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Climbing the Mountain: Offering Learning Language and Loving™ It for College Credit

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Working for the Cuyahoga County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities has enabled me and my colleagues to be creative with Hanen Programs. Our latest innovation was offering the *Learning and Language and Loving It* Program for college credit. Previous participants had asked if they could obtain college credit for the work they did. We checked with several sources and discovered that — with a few tweaks — it's possible. We are blessed with a system that supports us, a pool of potential "students" from our professional staff, and the cooperation of a local college. Encouraged by all of these factors, we took a collective deep breath and got started. Offering *Learning Language and Loving It* for college credit was not without its glitches, but we did it and learned from our mistakes.

Staffing

Two of my SLP colleagues, Heidi Minick Starke and Evelyn Kaufmann, had worked with me in the past to team-teach *Learning Language and Loving It*. One of our first challenges was logistical. We did not all have regular caseloads or offices at the center where we offered the course. Nor did all of the teachers who were interested in taking our class work at the same centre. The team approach enabled us to handle the logistics required to present a successful course. We planned together, took turns presenting sections of each class, and rotated through the students for videotaping sessions.

In spite of concerns that this approach would make the content and relationships frag-

mented, we found the opposite to be the case. In their evaluations, the students reported that they enjoyed the variety of presentation styles and video feedback. All of us were Hanen trained, so, although we each brought our own personality, the messages were consistent. We often augmented and supported each other in class and the students enjoyed the richness of the information.

Students

Our system comprises five early childhood centers, and the teachers are always looking for convenient ways to earn continuing education credits and/or college credit. One Monday per month is allotted as an in-service day during which staff can participate in onsite or offsite programs or meetings. We offered one session each month, alternating mornings and afternoons to allow staff to participate in other activities on those days.

The class was open to instructors, instructor assistants, early intervention specialists, and other support personnel (occupational, physical and music therapists). If one of them did not have a regular classroom, we asked her to arrange to consistently visit a classroom of children on a regular basis and to use those children for videotaping sessions.

Format

The course consisted of four blocks with two classes and two videotaping sessions each (except for block 4, which had only one videotaping session). Each block stood alone for a minimum number of continuing education credits. Students could take (in

order) one, two, three or all four blocks for continuing education credits, but were required to take all four to receive college credit. The once-a-month class format allowed time for us to maintain our regular caseload and Hanen commitments (planning, reading journals, videotaping). It also allowed our students more time to perform their regular job duties, prepare for videotaping sessions and write journal entries.

Credit hours

Hanen's development of the "block" format was instrumental in making this course accessible fit with our format. We offered eight sessions of two hours and 45 minutes each and seven videotaping and review sessions of 45 minutes each. This 27 hour total equaled two graduate credit hours. Classes ran from October through May, and college grades and credits were awarded at the conclusion of the spring semester. Continuing education hours for each completed block were awarded by the State of Ohio Continuing Education Department.

Class requirements

All students were required to keep a journal — in the form of guided questions from each class session — and to participate in the videotaping sessions. Instructors reviewed and gave written feedback on the journals after each session. In addition, students working for graduate credit were required to write a paper analyzing their journal entries using another guided question format. (These students were also required to make up the time they spent in class since they were earning college credit on "company time." This was not an issue, as most of them normally spent more than the required number of hours in their classrooms.)

The following is a breakdown of similarities and differences for the two types of credits:

Graduate credit requirements

- a. Complete all four blocks
- b. Complete all journal entries
- c. Write a paper (journal analysis)
- d. Pay college tuition
- e. Make up time spent in class
- f. Earn professional development hours along with the graduate credit

Continuing Education requirements

- a. Complete at least one block
- b. Complete all journal entries
- c. Earn state continuing education hours and professional development hours

Pedagogical considerations

This was our biggest challenge, as none of us had taught a college course before. Lesson planning was made easy with the revised *Learning Language and Loving It* Program format, but the challenge became how to organize the requirements so that the students, as well as the instructors, were accountable for the grades that would be awarded. We often thought of our learning curve as the slope of Mt. Everest! And we sometimes felt like we were riding a runaway train — always creating procedures and policies to govern the grading procedure "on the fly."

During the process, we had several epiphanies:

Epiphany #1:

The term "journaling" means many things to many people. For some, it was a "Dear Diary" approach. Others jotted down some thoughts 15 minutes before coming into class. Some participants actually mentioned points that had been covered in the previous class. And so, we needed to provide a framework for thought. We constructed questions that were based on the session to guide writing.

Epiphany #2:

The journal could not be included in the grade without an objective evaluation method. Our "learned" feedback would not translate to a grade, so we implemented a point system.

Epiphany #3:

The time came when we knew we had to get serious about deciding how to structure the paper that was due May 3 — and that time was during preparations for the session on March 29.

Epiphany #4:

We came to grips with the fact that we needed to specify exactly how grades would be determined — while preparing for April 19th class. We pledged to include that

information in our syllabus the next time we taught the class.

Epiphany #5:

Some of the students who demonstrated consistently weak videotapes and journals also had weak papers. They were getting failing or barely passing grades — so where did we go wrong? Our 20/20 hindsight revealed that we should have given specific objectives a bit sooner. It also must have been a late epiphany to some of these students that we were actually serious about giving out grades. In the end, we asked two students to rewrite their papers to be more reflective of the work of a graduate student.

Grading procedure

The final grade had four components, outlined below.

1. Journals (25 per cent, seven entries)

The student had to:

- submit all entries
- demonstrate synthesis/analysis of materials
- answer/address questions on the focus situation

2. Videotaping (25 per cent, seven sessions)

The student had to:

- prepare action plans for all sessions
- demonstrate use of the strategies (or plan to improve)
- show that she practiced the strategies (e.g., try to embed herself into a classroom routine before videotaping; discuss/express her awareness of the presence or absence of targeted strategy)

3. Class Participation (10 per cent, eight classes)

The student had to:

- attend all classes (or outline a chapter if she was absent)
- show a frequency/willingness to participate in class
- demonstrate, through comments, analysis of the information presented

4. Paper (40 per cent, one paper)

The student had to:

- submit the paper by the deadline
- address each section and questions posed
- demonstrate a change of practice in her description of the past, present and future
- write to an appropriate length (four to five pages)

Each of us assigned points to each component and averaged our subjective scores.

The grading scale was dictated by the college as follows:

93-100% = A
90-92% = A-
87-89% = B+
83-86% = B
80-82% = B-
77-79% = C+
73-76% = C
70-72% = C-
65-69% = D

Changes for next time

As much as we tried to plan how we would structure requirements for a grade, we were bound by the inescapable fact that we didn't know how to do it. It was only in the doing that we had a true learning experience. If our learning curve was Mt. Everest, we can see from the summit the things that we need to do next time! Here are some of the guidelines we created:

- clearly delineate requirements and grading procedures on the syllabus — include the composition of grades, criteria within each grading section, percentage weight of each section, and grading scale
- explain point penalties for each item not achieved
- keep a running account of grades for each student and counsel those students who are not meeting expectations at designated intervals
- include instructions for the paper on the syllabus so students can be thinking about ideas and plan ahead
- use the guided question format for journal entries starting with the first class

Conclusion

In spite of our internal procedural issues, the structure provided by the *Learning Language and Loving It* Program helped us feel organized. Student evaluations were overwhelmingly positive and all participants reported to have learned a lot. From what we saw in their journals, papers and videotaping sessions, we had to agree. The journals gave us an objective way to chart progress and also provided a self-guided opportunity for the students to recognize growth in their own thought processes. Even those students who had struggled showed increased awareness of strategies they hadn't used before.

We learned about the challenges of teaching, including grading, structuring classes, providing a clear statement of expectations, and providing ongoing feedback. Program Manager Janice Greenberg was intrigued with our idea and she encouraged us to find a way to do it.

We broke in our climbing shoes, dug in our picks, tightened our ropes and climbed the mountain without a serious casualty. Unlike repeat mountain ascents with their changing perils, we feel that our next time will be substantially easier than our last. Fortified by experience, we look forward to our next class!
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For further information about the program schedule, grading criteria, required paper and journal assignments that Priscilla used, contact Janice Greenberg, Program Manager for *Learning Language and Loving It*, at Janice.greenberg@hanen.org.