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Managing Diversity in the Counselor Education Classroom

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Introduction

Classrooms are complex sites of intersecting diversity that can often leave counselor educators feeling overwhelmed with the differing calls on their attention. Thinking of classroom diversity as focusing on what counseling students bring in terms of their race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, religious and spiritual affiliation, disability status, or sexual orientation, is overwhelming enough. However, to grasp the systemic interplays of diversity, we also need to factor in other dimensions. Of these, particularly salient aspects are the diversity of identities and experience we bring as counselor educators into the classroom, the culture of the counseling field, the topic areas of the course content, as well as the interactions that students have with their peers. Another issue that all educators become increasingly concerned with is handling and managing conflicts in the classroom that may well arise from the intersections of any or all of these areas. An asset that counselor educators bring to this endeavor are their skills in managing and working with groups.

On the other hand, our preoccupation with coverage of content as well as discomfort with conflict can lead us to overlook or refuse to attend to these issues.

Culture

Conceptualizing culture subjectively might be useful in terms of pedagogical process. According to Triandis (1972), a system of cultural knowledge can be defined as a given group's distinctive way of perceiving and understanding its social environment. People who share related basic life experiences thus develop similar and integrated cognitive and emotional structures. Within such a definition, cultural conflict occurs due to the internal and interactional tensions that arise when systems of cultural knowledge confront each other, particularly when the interpretation of cultural patterns is not available to others. In other words, cultural conflict arises when we are making the correspondence error (Gilbert & Malone, 1995) of overemphasizing personality-based explanations for people's behaviors and under-emphasizing cultural and situational explanations. For instance, when an African American man argues with a European American woman, the woman may feel intimidated (due to her sociocultural gender and racial socialization), perceive the interaction as a fight, and respond by trying to move the argument to safer impersonal grounds (gender socialization towards relationship and away from conflict). Meanwhile, the man is experiencing the woman as typically uncaring (based on his racial experience) about the issues and distancing, so he increases the force and passion of his arguments (cultural communication expression). The dance of misunderstanding goes on as each seeks to communicate with the other in culturally comfortable ways, but end up miscommunicating in profound ways that may well lead to each making personality-based explanations of the other such as "He's out-of-control and scary" or "She's shallow and there's no point trying to talk to her."

Different cultural systems take different positions on a series

of value continuums, first identified in a major work by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961). Table 1 depicts these four major dimensions and the continuums along which cultures line up. These dimensions become particularly important in terms of relationship and communication in the classroom, as culture is present in everyday activities and pedagogical decisions.

Table 1: Value Continuums

Authority Dimension	
	EgalitarianHeirarchical
	InformalFormal
Relational Dimension	
	IndependenceInterdependence
	CompetitionCooperation
	IndividualismCollectivism
	Low ContextHigh Context
Activity Dimension	
	DoingBeing
Temporal Dimension	
	LimitedAbundant
	EvolvingHistorical

Expectations from students and the instructor about how authority is manifested in the classroom and how hierarchical or formal it is need to be negotiated. How do you introduce yourself to your students? Is it alright for different students to address you differently? Are learning and related activities presented competitively or cooperatively? For instance, grading on a curve is a competitive function while group projects require cooperation. Are individuals required to be independent to demonstrate competence or interdependent? In other words, do we value those who do their work together, or do we suspect collusion? Is classroom interaction and participation in learning activities (high context) valued as much

as written work (low context)? Are assignments time-limited or evolving in process and content? As the counselor educator, your decision making on these educational questions and concerns interacts with the cultural norms of the field, which privileges certain values on the continuum over others.

Counseling Culture

One aspect of being the educator in this context is that one's membership in the profession means that one speaks from insider status. In other words, as counselor educators, we are immersed in the culture of our field, and are actively transmitting it. This means that our teaching can never be innocent. It is important to move away from this naiveté and critically reflect on the paradigmatic assumptions that we bring to the endeavor of counselor education. Just as we encourage students to identify their personal theories of human nature and change as preparatory to understanding theories of personality and counseling, we must interrogate our own theories of pedagogy and understand the positions from which we teach.

Cultural capital, first developed as a concept by Bourdieu (1986), refers to the knowledge and experiences that a person brings that can allow them greater ease and therefore adeptness in a certain setting leading to greater success. In the classroom context, students who have cultural capital are often similar to the YAVIS client popularized by Schofield (1964), in being young, attractive, verbal, intelligent, and successful, as well as often being European American, middle or upper middle class in origin, able-bodied, heterosexual, and Christian. They demonstrate the embodied form of cultural capital by their status social identities, as well as the institutionalized form of capital of academic knowledge through being adept at the forms of writing papers, carrying out research, and communicating effectively.

Sue and Sue (2003) point out some of the major characteristics of counseling that therapists expect from their clients such as openness or psychological mindedness, and verbal,

behavioral, and emotional expressiveness and articulateness. What we want from our clients, we are delighted to get from our students. The counseling student, who self-reflects openly, applying theories and ideas to themselves, sharing their understanding and insights in class and journals, tells us in subtext that we are successful educators. However, we need to notice that diverse students may have different preparation, assumptions, understandings, and expectations of the process. Even though most counselor educators may have left behind the banking model of education (Freire, 1996), many of our students may still believe in it. Much education in the public school system is through such methods and students who did not have well trained teachers in well funded classrooms in school, may well have experienced only the methods that relied on students maintaining a receptive and submissive demeanor. The challenge and open articulation of difficulties that we welcome might be extremely difficult for a student who has been taught that such confrontation is threatening and that disclosing incomprehension is divulging lack of intelligence.

An example of such a pedagogical practice that may hold different meanings for those with different cultural capital is the use of circles, where everyone sits facing each other. While the counselor educator and some students may indeed find this format egalitarian and welcoming, for students who come from marginalized groups, the circle may be painful rather than reassuring. It can be experienced as forced self-disclosure rather than an opportunity to be heard. The implicit pressure to participate can be mortifying rather than liberating if the requisite trust and safety in the instructor has not been built (Brookfield, 1995). This example is not used to imply that circles should not be used, but rather that their use should be understood as being complicated and being perceived differently by different students.

Pedagogical Preparation

As the counselor educator, it is helpful to consciously reflect on and attend to issues in planning and delivery. Start with selecting

textbooks that attend to and raise these issues, or if you do not have choices about it, incorporate diversity in discussing topic areas, where you can highlight presence or absence. Ponder the philosophical choices between a stand alone chapter on multicultural issues versus addressing multicultural issues through a section in every chapter. One choice highlights its importance for students but presents it as a separate issue, while in the other choice, its integration confirms its constant presence but students may not consider it important and merely a pro forma nod to correctness. You can supplement textbooks with additional readings that directly address, critique, or challenge the topic areas from multiple vantage points (Derek Bok Center, 2006).

Similar to the explicitness we value in gaining informed consent in counseling, address issues of respect and acknowledgement of diversity in your syllabus, and early on in the course lay down ground rules for difficult class discussions. Be careful here as you acknowledge that some rules may be for your benefit as the instructor and not necessarily culturally congruent for all. For instance, asking that people speak one at a time and focus on the topic rather than the person, are helpful guidelines in defusing tension, but also leave students who feel passionate and personal about topic areas at a loss for ways to engage.

Depending on the course content, one may have less or more time to focus on process. For instance, a counseling skills course would need to be able to actively use the skills being acquired to be able to engage in difficult conversations. An informational piece on cultural styles of communication could then be tied in to diversity discussions through interpretation and self-reflection communication styles (Choudhuri, 2007). In covering theories of counseling, the discussions may focus more externally on the applicability of various theories and interventions with different populations, and less on the experience of the students themselves. As the counselor educator, you need to constantly make moment-by-moment decisions on whether to stay with your teaching plan and topic coverage or discard it in favor of greater exploration of the specific discussion occurring

in the classroom. It is helpful to reflect on your decision making and to examine whether factors such as rigid expectation of content coverage, discomfort with spontaneous discussions, unease with emotion-laden process, or specific ideas on what it is important for counselors-in-training to know are overly influencing your choices.

You can generate constructive dialogue through setting clear goals and expectations, as well as by modeling through your own participation and process. If your discussion topics focus on issues of diversity, the message that you welcome dialogue on such issues will be clearer. Use and model the skills of accurate listening and reflection when discussions arise, to encourage the conversation. Be genuine and authentic in your responses, but notice that you need to summarize the student voices first, paying careful attention to include multiple perspectives. Creating a space for constructive conversations is based on structuring safety but also on encouraging risk taking. Inevitably, when one encourages students to take risks, the instructor will not be in complete control. In essence, the first risk is yours as the educator, to invite in uncertainty and unknown process. The more you are willing to take such risks and can model coping and surviving ambiguity, the greater the chances that students will follow through. On the other hand, understand that risk taking is differential across diverse students. What is easy for one student to disclose may be immensely difficult for another. It is important to value and legitimize the risk-taking rather than the content of the disclosure.

Many people, focused on the conflict potential of cross-cultural conversations, end up avoiding the discussion altogether. You can increase the safety of such conversations by attending to timing and establishing context. For instance, using humor about a cross-cultural issue may be well-received later in a class when students and instructor have greater comfort and trust with each other, while early on, students often observe the instructor for cues on how such issues will be processed. If you misstep, and note offense taken, strive to publicly acknowledge the gaffe and, if time permits, to process all reactions. Your humility will model for your students that it is okay to be wrong.

If conflict does occur, instructors can use various de-escalation strategies such as gentle reminders of ground rules (own your opinions, speak for yourself rather than as a representative of a whole group), the technique of wait and respond (note the issue and state that you will look into it and then respond), inviting additional research, acknowledgement, linking, as well as process interpretations and deflections to the larger issue. Some specific techniques include time outs, where the conversation is interrupted, the conflict explicitly acknowledged, everyone invited to take a break to regain their emotional balance, and then the conversation restarted with instructions on how to proceed. In tying the process to counseling content, it is helpful to remind students about the interconnections between identity and experience and perception. In one minute journals, everyone is invited to journal for a couple of minutes. Here, everyone in the class gets an opportunity to voice their opinion in relatively safe writing, which they can then share from in smaller groups. The journaling can be free form, or structured, asking students to focus specifically on describing their affect, cognitions, and sensations, and then describe their judgments and assumptions.

Not all issues need to be processed in the classroom. Some merely need to be interrupted and stopped. For instance, intentionally hateful and discriminatory speech or behavior needs to be addressed immediately, and the person responsible informed that it is unacceptable. One can process the issue with the student one-on-one in privacy after the class or during an appointment. At the same time, it is important to protect the lone outlier, whether attacked or attacker, from being mobbed by other students. Every student will watch the instructor's reaction and response with concerns about their own safety.

Instructors can use diverse case studies and examples in multiple ways and in degrees of complexity. These can range from developing case studies that focus in on diverse cultures to simply using a variety of names in random examples. Thus in a developmental course, instead of Bobby or Tim beginning to understand Kant's categorical imperative on the playground, it could be Juanita and Wei-Fan. The essential concern doesn't change but it

acknowledges that there are a wider set of actors in the world. Be careful however that such usage is not biased (Amoja Three Rivers, 1990). In other words, don't always use examples such as Benita Washington when discussing poverty and Ling Lu in examples of submissiveness (Bailey & Toro-Morn, 2001). Case studies that use diverse examples should be culturally applicable and coherent, meaning that the cultures referenced are those that students may well interact with, and that the behavior described is neither stereotypical nor outlandish.

Additionally, instructors can vary teaching strategies to accommodate different learning styles as well as different aspects of comfort. These include having random small group discussions, finding ways to solicit participation from every member of the class, get written anonymous feedback on specific questions about classroom environment, using guest speakers to bring in diverse voices and experiences into the classroom context, assigning group as well as individual projects, so that every student regardless of their cultural system has some area where they can participate and learn comfortably.

In the counselor education process, it is vital for students beginning to perceive themselves as the tool of their chosen profession to develop a counseling identity and stance that is flexible and authentic. The being of the counselor then becomes more central to the endeavor than performance as a counselor. To engage in a counseling relationship with others, students must become adept in extending themselves while understanding implicit boundaries, both their own as well as those of others. An essential component of such understanding is becoming as aware of the failure of good intentions to encompass all differences as it is the success of being able to build a relationship from the starting point of difference rather than commonality. All that happens in counselor education classrooms, conflict and harmony, discussion and silence, understanding and disagreement, becomes grist for the mill when related to the point of constantly circling from process to content and connecting it to counseling.

After all the discussions of difference, exhortations of caution, and advice on sensitivity contained in this paper, it is

important to remember that the desired goal in counselor education classrooms is not the erasure or silencing of cultures leading to some pasteurized and processed environment that will be “conflict-free”, but a fruitful and engaged conversation that may at times be passionate, argumentative, or even hostile, but that expands the knowledge and understanding of all parties present and is ultimately much more stimulating.

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