing, discussing the essential questions of the human condition, and exploring spirituality and religiosity.

Principles of Teaching

Internationally recognized for his expertise in teaching, the late Dr. Glenn Latham (2002) believed that every teacher should possess at least eight critical skills: (1) The ability to teach expectations; (2) The ability to get and keep students on task; (3) The ability to maintain a high rate of positive teacher-to-pupil interactions; (4) The ability to respond non-coercively to inappropriate behavior that is consequential; (5) The ability to maintain a high rate of risk-free student response opportunities; (6) The ability to serve problem-behavior students in the primary learning environment (i.e., the classroom); (7) The ability to avoid being trapped; and, (8) the ability to manage (student) behavior “scientifically” (i.e., the ability to manage behavior through scientifically proven principles such as “treatment-outcome research”).

Similarly, Rickford (2005) cites “six deep teaching principles” that effective teachers must have if they are to be successful in the classroom. Although addressed specifically to reading teachers, the six principles of: (1) student engagement; (2) learner participation, (3)

repetition and reinforcement; (4) high expectations; (5) sound teaching pedagogy; and, (6) conceptual understanding are equally applicable to family life educators.

Interestingly, Rickford (2005) speaks of the importance of a sound pedagogy as a key principle in the facilitation of effective teaching. Unfortunately, a clear and sound pedagogy of how to teach topics in family life education is muted in the primary literature used to instruct family life educators (see, for example, Powell & Cassidy, 2001). For this reason, a specific model for teaching family life education topics effectively is discussed below. This model provides a simple user-friendly methodology that incorporates the wisdom of empirically-informed teaching principles based on theory, change, experience, and intervention.

The AIAI and FTFD Teaching Model

The AIAI and FTFD Teaching Model integrates previous theoretical and methodological frameworks into three simplified principles. The principles and the appropriate explanations are discussed below. Figure 2, offers a brief example of how to coordinate and integrate the AIAI and FTFD Teaching Model into a unified lesson plan that can potentially lead students toward insight, application, and change).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Principle 1 – AIAI: Attention, Interact, Apply, Invite

Attention. Before a teacher can teach effectively, the teacher must catch the students' attention so they are prepared to be taught. Neglecting this principle has been the downfall of many teachers who could have been successful otherwise. A short humorous story, joke, video clip, object lesson, dramatization, question, game, etc., that creates interest in discovering what will be taught in the specific class can be very effective attention ideas. For the attention idea to be effective, it must be able to take the students' minds off of the outside distractions/influences

they may have entered the classroom with and focus the students as a unified whole on discovering the information you are about to lead them into. The attention idea need not be lengthy. In fact, it is better if it is not.

Interact. Next, the teacher proceeds with the introduction of the workshop or presentation information. Effective teachers use interaction methods such as insightful questioning, object lessons, student sharing, stories, dramatizations, group activities, etc., that center on the student and not the teacher. In other words, the mindset that the effective interactive teacher should have is as a facilitator of information and discussion, not as a stand-and-deliver lecturer.

Apply. After a principle is taught, the teacher must help or elicit the students to make application to their own lives. A crucial key to successful teaching is to spend as much time on applying the principles and information as possible with the students in order to help them access potential new skills that can help them change their lives and their relationships.

Invite. Lasting change is less likely to occur unless the students are invited to choose a principle or a piece of information from each class they can add to their repertory of relationship skills. Providing an invitation and then a method of targeting specific skills or behavioral change is crucial to the effective instructional process.

For example, a teacher of married students may want to target behaviors that enhance the students' marital friendships. A discussion in class about potential behaviors that could be used to enhance marital friendships might be followed-up with the teacher giving the students a target behavior handout (see Figure 3) and inviting them to choose a skill or behavior discussed in class they would be willing to work on to enhance their marital friendships. Using a target behavior handout allows the students to identify and assess behaviors employed during the coming week that have enhanced their marital friendships. Alternatively, the teacher can identify a specific

behavior or skill to be worked on such as avoiding contempt (see Gottman, 1994) and invite the students to use the target behavior handout to assess how well they did with acquiring this skill.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Principle 2 – Variety and Pacing

New and different ideas to “catch” the students’ attention, involve, apply, and invite are an important key to successful teaching. If the teacher becomes caught in a teaching method’s “rut,” both the students and the teacher will suffer. It is critical for teachers to “get outside their comfort zones,” and try new techniques, methods, and styles of teaching.

Ideas that can be used to catch a student’s attention, interact with a student, elicit application of the information by the student, invite the student to do something to change his/her life, or to add a new relationship skill include, among others:

- Show a short video clip.
- Tell a short and interesting story.
- Use an object to teach a principle.
- Ask a thought-provoking question.
- Share a personal experience.
- Begin with humor (i.e., a joke, a funny story, cartoons, a humorous experience, etc.).
- Initiate a group activity or a game.
- Model a relationship experience or organize a role-play.

It is easy to get so caught up in variety or in one aspect of a presentation that teachers may neglect moving the students toward application and an invitation to change their lives. If this occurs, the students may leave feeling unaffected by what was taught. Therefore, learning how to pace the presentations so as to keep the students moving in a positive direction is an important skill to learn. It may be helpful to write on the lesson outlines the amount of time you want to spend on any specific principle. It is important to remain flexible, but planning how much time each section might take will help keep the presentation on track.

Principle 3 – FTFD – Effective Questioning Techniques

Effective questioning begins with an understanding of the FTFD method of questioning. Note that that each FTFD component parallels the corresponding AIAI component (e.g., Attention corresponds to Fact, Interact corresponds to Thinking, etc.).

F is for Fact. Initial questioning begins with questions that are factual in nature. For example, “What is the current divorce rate in the nation?” or “Does anyone know what the 3 C’s of marriage represent?”

T is for Thinking. Thinking questions mark the next stage in the process of helping students conceptualize the principles and to move toward the application of the principles into their individual lives. For example, a teacher might ask, “Why do you think the divorce rate is so high?” or, “Why do you think Communication, Conflict management, and Commitment might be considered three major keys to a successful marriage?”

This kind of thinking can be used for every kind of attention or involvement idea. For example, a teacher might ask, “Now, why do you think I would show you this video clip, tell you this story, or use this example?” Similarly, the teacher might ask, “What does this object lesson

have to do with your marriage?” The students are then free to move to a deeper level of thinking – a level that prepares them for the next levels of application – Feeling and Doing.

F is for Feeling. This is the level of questioning where change begins to occur. For example, a teacher might ask the students, “How do you feel about this principle or about what we have discussed?” or, “How do you feel about your conflict management style and how it contributes to or detracts from your relationship?”

D is for Doing. As the students begin to make application of the principles and information being taught, they need to be invited to “Do” something to enact change in their lives. This invitation can be initiated by the teacher, by the students themselves, or by one or both members of a relationship dyad. For example, a teacher might say, “I would invite you to choose one thing you would like to work on as a couple for the next week” or, “I would like you to think about conflict management. Is there something you could do differently that would help you manage conflict more efficiently?” or, “Was there a time during the class when you felt there was something you could specifically do that could benefit your close relationships? I invite you to choose that one item/skill and to work on it as your homework assignment for the coming week.” Additionally, identifying specific target behaviors for the students such as to avoid criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling and inviting the students to track their daily progress is highly recommended by scholars and therapists (Gottman, 1994; Mace, 1981; Marshall, personal communication, April 2, 2003).

Synthesizing Theory and Research

Ecological systems theory assumes that humans can change and modify their respective environments to improve well-being when provided with the necessary resources. Through the instructional process, family life educators can play a pivotal role in providing healthy resources

to individuals, couples, and families who are seeking to change or modify their current contextual environments to improve individual and relationship well-being.

The AIAI and FTFD Teaching Model provides family life educators with one approach to organize and deliver effective resources to their students. It is empirically-informed, theoretically driven, and founded upon a model of change. The AIAI and FTFD Teaching Model is user-friendly and can be used in curriculum development to teach family life education topics effectively.

Anecdotal Student Evaluations

Anecdotal responses and evaluations from over 80 family life educators who have learned and implemented the AIAI FTFD Model of Teaching indicate that the model has positively impacted their teaching preparation, confidence, and delivery. For example, one family life educator expressed, “Now that we have learned this model, we can teach anything.” Other responses from students involved in a recent Methods of Family Life Education university course include the following, “The teaching methods were great;” “I think actually putting what we learned to use and actually teaching a lesson is an excellent idea. It really helps to learn the format (i.e., AIAI and FTFD) and get feedback;” “He promised at the beginning of the semester that we would become better teachers. I feel more comfortable teaching...” Such feedback, along with consistent positive evaluations from community representatives who allow university trained family life educators to teach in their specific family-centered organizations, reinforces the value of a model such as AIAI and FTFD to help family life educators learn to instruct effectively on any topic.

Discussion and Implications for Future Research

The AIAI FTFD Teaching Model is simple, concise, and goal-directed with a focus on application and intervention. Each component of the AIAI FTFD Teaching Model is specifically

designed to help guide the student toward insight and change through the development of behavioral skills.

The AIAI and FTFD Teaching Model can also provide nervous or struggling teachers with a model to prepare their lessons and deliver them with variety and confidence. Family life educators who use the model are encouraged to spend as much time as they can in the application area in order to maximize the potential for student change to occur.

Initial anecdotal student evaluations indicate that the AIAI FTFD Teaching Model is a viable approach to teaching family life educators how to prepare and deliver multiple topics in family life education effectively. A formal study of the impact and efficacy of the AIAI FTFD Teaching Model will need to be conducted so researchers can learn more about the possible impact this teaching methodology can have in helping family life educators successfully organize, prepare, and deliver their various presentations.

Future qualitative research will also need to be conducted from the students' perspective to learn more about the possible impact this teaching methodology can have on their classroom experience and their interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Finally, future research identifying the effectiveness of target behavior intervention strategies such as the one presented in this article might allow family life educators an important window into how they can have an impact on their students outside of the classroom, as well.

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The Process of Change

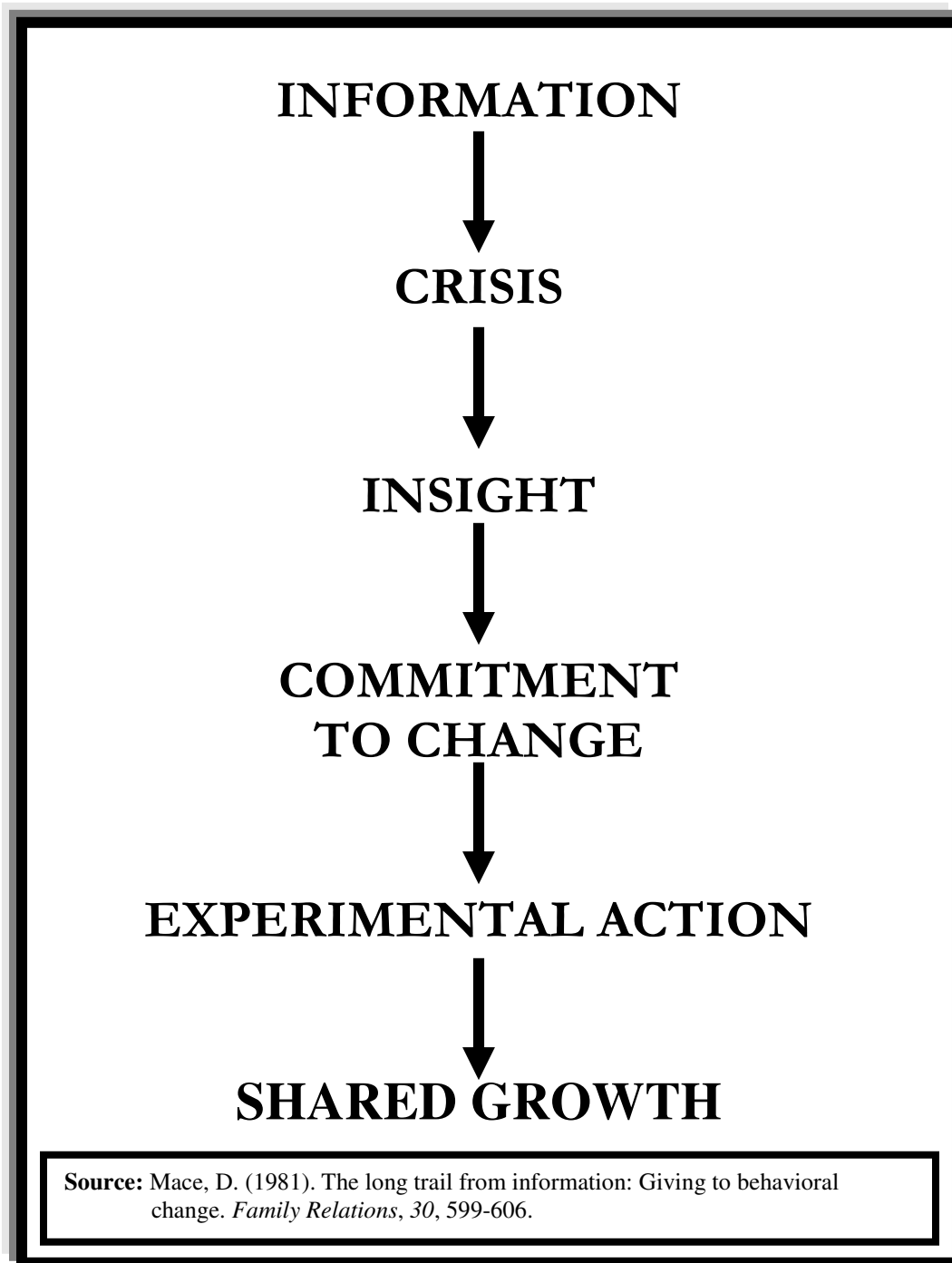


Figure 1. The process of change.

Teaching Outline - AIAI FTFD

Display Title Page of PowerPoint; Welcome: Motivation & Background:

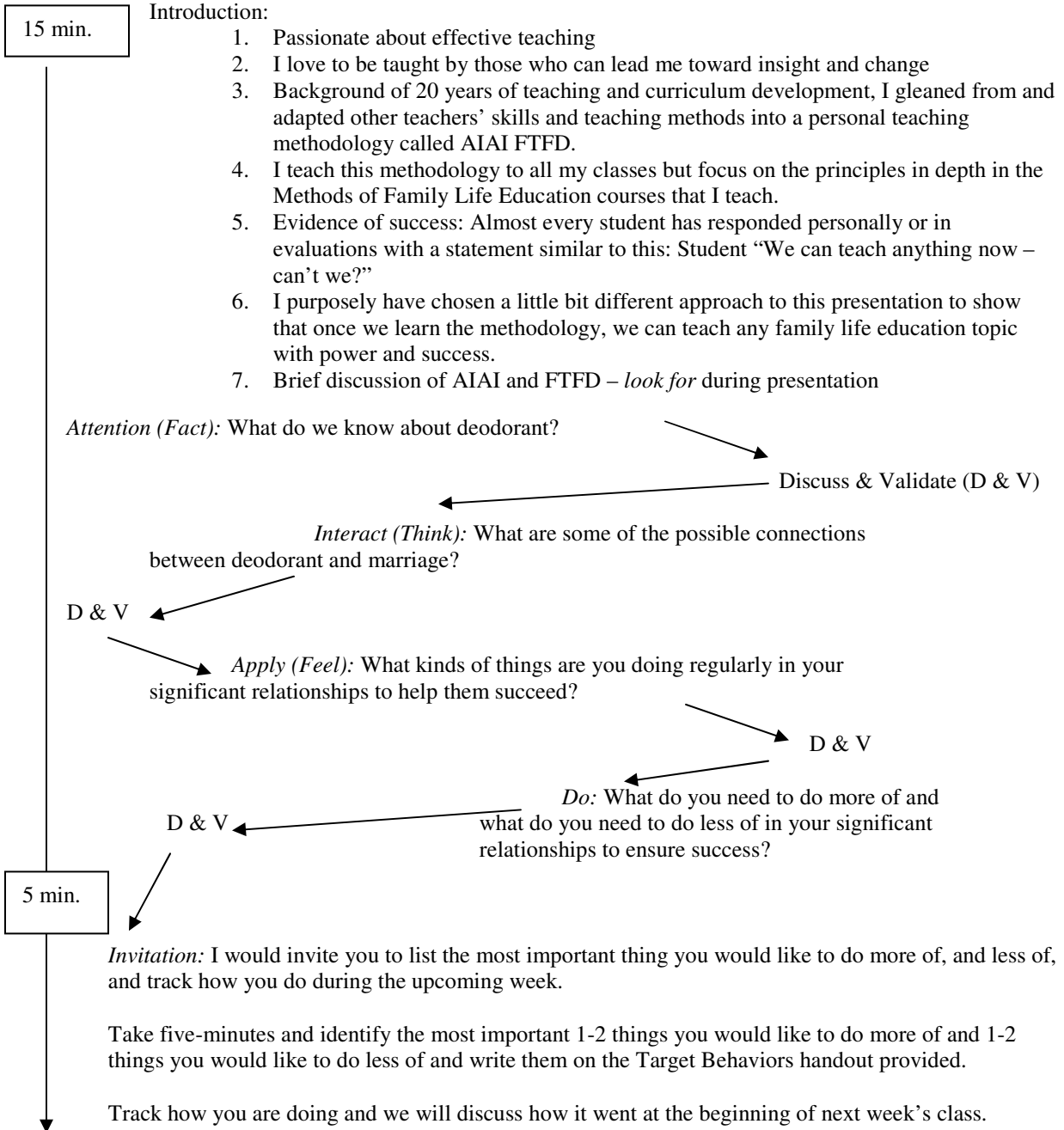


Figure 2. Brief AIAI FTFD teaching outline example.

Targeting Change in Effective Teaching

Homework: Choose a Target Behavior

Week:

Frequency of Target Behaviors

| Target Behavior: | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday | Totals |
|---|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|--------|
| 1. Behavior(s) that enhanced my marital friendship. | √√√ | | | | | | | |
| Behavior(s) that diminished my marital friendship. | √ | | | | | | | |
| 2. | | | | | | | | |
| 3. | | | | | | | | |
| 4. | | | | | | | | |
| 5. | | | | | | | | |
| 6. | | | | | | | | |

Figure 3. Targeting change in effective teaching.