

Did You Hear Me? The Effects of Live Simulated Environment on the Active Listening Skills of Instructional Leaders

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Abstract

Instructional leaders are challenged with numerous expectations, pressures and job responsibilities on a daily basis. It is getting more difficult for Instructional Leadership (IL) programs to prepare candidates with limited time and resources. Virtual simulations can bridge that gap between book knowledge and skill-based practices. This study explores the use of virtual simulations in enhancing the active listening skills among five graduate IL candidates at a large rural southeastern university. This study finds the value in implementing Virtual Environments to a Master's level IL program. Eighty percent of the participants were successful in defining active listening and had little to no difficulty in utilizing rephrasing skills during the simulation.

Keywords: virtual environments, parent-teacher conferences, instructional leadership, difficult conversations, active listening skills, live interaction

1. Introduction

Instructional Leaders (IL) within a school are considered to be the key players for creating and sustaining a high achieving school and welcoming school culture. Effective IL practices improve school organization, teaching, and student achievement outcomes. When new school leaders are appointed as school principals, they are expected to make sound leadership decisions and interact with all stakeholders from their first day on the job.

1.1 The Problem/Need

In Instructional leadership it is assumed that new principals have the knowledge, skills and behaviors needed to be successful in their position. However, with limited preparedness to transition into an IL, many are left feeling incompletely prepared (Hall, Almy & Tooley, 2013). Principals themselves agreed that the preparation they received did not prepare them for what was required of them as new principals (Finkel, 2012; Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008). Universities require IL students to complete an internship, which is usually pursued simultaneously to them have a full-time job. This does not allow for the IL student to fully engage in the internship experience and practice all the necessary skills.

For example, a southern State requires ten consecutive day internship. It is unlikely an IL student would encounter all opportunities to practice all of the necessary skills required to be a school administrator. With limited exposure during internship, instructional leaders need opportunities to role play realistic scenarios in order to transition theoretical knowledge into practice. To assist with simulation practice, digital devices are being increasingly adapted for learning and education purposes (Zawacki-Richter & Latchem, 2018). One way to support IL candidates is through the use of virtual environments (VEs).

1.2. Virtual Environments

The use of virtual environments is an emerging resource that provides realistic practice in the academic settings and has been utilized to prepare individuals in the areas of medicine, military and educator preparation programs (Dieker, Grillo, & Ramlakhan, 2012). Virtual environments and reality have been described as the learning aid for the 21st century (Rogers, 2019). The use of avatars and the virtual environment provides an authentic practice that incorporates a reflective practice (Dieker, Straub, Hughes, Hynes, & Hardin, 2014). To move from theory to practice, virtual environments create a safe environment that the learner can experiment with theory to provide opportunities for deep reflective practice. The use of the virtual environment provides opportunities for coaching and providing feedback to IL students. Feedback from this practice is intended to assist IL candidates with realistic scenarios in how to manage difficult conversations within a safe and simulated environment (Taylor, 2010).

1.3. Communication Skills and Leadership

According to Sparks and Hirsch (2005), "...communication can be categorized as a trait that circumvents all leadership processes. The inability to communicate can derail the educational leader's ability in all areas" (p. 40). Effective communication in leadership reveals who or what is valued in the organization and lends tone to everyday activities (Bolman & Deal, 2017). It is vital for school leaders to both practice effective communication and use it to promote positive leadership (Gilbert, 2012). Cramer (2014) noted that "speaking with courage, hope, and authenticity are the marks of effective leadership, and they are possible only if we focus more on our attention and effort on our assets than our deficits" (p. 87). Virtual environments allow IL faculty to create and implement simulations of varying scenarios involving communication skills that can be implemented throughout courses in IL training programs. Implementing virtual environments and designing scenarios for candidates that provides authentic reflective practice, feedback and coaching, can deepen their practice (Dieker Hynes, Hughes, & Smith, 2008). By implementing the VAL and designing scenarios for instructional leadership, candidates are able to participate in hands-on practice and active involvement which are essential in learning.

On average, principals spend 15% of their time on internal relations, including parent conferences (Hornig, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010). There are several strategies that can be used in conducting a parent conference. However, for this particular study, the authors were interested in the specific skills of active listening. During a conference between an administrator and a parent, one of the skills that is needed is to have active listening skills. Listening is a critical communication skill that is an essential component needed for IL candidates. Active listening involves clarifying comments through open ended questions, restating what parents say, identifying with parents, and summarizing the conversation (Anderson, 2008). Unfortunately, many IL candidates do not have the opportunity to practice active listening skills before going into an administrative position. As an instructional leader, one cannot lead without recognizing the importance of communication and listening skills.

Virtual environments can be carefully designed to provide IL candidates the opportunity to have a virtual simulation with parents. The realistic scenarios and simulations that take place provide authentic practice where mistakes will not impact the relationship between an administrator and a parent. The environment for IL candidates is a safe and controlled environment which allows for them to conduct an effective conference.

Live simulation research with instructional leader preparation is relatively new field. This study adds to small but growing literature base by analyzing IL candidates' use of a virtual practice to allow for real time communication with virtual parents in an administrative capacity. The goal of this study was to provide IL candidates an opportunity to learn and practice new strategies to communicate, specifically active listening, through the use of VEs and answer the following research questions:

1. Can understanding communication skills and active listening skills help instructional leadership candidates conduct an effective parent conference?
2. Can live virtual simulations be beneficial in increasing an instructional leadership candidate's ability to model communication skills and active listening skills?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

A convenience sampling was selected for this study, in which five participants enrolled in a graduate level class at a large urban university in the Southeastern region of the United States. The participants were required to be currently enrolled in the College of Education and have no formal preparation in practicing active listening skills. Within this study, all participants were females ranging from the age or 34-45 years old who volunteered for this study.

2.2 Setting and Materials

The study took place in the university's Virtual Avatar Laboratory (VAL). The VAL is in a specially designed classroom specific for simulations. The simulation takes place in the middle of the room with a table and chair. On the wall in facing the table, a large smart television, video camera, and computer are attached to the wall. Avatars and virtual environment appear on the screen via Mursion, Inc. software. The virtual environment can be set up as a conference room, classroom, or an office to give the candidate a realistic environment to conduct the conference. The virtual parent avatars are controlled by a remote live actor who can interact with the IL candidate in real time to allow them to practice active listening and rephrasing during the conference. The VAL allows for the scenarios to be recorded and used for the candidate to learn through reviewing their conferences. The live actor gave pause time and waited during difficult times of the simulation to see if IL candidates could recognize opportunities for rephrasing.

Scenarios for the virtual simulation were planned jointly by IL faculty, actor, and VAL director. This study utilized a scenario with a mother of a 5th grader who is concerned about a school bully and her son's safety at school.

The study used the following virtual simulation:

Ms. Linda Ingram, the mother of Will Ingram who is a 5th grader, has requested a conference with you the principal to discuss her concerns for her son's safety. She has previously raised concerns with one of Will's teachers about a student bullying her son. She feels as though students are bullying her son by (a) not playing with Will or interacting with him during Physical Education, (b) when the class participates in group work, no one picks Will to work with him in a group, and (c) one day a student named Zack, made fun of Will's new haircut by calling him Mohawk boy.

Upon investigating the situation you as the principal learns that in PE class, Will has been hitting students with rocks, however the PE teacher never sent home a letter to Will's mom. The PE teacher did make Will stand in the Quiet Zone for 5 minutes of his PE time for throwing rocks at other students. However, the classroom teacher did send a letter home to the mother and called and left a message about Will calling other students names in the classroom. The classroom teacher never heard back from Ms. Ingram

IL candidates were asked to demonstrate the active listening skill of rephrasing while avoiding precarious situations with the parent during a 7-10 minute conference. The participants were given three opportunities to rephrase during the 7-10 minute simulation.

2.3 Dependent Variable

The ability of students to define rephrasing and implement rephrasing was measured. Students wrote the definition of rephrasing on the exit slip. If the student's definition was similar to the definition provided in class, then the student was considered to have accurately defined rephrasing. Students were provided three opportunities to rephrase what the parent said during the simulation. The number of times the student accurately reflected what the parent said during the simulation was measured.

2.4 Independent Variable

Prior to the virtual simulation, the participants began by participating in class lectures related to conducting a successful parent conference through the using active listening skills and rephrasing techniques in a university course. The topic was introduced in one class session. A one hour lecture was conducted the next class session, one week after the introduction, focusing on strategies and suggestions to implement successful conversations with parents, avoiding precarious situations, and using active listening skills.

Following the lecture, IL candidates then had the opportunity to practice through live simulations in the VAL. The simulations lasted 7-10 minutes in length. Afterwards the reflection discussions were led after each simulation with the Exit Survey. Recorded simulations of the IL students were viewed during the reflection discussions, The Exit Survey (see Figure 1) asked the participants to reflect on what went well, what could have been improved, and what did they learn from the simulation. Each participant completed the Exit Survey. The one page Exit Survey was completed by each participant after they completed the simulation. After each simulation, the instructor gave feedback to enhance the learning process by providing thoughts and comments to the students. At the end of the simulation the students were given specific strengths and weaknesses of their simulation. The feedback that the IL candidate received was intended to increase their awareness of their performance and to assist in improving conference skills prior to them entering administration.

2.5 Design

This qualitative case study was used to interpret and gain insight into active listening skills with a specified population. This approach is in line with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) suggestion that, "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6).

3. Results

All participants were successful in defining active listening on the exit survey. Eighty percent of the students had little to no difficulty in utilizing rephrasing skills during the simulation. All IL candidates were able to define rephrasing. Four out of the five IL candidates demonstrated the ability to rephrase three times during virtual simulations (see Table 1).

During the reflection discussions, the students were able to see if they addressed the virtual parents concern by rephrasing during the conference. They were able to see if they rushed through the conference or was their pacing good. Some of the students did a good job listening to the virtual parent, however they never assured them that they understood what they were saying. One student had no difficulty defining rephrasing however, she had difficulty one out of the three times with the task of rephrasing. During the conference, the student got anxious and noted that she was waiting for the parent to stop talking to make her point, and she realized that she did not truly listen to what the parent was saying.

The following are some comments made by some of the teacher candidates:

- "I need to speak with confidence...I was terrified of what Ms. Ingram was going to say to me."
- "This felt so real...I truly felt like a principal in my office having a parent conference."
- "I did it, I am extremely proud of myself...I really tried hard to rephrase and it made me feel so good when Ms. Ingram said thank you for listening to me."
- This is harder than it looks...this was so enlightening, I want to try it again."
- I really felt like my communication with Ms. Ingram was a lot better being that this was my second time."

Discussion

The findings supported the need to learn and practice rephrasing and active listening skills to improve their preparation. The candidate's actual feel like they are meeting one on one with a parent which is an indication of the virtual simulation effectiveness. The interaction that takes place between the candidate and the parent avatars was very realistic. Students forget that they are in a university classroom and acted as though they were really having a parent conference with the avatar.

The data collected positively answered the research questions. When focusing in on the two aforementioned research questions, can understanding communication skills and active listening skills help instructional leadership candidates conduct an effective parent conference? And can live virtual simulations be beneficial in

increasing an instructional leadership candidate's ability to model communication skills and active listening skills? The answer is clearly yes. All IL students were able to define active listening. Four of the five IL students demonstrated appropriate active listening skills. The exit surveys and reflection discussions also revealed that IL students greatly benefited from the one-hour lecture coupled with the opportunity to practice the specific skill of rephrasing in virtual simulations. In fact, all of the students discussed that modeling and learning specific ways to rephrase and participate in active listening allowed them to be successful.

3.1 Implications

Virtual simulations involving active listening skills may have implications for teaching other skills. Students learned more than just rephrasing. The students' comments indicate that they learned other aspects of communicating with parents.

Virtual simulations have an advantage over typical role playing activities. The virtual simulation allows the student to really feel like they are in the moment, in the office meeting with the parent. Also, the avatars are trained to not get out of character which adds to the life like moment. Role playing with other peers or adults who have not had the training may not provide a realistic situation in which to practice communication skills.

3.2 Limitations

This study was viewed from a narrow lens of research, being that only five participants were included and were all female. The scope of the research was limited to a specified population to only include graduate level students. A small sample size of five students was used in this study, to enhance the results, a larger sample size is recommended.

This study was not able to control for previous exposure to active listening skills in professional development and other IL courses. The students had multiple opportunities to practice active listening skills and rephrasing, which might have ingrained specific skill outcomes. Lastly, although there were variations in each simulation because of the live interaction, some students had the opportunity to watch, listen, and participate in the feedback of other simulations before they participated which may have influenced their responses during the simulation.

4. Conclusion

Within this study, IL candidates participated in a virtual simulation to rephrase and practice active listening to enhance their learning. If the technology is available, colleges and universities that are preparing instructional leaders can use virtual environments to provide the opportunity to conduct an effective parent conference. Instructional leadership preparation programs need to continue to examine use of simulations if relevant to the skills being assessed. Allowing students the opportunity to strengthen their active listening skills and rephrasing will help prepare them for their upcoming position in administration.

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Table 1 Demographic and Performance Data

Instructional Leader Student	Gender	Age	Race	Ability to define rephrasing	Ability to rephrase
1	F	34	African American	Yes	3/3
2	F	38	Caucasian	Yes	2/3
3	F	45	Caucasian	Yes	3/3
4	F	40	African American	Yes	3/3
5	F	38	African American	Yes	3/3

Figure 1.
Exit Survey

VIRTUAL AVATAR LABORATORY

Active Listening in a Parent Conference About a Child Being Bullied

EXIT SURVEY

1. What went well and why?
2. What do you feel you can improve on in regards to active learning?
3. What did you learn today about utilizing rephrasing skills during the simulation?
4. Did you make it through the simulating by using a preplanned set of reasoning strategies for this parent conference? What happened?
5. What do you still need to learn about dealing with parent conferences as an instructional leader?
6. On a scale from 1-10 (ten being highest), how prepared do you feel to resolve a situation that a parent may have in regards to their child, after completing the active listening simulation? Circle the number below.
1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10