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A Self-Evaluation Framework to Enrich Online Forum Work by Students in Graduate Contexts

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Abstract

This paper presents a model for self-evaluation of online learning contributions used with graduate students. The model is outlined, followed by a detailed assignment copy that shows students how to use the model and attendant criteria for each component of the model to plan, write, and assess their own online contributions as the sub-topics within a graduate course evolve. Finally, an example of one student's self-analysis, developed using this framework is provided to show the depth and breadth of posts that can be garnered by applying this framework. The example is provided in three parts that correspond to the three elements of the model, in abbreviated form (i.e., where the student provided several examples, one example was chosen as a sample).

Keywords: online learning; self-assessment, online posts

In 2013/2014, we published an article titled "Threading the discussion: A model to examine the quality of posts in an online learning environment. Since that time, the model has been used in several online MEd and PhD courses to provide guidance and criteria for students as they engage in discussions during graduate courses. The model was based on three aspects (Reynolds, 2005) that, when combined into an online course assignment, consistently produce rich self-assessments of engagement from students in graduate level online learning. The three aspects include: 1) an overview of the three parts of the self-evaluation framework (inclusion/social presence, cognitive presence/influence, and teaching and constructing new understanding in a community of learnership); 2) a description of the self-assessment task; and 3) examples of how graduate students have applied the resulting framework to self-assessments. The purposes of this article are to review the background literature for the development of the original model, re-present the model and the self-assessment coding system that students use to analyze their own online posts, and to show the effectiveness of this model by providing examples of posts from graduate students and how they have used the model for self-evaluation. We also argue that having this model at the outset of an online graduate course and provided as an assignment within the course (due toward the end) promotes deep discussion and strong engagement with course ideas.

In the earlier paper we acknowledged the increasing trend toward online course offerings in universities (Siemens, 2006), including in advanced sciences such as medicine (Goldie, 2016). This trend creates a challenge for educators to determine how students are interacting in that environment but also opens up opportunities to reexamine theories about how people learn in social contexts, including online environments. Additionally, we noted the importance of moving beyond assessment of the number and frequency of posts to also monitor the quality of posts. We contend that, with adult learners in graduate program online courses, teaching these students to recognize and monitor the quality of their own posts is a desirable course outcome.

Online learning is premised on social-constructivist theory (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1978), as well as good modeling about teaching for preservice teachers and others in helping professions that require some teaching aspects in the job. This approach is further supported by other social constructivists to create a collaborative approach to learning (Freire, 1990, 1994; Hardwick, 2000; Jeffries, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Senior, 2010). Learner-centered approaches in an adult online learning environment must be deliberately planned by the instructors to maintain a constructivist approach in a distance-learning environment (Boyd et al., 2006; Fox, 2005; Jeffries, 2003; McConnell, 2000). By ensuring that the qualities that should be present in students' posts and that should characterize their person-to-person interactions (either student to student or student to professor) are visible to students, professors can guide interactions that maintain a social-constructivist approach, and position students as co-constructors of the knowledge that enriches the course (Fairclough, 2001; McConnell, 2000).

Connectivist Approaches in Online Learning

Online environments create new opportunities to re-define the traditional one-way delivery of knowledge and create occasions when the two-way flow of knowledge can be used to engage learners (Siemens, 2006). In this evolving approach, constructivist beliefs and technological capabilities come together to provide opportunities for connections among students, and between the students and their professor that are unlike any previous academic interactions. This approach is being referred to as a connectivist approach. To support and maintain connectivist interaction in the discussions that take place online, professors and their students would benefit from clear conceptions about how to engage in self, peer, and professor evaluations of the quality of their contributions to online threads. Recent pedagogy in distance education promotes a connectivist approach, where students interact through networks and social media (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Connolly, 2007; McConnell, 2000). According to researchers Anderson and Dron (2011) emphasis in a connectivist environment is placed on finding and sharing new ideas and knowledge (see also Boyd, MacNeill, & Sullivan, 2006), rather than on learning and memorizing, where both students and professors engage in co-learning and exchange of ideas, creating a more open learning environment (Fox, 2005; Gibbons, 2000). Such a change in the interaction norms requires that students and professors share clear expectations about how learning forums can work. A clear framework that outlines the possibilities for interaction, and the expectation for thorough self-assessment of that interaction, can provide this guidance.

Several authors contend that rich connectivist interaction is possible in both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments (Jeffries, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Walton, 2000). The online instructor's role is challenging with the unique demands of asynchronous learning environments when they also may be attempting to approach instruction by providing active learning efforts (Senior, 2010). In this environment, instructors need to design course experiences to be both active and connectivist, which requires reorganizing, refining, and re-structuring course delivery to take full advantage of the many features of online learning platforms (Connolly, Jones, & Jones, 2007; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2004; Jeffries, 2003). Language choices and the quality of each professor's interaction, instructions, and modeling of course requirements become particularly vital to ensure good quality of course delivery in an online environment so that students have a clear view of expectations and possibilities for excellence in relation to those expectations (Garrison et al., 2004; McConnell, 2000; Harris, 1970). Clarity of written directions and examples is particularly important in this environment, which lacks the opportunities for pedagogical gestures and nuanced glances to direct or re-direct student efforts (Saevi, 2011; Hatt, 2005; Garrison at al., 2004; McConnell, 2000; Ryan, 1972).

Few studies have looked at the effect of collaborative pedagogy on post-secondary students (Shoffner, 2009; Hardwick, 2000), although some studies have shown the unique advantages of online learning in other course contexts. Well-managed online dialogue provides an increased feeling of community (Carter, 2008; McConnell, 2000), opportunities for students to improve written skills (Carter, 2008), increased time to respond, more equality among

genders, no interruptions, and a permanent record of responses (McConnell, 2000). In addition to increasing their personal comfort with online learning, through online courses, students also experience increased confidence in their writing abilities (Carter, 2002). Language competency and clarity improve the quality of interaction among online learners. Improved writing abilities are crucial to course and student success in these environments so that effective communities of practice or learnership can develop through course design interactions (Fox, 2005; Garrison, 2004; Bruffee, 1973) where students can feel a sense of belonging (Connolly, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Bruffee, 1973). We contend that creating this sense of belonging through directional clarity within the online environment is a key role for online instructors.

Creating a learnership environment where expectations are clear, interactive comfort is mediated by a strong interaction framework, and diverse goals and ways of learning and interests are supported, allowing the professor to facilitate learning, thereby encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning (Garrison, 2004; Jeffries, 2003; McConnell, 2000); interact successfully with other course participants (Mashhour & Saleh, 2010); and create a community of learnership (Connolly, 2007) that meets their learning needs. The quality of interaction among students, and with the professor, is a critical component of an effective online course. It makes good pedagogical sense to give due attention to structuring this interaction to be sustainable, and support students in becoming accountable, knowledgeable about the possibilities, and rewarded for efforts. Detailed self-assessment can serve these purposes.

Threading for Enrichment of Online Learnership

In 2013, the authors (Maynes & Hatt, 2013) developed a visual model as an overview for students in an online graduate course. The visual model was based on the earlier work of Reynolds (2005) who identified categories of online interaction into three types. These included: 1) background development of key problems; 2) problem engagement and investigation; and 3) resolutions, solutions, and new directions. Reynolds' categories seem to imply that learners must first develop background and investigate a problem, before they can solve a problem. Intuitively, this sequence makes sense in an informed learning context such as a graduate program. What our visual model layers onto this sequence is the anticipation that the sequence may be less than linear and may be enriched by the social nature of a well-constructed online learning environment, that supports learnership skills (Connelly et al., 2007). This overview of a course sequence is shown in Figure 1.

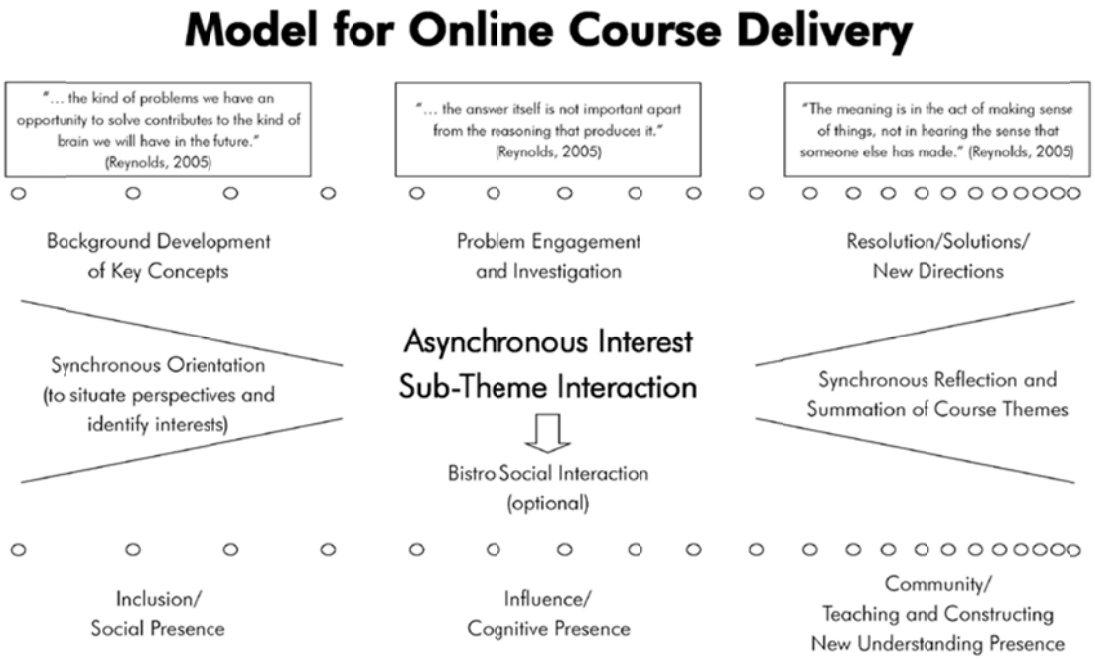

Figure 1. Model for Online Course Delivery

In this model, the three areas of problem engagement are aligned with three areas of online interaction that may be engaged by students. Background development of key concepts is aligned with anticipated students' actions online and demonstrates their *social presence in the group*. Engagement and investigation are aligned with students' *cognitive presence and influence* efforts online and building community, teaching in the community of learnership and constructing new understanding are aligned with Reynolds' stage of *resolutions, solutions, and new directions*.

However, for students, the process of moving across these stages with substantive posts and interactive engagement is likely more challenging than exhorting them to do so. With this realization, we have embedded self-evaluation of online presence and engagement in quality contributions, that are both additive and critical of substance, into current graduate courses online, as professors choose this option. The self-evaluation is outlined as an assignment in relevant courses. An example of how this assignment is embedded in courses is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Assignment Outline for Self-Assessment of Online Contributions

Self-Assessment of Online Participation and Contribution to the Community of Learnership

It is expected that you will contribute to the evolution of ideas in each topic on a weekly basis. To keep discussion strings manageable, you may be assigned to one, or two, or more

discussion groups for this course. At the end of the course, you will be asked to provide and explain a self-evaluation for your participation in the course, using the following framework.

Using the framework that is provided below, colour the text for the types of participation and interaction that you feel you have contributed throughout the course. **Do this by colouring on the list of types of interaction in the sample chart.**

Colour your strongest modes of interaction green, your next strongest burgundy, and your least strong form of participation in blue. If you didn't engage in any one or more of the listed types of interaction, leave the text black.

To help you understand the forms of interaction, look at the chart below. **Don't add colour to this chart…it's just a sample of ways to think about this task.**

Nature of Online Contribution	**Sample of Contribution of this Nature**
Inclusion/ Social Presence	• support an idea offered by another person • give someone credit for an idea • attend to logistical details
Cognitive Presence/ Influence	• challenge ideas expressed by other contributors • explore possibilities in a "think aloud" voice
Teaching and Constructing New Understanding Presence in a Community of Learnership	• expand on the ideas posted by others • offer alternative perspectives • synthesize ideas

Obviously, more of the third type of online interaction will enrich everyone's online course experience.

The Assignment

This is the list of interaction and participation types that you should colour in the 4th column only. Provide an example in the 5th column.

These online thread characteristics can be related to each of the three types of online contributions shown in the chart above and in the left column below. The following chart connects these characteristics with each of the types of contributions.

Nature of Online Contribution	**Date of Posts/Threads/ Summaries/**	**Sample of Contribution of**	**Online Thread Characteristics**	**Example(s)**

	Sharing	**this Nature**	**(Add colour to those that you have used in your posts.)**	
Inclusion/ Social Presence		• support an idea offered by another person • give someone credit for an idea • attend to logistical details	• requesting information (RI) • building a sense of community through social engagement (BCSE) • collaborating (C) • making social and personal connections (MSPC) • seeking online friends (SOF)	•
Cognitive Presence/ Influence		• challenge ideas expressed by other contributors • explore possibilities in a "think aloud" voice	• solving problems (SP) • seeking experience among participants (SE) • making "expert" contacts (MEC) • reusing resources and previous knowledge (RR) • acquiring resources (AR) • building a sense of community through cognition (BCC) • coordination of efforts and ideas (CEI) • creating synergy and interest (CS) • discussing	•

			developments (DD) • creating records and summaries (CRS) • documentation and referencing (DR) • clarifying personal understanding (CPU) • expanding personal and professional skills (EPPS) • clarifying criteria (CC) • bridging between criteria and success criteria (BCSC) • mapping personal and group knowledge (MPGK) • identifying gaps in knowledge (IGK) • making plans to address gaps in knowledge (MPAG) • seeking mentors (SM)	
Teaching and Constructing New Understanding Presence in a Community of Learnership		• expand on the ideas posted by others • offer alternative perspectives • synthesize ideas • offering	• requesting examples and exemplars (RE) • coaching others (CO) • making conceptual connections (MCC) • testing the validity of new ideas (TVNI) • linking theory and practice (LTP)	•

		resources	• creating other ways of displaying understanding (e.g., visual models) (WDK) • making connections to previous learning (MCPL) • making connections to other's ideas (MCOI) • offering resources (OR) • sending examples or photos (SEP) • approved assignment collaboration (AAC)	
Include your suggested mark here (/20). Your Summative Comments:				

Professors could, of course, add other online behaviours that they observe in any of these three categories of interaction as they use this framework, as we have done since its' initial use.

Enriched Interaction and Rich Self-Assessments

It would be predictable for students, and especially for those new to online learning, to experience an 'ahh' moment as they face this assignment. It may not have previously occurred to them that their online posts may indicate a variety of purposes and may indicate their readiness for engagement in a community of learnership at levels that differ from other students in the same course. This framework therefore serves the dual purposes of making students aware of the possibilities for engagement and modeling how that engagement can be enriched by analyzing its' purpose.

In this case study, we use a co-author assignment example to support our claim that this approach has rich online course engagement potential when used in the way described above. In a recent graduate course, a professional educational assistant in the public system, Amarpreet Anand, produced an exceptional, but not unusual, self-assessment of her online contributions in a graduate course about the evaluation of curriculum and instruction. Her

self-assessment is provided here (Figures 3, 4, and 5) in three sections to highlight the three components of the framework as outlined in Figure 1. We have chosen to maintain reference to the work of one student so that a sustained voice is evident in the writing. The examples refer to only the right-hand column of the chart displayed in Figure 2 to preserve space. Also, the student shared several examples of their online interaction in each category. Only one example has been selected for each figure for the sake of brevity.

First, in response to the prompt to self-analyze her online contributions related to *inclusion and social presence (*including: requesting information (RI); building a sense of community through social engagement (BCSE); collaborating (C); making social and personal connections (MSPC); and seeking online friends (SOF)) in the course, Ms. Anand wrote the following, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Inclusion and Social Presence Evidence and Self-Assessment

Example 3

Hello XXXX,

I appreciate you sharing your personal life experience. It's inspiring to hear about the progressive and supportive environment your parents created, despite working in gender-traditional occupations.

I want to share my personal struggle in navigating defined gender roles within my culture. In Indian culture, men and women often have clearly defined tasks, and I have personally struggled to get my husband on board with sharing responsibilities. Even after 25 years, I have made only some progress with him, but I never give up and always hold onto optimism! I have focused on training my children to be self-sufficient. My son cooks, cleans, and does his laundry, while my daughter, due to health issues, isn't there yet. However, I always remind her to be financially independent, so she doesn't have to rely on anyone in life. She can choose her path and wear pants if she wants to.

Being part of traditional societal constructs, I recognize the benefits of switching gender-specific roles when needed. This has long been necessary, as we cannot afford to have only one person managing both work outside and inside the household.

Your story encourages me to keep pushing for change and to continue instilling these values in my family. My mantra is: Continue to advocate for change on both personal and professional levels, and never give up! By being persistent, we can continue to inspire ourselves and perhaps others whose lives we touch daily.

Kind regards,

Amarpreet (Anand, 2024f)

Characteristics: Building a Sense of Community through Social Engagement (BCSE), Collaborating (C), and Making Social and Personal Connections (MSPC)

Justification: My message effectively addresses several key criteria. By connecting with XXXX personally, appreciating her story, and sharing my experiences, I Build a Sense of Community through Social Engagement (BCSE), creating a supportive environment and reinforcing mutual understanding. The message also demonstrates collaboration (C) by discussing how I have navigated gender roles and how XXXX's story has inspired me, contributing to a collective effort to address and change these roles. Additionally, by opening up about my struggles and relating them to XXXX's experiences, I make meaningful Social and Personal Connections (MSPC), which helps to strengthen relationships.

Second, in response to the prompt to *have a cognitive presence and influence* (including: solving problems (SP); seeking experience among participants (SE); making "expert" contacts (MEC):reusing resources and previous knowledge (RR); acquiring resources (AR); building a sense of community through cognition (BCC); coordination of efforts and ideas (CEI); creating synergy and interest (CS); discussing developments (DD); creating records and summaries (CRS); documentation and referencing (DR); clarifying personal understanding (CPU); expanding personal and professional skills (EPPS); clarifying criteria (CC); bridging between criteria and success criteria (BCSC); mapping personal and group knowledge (MPGK); identifying gaps in knowledge (IGK); making plans to address gaps in knowledge (MPAG); and seeking mentors (SM))in the online forum, Ms. Anand wrote (Figure 4),

Figure 4. Cognitive Presence and Influence Evidence and Self-Assessment

Example 1

Hello Everyone,

I greatly appreciate the insightful contributions made by each of you in the discussion posts. The depth of knowledge I am acquiring is remarkable, and I would like to express my gratitude for this enriching experience. As an Early Childhood professional currently engaged in a kindergarten program, my educational approach may resonate with some of you and offer new insights to others. While immersing myself in learning about teaching methodologies employed in elementary and high school grades, I trust that my shared experiences will evoke familiar and novel perspectives, prompting thought-provoking questions. I encourage you to engage with my post and pose any inquiries. I am committed to addressing your questions to the best of my ability, as it facilitates a deeper exploration of my professional practice. Thank you for your engagement and participation.

The readings for this week offer a thorough analysis of various curriculum frameworks, and I identify a strong alignment between one of these frameworks and my approach to Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK), particularly in the work of McTighe and Wiggins's Understanding by Design (UBD) framework. While UBD prioritizes the cultivation of profound understanding and the transfer of knowledge, the FDK curriculum emphasizes nurturing young learners'

holistic development, advancement, and comprehension. Both frameworks espouse student-centered methodologies. UBD advocates for exploring students' pre-existing knowledge and experiences, tailoring instruction to suit their needs, and fostering substantive learning outcomes, a philosophy closely mirrored in FDK. Here, an environment conducive to play-based learning is championed, allowing children to engage in exploratory endeavours and construct the comprehension of their surroundings. The UBD's backward design strategy, which commences with delineating terminal objectives and then orchestrating learning experiences in reverse, aligns harmoniously with the overarching structure of the FDK curriculum framework, which is oriented towards long-term outcomes. Within FDK, educators craft play-based learning experiences rooted in children's interests while remaining cognizant of enduring objectives and assessment criteria. Moreover, the UBD framework encourages the integration of multiple subject areas within the unit design, fostering interconnections between disparate domains—a principle congruent with FDK's holistic learning ethos, which integrates various developmental domains encompassing social, emotional, cognitive, and physical dimensions, thereby nurturing overall well-being.

Embracing a co-learning approach and striving to foster meaningful, play-based learning experiences responsive to my students' emergent interests and inquiries, I begin by establishing precise learning objectives. Drawing insights from assessment data, I tailor instructional strategies to meet their needs and curate immersive learning experiences to promote understanding and practical application. A recent example illustrating the integration of the UBD framework into my teaching practice is evident in my students' interest in botanical exploration and their initiative to create a flower shop within the dramatic play area of our classroom.

During UBD Stage 1 (Identify Desired Results), I examined the overarching theme and fundamental inquiry: How can we collaboratively create and oversee a flower shop that enriches our learning community? By prioritizing this central question, I ensured that the intended outcomes aligned harmoniously with the curriculum domains and educational aims outlined across the **four pillars of the Kindergarten program.** These pillars encompass belonging and contribution, self-regulation and wellness, literacy and numeracy skills, problem-solving and innovation.

During UBD Stage 2 (Determine Acceptable Evidence), I initially assessed the children's enthusiasm for delving into the realm of plants and establishing a flower shop by closely observing their interactions and engagement. Additionally, I devised a continuous evaluation strategy to monitor their understanding and progress toward the desired objective throughout the learning process. This comprehensive assessment strategy was designed to gain a holistic understanding of the children's learning capacities across the **four frameworks of the kindergarten program:**

Belonging and Contributing: I intended to evaluate the children's sense of belonging and contributions to the flower shop environment. Utilizing observations, checklists, and

documentation of their interactions and collaborative efforts in the flower shop, I aimed to assess their social skills, communication abilities, and comprehension of community roles.

Self-Regulation and Well-Being: I planned to assess the children's self-regulation abilities and overall well-being through observations and anecdotal documentation. This entailed monitoring their emotional regulation, cooperation with peers, demonstration of sharing and turn-taking, respect for personal and communal boundaries, and assumption of diverse responsibilities, such as acting as florists or cashiers, within the flower shop setting.

Demonstrating Literacy and Mathematics Behaviours: My objective was to evaluate children's literacy and mathematics competencies as they engaged in activities within the flower shop. By collecting work samples encompassing drawings, writings, poster creations, crafting of paper currency, and making price lists, I aimed to gather evidence of the children's evolving literacy skills. This included their grasp of letter recognition, writing proficiency, and comprehension of financial literacy concepts such as currency identification, value comprehension, counting, and sorting.

Problem-Solving and Innovating: The assessment also focused on children's problem-solving and innovative capacities within the flower shop context. Through performance tasks, including engaging in role-playing scenarios and undertaking design projects, children had the opportunity to exhibit their proficiency in problem-solving, critical thinking, and the generation of inventive solutions within the framework of managing a flower shop.

In UBD Stage 3 (Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction), I planned learning experiences and instructional strategies to align with the desired outcomes. Embracing a co-constructivist philosophy, I facilitated a collaborative session wherein students' ideas and preferences were pivotal in shaping the conducive learning environment. As illustrated in the image (Image 1) below, this process exemplified the symbiotic interplay between educator guidance and student agency, fostering an environment wherein individual identities were affirmed, equity was promoted, and a profound sense of belonging was cultivated.

Image 1. Children's Web of Ideas

Kindergarten Planning document

The collaborative brainstorming session yielded insights that guided the integration of children's interest in the flower shop into diverse learning experiences across various domains, including language and literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, sensory exploration, and the arts. Presented below (EL-KGT PROGRAM PLANNING) is a template frequently employed for kindergarten planning, showcasing play-based learning activities tailored to accommodate children's individual needs and interests, exemplified by the thematic exploration of the flower shop.

EL-KGT PROGRAM PLANNING.pdf

Making Thinking and Learning Visible

As an educator who perceives the classroom environment as a significant "third teacher," I am dedicated to ensuring that the endeavours and learning of children are consistently visible within our learning space. Deliberately crafting the physical environment, I prominently showcase the efforts and accomplishments of the children, thereby making their thinking and learning tangible and visible. By displaying children's work both within the classroom and through platforms like Google Classroom, I establish a concrete record of their educational journey, facilitating reflection upon progress, identifying areas for growth, and celebrating achievements. This visible representation of learning instills in children a sense of ownership and pride, reinforcing their confidence and motivation to participate actively in their educational endeavors. Additionally, this shared learning extends an invitation to our families,

encouraging their involvement and support at home, thus fostering a collaborative approach to education. Here is an example of visible learning (Image 2):

Image 2. Making Thinking and Learning Visible

I look forward to your perspective on the FDK curriculum framework utilized in the early learning classroom.

Kind regards,

Amarpreet (Anand, 2024a)

Characteristics: Solving Problems (SP), Seeking Experience among participants (SE), Reusing Resources and previous knowledge (RR), Building a sense of Community through Cognition (BCC), Creating Synergy and interest (CS), Discussing Developments (DD), Creating Records and Summaries (CRS), Documentation and Referencing (DR), Clarifying Personal Understanding (CPU), Clarifying Criteria (CC), and Bridging between Criteria and Success Criteria (BCSC)

Justification: This example effectively meets several criteria. The approach to integrating the UBD framework in the classroom demonstrates strong problem-solving skills (SP) by addressing curriculum goals through hands-on projects like the flower shop. The post Seeks Experience among participants (SE) by encouraging peer engagement, fostering collaboration, and valuing diverse experiences. It also showcases how previous knowledge and resources are reused (RR), as seen in the application of established educational frameworks. Building a

sense of community is a key feature, achieved by involving students in collaborative projects and making their learning visible, which fosters shared educational experiences (BCC). Integrating students' interests into curriculum planning creates synergy and maintains engagement (CS), while discussions on curriculum development illustrate the ongoing evolution of teaching practices (DD). The post includes records and summaries (CRS), such as displaying children's work and planning documents, to support tracking and reflecting on student progress. Documentation and Referencing (DR) exist through educational frameworks and related resources. Additionally, the post clarifies the educator's approach and teaching practices (CPU), enhances the personal understanding, and outlines criteria for evaluating student progress (CC), thus bridging between educational and success criteria (BCSC).

Third, in response to the prompt to *teach and construct new understanding in a community of learnership* (including: requesting examples and exemplars (RE); coaching others (CO); making conceptual connections (MCC); testing the validity of new ideas (TVNI); linking theory and practice (LTP); creating other ways of displaying understanding (e.g., visual models) (WDK); making connections to previous learning (MCPL); making connections to other's ideas (MCOI); and offering resources (OR)), Ms. Anand wrote (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Teaching and Constructing New Understanding in a Community of Learnership

Example 2

Chapter 5 delves into the roles and implications of objectives, outcomes, and standards in teaching and learning, offering a nuanced analysis of their advantages and limitations. In the context of a Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) classroom, I examine these concepts from the perspective of an early childhood practitioner.

Objectives specify what teachers aim to teach and what students are expected to learn, playing a crucial role in lesson planning and instructional strategies and allowing for clear measurement of student learning. For example, when students learn about primary colours and how to mix them to create secondary and tertiary colours, the objective is clear and measurable: students identify primary colours and demonstrate their understanding of colour mixing. However, the text argues that objectives can sometimes be restrictive, particularly for content that is difficult to measure and when we prioritize measurable outputs over the holistic and often subjective nature of the learning process. For instance, setting an objective to assess children's creative expression can be limited due to its highly subjective nature. Focusing solely on the final drawing may overlook the richness of the creative process, which involves experimenting with different drawing tools, expressing emotions, and developing imagination. Educators who find a harmonious balance between clearly defined objectives and an appreciation for the less tangible aspects of early childhood education can foster a more comprehensive understanding of student growth.

Outcomes focus on broader competencies and skills valuable beyond the school environment, requiring students to demonstrate their learning in real-world contexts and encouraging

practical application. During exploratory play, children collaborate on building projects, like castles or forts with blocks and figurines, demonstrating teamwork, problem-solving, and basic engineering principles. This outcome assesses not just the knowledge of building structures but also social and cognitive skills. However, the text highlights the complexities of assessing outcomes as educators concentrate on the outputs rather than the teaching inputs. For instance, a child might show a good output by excelling in teamwork one day but could struggle the next due to mood or group dynamics. Educators can adopt a nuanced approach that balances structured assessments with flexibility to fairly and comprehensively evaluate each child's development. Educators can track a child's development across multiple play sessions, noting progress, consistency, and emerging patterns.

Standards often associated with standardized testing establish consistent benchmarks for educational achievement, ensuring educational consistency across schools and regions. For example, a standard might stipulate that students should recognize most letters and their sounds by the end of kindergarten. This standard guides educators in establishing a responsive literacy environment through activities and assessments to develop students' letter and sound recognition skills progressively. These activities encompass interactive alphabet games, phonics songs, letter tracing, writing exercises, letter hunts, and read-aloud sessions. However, as mentioned in the text, adherence to standards may result in a narrowed curriculum primarily focused on specific subjects. Although there is no allocation of a specific number of hours in kindergarten for literacy, math, and science instruction, potential shifts in this approach could arise in the future. If there is an overemphasis on testing and standards linked to high-stakes assessments in FDK classrooms, it could detrimentally affect the prioritization of a well-rounded and holistic approach to early childhood education - the approach that values all domains of learning and acknowledges the importance of play, exploration, and social interaction in children's development.

Strategies for Communicating Learning Expectations and Performance Standards in FDK

Teachers and educators consistently work on engaging students in understanding the learning expectations and performance standards by creating strategies such as WALT (What Am I Learning Today?) and WILF (What Am I Looking For?). In the early years of the kindergarteners' learning journey, I focus on establishing a foundational understanding of learning expectations and performance standards in a developmentally appropriate manner by utilizing similar interactive and reflective practices such as **Think-Pair-Share, KWL (Know, Wonder, Learned), and Reflection portfolios.** These strategies create a supportive and engaging learning environment that fosters holistic development and a deeper understanding of educational goals.

Think-Pair-Share Strategy (in STEAM Education): The think-pair-share strategy is implemented during STEAM activities, such as exploring the concepts of sink and float, facilitating student engagement, and collaborative learning. The method encouraged students

to think individually about a topic, discuss it with a partner, and finally share their ideas with the larger group.

Think (Individual Work): Each student was provided a piece of tin foil and tasked with designing a boat that could hold as many pennies or pebbles as possible. Students were encouraged to draw their designs on paper, considering factors such as the shape, size, and structure of the boat. This phase emphasized individual critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Pair (Collaborative Work): Students were paired to discuss their individual designs and encouraged to combine their ideas to create a single, optimized boat design. They then co-constructed their boat using the tin foil and tested its buoyancy and capacity. This phase fostered collaborative learning and the integration of diverse ideas.

Share (Discussion): Each pair presented their boat to the class, explaining their design and estimating the number of pennies or pebbles their boat could hold. They placed the weights in their boats during the presentation, counting until the boat sank. This was followed by a class discussion comparing the different designs, analyzing their effectiveness, and reflecting on the buoyancy, shape, and size principles that influenced the boats' performance.

This activity led students to articulate their design processes and reflect on their outcomes, facilitating a deeper understanding of buoyancy and design principles. The Think-Pair-Share approach ensured active participation from all students, fostering a collaborative learning environment that enhanced their knowledge and comprehension of the scientific concepts (See IMAGE 1).

IMAGE 1. STEAM Activity

To learn more about this approach, please refer to Active Learning-Think, Pair, Share

Utilizing the Know-Wonder-Learned (KWL) approach in Early Childhood Education: A Case Study on Space Exploration:

Incorporating the KWL approach for class projects has proven effective in fostering students' curiosity and engagement. For instance, my students' interest in space led me to expand their learning using a KWL chart while aligning with the principles of Universal Back Design (UBD). By establishing clear learning objectives, drawing insights from assessment data, and tailoring instructional strategies, I curated immersive learning experiences to promote their understanding.

- Initial Discussion (Know): To activate students' prior knowledge, I facilitated a class discussion in which students shared what they already knew about space. Their responses were recorded in the "Know" column of the KWL chart (See KWL Chart: Know).

- Generating Questions (Wonder): After discussing their prior knowledge about space, students were prompted to think about what they wanted to learn. They were encouraged to ask questions and express their curiosities to foster a sense of wonder and promote inquiry-based learning. Their questions were recorded in the "Wonder" column of the chart (See KWL Chart: Wonder).

Play- and Inquiry-based activities: I planned and conducted a series of play- and inquiry-based activities to address the students' questions (See IMAGE 2):

- Read books about space, planets, astronauts, earth, moon, and constellations.

- Showed age-appropriate educational videos about space exploration and the solar system.

- Engaged students in creating paper mâché planets and making a frizzy moon.

- Involved students in conducting a rocket launch using a simple baking soda and vinegar experiment.

- Co-constructed a space station in the dramatic area.

- Created a moon rock sensory station.

IMAGE 2. Space Exploration

- Learning reflection (Learned): After completing various activities, I revisited the KWL chart to assess students' learning about space. We discussed the new information acquired and answered any pending questions. Their responses were recorded in the "Learned" column (See KWL Chart: Learned).

The utilization of the KWL approach underscores how young learners actively expanded their understanding by linking it to their existing knowledge and interests. It demonstrates their inclination towards inquiry, fostering curiosity, and involvement in hands-on learning activities, which made exploring space enjoyable and significant. Furthermore, the KWL chart facilitated students' reflection on their learning trajectory, consolidating newly acquired knowledge and skills.

KWL Chart

Reflective Portfolios:

Implemented within the FDK classroom, this strategy offers a structured method for students to document and reflect on their learning experiences. It facilitates comprehension of learning objectives, engagement with success criteria, and the observation of tangible evidence illustrating progress. Through consistent reflection on their work, students cultivate a deeper understanding of their educational journey, fostering academic and personal development. For instance, within the initial phases of a botanical exploration project, students recorded observations and drawings of seeds and emerging plant growth in their portfolios. They supplemented these entries with photographs depicting the plants at various developmental stages. During scheduled reflection sessions, students scrutinized their portfolio contents, responding to inquiries such as, "What did you learn about the requirements for plant growth?" and "How did the appearance of your plant change over time?" Subsequently, students shared their portfolios with peers and educators, elucidating their learning outcomes and the fulfillment of success criteria. This collective recognition of growth and achievement underscores the significance of the learning process and its ultimate outcomes.

Curriculum Design Issues in the FDK Program

The intricacies of curriculum design in FDK programs illuminate the challenges inherent in delivering high-quality early childhood education. The delicate balance between fostering play-based learning and meeting specific educational objectives underscores the nuanced approach educators must take to encourage both exploration and structured learning. This equilibrium is particularly daunting for new educators to the program, who must navigate the task of scaffolding learning experiences that nurture children's curiosity and independence while guiding them toward essential educational milestones.

With over a decade of experience in the FDK environment, I have embraced the concept of social capital and its pivotal role in fostering collaborative endeavors among educators. Research by Pil and Leana (2009) highlights the benefits of high social capital in schools, including elevated student achievement, robust mentorship opportunities, and the cultivation of skills and confidence among new educators (Holdsworth & Maynes, 2017). Collaborative

planning sessions involving teachers and early childhood educators have emerged as indispensable tools in my professional practice. This collaborative approach fosters the exchange of diverse ideas and facilitates the creation of cohesive curriculum frameworks that seamlessly integrate play-based learning with academic objectives.

By harnessing multiple professionals' collective expertise, we continuously co-create curriculum plans, reflecting on our practices to adapt and refine our curriculum design approaches. This iterative process ensures that we address the diverse needs of our students while nurturing their holistic development and promoting academic success, all while aligning with curriculum standards.

Thank you for reading my post. I encourage you to engage with it by sharing your thoughts.

Best,

Amarpreet (Anand, 2024b)

Characteristics: Requesting Examples and Exemplars (RE), Coaching Others (CO), Making Conceptual Connections (MCC), Linking Theory and Practice (LTP), creating other Ways of Displaying Understanding (WDK), Making Connections to Previous Learning (MCPL), Making Connections to Other's Ideas (MCOI), and Offering Resources (OR)

Justification: The example effectively addresses several key criteria related to educational practices. Requesting Examples and Exemplars (RE) is well met through the detailed descriptions of teaching strategies such as Think-Pair-Share and KWL charts, which provide clear and actionable models for educators. Coaching Others (CO) is implicitly achieved by guiding and supporting educators with practical insights into effective teaching methods, although this is not framed explicitly as coaching. Making Conceptual Connections (MCC) is demonstrated by linking theoretical concepts with practical applications in early childhood education, bridging abstract ideas with real-world classroom practices. Linking Theory and Practice (LTP) is evident in integrating educational theories with practical examples from teaching, showing how theoretical knowledge informs classroom strategies. Creating other Ways of Displaying Understanding (WDK) is particularly notable, as visual models, including images of children's work, provide alternative ways to display and assess understanding, offering a tangible representation of learning outcomes. Making Connections to Previous Learning (MCPL) is accomplished by referencing established theories and personal teaching experiences, linking current practices to past knowledge. Making Connections to Other's Ideas (MCOI) is reflected in synthesizing insights from various educational theories and practices, combining multiple perspectives into a comprehensive approach. Offering Resources (OR) is addressed through practical examples and visual models, including children's pictures, valuable resources for educators to implement and adapt in their practice.

Conclusions

Adult learners who are studying in an online graduate program have unique needs and insights into their learning. However, self-assessment is a complex skill and may carry vastly different meanings for different course participants. By providing a complex model for online engagement in a graduate course and by providing structure and specific criteria for self-assessment of personal engagement, we can demonstrate the level and complexity of the engagement that is required and we can provide guidance for students to undertake detailed self-assessments that help them reflect on their course contributions. This approach is consistent with the social constructivist and connectiveness nature of online learning.

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