

Counselor Education in Practice: Design and Implementation of a Counseling Course Based in Theory and Practice

Michael Kiener
Maryville University
mkigner@maryville.edu

Michael Kiener, Ph.D., CRC (Assistant Professor in Rehabilitation Counseling, School of Health Professions at Maryville University) has been a certified rehabilitation counselor since 2001 and has worked in the state, private, and not for profit sectors. Michael has degrees in early childhood education, rehabilitation counseling, and counselor education. Michael is very interested in examining ways to enhance the counseling relationship, motivation, critical thinking and teaching, and has published research on vocational decision making and on techniques to enhance critical thinking.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for any counselor educator is to design a course that is based in theory and one that also has effective

practical implications. Taking into account the many factors that play a part in the planning of a course such as accrediting body requirements, course content, class size, text selection, teaching pedagogy, student knowledge, university requirements, and assessment criteria; many counselor educators may feel overwhelmed with such a task. However, it is the ability and undertaking of every good counselor educator to accomplish this task (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998).

Although, the topic of counselor trainee education is not new, it has been primarily focused on specific tasks and skills such as multiculturalism, micro skills, case conceptualization, supervision, and role playing (Granello, 2000; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Sexton, 1998a; Sexton, 1998b). However, research on specific teaching pedagogy related to counselor education is minimal and has only recently received attention as an area of research (Granello, 2000; Guiffrida, 2005; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Sexton, 1998).

The intent of the paper is to focus on the process of creating and implementing a graduate counseling class. It will specifically address how a rethinking of the teaching process led to an examination of teaching methods, counseling theory and usefulness in practice. The result

incorporated and linked multiple components of the program and school's mission, teaching pedagogy, critical thinking, and personal experience to the student learning outcomes and enabled the class to have an awareness of theory (Existentialism, Solution Focus, Systems, Feminism, Jungian, Person Centered), theory in practice (micro skills, counselors role, cultural aspects, use of questions, transference and countertransference) and their profession (how rehabilitation counseling relates to inclusion in society, quality of life, and employment). The goal was to go beyond presenting factual information; for the students to contribute to a class atmosphere of analysis and synthesis that would be able to be applied to their profession.

Feasibly it would be appropriate to start with a description of my teaching philosophy and a definition of constructivism pedagogy and then discuss how these two influences outlined the design and implementation of the class. Succinctly, I believe and recognize it takes students different amounts of time to learn and understand material. Students need to practice the required skills to master material throughout a course while receiving appropriate feedback to acknowledge strengths and areas of improvement. Moreover, I regard student aptitude as time needed to learn and master a task rather than a relative constant trait of a person's possible achievement (Gentile, 1997). The skill of teaching is a collaborative effort with the skill

of learning. This philosophy, I believe, corresponds well to constructivism pedagogy where knowledge is constructed as the students interact socially with multiple perspectives on the topic (Granello, 2000; Grant, 2003). Key to this perspective is the openness to point of view and prior experiences of all participants in the process and how those experiences can facilitate discovery and enhancement of new learning and challenge previous knowledge resulting in students who are more active in their learning (Guiffrida, 2005).

Course Construction

The decision to change the construction and format of the course was an accumulation of multiple factors all thought to enhance the university, program, teaching pedagogy, and most importantly the students ability to use what they have learned. The choice to explicitly acknowledge program and school's mission, teaching pedagogy, critical thinking, and personal experience, and link them to the student learning outcomes was thought to add to the students ability to think metacognitively about their profession. A systemic approach to learning; how will the individual (personal experience) experience his or her client (critical thinking & teaching pedagogy of counseling) while interacting in his or her role in an

agency (program) and at the same time be aware of other societal influences (university). The construction of the course constantly demonstrated (by pedagogy) how topics were interrelated to the mission statements, critical thinking, and personal experience and how that new knowledge related to their professional development.

Course Format

The initial plans to modify the course centered on the debate of quality or quantity and evolved into an examination of counseling pedagogy. What was more important; many theories covered generally or fewer theories explored more in-depth? The choice was for the ladder; knowing that the program had one theory course and three additional semesters of practicum and internship courses where additional exposure to the material would be experienced and practiced. It was felt that a closer examination of the material would increase student metacognition, participation, and discovery in their learning. To enhance closer examination of the material, the students were divided into semester long learning groups where they participated in small and large group activities. The students were encouraged to discuss the material from multiple perspectives and then present their findings to the other groups.

Specifically, each class segment was formatted to occupy two class periods. Each segment (two classes) focused on one theoretical orientation and one practical aspect of counseling (e.g., micro skills, use of questions, and transference). During each segment, the first class focused the basic assumptions and techniques of the theory, while the second class focused on primary writings of the theorists to allow for a deeper and contextual understanding of the material. Additionally, the practical counseling aspects were discussed in the first class whereas during the second period practical examples were identified and discussed to further demonstrate the learning experience.

For example, a class segment centered on Feminist psychotherapy (theoretical orientation) and the counselor's role (practical aspect of counseling) was taught as follows; the first part of the first class focused on the major assumptions of Feminist psychotherapy and the second part of the first class examined the student's idea of the counselors role during counseling (in their learning group). During the first part of the second class, the student learning groups presented to the other groups their thoughts on the counselor's role based on their experience and additional readings. While the second part of the second class focused on primary

readings of Feminist psychotherapies, where each learning group had a different reading to discuss in both small and large group format.

In sum, it is felt that the students' past experience, learning groups, and the primary and secondary readings provide multiple perspectives from which to analyze and synthesize the material. The multiple experiences promote an atmosphere of collaboration and reflective thinking for the students; thus contributing to constructivism pedagogy.

Discussion

Now that a description of the class has been presented, it would be beneficial to attend to the purpose of the article that is to illustrate how the rethinking of the teaching process led to an examination of teaching methods, counseling theory, and usefulness in practice. Teaching methods were expanded to include short lectures, small and large group discussions, individual work, role plays, and video tapes. Moreover, students were encouraged to bring in personal experience to collaborate with these methods, which paralleled a further adoption of constructivism pedagogy of creating meaning from multiple perspectives and experiences. Thus allowing the students opportunity to analyze and synthesize material from various points of view.

The rethinking of counseling theory did not focused on a paradigm shift or creating a new theory, but rather focused on how the theories interrelated with rehabilitation philosophy and personal style/instincts of the students. Throughout the course the students were encouraged to investigate how the rehabilitation philosophy of the value of employment, quality of life, and inclusion in society corresponded with the theories. In addition, the theories were examined for their connection to each other and to therapeutic common factors (Hubble, Duncan, Miller, 1999). The continual linking of course material to rehabilitation philosophy provided opportunities for the students to make meaningful connections to theory in practice and think metacognitively about the profession.

The process of rethinking and designing the class addressed similar concerns that emerged from reviewing the research on counseling pedagogy. For example, how to best communicate the material to the students, how to facilitate with students a collaborative and active learning environment, how to assess if the material is useful in clinical settings, what do teachers know about learning, what methods are effective for promoting learning, and what is rationale for pedagogical design (Fong, 1998; Granello, 2000; Granello & Hazler, 1998; Guiffrida, 2005; Nelson &

Neufeldt, 1998; Sexton, 1998)

By fully embracing constructivist pedagogy, using multiple teaching methods, and encouraging the use of students' perspectives, a positive atmosphere to communicate the material was presented, a collaborative and active learning environment was established, and material was linked to clinical settings. Moreover, introducing, illustrating, and using theories from cognitive psychology (chunking of memory), critical thinking (elements of thought), and psychology of learning (over learning and memory interference) the class incorporated and used a rationale for pedagogical design, and knowledge about learning (Ahuna & Tinnesz, 2003; Gentile, 1997; Paul & Elder, 2002).

Conclusion

It is important to point out that there was no formal process set up to assess the students ability to analyze, synthesize, and think metacognitively about the material they learned, perhaps that is the next step in the evolution of this class. However, opportunities were provided at three different times during the class for the students to self-assess themselves and the class. Here are a few quotes that speak to the class

design and outcomes. "Something that helped was having the groups read different articles about application and research, and having then 'teach' the class about what they read. All of the handouts were very helpful and made me even more curious." "I was able to analyze, critique, and synthesize information about the theories studied in this course." "(T)he nature (and one strength) of the class was that of frank and open discussion." "I was able to make connections between the theories we discussed and the work of Rehabilitation Counseling." "This particular class broadened my perspective and knowledge on counseling and how to work with clients." "Learning from others in the class and their experiences also taught me that real people can do this. I could actually relate to what people were experiencing, even though my experiences were completely different." "I believe I have a solid, core foundation in developing my own style of counseling because of this course." "I felt that the learning group was a new and interesting way to learn about this subject. It gave me ways of looking at specific situations and provided other voices and input besides the professor." "The critical thinking, reading, papers, lectures and especially the small group work helped me to realize how healthy it is to think outside of the box and to ask questions and feel comfortable with your style."

Again, although there was no formal assessment of the students and other factors such as student prior knowledge could have influenced their remarks, I feel the richness and content of the quotes speak to the class and students' ability to analyze, synthesize, and think metacognitively about the material they learned. Additional classes and further examination of counseling pedagogy will only enhance our knowledge and the skills of future professionals.

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