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## **Highlights on Teaching Counselor Education: Decision Points and Pearls of Wisdom**

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**READER'S NOTE:** The following paper is derived from a panel discussion which occurred at the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision bi-annual conference in Nashville, Tennessee, October, 2011. Thus, section headings such as "Pearls of Wisdom" or other aspects of authors' perspectives are offered without necessarily providing exhaustive scholarly or empirical substantiation of their suppositions.

Offering effective and engaging courses in counselor education requires attention to both content and process. In this manuscript, experienced counselor educators present some essential decision points that must be considered in new course preparation to insure that students will gain the most possible knowledge from the classroom experience. This paper was generated from content presented at a panel discussion at the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision bi-annual conference in Tennessee, 2011.

Training students to become professional counselors is an exhilarating and a challenging task. The stakes involved for counselor educators are higher than in other disciplines; the potential for students to do damage to their clients, be it inadvertent or intentional, is a real possibility. To minimize risk of harm and to increase client benefit, counselor educators have dual tasks; 1) teach content to their students, while 2) facilitating self-exploration and self-reflection related to said content. Counselor educators have a marked responsibility to not only the students themselves, but also the greater community at large. These dual tasks require faculty to be knowledgeable about the content one is teaching, as well as modeling mindfulness and intentionality in one's teaching style and strategies. This endeavor is best accomplished by organizing and presenting content that is increasingly more sophisticated, assessing learners' skill in content application, and facilitating students' self-exploration (MacCluskie, 2011).

There are proposed frameworks for conceptualizing progressive sophistication of content (e.g., Bloom, 1956). Such frameworks are useful in organizing course content in any given class meeting, within a course over a whole academic term, or even across an entire curriculum as the course sequence for the curriculum is being organized (MacCluskie, 2011). The conscious competence model (Chapman, 2006) is one way to frame the stages of skill acquisition. Students begin in *unconscious incompetence*, not knowing what they don't know. Through active learning, they may become acutely aware they are lacking a skill set (i.e., *conscious incompetence*). Use of modeling, encouragement, and a taxonomy of skill sophistication can move students into a stage of *conscious competence*, in which they can think about what skill to use, and then appropriately choose a skill. The ultimate goal for learners is *unconscious competence*, in which they are functioning as a professional, seamlessly applying their learned skills without thinking about what they "should" say.

Active learning can be accomplished by energetically involving students in an interaction with the content at hand (MacCluskie, 2011). Counseling students can be highly introspective, thus raising the likelihood that students are learning the course content and applying it to their own lives. This naturally occurring process can be used to structure learning opportunities for students to self-examine in the context of that content. For example, while discussing the helping skill of confrontation and supportive challenging, students might be placed in dyads to discuss how conflict was handled in their own family of origin. Finding ways to catalyze self-awareness is perhaps the most challenging and rewarding aspect of counselor education. Effective teaching is reflected when a counseling student is able to grow personally in the process of learning to serve others.

As the focus of this manuscript shifts from pedagogy to exploration of specific courses, the authors hope to provide readers with an exploration of key decision points instructors of those courses may wish to consider. Each course requires an instructor to

first make some fundamental decisions germane to the course content before assembling the course. We offer readers information about those fundamental decisions and also one or two “pearls of wisdom” (lessons learned from experience) from counselor educators with extensive experience teaching their respective content area. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, this information was presented in a panel discussion. The panel discussants were contributors to Perera-Diltz and MacCluskie (2011). Therefore, more detailed information on preparing coursework and resources for core coursework in school and clinical mental health counseling can be found in Perera-Diltz and MacCluskie (2011).

### **Foundations of Clinical Mental Health Counseling**

The Foundations of Clinical Mental Health Counseling course is titled differently at various universities and may be called Professional Issues in Counseling, Introduction to Counseling, or Professional Orientation and Ethical Standards in Counseling. It is often delivered in a survey fashion, providing a brief overview of foundational information related to the profession. Topics might include: mental health counseling in America or in the 21st century; introduction to ethics and legal issues in the counseling profession; counseling in a multicultural society; professional counselor as scholar practitioner; introduction to counseling theories; the counseling process; counseling children and vulnerable adults (i.e., older persons and persons with disabilities); couples and family counseling; group counseling; school counseling; counselor supervision; career counseling; and consultation (Duba & Nims, 2011).

There must be a balance between the quantity (i.e., course topics) and quality (i.e., depth of conversation, discussion, and focus) of information being presented. Although one goal of the course is to increase one’s knowledge base, opportunities for conceptualization and application must be provided for students to become active in their learning. Consequently, for each topic area, it is recommended that reading materials, Web sites, as well as learning activities be provided similar to that provided in Duba & Nims (2011). However, it is necessary to remember and remind students that most of the information covered in the course will be explored in detail during their education so as not to overwhelm them. The overarching goal of this course is to produce future counselors who are knowledgeable about their field and feel confident in their identity as counselors. Professional counselors’ identity is intertwined with the framework of developmentally and culturally sensitive counseling, thus necessitating coursework on lifespan development and social cultural issues.

### **Human Growth and Development**

Lifespan development theory extends across the entire counseling curriculum (McHenry & McHenry, 2011). Simply put, all counseling theories, approaches, techniques and styles *must* be considered and applied with attention to development and/or developmental status of the client. Therefore, the scope and breadth of the materials covered in a graduate level human development class for counselors should include a wide variety and substantial array of different views of the process of human development (McHenry & McHenry, 2011). However, given the vast amount of information available and the necessity to prioritize the most salient and relevant

information to teach, below are some significant decision points and pearls of wisdom for counselor educators teaching a human development course.

The most central decision point is choosing which theories and aspects of development to cover, infusion of theory into actual practice, use of media (e.g., videos, movies), and perhaps most importantly, to clarify how the professor/program actually defines human development (McHenry & McHenry, 2011). Various and varied in nature, the multitude of theories from which a professor can choose range from broad concepts such as major stages of life (e.g., Erikson's Psychosocial Stage Model) to specific and/or unique theories that address issues such as, the stages and phases of grief and loss and spiritual development (McHenry & McHenry, 2011). Therefore, the instructor must envision and then craft a course that builds a picture of the major components to lifespan, without overwhelming students with the several hundred theories that exist today. Here is a short list of possibilities: cognitive, moral, minority, psychosocial, psychosexual, identity, grief and loss, addictions, spirituality and social/relationship (McHenry & McHenry, 2011). One additional consideration during this process is the sequencing or scaffolding of stages of life. That is, the professor should consider whether to tackle a new theory each week, build the course across the lifespan using general age ranges (such as development in childhood, adolescents, young adulthood, etc.), or use a thematic approach. Clearly, all options offer the opportunity to integrate multiple aspects of normal and abnormal human development across the lifespan.

As with other counseling courses, theory into action is a critical part of the counselor developmental process (McHenry & McHenry, 2011). Simply knowing the facts about a developmental model fail to help a counselor apply the theory to conceptualize and select interventions when helping a client. Practice exercises, modeled demonstrations of the use of different theories, documentaries, and films all facilitate student retention and application of skills across the spectrum of life. Regardless of the instructor's theoretical, ideological, and pragmatic knowledge of the theories of human development, the true test of instruction lies in the meaning of the educational experience which students take from the course to effectively impact and positively help their clients (McHenry & McHenry, 2011).

Similar to the salience of developmental details of a client, the cultural lens through which a person views and analyzes his or her experience is another universal concept taught throughout the counselor education curriculum. We turn now to a discussion of how to structure and deliver a course in multicultural issues.

### **Culturally Intentional and Competent Counselors**

Students often verbalize statements such as, "I would feel uncomfortable including religion or spirituality in counseling," "I am afraid they think I am too young to have had the life experiences they have had," "I have never thought of myself as a racial or ethnic person," or "We are ALL people." Such comments suggest a lack of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and/or skill. In order to maintain genuineness and authenticity while facilitating honest self-exploration in clients, counseling students must be challenged to candidly confront who they are and what they bring to counseling (Pack-Brown, Coutler, & Fuller, 2011).

Awareness, knowledge, and skills in multicultural competencies (e.g., American Counseling Association [ACA] Code of Ethics; ACA, 2005) can be facilitated through selecting a variety of appropriate resources with which to supplement the course (Pack-Brown et al., 2011). Appropriate resources are those that promote class discussion and practice responding to cultural cues; facilitate student self-awareness of personal biases, stereotypes, and prejudices; impart knowledge about common values, life experiences, and worldviews of diverse and multicultural populations; and stimulate reflection on methods of working effectively with multicultural and diverse individuals and communities. A course outline that encompasses the following aspects of multiculturalism is recommended: 1) cultural and social justice awareness; 2) cultural and social justice knowledge; and 3) knowledge and introductory skills (Pack-Brown et al., 2011).

Embracing the idea that teaching about difference is a viable and ethical counseling tool is essential to provide a useful learning experience. Acknowledging and increasing the instructor's own comfort level with controversial beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and physical behaviors is also a necessary component in successfully teaching this course (Pack-Brown et al., 2011).

Another important aspect of training as a counselor is learning and implementing the ethical code and guidelines of professional conduct. Following is a presentation of the main points for consideration in designing and developing a course in legal and ethical conduct of counselors.

### **Professional Code of Conduct**

Ethics education is not limited to review of the profession's rules, regulations, codes, or the types of egregious misconduct that other counselors have committed. Rather, it is about acquainting students with the fundamental values of the counseling profession, appreciating the fundamental role that ethical values play in counseling services, and assisting students in integrating professional values with their own personal values. Material for this course must be selected with attention to integrating the values of the profession. Handelsman, Gottlieb, and Knapp (2005) suggested ethics education is not completed in a single course or examination. It is an acculturation process, aiming toward creating a professional ethical identity. Ethics education is a task that must be embraced as central and included in virtually every portion of counselor training.

One major decision point involves how to move beyond description of the content of codes and rules, toward engaging students in processing complex ethical questions and cases highly likely to be faced in practice (Welfel & O'Donnell, 2011). Such immersion attunes their skills in critically analyzing the dilemma at hand, helping them appreciate the emotional demands and sociocultural dimensions of ethical questions. Use of a structured decision-making model is crucial in this process. More fundamentally, case method process raises learners' sensitivity to ethical dimensions they would not otherwise identify as ethical. Ethical violations arise from the failure of a counselor to recognize those ethical dimensions. This approach stands in direct contrast with the "spray and pray" method of teaching, where instructors tell students about standards and then hope they will remember them and apply them in their work, with no actual experience doing so (Welfel & O'Donnell, 2011).

Students must appreciate the interplay between ethical standards and statutory and common law, and the values and roles each plays in practice (Welfel & O'Donnell, 2011). Ethics educators also have a responsibility to emphasize that ethical practice goes well beyond ensuring that the students abide by the regulations. Ethical practice is not simply a matter of risk management. How best to present such an understanding must be determined.

When properly designed, an ethics course helps students see that ethics of the profession are a major support in allowing them to actually facilitate change in those who seek it (Welfel & O'Donnell, 2011). Discussion of ethical issues helps students develop tolerance for ambiguity, along with a deep appreciation of the power of ethical and unethical work.

Counselors are expected to demonstrate professional conduct within ethical and legal boundaries in every setting. In most settings, counselors have occasion to provide group counseling. In fact, some clients may have presenting concerns or characteristics that make group counseling a preferred method of intervention. Below we provide some guidelines on how to develop and deliver a group work course.

### **Group Work: Standards, Techniques, Practice, and Resources**

Counseling students' understanding of group work theory and competence facilitating groups is essential. Group leadership competence requires familiarity with similarities and differences between group work and other modalities; the types and stages of groups; group work associations, organizations, research and resources; and ethical and cultural diversity considerations specific to groups. Counseling students must also develop the necessary leadership skills to facilitate different types of groups. An effective group course provides a combination of lecture and experiential activities (Gladding & Ivers, 2011).

One major decision point is whether to have students role play simulated group experiences or run a growth group in which students are members (Gladding & Ivers, 2011). Role playing provides students with hands-on opportunities to practice and develop skills such as linkage, cutting off, and drawing out. In contrast, growth groups provide students with an organic group experience that role plays cannot provide. However, ethical dilemmas around student self disclosures and accidental or purposeful discussion of group happenings outside of the group may occur (Gladding & Ivers, 2011).

Teaching a group course is a unique, energizing experience; leadership skills are essential for students to master (Gladding & Ivers, 2011). Instructors are advised to be knowledgeable of supplemental resources (e.g., Web sites, readings, group work videos) and to engage students through experiential activities based on factual information, such as small group activities that simulate different group stages (e.g., forming, storming, performing).

From group we move to career development, another traditional topic, relevant and usually present as core curriculum in counselor education. Below we provide some guidelines on decision points for such a course.

## **Career Counseling**

Work plays a huge role in peoples' lives. As a case in point, many students in a career development class find themselves back in school due to changes in their own careers. The ultimate goal of this course is enhancement of students' confidence and satisfaction in their knowledge and competence in performing their art (Toman, 2011).

A typical career counseling course should include career development theories, interventions and assessments, exercises, course assignments, and experiential activities. Exercises and experiences can be developmentally graded to aid students in advancing their sophistication and understanding of the career development process. From beginning to end of a semester or quarter, the complexity of the career development theories, interventions, and experiential class activities should grow, due to the cumulative effect and contrast/comparison between theoretical perspectives (Toman, 2011). A mixture of individual, group, and student-supporting-student activities can facilitate such growth. Every career story can be a teaching tool for the student and the instructor (Toman, 2011).

The knowledge content for any course comes from research. Research is the basis of all we do in the social sciences. Without research we have no way of knowing if what we do is effective and safe; without research we are just guessing, while with it we have a scientific grounding. Thus, research is a part of core training for counselors so they may become good consumers of available knowledge and also contribute to the existing knowledge pool on counseling (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009).

## **Research in Counselor Education**

Counseling students come from different backgrounds and with a variety of undergraduate degrees including degrees in psychology, education, communications, and humanities to name a few. Teaching research to a class of students with differing undergraduate degrees can be both challenging and intimidating (Danzinger, 2011). Many students enter counseling programs with a preconceived notion that research will be their hardest course and those who have no previous experience with research may even dread the prospect (Danzinger, 2011). A counselor educator instructing a research course is faced with the task of helping students overcome their anxiety related to research course material and learn basics of research design, statistical analysis, the mechanics of preparing research for publication or presentation, ethical issues related to research, program evaluation, and the fundamentals of being a competent consumer of research literature (Danzinger, 2011).

Considering the task at hand, the first step is to take care in choosing the appropriate textbook and supplemental readings which are readable; many research design and methodology texts can be dry, un-engaging, and highly technical. Next it is necessary to determine the proportion of dedication to qualitative versus quantitative design. It behooves to focus on most frequently used designs in counseling. Finally, a decision must be made on the proportion of course dedicated to developer versus consumer of research (Danzinger, 2011). The instructor is challenged to make the course interesting and engaging for the student and successful attainment of this goal can be rewarding.

The culminating experiences for counseling students are the field placement courses, also known as practicum and internship experiences. These are the courses in which students must demonstrate synthesis and application of the varied courses they have completed. Below we provide some guidelines on how to facilitate this final experience in counselor education.

### **Field Placement Courses: Practicum and Internship**

Teaching practicum and internship courses can be a challenge because students are required to put into practice didactic and classroom experiential knowledge. The challenge extends to the professor, too! Leading students to make the leap from the academic to the professional can be a daunting task, especially with students who have little or no practical experience. By using their own creativity, intuition, and knowledge of group process, instructors can transform a daunting task into a rewarding experience.

Setting the stage for a “process versus academic” course is essential. Therefore, the main decision point in designing and preparing this class is to determine how to encourage students to integrate the knowledge they have gained into the process of counseling. Faiver, Brennan, and Britton (2011) underscore the importance of creating a community of support, safety, and respect as well as the value of assisting students in being vulnerable and “not knowing” versus presenting themselves as all-knowing and all-together. The importance of teaching students about the process of giving and receiving feedback is stressed by incorporating the paradigm that feedback should be offered, not forced on students, and framed as an opinion and possibility, which is provided in a specific, behavioral, and constructive manner (Faiver et al., 2011).

One of the rewards of teaching practicum and internship is the opportunity to participate in the development of a student’s counselor identity (Faiver et al., 2011). Witnessing students, who often begin with a very insecure identity as a counselor, grow into more confident, self-aware clinicians who are finding their unique voices as counselors is truly a joy. Somewhat analogous to parenting, being part of the developmental process of others can promote a sense of connection among class members as well as to the larger profession as a whole. In sum, the authors’ intent is to offer support, ideas, and stimulus in order to make teaching this course a success for all involved.

### **Adapting Courses to the Online Format**

Information on teaching counselor education would not be complete without a discussion on how to adapt coursework to the web-based learning environment. Developing and instructing a quality web-based course cannot be achieved by simply placing materials from a traditional course online. To achieve quality, a design and delivery method with an understanding of the role of the learner and the instructor is necessary.

Learners who are individual self-starters and highly motivated (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006) are best suited for a web-based environment. However, it may not be appropriate or feasible to screen learners for a Web-based learning environment. Therefore, the design and instruction will need to provide some structure for the learners to facilitate managing their time through a schedule for completing and submitting assignments; a schedule for routine participation; a method to



address technology issues; and a forum to ask questions and ask for help when needed (Conceição, 2007). The best design is a continuously evolving classroom informed by learner styles based on the seven principles of effective teaching (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001).

There is slightly differing opinion on the role of the web-based course instructor. Conceição (2007) views web-based instruction as a partnership of teaching and learning in which the instructor: a) designs, organizes, administers, and presents course content; b) facilitates the learning process; and c) acts as a catalyst who activates conversation. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) propose that the instructor is the designer of the educational experience, the facilitator of the social environment, and the expert on the subject matter. Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter (2001) consider the instructor as the facilitator of both cognitive components of learning and affective components of relationships within the classroom environment as well as the course manager. The role of the instructor is based on the design and expectations of the course and must be considered when developing a web-based course.

It is important to note that although web-based teaching is similar to teaching in traditional style with a focus on active learning, there are some points of difference. These differences arise in the teaching focus; accessibility of course; learning pace; creation of an active community of learners; interpersonal dynamics of classmates; interactions of a wider audience; and social rules and/or boundaries in networking.

Two components essential in developing quality web-based coursework are: 1) determining the essential topics of, and a design for, delivery of the course; and 2) determining the tools available and the tools best suited for delivery of your chosen materials. Five essential tasks in instructing a quality web-based course include: 1) acquainting students with the content and format of the course; 2) establishing communication and participation guidelines; 3) creating and managing a learning community; 4) evaluating students, course design, and course content; and 5) managing instructor presence and time (Perera-Diltz, 2011).

Web-based instruction can be a fun and flexible alternative to face-to-face classroom instruction and an opportunity to provide individualized instruction to a larger pool of students. However, web-based instruction must be designed and delivered with knowledge of a web-based learning management system and with clear expectations. Otherwise, it can be boundless, time consuming, and frustrating to both the instructor and student.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching counselor education requires faculty to pre-plan and determine the content to be delivered, the method of delivery, the method of evaluation, and ways to facilitate self-exploration and self-reflection in their students. In planning coursework, it is important that counselor educators be fully cognizant of the standards for a given content area and then determine what resources (i.e., texts, supplemental reading, audio-visual aids, website explorations, case vignettes, learning activities) are available to deepen and widen the active learning experience of students. Counselor education can be rewarding for both the instructor and the student if the instructor is knowledgeable and resourceful in designing and delivering the course.

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