



Teaching Resource

Empowering Students as Leaders of Behavior Change: An Experiential-Learning Project

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ABSTRACT

Educational Practices in Kinesiology 3(1): 30-43, 2023. The purpose of this resource is to allow university educators to implement an experiential-learning project in which students act as leaders of behavior change. Specifically, kinesiology students are paired with “clients” to engage with outside of the classroom and tasked with helping the clients achieve their physical activity goals. This semester-long behavior change project can be used in classes delivered in online, in-person, or hybrid formats. It is estimated that two hours are required for initial project instructions and set-up, with about 12 additional hours throughout the semester for continuous instruction, review, discussion, and presentation. Students are expected to benefit from practice and interaction with real clients. As a result, students are expected to increase their experience with behavior change theory, programming, measurement, evaluation, and program refinement. Students are also expected to greatly enhance their communication skills as they interact with clients in a professional manner. This article includes all materials required to deliver this experiential-learning project to students in kinesiology, sport, or exercise science programs.

KEY WORDS: Behavior change theory, behavior change techniques, service learning, knowledge translation, health promotion

■ INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to allow upper-division undergraduate Kinesiology students to gain experience designing, implementing, and evaluating a behavior change program. Physical inactivity remains prevalent and creates burdens for the individual and society (Bennie et al., 2019; Ozemek et al., 2019; Whitfield et al., 2019). Thus, creating a behavior change project designed to increase physical activity behavior can result in meaningful outcomes for both students and program participants. Students who successfully complete this project develop several important skills related to health and fitness. This project targets several trends in health and fitness, including health/well-being coaching and personal training, as well as tools used by fitness professionals (e.g., mobile exercise apps, wearable technology)

and modes of exercise promoted by students (e.g., body weight training, outdoor activities; Thompson, 2023).

The project, currently in its third iteration, is designed for successful implementation with up to 40 students. Improvements from the past iterations have focused on project formatting, presentation requirements, scaffolding, and sequencing. In this project, students act as “health coaches” for a real “client,” so instructors may consider pairing upper-division students with faculty, staff, or lower-division students. Lower-division students, faculty, or staff may serve as the program “client” and students may earn credit for their participation within the project. However, this project was initially designed to pair students with real-world, non-student clients from the community.

In sum, this project allows students to gain real world experience using discipline-specific knowledge to solve-problems and think critically in efforts to deliver a health promotion service within real-world settings. Students gain experience with applying concepts of behavior change, including (but not limited to) changing outcome expectancies, self-efficacy, self-regulation strategies, and theories of behavior change; each are important for knowledge translation and practice (Thomas & Cardinal, 2021).

In simple terms, students are expected to gain experience with the design and implementation of a physical activity or exercise behavior change program. Students learn about and apply theoretical frameworks and theory-based behavior change techniques. Instructors seeking to implement this project with their own students are encouraged to adapt these learning objectives as appropriate.

This project requires no prerequisite knowledge, although introductory knowledge about physical activity and exercise behavior is helpful. Students could benefit from knowledge about the benefits of physical activity and consequences of sedentary behavior. Recommended, but not required courses, might include exercise psychology, health psychology, lifetime fitness or personal wellness, and communication courses.

■ METHODS

Classroom Management

Faculty implementing this project should plan on investment of time and instruction early in the course. This project has been implemented starting in Week 2 of a 16-week course. Two days of class are dedicated to a project overview, which includes a project rationale and student instructions. Students learn about required project components, including eight behavior change logs, three behavior change program summaries, and a behavior change project presentation. In addition, at least 2-3 days throughout the semester are dedicated to “Behavior Change Workshops” for discussion, updates, and problem solving related to the behavior change program. For example, students are encouraged to discuss project progress and barriers and other students are encouraged to offer suggestions. Students are also encouraged to brainstorm client objectives and link objectives with behavior change techniques and outcome measures. Finally, 15 minutes per student is allocated if students are assigned to give a presentation about their project at the end of the semester. This includes up to 10 minutes for the presentation, up to three minutes for questions and discussion, and a two-minute buffer. Students are also randomly assigned to serve as peer reviewers and moderators for other presentations. Peer reviewers give feedback on the presentation content, format, and delivery (e.g., did the students follow instructions for time, required content, etc.).

Moderators solicit questions from the other classmates and ask their own questions if no other classmate has a question. This helps ensure that each presentation results in a rich discussion.

Equipment

No specialized equipment is necessary for this project. Students are encouraged to communicate with their clients using a method that is mutually agreeable; this may include Zoom conversations, text messaging, phone calls, emails, or in-person meetings. Importantly, students are not required to meet clients in face-to-face settings. If client access permits, students can be encouraged to incorporate technology (e.g., mobile apps, consumer-grade accelerometers) as part of their programming.

Student Instructions

Successful implementation of this behavior change project requires clear instructions early in the course. In addition to providing instructions specific to the project, lecture topics have included an overview of considerations for designing and evaluating interventions and behavior change programs. Other topics focus on theories of behavior change within health-related domains (e.g., self-determination theory [Teixeira et al., 2012], affective-reflective theory (Brand & Ekkekakis, 2018; 2021) and considerations for equity and inclusion and working with historically underserved populations (Joseph & Kriger, 2021; Thomas et al., 2022b).

Students are expected to produce several artifacts from this project demonstrating their achievement towards the project learning objectives. These artifacts include (a) three project summaries, (b) eight behavior change logs, and (c) a project presentation. Description of each artifact is described within their respective template file, found on the project webpage published on the Open Science Framework website (see Zenko, 2023). A sample project timeline with key instructions, readings, and project milestones are summarized in Table 1. Many of the readings are open access. These readings are designed to introduce concepts and prompt discussion; they complement other course readings.

Students are expected to communicate with clients at least once per week throughout the entire behavior change program. To create accountability, students are expected to submit documentation of this communication, which may take the form of emailed summaries of the conversations. Optionally, and to further support their professional development, instructors may consider having the clients formally evaluate the students and their communication and professionalism as health coaches.

Table 1. Sample Project Timeline

Week	Activity & Instructions	Assignment/Assessment	Suggested Readings & Materials
1	Instructor and students begin recruiting potential clients to assign to students, as needed.	Students submit proof of liability insurance.	
2	Introduce the project rationale and expectations. Students are instructed to find a client, with explicit instructions that this is a free program, and no money is expected to be exchanged. Clients must complete a liability waiver before enrolling.	Student submits name and contact information for potential clients using the Learning Management System.	Michie et al. (2013); Rebar et al. (2021); Rhodes et al. (2019)
3	Students begin meeting with clients and learning about client background. Student keeps information anonymous and confidential and begins discussion on goals that are meaningful and relevant to the client. Goals should be focused on increasing physical activity and/or exercise behavior. In class, instructor provides an overview of design, implementation, and evaluation of behavior change interventions. Instructor introduces the concept of logic models.		Goldman & Schmalz (2006); Ojo et al. (2019); Teixeira et al. (2012; 2020)
4	In class, students are introduced to the concept of motivational interviewing, which may be used with clients.	Student submits Behavior Change Log #1.	Markland et al. (2005); Murtagh et al. (2018); Noetel (2017); Quested et al. (2021)
5	A “Behavior Change Workshop” takes place where students discuss progress and barriers that their client is experiencing. Instructor and students discuss ways to overcome barriers.	Student submits Behavior Change Log #2.	Brand & Ekkekakis (2018; 2021)
6	Instructor leads discussion using three or four projects as examples and helps students clearly link a behavior change objective to a behavior change technique and outcome measure to assess whether the objective has been achieved.	Student submits Behavior Change Log #3.	Delli Paoli (2021)

Table 1. Sample Project Timeline Cont.

Week	Activity & Instructions	Assignment/Assessment	Suggested Readings & Materials
7	Instructor leads discussion using three or four projects as examples and helps students clearly link a behavior change objective to a behavior change technique and outcome measure to assess whether the objective has been achieved.	Student submits Behavior Change Summary #1.	Hohberg et al. (2022)
8	Instructor leads discussion using three or four projects as examples and helps students clearly link a behavior change objective to a behavior change technique and outcome measure to assess whether the objective has been achieved.	Student submits Behavior Change Log #4.	Casey et al. (2009); Hu et al. (2021)
9	A "Behavior Change Workshop" takes place where students discuss progress and barriers that their client is experiencing. Instructor and students discuss ways to overcome barriers.	Student submits Behavior Change Log #5.	Students prompted to lead discussion on a behavior change reading of their choice.
10	Instructor leads discussion using three or four projects as examples and helps students clearly link a behavior change objective to a behavior change technique and outcome measure to assess whether the objective has been achieved.	Student submits Behavior Change Summary #2.	Students prompted to lead discussion on a behavior change reading of their choice.
11	Instructor leads discussion using three or four projects as examples and helps students clearly link a behavior change objective to a behavior change technique and outcome measure to assess whether the objective has been achieved.	Student submits Behavior Change Log #6.	Students prompted to lead discussion on a behavior change reading of their choice.
12	A "Behavior Change Workshop" takes place where students discuss progress and barriers that their client is experiencing. Instructor and students discuss ways to overcome barriers.	Student submits Behavior Change Log #7.	Students prompted to lead discussion on a behavior change reading of their choice.
13	Instructor leads discussion using three or four projects as examples and helps students clearly link a behavior change objective to a behavior change technique and outcome measure to assess whether the objective has been achieved.	Student submits Behavior Change Log #8.	Students prompted to lead discussion on a behavior change reading of their choice.

Table 1. Sample Project Timeline Cont.

Week	Activity & Instructions	Assignment/Assessment	Suggested Readings & Materials
14	Instructor leads discussion using three or four projects as examples and helps students clearly link a behavior change objective to a behavior change technique and outcome measure to assess whether the objective has been achieved.	Student submits Behavior Change Summary #3.	Students prompted to lead discussion on a behavior change reading of their choice.
15-16	(Optional) Behavior Change Project Presentations take place in class. Students submit a presentation using a multimedia software and are randomly assigned peer-reviewers to provide feedback. Students are also randomly assigned to act as a moderator for other presentations; moderators keep track of time and lead the discussion of each presentation.	Student gives a presentation about their behavior change program.	

■ DISCUSSION

As a result of this project, students gain much-needed practical experience in designing and implementing a behavior change program within a real-world setting (Bain & Poindexter, 1981; Cheng et al., 2022). As illustrated by its learning objectives, the project is to strengthen students' communication skills in professional settings, especially with clients receiving health promotion services. This project provides an opportunity to bridge academic programs with diverse communities through what, in essence, is a service-learning project (Cardinal, 2013). Students learn how to apply theory-based behavior change techniques to aid clients in working towards their health and physical fitness goals. Moreover, students receive opportunity to reflect on their efforts, inclusive of pitfalls, through completion of the Behavior Change Logs and Summary assignments, Behavior Change Workshops held in class, and end-of-term presentations. While personal training and health coaching are popular jobs within the fitness industry (Thompson, 2023), students require supervised practice to ensure they can aptly use disciplinary knowledge in their future career and personal life (Ross & Thomas, 2022; Thomas et al., 2022). Apt application of disciplinary knowledge requires students to think critically about their approach to promote physical activity and to understand barriers and facilitator towards that end (Brahler et al., 2002; Cardinal, 2016).

Student engagement is high, and the project allows the concepts taught in class to be applied to real-world clients and situations. Students have frequent opportunities to compare and contrast their experiences with the research literature. Student feedback collected after the semester, following ethical approval and informed consent, suggests positive learning experiences. One student noted that “the timeline and various resources the program has for the client and health coach really helped to aid in making a program that fit the client’s needs and goals”. To improve the project, students suggested more examples of behavior change techniques and examples of completed student projects. Another student suggested that face-to-face communication may be more effective. However, face-to-face communication has not been required as this project has been implemented during and after the shift to virtual instruction forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, face-to-face communication may not be feasible for all students and clients. Finding means to engage in virtual health coaching would help students develop marketable skills (McManus, 2022). Additionally, numerous studies report “mediated” health coaching is efficacious and effective when behavior change techniques are used (Rogers et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2010). Thus, this project may provide students with a novel experience to learn the ins and outs of physical activity promotion using multiple modes of delivery (Cheng et al., 2022). We recommend that future educators empirically assess the learning outcomes associated with their implementation of this project.

There are no known accessibility barriers for students. Materials are screen readable and there is flexibility with the communication strategy and timing. Additional costs are minimal and entirely attributable to professional liability insurance (often offered through the student’s University). Instructors are encouraged to modify the timeline and assignment structure as appropriate for their setting and student experience level.

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■ RESOURCES

Behavior Change Log Instructions

In 300-500 words, and using complete sentences, describe what you and your client discussed this week.

Be sure to clearly and explicitly address the following prompts:

- Which behavior change technique(s) you worked on implementing, and how? (2 points)
- What progress has your client made? Describe the measurement of your client's progress here. (1 point)
- What challenges have you experienced? (1 point)
- Which peer-reviewed literature have you engaged with? Provide the full reference and upload the articles. You should be reading at least 1-2 articles about physical activity and exercise behavior change (e.g., interventions, theoretical papers, observational studies about correlates and predictors of physical activity, systematic reviews, etc.) per log. (1 point)
- For credit, you must provide documentation of your meeting with the client. This can be as simple as a PDF copy of an email to your client which summarizes your discussion, provides encouragement, and guidance for implementing behavior change techniques. You may also type a summary of your discussion, and guidance you gave your client for implementing behavior change techniques, and have your client sign off on the document. If a summary of your meeting is submitted, have your client sign-off on the document before submission (e.g., using their electronic or hand-written signature).

Behavior Change Project Summary Rubric (to be adapted by instructor)

Component	Expectation	Expectation Met (Yes/No)
Case Description	The age, gender, summary of past physical activity behavior, and barriers to increasing and maintaining exercise and a physically active lifestyle are fully described.	
Summary of Progress	Progress to-date is described, with a summary of prior goals, objectives, and Behavior Change Techniques, as well as any barriers and solutions to barriers that have been implemented.	
Primary Goal	The primary goal is identified, in collaboration with client. This goal is specific, measurable, agreed upon by the client, realistic, and has a timeline associated with it.	
Objective 1	Objective 1 is fully described, justified, and clearly and logically linked to the primary goal.	
Implementation Plan 1	The implementation plan for Objective 1 is fully described, such that it is clear that the client has plans for how, when, and where they will achieve Objective 1. This also includes alternate plans to overcome anticipated barriers.	
Objective 2	Objective 2 is fully described, justified, and clearly and logically linked to the primary goal.	
Implementation Plan 2	The implementation plan for Objective 2 is fully described, such that it is clear that the client has plans for how, when, and where they will achieve Objective 2. This also includes alternate plans to overcome anticipated barriers.	
Objective 3	Objective 3 is fully described, justified, and clearly and logically linked to the primary goal.	
Implementation Plan 3	The implementation plan for Objective 3 is fully described, such that it is clear that the client has plans for how, when, and where they will achieve Objective 3. This also includes alternate plans to overcome anticipated barriers.	

Behavior Change Project Summary Rubric Cont. (to be adapted by instructor)

Component	Expectation	Expectation Met (Yes/No)
Behavior Change Technique 1	Behavior Change Technique 1 is identified, fully described, and justified using the text and/or peer-reviewed literature, with included proper in-text citations in APA format. Each behavior change technique must include at least two in-text citations and two references.	
Behavior Change Technique 2	Behavior Change Technique 2 is identified, fully described, and justified using the text and/or peer-reviewed literature, with included proper in-text citations in APA format. Each behavior change technique must include at least two in-text citations and two references.	
Behavior Change Technique 3	Behavior Change Technique 3 is identified, fully described, and justified using the text and/or peer-reviewed literature, with included proper in-text citations in APA format. Each behavior change technique must include at least two in-text citations and two references.	
Outcome Measure – Goal 1	The measure and measurement plan for assessing progress toward the primary goal is identified. The measure is cited and properly referenced and a copy of the measure is included.	
Outcome Measure – Objective 1	The measure and measurement plan for assessing progress toward Objective 1 is identified. The measure is cited and properly referenced and a copy of the measure is included.	
Outcome Measure – Objective 2	The measure and measurement plan for assessing progress toward Objective 2 is identified. The measure is cited and properly referenced and a copy of the measure is included.	
Outcome Measure – Objective 3	The measure and measurement plan for assessing progress toward Objective 3 is identified. The measure is cited and properly referenced and a copy of the measure is included.	
Measurement and Evaluation Timeline and Communication Plan	The measurement and evaluation timeline is included, with details on when progress will be measured, how progress will be measured, and how frequently progress will be measured. This also includes a strategy for communicating with the client (i.e., how and how frequently).	