Effectiveness of Instructional Packets:

The Interaction Between Content and Implementation

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Ethnography of Learning Environments

Students learn from a variety of sources. They interact with teachers, other students, textbooks, Internet resources, additional tutors, and learning packets. Each of these instructional resources has different strengths and weaknesses. As a result, a variety of resources are often used so that instruction is balanced to meet the specific needs of every type of learner and every type of knowledge. Teachers often rely on one-on-one work and instructional packets in order to provide individualized instruction to students who have different needs. This approach is also used by teachers when teachers need to spend time on anther task and do not have enough time to cover all the relevant material. This second usage is what I would like to focus on. My observations with four different learning environments with inner-city Utica students revealed interesting interactions between the types of packets being used by teachers and the ways these packets have been integrated with learning. Based on these observations and past research, I will elaborate on the specific relationship between instructional strategy and the use of learning packets.

There is a growing need for schools to provide time for students during school hours, before school, or after school, where students can work on their homework such that intervention for struggling, or at-risk students can be effective (Payne, R., Sato, M. & Lensmire, T. J., 2010). My observations are geared towards such programs. Specifically, they are focused on tutoring programs for GED preparation and Regents preparation, primarily at the BOCES School but also at an after-school program with other Utica public schools. These observations are supplemented by observations in a regular classroom at the BOCES School. BOCES is part of the Alternative Education section of the Middle Settlement Academy in an

inner city. The majority of the population in this school is minorities from low-income families. All of these students have been suspended or expelled from their public school for behavioral issues. Most of these students lack role models in the home life to encourage them to achieve and often also have low motivation to succeed in school. The school also faces significant attendance issues. Mrs. S explained that students often skip classes and then attend school close to the end of each quarter in an attempt to catch up with the work. While this is not beneficial to their learning, it often also deters the other students who regularly attend because they waste time while the teacher tries to catch the other students up. During my time at the school, attendance in the classroom varied from 30-50%. The teachers in the school, however, follow the school's motto of "When you graduate, you will be college and career ready" and encourage the students to be optimistic about their future. This was characterized by Ms. A's comment that, "These kids can go to college if they want. They can even go to Harvard Law School. What we need to do is teach them how to work hard."

Independent study, the primary use of instructional packets, is two-fold. Firstly, it is used when students need to rehearse or practice something. Secondly, it is used to encourage students to acquire study skills such as how to locate, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information (Cruickshank, D., Jenkins, D. B., & Metcalf, K. K., 2012). In the Living Environments class, the instructional packets are usually used for the latter goal. While this is a traditional classroom where the teacher lectures and the students take notes, the teacher faces sever attendance issues such that all of her students are never at the same part of a unit. She uses instructional packets to allow students to

progress through the material without being slowed down by people who are absent more often. Students are given worksheets to work on individually using the textbook and their notes from the few lectures she gives, and the students ask the teacher for help. The students complete their worksheets individually, although they often try to work as a group. The teacher struggles to give individual attention to the students without distracting others. She also struggles to keep all the students focused and motivated as each member in the classroom is working on at least a different question.

The three other learning environments used in this study were primarily tutoring programs. MacDonald (2000) outlines that tutoring serves five goals: to promote independence in learning, to personalize instruction, to facilitate insights into learning, to provide a student perspective to learning and school success, and to respect individual differences. The Tutoring program attempts to cover all five of these goals through individualized attention between middle and high schoolers and college students who serve as a tutor and role model to these middle and high schoolers.

The Tutoring program also works towards the same use of instructional packets. In the Tutoring program, students go to a local private liberal arts college where they receive help with their homework from college students. The students in this program come from regular inner-city public schools. While they may not necessarily have behavioral issues, they are all struggling students who require additional help and guidance with their homework, which usually consists of packets of questions and worksheets based on the material that has been covered in class. Since most of these students, (28 out of 30 in one survey) hope to attend college; their demographic is very different from those at the BOCES school. These

students require additional support but are motivated and optimistic about their future. Since they come from a very different program, there is also more variety in their homework such that it includes everything from practice tests to poster-making projects.

The other two tutoring programs focus mainly on the rehearsal and practice of content. Therefore, in these contexts, tutoring is primarily used to promote independence in learning. In the GED Resource Room, students would come in each day and work independently on exercises from a GED Practice book. This book consisted of an explanation of a concept or formula, followed by exercises related to that concept. Backwards design dictates that evidence of learning must be from the desired results (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). This classroom explicitly follows this pattern such that all learning is in the form of practice questions for the end result, passing the GED exam. At the beginning of each quarter, Mrs. A would plan the number of exercises that each student was to complete by the end of the quarter for Math, Reading Comprehension, and Writing. The students were then in charge of completing all of those exercises by the end-of-the-quarter deadline. As students finished exercises, they would turn them in to Mrs. A or the teacher's assistant (TA), who would then grade their work. The students were expected to maintain a balance between the three subject areas and they always met this expectation without external force from the teacher. While the students worked independently on their assigned work, the TA would always be around to answer any questions they may have.

The After-School program was also a tutoring program but structured very differently. This program was for students who had been suspended from the Alternative

Education School for behavioral issues. These students attended a study hall-based program everyday from 2:15 to 4pm. The students in this program work on packets of homework and tests that are prepared for them by the teachers in the school. While all teachers use this block of time for planning purposes, each day some teachers are assigned to tutor in this program instead of using it as their planning time. Since the primary goal for these students is to pass the Regents exam, the packets that they work on are sample questions from past Regents exams. However, since they are taking the Regents, and not the GED, the instructional packets vary to include all subject areas and all question types from equation solving and multiple-choice questions to word problems and essay writing. Here, again, the students direct their own study but can ask the teachers for help when required. The teacher here exercises slightly more control than the teacher in the GED classroom in terms of what packets the students should be working on. However, the students are easily able to avoid this intervention if they monitor their work sufficiently well.

Given the specific nature of students that these environments include, children who are already low on motivation and struggling in school, these instructional packets provide the practice they need to excel in standardized tests. Independent work serves five purposes. It enhances academic discipline, drills the intellect, provides an organizer for classroom instruction, assesses student knowledge, and engages parent involvement in schooling (Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J. & Dunne, D. W., 2007). The children in these environments often either come from single-parent household where their parent does not have time to help them or comes from a two-parent household with both parents working

multiple jobs and still having no time. Therefore, the last purpose of homework does not apply in this context. However, the other purposes are apt for all four environments.

In the after-school program and the GED Resource room, the explicit goal of the class is to maximize the number of students passing the GED or the Regents exam. The amount of time devoted specifically to practicing for an exam has led to higher proficiency scores in a range of subject areas math to literature (Kralovec, E., Buell, J. & Skinner, D., 2008). The same study also found a direct correlation between time spent on practice problems and percentile increase in performance such that high school students demonstrated a 19 percentile point increase in scores if they regularly completed their practice homework. This effect was especially seen when the work involved rote learning, practice, or rehearsal, rather than higher-order tasks. This applies to the practice problems that the students in the GED classroom were doing which was directly in the format of a GED test. This may be what leads to the high passing rate of the GED Resource Room. Completing practice tests have also been related to higher achievement, specifically for the GED exam (McLaughlin, J. W., Skaggs, G., Patterson, M. B., 2009). By achieving success in their practice problems, students were able to boost their confidence because they knew what to expect from the final test. Their practice, even though it was only repetition practice, could still lead to higher accuracy because the students are engaged in more review and practice of the necessary skills (Merriman, D. E., Codding, R. S., 2008). This especially true for the reading and writing sections of the GED as students regularly referred to it as easy or simple, and did not require any help with it.

The after-school program specifically is aligned with students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. These students not only lack motivation to do work but often also lack motivation to stay in school at all. These students need small formative assessments so that they are given multiple opportunities to meet standards, which has been found to build resiliency (Tepovich, A., 2012). These students were often seen completing multiple packets within each session, which indicates that each sheet was short and relatively simple. By building difficulty and content in small increments, the teachers ensure that the students do not get discouraged. This is especially relevant to the students in the after-school program who are at constant risk of dropping out, because pushing on their limits can cause them to shut down, and even regress (Tepovich, A., 2012).

With the living environments classroom and the Tutoring program, the teachers and students are aiming for more than just a passing grade on a standardized test. These students often want to go on to college and get a good job. In this context, independent study packets are used to empower the students in their learning so that they are not dependent on a teacher or school and can continue learning after graduation. In this context, teachers need to spark curiosity and enthusiasm for the material in the students before they can expect them to work independently. Their assignments need to vary in content and be challenging enough to maintain attention (Cruickshank, D., Jenkins, D. B., & Metcalf, K. K., 2012). In these classrooms, the instructional packets have a wider range of questions that include higher-order and lower-order questions. The tests that the students in Living Environments practiced included all types of questions from multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank to

long-answer questions that required students to deduce results from the information given (Please refer to Journal 7). The homework packets that the students in the tutoring program completed also included a variety of questions in subject areas such as literature or social studies. However, math instruction still relied highly on repetition practice. While this may not have been the most engaging form of practice for the students, it gave them the required review time to build their math skills and prepare for their assessments. While the material itself was not engaging, the students were able to stay motivated because either the instructions or the questions themselves were challenging enough to maintain attention. The only concern with the challenging nature of the material in the tutoring program was that only the students in the program received extra help and the others were expected to complete those worksheets independently.

While instructional packets do provide the advantage of personalizing instruction and providing practice, they are not always suited for independent work. In certain cases, collaborative work between students is more effective and keeping the students engaged and supporting their learning. This was especially seen in the after-school program, the tutoring program, and the Living Environments classroom. Students in all three environments were more excited and engaged when they tried to collaborate. They derived self-worth and pride from being able to help another student. They also found it helpful to talk to another student about their work in order to flush out their ideas. This was especially relevant because these students struggle with writing and speaking academic English. Conversing with a peer helped them structure their ideas before they had to write them down. This benefit has been seen in other studies, wherein students benifitted from articulating their thinking because it is cognitively demanding (Eggen, P.

D. & Kauchak, D. P., 2006). Peer interactions have also been shown to lead to higher achievement and improved motivation (Eggen, P. D. & Kauchak, D. P., 2006). This was primarily seen in the classrooms because students were more active and engaged when they interacted with each other rather than when they worked individually. Through collaborative work, students have been shown to learn more material and learn with higher motivation with higher retention rates (Johnson, R. T. & Johnson, D. W., 1987).

Collaborative work also creates a friendlier climate for students who come from diverse backgrounds. The students in these classrooms and programs live very different family lives. Some of them have family members in jail, others have only one parent, and many of them face a lot of struggles with their families. Peer interaction in the classroom creates a collaborative culture that makes the students feel more of a sense of belonging in their school (Payne, R., Sato, M. & Lensmire, T. J., 2010). Especially in the cases when students helped each other out with work, the "tutor" would be in a positive mood because they were able to help someone. The "tutee", on the other hand, appreciated that other members of the class cared to help and tat made them feel a sense of belonging. Such peer-assisted learning paradigms are especially beneficial to students from low-income families, students in urban settings, and minority students, which was the primary population that I had observed (Rohrbeck, C. A., Ginsburg-Block, M. D., Fantuzzo, J. W. & Miller, T. R., 2003). These interactions are especially beneficial because they provide sudents with a variety of language inputs and a additional opportunities to practice their language skills (Rohrbeck, C. A., Ginsburg-Block, M. D., Fantuzzo, J. W. & Miller, T. R., 2003). These skills are particularly relevant since these students hope to attend college someday and communication skills are a core prerequisite of colleges.

Though independent and collaborative work have shown important benefits, they are each useful for a different purpose. Teachers always assigned the students to work independently because they were worried that collaboration and peer interaction would lead to distractions in the classroom. However, when students broke this rule and collaborated, they always stayed on topic. When the students were discussing their opinions or interpretations of a book or when they were talking about reasons and causes for other subject areas, they act of collaborating and conversing was engaging enough that they did not feel the need to digress from the topic. However, when students were interacting during lower-order tasks such as math problems or multiple-choice questions, they were easily distracted by off-topic conversations. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) divide two types of work students can complete: authentic and inauthentic work. Inauthentic work includes problems such as fill in the blanks, selecting an answer from choices, answering recall questions and practicing decontextualized skills. This type of work is better suited to independent work because it is recall-based and requires little subjective input. Authentic work, on the other hand, includes conducting research, debating an issue, interpreting literature, solving real-world problems, and purposeful writing. In these tasks, students have to synthesize their knowledge with their critical thinking skills in order to achieve. Collaboration helps this process because it allows for positive interdependence along with individual accountability (Johnson, R. T., & Johnson, D. W., 1987). When students collaborated on higher-order tasks, they were still required to create their own answers but received a certain level of support from the approval of their peers, which made them more comfortable and confident in their ability to respond. This supplements the benefit of having students practice their communication

skills by articulating their thoughts before writing them down. Students also felt more comfortable receiving criticism for their language when their mistakes were pointed out in a peer discussion as opposed to when they were directly talking to a teacher or tutor because they felt more secure in peer interactions. While teachers should be concerned about maintaining discipline in their classroom, we can see that collaborative work on higher-order tasks does not disrupt order and structure in the classroom.

While instructional packets are effective, they often need to be supplemented with programs for assistance. This is primarily due to a variety of sociocultural factors that play into Instructional packets have clearly been effective in classrooms. When appropriately enforced, both individual work and collaborative work are effective in increasing proficiency in course material. However, the students in these environments do not have very stable home lives. They do not receive much additional help at home and often do not even have a quiet place to work at home, two factors that are essential to completion of homework. Research has found that work is most effective when it is done in the presence of appropriate support and assistance (Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J. & Dunne, D. W., 2007). This is They found that students in low-income families lack a quiet and secure place to work, in addition to not having sufficient support from parents. With unfavorable conditions at work, there has been a shift in ideology with more teachers demanding an extended school day to complete homework, instead of sending it home. When work is done in the presence of the teacher, he or she also has more control over responding immediately to questions so that the students are not discouraged when they are not able to complete a part of their homework assignment (Kralovec, E., Buell, J. & Skinner, D., 2008). As teachers complain of increasing pressures due emphasis on

accountability and high-stakes standardized testing, more reliance on challenging homework can give teachers more time in the classroom to cover material.

These benefits can be clearly seen in the need for a tutor in all four classrooms. The students in these classrooms frequently asked for help from any teachers or tutors that were available. Often, the student was not only confused about the material but also lacked previous knowledge. For example, when asked to analyze a poem, S2 was not familiar with the concept of metaphors and when asked to summarize a book, T was not aware of how to separate key events from other events. Through after-school programs and tutoring programs, students are able to work on their independent packets while still being in the presence of assistance from teachers and tutors. In addition, students can work in a structured, quiet environment and learn to develop disciplined work habits that can benefit them in their professional life. These two results have been identified as two of the key goals of homework, after proficiency in course material (Kralovec, E., Buell, J. & Skinner, D., 2008). Providing a student with tutoring opportunities allows them gives them the resources that can supporth their independent work (Merriman, D. E. & Codding, R. S., 2008). Lastly, such programs increase the time that students spend engaging with academic material, which also leads to higher achievement levels (Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J. & Dunne, D. W., 2007). As students are assigned engaging and challenging homework, they also benefit from being provided a supporting environment in which they can complete this homework. The effectiveness of instructional packets is largely dependent on the ways these packets are implemented. When students are assigned lower-order, repetition homework, they are capable of doing it independently. However, higher-order questions that require students to use critical

thinking skills are more engaging and effective when students are able to collaborate with a peer. Such tasks are also more effective when done in the presence of a teacher or tutor who can provide support and assistance.

While lower-order and higher-order tasks require different kinds of implementation in instructional packets, they are both essential to well-developed learning. Borich () emphasizes that lower-order content needs to lead to higher-order content in order to effectively create learning. The three types of knowledge that a student is taught are declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and dispositions (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). In order to effectively cover all three types of knowledge, teachers need to effectively teach and test students using a variety of measures. The most effective way to engage students in this range of competencies is to contextualize their learning ((Eggen, P. D. & Kauchak, D. P., 2006). When T's and J's discussion of *The Outsiders* was more in-depth and focused than when S2 attempted to read Tupac Shakur's poem because the former book was more relevant to their lives in an inner-city public school. When learning is fit into the sociocultural context of the students, they are able to make more connections between the abstract concepts and their realities, thus leading to more effective understanding and more engagement in the material. Teachers also found that most students, who struggle academically, do so because they do not know how to ask questions. Providing students with the skills they need to make use of their resources is an often-overlooked aspect of teaching (Payne, R., Sato, M. & Lensmire, T. J., 2010). This was clearly not the case with T who had been assigned homework that helps her practice such skills, such as when she had to create questions based on her reading of *The Outsiders*. However, in other contexts, students did not

always know how to articulate what they did not understand, which led to teachers being unclear in their explanations also (Please refer to Journal 6). When teachers equip their students with the skills and resources, the students are able to perform to meet standards and expectations.

The four environments outlined in this study are structured very differently. One of them is a typical classroom, two of them are resource rooms focused on independent work, and one is a tutoring program that is not affiliated with their school. Across all these different learning environments, the common thread was the effectiveness of the use of independent study packets to personalize instruction to the needs of the students. The effectiveness of these packets were contingent on their implementation such that higher-order content was better suited to peer interaction and collaboration whereas lower-order content was better suited to individualistic work. Student engagement and motivation was seen to increase when they were allowed to collaborate and when the course content was contextualized within their sociocultural lives.

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