



Creating Symbiotic Learning Relationships among Traditional and Non-Traditional Students on a University Campus



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Introduction

Several years ago, our campus launched a comprehensive transition and post-secondary program (CTP) designed to provide a complete college experience for young adults with intellectual disabilities (ID). Up until that time, no other colleges within our state's University system had fully opened doors to this population of students. The goal for the CTP was to provide equity in post-secondary learning experiences while emphasizing inclusivity and integration into traditional college coursework and life, including on-campus residential living with the general college student population, all while providing specialized instruction in areas of these students' needs that aren't often offered in college classrooms. Examples of these areas include functional academics, independent living skills, employment skills, social skills, hygiene, safety, etc., which are taught with a goal of improving the historically poor outcomes for this population resulting in successful transition to independent living. Essentially, the program was envisioned to live the mission of our university through actions and as a mechanism to provide access and opportunity for those with ID who do not meet traditional college entry requirements. Yet it has done much more than that. CTP students are active participants in the university community, and they form relationships within the college student population, learning, and importantly, teaching others about inclusion and providing rich learning experiences and developmental benefits to students across campus. What follows is a brief description of our CTP program, the growing relationships with other programs in the university, specific benefits to students found in one program partnership, and the benefits of such partnerships through the

voice of pre-service special education teachers who developed mutually beneficial relationships with CTP students.

CTP Programming

The CTP admits a small cohort of students each fall to join the two- or four-year program. Students begin their college experience in a supported and structured environment in which they attend CTP courses together and live in a dormitory with other college students, but with the benefit of specially trained residence hall assistants. In addition to CTP courses, these students enroll in a variety of traditional college courses aligned with their interests, such as Introductory Biology, World of the Arts, 3D Design, and Bowling, in which they attend with other college students and meet the same academic expectations to pass the courses. At the end of the two-year program, participants have an opportunity to continue their college experience living in an off-campus apartment arrangement and continuing with CTP and university courses for another two years, resulting in the equivalent of a four-year undergraduate experience. At the start of this program, CTP student relationships were primarily within their program group and among their residence hall assistants and graduate student instructors. They remained more insular than intended, although they lived within the university community and participated in student activities such as eating in the cafeterias, attending sporting events, and attending other university events including walking the stage at graduation upon program completion. We sought experiences for these students that would result in authentic community friendships outside of their CTP program, and we are moving toward this vision through structured partnerships with university programs.

Program Collaboration

Students in the CTP have joined clubs, attended ballgames, gone to class, and made lasting friendships with many students across campus. Anecdotally, they've reframed stereotypes surrounding a population seldom seen in institutions of higher education yet common in society outside of college. Beyond this, organic connections occurred as the CTP partnered with academic departments in ways that provided meaningful shared experiences for all students involved. For instance, many students in the CTP could benefit from continuation of speech and language supports after completion of high school. Conveniently, the speech and language pathology graduate program on campus needed practicum experiences involving students with significant disabilities. Because of this area of need, the CTP partnered with them, which ultimately led to graduate students accruing supervised experience hours while working with the CTP's low incidence population. The obvious beneficiaries were the students who received the instruction, yet perhaps even more so were the graduate students who got first-hand experience supporting individuals with ID. After learning clinical techniques in class, graduate students had the opportunity to promptly apply and generalize those skills in an authentic environment, receive feedback, and then further refine their skills via practice for use in their future careers. This mode of learning is often available at apprenticeships when learning a craft or trade, but not among pre-service clinicians or educators who routinely wait until the end of their program before having an internship, practicum, or student teaching experience. This program partnership illustrates the substantive benefits that students from each program received, both from an academic perspective and by enlarging the social networks and circle of friends for all students involved. The long-term benefit will hopefully be a more knowledgeable natural support system for individuals with ID in their communities at large.

Students Learning from Students at the Undergraduate Level

Most recently, working with students from the CTP was integrated into an undergraduate special education instructional methods course that historically had no fieldwork or direct practicum-type experience for its students. Pre-service educators, in this class focusing on intensive interventions for students with significant disabilities, learn evidence-based methods to teach academic and life skills, ways to improve autonomy, goal planning, and development of self-determination skills. Additionally, students in this class learn how to conduct an ecological assessment, a task analysis, and person-centered planning. Ecological assessment is essentially an evaluation of an environment and its sub-environments to identify any needs or barriers for the target learner that are subsequently addressed via instruction or accommodation in the natural environment. Creation of a task analysis involves the educator breaking down a task into its component steps and then systematically teaching

them. For instance, a student may need support with cooking in the kitchen, so the educator could create a sequence of steps that progresses through safely preparing a meal, including gathering each ingredient needed, locating the required measuring cups and mixing bowls, walking to the stove to turn it on, adjusting the temperature as noted on the recipe, etc., and then they could teach and monitor student progress for each of those steps until the learner is able to successfully complete the process independently. Finally, the pre-service special education teachers learn about the importance of person-centered planning and how to assess a learner's goals, hopes, and dreams, and then actively take steps to help their students reach said goals. Similar to other aspects of learning, person-centered planning can be understood from a textbook satisfactorily, yet theoretical knowledge pales in comparison to authentic application of the skills with a real person with ID who has genuine goals and future plans.

The Process

At the beginning of the semester, the methods class began as typical with assigned chapter readings, open discussions, and lots of theoretical and foundational skills learning -some of which were previously noted- designed to set the stage for upcoming applied experiences. Conceptually, the process of pre-service teacher learning included explicit and systematic instruction, followed by completion of activities during class that were designed to promote understanding, and then working within a group framework to practice deploying the strategy. For example, the pre-service teachers were trained to use and identify a learner's goal via the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction, which included an introduction to the topic, a rationale for its use, its relation to other content from class, and an overview of the process that included examples of completed forms involving a student. Following this, the pre-service educators were paired with a student from the CTP who needed updated goal planning, with an emphasis on employment, social, or independent living domains. Once a goal was established, the pre-service educator team investigated any environmental needs that the CTP student had via conducting an ecological assessment. Next, pre-service educators identified a skill to teach within that environment, which led to development of a task analysis and subsequent opportunities to practice prior instruction that was received during class. This process was supervised by the methods course instructor, and the experience provided genuine context and ongoing systematic and applied learning opportunities that would have been difficult to match outside of the CPT.

Debriefing After the Experience

At the end of the term, the preservice educators were asked to reflect on their experiences and learning throughout the semester. Their reflections on the learning experience underscore the impact of their work and the impact of the CTP students upon them, as well as their development of pedagogical skills. Comments focused on topics such as developing understanding

of individual potential, breaking down stereotypes, mastering professional skills in an authentic way, and development of symbiotic authentic relationships. Pre-service teacher reflections revealed significant personal and professional development, and some reflective comments on the semester-long experience are presented next (grouped by theme) with student permission.

Theme #1: persons with ID are capable of learning complex skills

Learning what a person is capable of is incredibly important and can guide subsequent instruction; the importance of having high expectations cannot be understated. As one student (A) noted:

My experience with working with students with significant disabilities has changed significantly in terms of how independent they can be and how much they know that you think they do. I noticed that with my work with those students, tasks that I thought were going to be a huge hurdle, were some of the tasks they could do better than me!

Similarly, another student (B) concluded:

As a result of the practical experiences with the [CTP] students, I was incredibly surprised to see the level of self-determination these individuals had. I was fascinated by their ability to set goals and go above and beyond in accomplishing them. They were also very receptive to feedback and advice from us, which made it an enjoyable collaborative experience. Being given the opportunity to facilitate this goal setting was great preparation for the future, and it opened my eyes to the fact that the students (and individuals with intellectual/significant disabilities for that matter) are able to be just as independent as the rest of us, if only given the resources and guidance.

As pre-service teachers, it's noteworthy that these students will enter the field of special education with a different perspective of learning potential and the importance of challenging students to reach high levels of attainment.

Theme #2: removal of stereotypes

The developing awareness of the potential of students with ID is intricately tied with demystification and breaking down stereotypes. Having special education teachers enter the field of teaching with more realistic beliefs about individuals with disabilities is a boon to the profession, conceivably could improve long-term student outcomes, and is an important step toward reframing thoughts and opinions among direct service providers. Multiple pre-service teachers reflected on the change in their stereotyped beliefs about students with ID. For example, student (C) stated:

Working with students with significant disabilities helped to remove any lingering stereotypes I had of what these individuals can accomplish. I feel like many people hear significant disability

and assume the individual is unable to do basic life skills. It was, however, interesting to go into [a CTP student's] home to see how they live independently. A lot of their living space was far cleaner than any individual I have come across who does not have a significant disability.

Student (D) similarly shared:

I think that working with her totally knocked down any stereotypes that I may have had in my mind about students with intellectual disabilities.

Developing more realistic perceptions of human ability allows future teachers to more accurately assess and plan instruction when they are teaching professionals.

Theme #3: benefits of applied experience

Pre-service teachers in the class also focused reflection on mastering professional skills in an authentic way and how this model of instruction benefitted their knowledge and skill development. Student (E) discussed:

This semester I learned a great deal in the classroom while also working with the [CTP] students...I think that I learned more from them than they did from me...I enjoyed working through an ecological assessment and task analysis in real life and I think that getting that real-life personal experience was fundamental and cannot be substituted with a book activity.

Student (C) concurred explaining:

Ultimately, the experience that I found to be the most beneficial throughout this course was getting to work with the [CTP] students, helping them to develop and achieve progress towards their individual goals. I feel that I learned just as much from [my student] through this process about effective prompting and instruction, if not more, than what he learned about his goal.

The pre-service teachers preferred a model of instruction for their learning that developed foundational skills with close proximity application of their new skills in real world situations. The routines put in place through the authentic learning activities also provided opportunity to broaden social relationships among different groups of students.

Lasting Impact

Comments from students suggested that the semester-long experience will have a lasting impact on practice and, importantly, on their long-term relationships with CTP students. Student (D) concluded:

This project allowed me to create long lasting bonds, make memories, and learn more about my future profession...Now I consider [my student] a friend of mine who I will continue to stay in touch with as life continues. We already have plans for a football game next fall!

Likewise, student (E) reflected:

I found that I created a new relationship with a really cool individual. She is a self-advocate and told us what she wanted to do for the project and the tools that she would need to be successful in doing so. [She] also became a friend. I had visited her at work, and I got to see her skills in action. She even messaged me a few times outside of class asking if she could stop by my work to stay hi. It was cool to build this bond with her.

These student comments encapsulate one area of emphasis, and hope, when the CTP was developed. The mission of our university puts a lens on diversity and understanding different perspectives and cultures. By providing more structured interactive experiences between CTP students and pre-service educators, our campus' mission was put into action and helped to shape the perspectives of a sample of the next generation of teachers who will soon be entering the public education system. The experiences also led to growth and new opportunity for CTP students, which is undeniably a welcome change. Their integration into the instructional methods course helped to foster natural support relationships within the university community, as well as break down misperceptions and stereotypes. In the end,

everybody benefitted. The pre-service educators had unmatched experiences that will serve them well with their future students, and CTP students learned a new skill that will be important to their transition into the community. Furthermore, all students made new social connections and became one step closer to doing something they found personally important, whether it be teaching in a classroom, living independently, or anything in-between.

Conclusion

The importance of providing students with equitable opportunities and relevant experiences can't be understated, particularly when both lead to positive outcomes for everybody involved. In this CTP and its partnerships with teacher and clinician preparation programs, pre-service educators benefitted from an opportunity to extend content from class into a real-world, applied setting, while simultaneously providing opportunity and targeted goal-planning to students from the CTP. This symbiotic relationship illustrates an example of the benefits of serving underserved populations within post-secondary educational environments, and how, as Aristotle adeptly noted, the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.



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